

Reports from the project

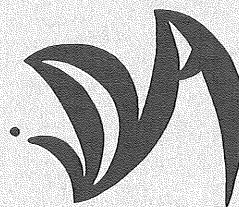
Individual Development and Adaptation

**WOMEN'S HEALTH, WORK, AND EDUCATION
IN A LIFE-SPAN PERSPECTIVE**

**Timing of childbirth and education: A life event
approach to female career patterns**

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- No. 70 Bergman, L.R. Women's health, work, and education in a life-span perspective. Technical report 1: Theoretical background and overview of the data collection. (*January 2000*)
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- No. 72 Publications 1961 - 2000. (*December 2000*)
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- Nr. 81 Grip, A. Linjära statistiska kontra icke linjära dynamiska modeller av individuell utveckling. (*Oktober 2002*)
- No. 82 Isaksson, K., Johansson, G., Lindroth, S., & Sverke, M. Women's health, work, and education in a life-span perspective. Timing of childbirth and education: A life event approach to female career patterns. (*November 2002*)

Foreword

The enclosed report contains a basic description of female career patterns in relation to childbirth and education. The authors are Kerstin Isaksson, Gunn Johansson, Siv Lindroth, and Magnus Sverke. In the report, data are used from the longitudinal research program Individual Development and Adaptation (IDA).

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Stockholm, November 27, 2002

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ABSTRACT

Research on career patterns has presented a number of theoretical models, each of which highlights slightly different aspects. Although these models are implicitly assumed to be of general validity, they are usually coloured by their cultural, ethnical and historical background and by a lack of gender perspective. A review of research on women and career development (Philips & Imhoff, 1997) concludes that the research in the recent decade took important steps towards capturing the complexity of female career development. Still, some critical gaps remain. The general aim of this paper is to describe female career patterns in terms of shape, level and stability. Special attention is paid to the impact of the timing of childbirth and other transitions and turning points over the life course. Finally, the patterns are related to career satisfaction and the perception of work–family balance. Data were taken from work histories in the interviews of a sample of Swedish women aged 43 ($n = 109$) as part of a longitudinal study of school children followed since the age of 10. Career patterns were plotted on the basis of life events in three areas (education, family and work). Results revealed relative stability of labour force participation, but not of work hours over the life course. Continuous full-time work (from 16 to 43) was highly unusual and almost entirely limited to women without children. Career progress in terms of moving to higher career levels was a common feature of the cohort. The most commonly found pattern consisted of women taking more than one career step.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on career patterns has presented a number of theoretical models, each of which highlights slightly different aspects. One of the more influential models was suggested by Driver (1988) and describes career-pattern categories as “stable”, “linear”, “spiral”, “transitory” or as a mix of these. Super and Hall (1990) assume career development to pass through phases defined by theories on psychological human development in adult life. Derr (1986) has suggested a minimum number of dimensions for descriptions of career orientation: “getting ahead”, “getting secure”, “getting high”, “getting free” and “getting balanced”.

Although these models are implicitly assumed to be of general validity, they are usually coloured by their cultural, ethnical and historical background and by a lack of gender perspective. They are based extensively on the living and working conditions of white American males in the middle and latter half of the 20th century. It has been repeatedly emphasized that existing models are ill suited for the analysis of women’s living conditions (see e.g., Arnold, 2001; Burke & McKeen, 1993; Driver, 1988; Gustafson & Magnusson, 1991). Research on female careers, however, has attracted increasing attention in recent decades when women’s labour force participation has approached the level of males. A review by Philips and Imhoff (1997) concludes that research in the past decade has taken steps towards capturing the complexity of female career development. Still, there are critical gaps in our knowledge. One concerns changes and transitions in women’s vocational lives, and this is the focus of the present study.

The study is based on a unique and unusually rich set of data on female occupational histories ranging from the time when they left school until the age of 43 in a

representative sample of the labour force. Career patterns are described and categorized using a life event approach.

1.1 Female careers in the literature

Early work in the area of female careers described how women experienced more complex interactions than males with the labour market and a greater diversity of work histories (Moen, 1985). A typical female pattern after World War II has been one of discontinuity, with exit during the childbearing years as a typical feature. Recent decades have witnessed increased opportunities for part-time work. This was one of the necessary conditions for an increased proportion of females being gainfully employed over longer periods of the life course. Results from the 1970s described combinations of full-time and part-time work as well as periods of absence from the labour market (Moen, 1985).

Han and Moen (1999) used longitudinal data from males and females born between 1920 and 1940 to describe career paths and timing of retirement from a life course perspective. They identified five highly gender-segregated patterns, three of them stable and two less stable. The unstable patterns (“delayed entry” and “interruption”) and one of the stable patterns (“stable part time work”) were the dominating among females.

Scandinavian research in this area is relatively rare. Existing research falls into two main categories: (1) studies describing antecedents of careers in terms of education (Bjerén, 1994), or personality factors (Pulkkinen Ohranen & Tolvanen, 1998, Rönkkä & Pulkkinen, 1998), and; (2) research focused on career development of females with an academic education (Bjerén & Elgqvist-Saltzman, 1994; Pulkkinen et al., 1998). These resembled those found in the US. As compared to men’s careers, women’s careers are generally more discontinuous, with frequent changes and gaps. On the average, Scandinavian women with an academic degree have a slower career development than their male counterparts. As compared to less educated women, they work more part-time and have fewer children. While men typically experience an early sharp career rise, women tend to be slower and meet various obstacles, often connected to their family responsibilities (Höyrynen, 1994).

An interesting study compares three generations (born in the 1920s, the 1930s and the 1950s) of educated women in Norway and Denmark (Lie, Pedersen & Rørslett, 1994). Their career patterns display the impact of the development of the welfare state: provision of day-care and legal rights aiming at equality in the labour market for women and men. The typical pattern of the oldest generation was to leave work when they had children and return later, the in-between generation typically worked part-time, and the youngest generation strives to combine domestic work with a professional career. The youngest generation had a more continuous connection to the labour market and they also reported experiencing more stress.

One final example of a study using a person approach to life course data was reported by Gustafson and Magnusson (1991). This study used data from girls aged 10 until the age of 26 and conducted a pattern analysis of individual educational data. Although limited in scope the report clearly shows how a focus on individual development over time gives a richer and more complex picture of career development than traditional variable-oriented models based on cross-sectional data.

1.2 General aim and questions

In the study of individual development it is often relevant to distinguish between two different kinds of life events and changes of the life-course trajectory (Elder, Pavalko & Clipp, 1993). When longer periods of the life course are analyzed, we pass through a number of *transitions*, i.e., changes that occur to most of us as part of various life phases (e.g., leaving school, entering the labour market, starting a family, retirement). A second kind of change, *turning points*, strikes us unexpectedly and lead to a change of the life course in a new direction (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). In a short time perspective it is not always clear what constitutes a turning point, but in a longer perspective and in retrospect, they may be identified along with their antecedents. As part of the longitudinal Berkeley study, Clausen (1995) investigated turning points of men and women. A majority of males reported work-related events as being decisive of turning points; examples mentioned by males were change of work and unemployment. Females were less inclined to mention work related events; however, returning to employment after a period of home work was one such event.

The aim of this paper was to investigate career development in a small random sample taken from a cohort of women pursuing careers on many different levels and with qualifications ranging from low to very high. Career patterns were described in terms of shape, level and stability. Transitions were described and an effort was made to identify turning points in a life course perspective. Special attention was paid to the impact of education and timing of childbirth on career patterns.

2. METHOD

2.1. The IDA program

2.1.1. A longitudinal cohort

The IDA program was initiated in the early 1960s by Professor David Magnusson. The first data collection was carried out in 1965 and included three complete school-grade cohorts in a Swedish town of about 100,000 inhabitants. The cohorts were aged about 10, 13, and 15 years, respectively. Information has been collected from the children themselves (e.g., school performance, tests, vocational preferences, health, and family), from teachers (e.g., ratings), parents (e.g., living conditions, family situation), peers (e.g., social networks) and registers (e.g., school marks). For detailed information on the previous data collections, see Magnusson (1988), Magnusson and Bergman (1997), and Magnusson, Dunér and Zetterblom (1975). The main cohort also included a biomedical sub-sample of children for which additional data were collected.

2.1.2. The present sample

A new wave of data collection took place in 1998, at the age of 43, focusing on women's work, health, and education in a life-span perspective (Bergman, 2000). It included all women in the main cohort (N=639). However, only the women initially belonging to the biomedical sub-sample were included in the present study. Attrition in this random sample originally consisting of 120 women was low (11 persons, 9%) and the remaining 109 women were used for this analysis.

2.1.3. Representativity of the IDA women

Demographic characteristics of the IDA sample at age 43 was compared to population data for Swedish women aged 35–44 years (Isaksson, Johansson, Lindroth & Sverke, 2000) About two thirds of both groups were married. The IDA group had a slightly higher percentage cohabiting and fewer single women compared to Swedish women in the age group 35–44 years. No apparent differences were observed with regard to education; the proportion obtaining each level was similar with about 30% having third level education. Employment data, finally, showed that a somewhat higher proportion of IDA women (84%) were economically active (full time, part time, self-employed, and work in family-owned firm) at the age of 43. Five per cent studied, 5% were unemployed and 6% were classified as “other” (ill, disablement pension etc). Thus, on the whole, the IDA cohort at age 43 resembled other Swedish women of similar age. Considering the fact that the age of the IDA women approached the upper extreme of the age interval represented by the population cohort, the few deviations may be considered moderate.

2.2. Data used for the present analyses

2.2.1. Personal interview

The first part of the 1998 data collection was a comprehensive personal interview covering, among other things, family conditions, education, career history, work experiences, work values, life satisfaction, health and leisure-time activities. In terms of retrospective work history data, activities were recorded if they lasted six months or more. In the context of the interview, five handout questionnaires and nine leave-after questionnaires were distributed. Of the 639 eligible respondents, altogether 569 women participated in the interview and most of them completed all questionnaires.

From the interview data of 1998 the following information was retrieved: occupational history, education biography, current and past family conditions in terms of number of children and present family status. Finally, life goals and a “life line” as recorded by the women themselves were retrieved from the questionnaires.

2.2.2. Indicator of career level: The SSYK96 coding system

Occupational categories and levels were coded according to the Swedish Standard Classification of Occupations 1996 (SSYK96; see SCB, 1998a). This is a national adaptation combining the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88), published by the International Labour Office in Geneva in 1990 and the closely related ISCO-88 (COM), which is used for the compilation of statistics in the European Union. The classification organizes occupations into a hierarchical framework based on two concepts: *kind of work* performed and *skill level* (SCB, 1998a).

Kind of work is defined by a set of tasks or duties to be executed and is grouped into ten major-group occupational fields. Each such field is divided into sub-major groups. Further classification can be made using a three-digit code resulting in minor groups and, finally, in unit groups (i.e., specific occupations) represented by four digits.

Skill level is defined in terms of level of qualification and specialization. Three skill levels have been operationalized in terms of educational categories (International Standard Classification of Education). The use of the educational categories does not

imply that the skills required for a given job can be acquired only through formal education. The levels are:

1. Elementary occupations
2. Upper secondary school education
3. College or university education

2.2.3. Plotting careers

For each woman a plot was made (cf. Isaksson et al., 2000), starting in 1970 at the age of 16 when the women left primary school. Events were marked along a time axis ending at the age of 43. Events in three life areas were indicated on the age line, using simple arrows to indicate the age at which each event occurred (see Figure 1).

1. *Educational events* were marked if the individual pursued a course or education longer than six months. Duration of the course and exams were also noted.
2. *Family-related events*. Marriage, divorce, childbirth and parental leave were indicated on the time axis.
3. *Career-related events (objective indicators of career change)*: Acquiring new employment, type of work (coded by SSYK) working hours (full time/part time), unemployment, absence, domestic work or other related events.

The plots were compared to find patterns and subgroups according to the following criteria:

1. *Shape*.
 - Straight line career (pursuing jobs on the same level of education according to SSYK)
 - Mobility upwards or downwards (change of level according to SSYK)
2. *Level*.
 - High: SSYK = 1–3 (professional or manager, self-employed; education mostly at academic level)
 - Medium: SSYK = 4–8 (secondary school)
 - Low: SSYK = 9 (2 years secondary school, mostly unqualified jobs)
3. *Stability*.
 - *Continuous* career line: working or studying without major interruptions (except for parental leave of one year and for education)
 - *Discontinuous* career: interruptions > 1 year for domestic work, unemployment, illness etc.

Finally, additional information from the questionnaires about life satisfaction (life goals and lifelines) was used to compare groups on career goals and career satisfaction over the life course.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Career patterns: analyses based on the records of work-related activities

Table 1 summarizes five major career patterns that were distinguished in the material. For each pattern the table indicates career level as well as change/stability over the life course (16 to 43 years).

Table 1. Summary of career patterns.

Career label	n	Percent
1. <i>Consistent on one level</i>		17
1a. Medium level	17	
1b. Low level	2	
2. <i>One step upwards</i>		25
2a. Education > family	8	
2b. Family > education	20	
3. Several steps upwards	30	29
4. Career delayed	8	7
5. Discontinuous pattern	16	15
Not classified	8	7
Total	109	100

Pattern 1. Consistent on one level

The first pattern that emerged from the data was characterized by stability of the career level from school age to 43 years. Although stability was central to this pattern, the level of career (according to the occupational coding) could be either medium or low skill level.

1a. Medium level (n=17)

A typical pattern in this group was to attend secondary school for two years (preparing for an occupation) in order to start working after school. Many had their first child after a few years of work, generally before the age of 25. Further education in this group was not uncommon, but did not lead to a change of career level. Rather, it could take the form of a shorter course to get formal qualification for a preferred job (e.g., assistant nurse). Women in this group were clearly combining work and family, without longer interruptions. Legal parental leave was followed by relatively long periods of part-time work. Typical occupations in this group were assistant nurse, office clerk, and child-care worker. An example of this pattern is presented in Figure 1.

1b. Low level (n=2)

Only two persons displayed this pattern, possibly due to the relatively small sample. Both women changed jobs several times over the life course. The jobs remained on a low level and required only primary education (e.g., sales and service occupations).

Pattern 2. Upward mobility one step

Upward mobility is the most common career pattern found in the sample. Although sharing upward mobility as a common feature, this pattern could be divided into several sub-categories. Mobility was typically associated with pursuing further education (more than 6 months) resulting in an occupation on a higher career level than before. Sub-groups differed already when they left secondary school in what appears to be an early conviction of an occupational choice.

2a. Occupational choice and college education before family formation (n=8)

Women in this group continued into college education immediately following secondary school, or after a short break for temporary work. Some women married while studying, but they usually finished their education before childbearing. They typically started their first job (>6 months) at the age of 22–23. Arrival of the first child was most common after age 25 or even after 30. In general, the women had only short breaks for parental leave, followed by part-time work in the majority of cases (7) and return to full-time work when the children grew older. Typical occupations represented in this pattern were teacher (pre-primary and primary school), administrative civil servant, trained social worker, engineer, and nurse.

2b. Family and children followed by further education (n=20)

Typical of this second largest sub-group was to start working after school in relatively unskilled jobs, and later to qualify for a higher level job, either in the occupation tested before (e.g., starting out as a day-care nurse and later becoming a primary-school teacher) or in a different occupation. Occupational choice seems to have been postponed for a few years compared to pattern 2a. Some women in this group had children relatively early and appear to have postponed their occupational choice for this reason. Changing the line of work or occupation after the “testing” period is common. As many as 13 women in the group did this, while eight women stayed in their first occupation but pursued formal, further education to get a higher position. Figure 2 presents a typical example of this pattern.

The most common change of level in pattern 2b was from medium level to high level of education but there were also a few taking larger steps on the career level (low to high). After choosing a line of occupation these women had relatively stable work histories, and dramatic turning points such as unemployment were uncommon. Balancing work and family demands did not appear to be a major problem, partly because most women chose traditional female occupations, which can easily be adapted to variations in family demands. A representative career plot from this group is presented in Figure 2.

Pattern 3. Upward mobility more than one step (n=30)

This category is the largest in our sample and consists of women who took more than one career step. There were several ways to combine work and childcare and still allow time for further education. The general pattern in this group, however, was to start a career by work and education before childbirth, to take the legal parental leave (> 1 year), to then continue at a lower pace, reducing work hours during the childbearing phase, and, then, to increase working hours again as the children grow up.

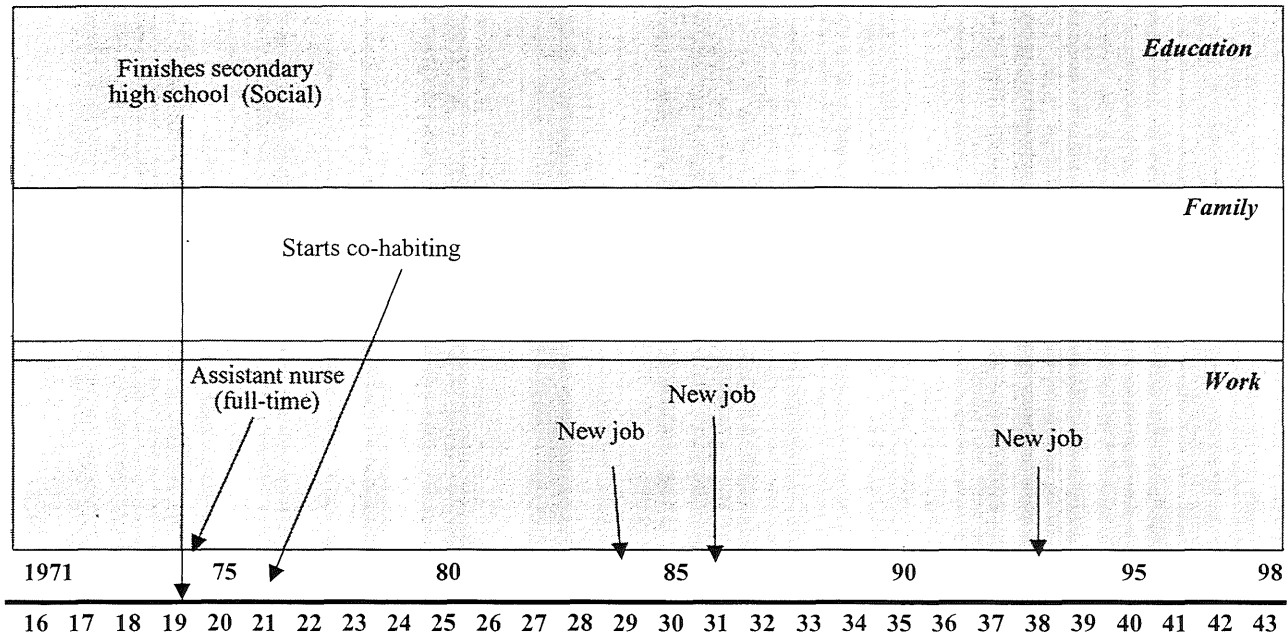


Figure 1. Example of career pattern 1 – “Consistent on medium level”

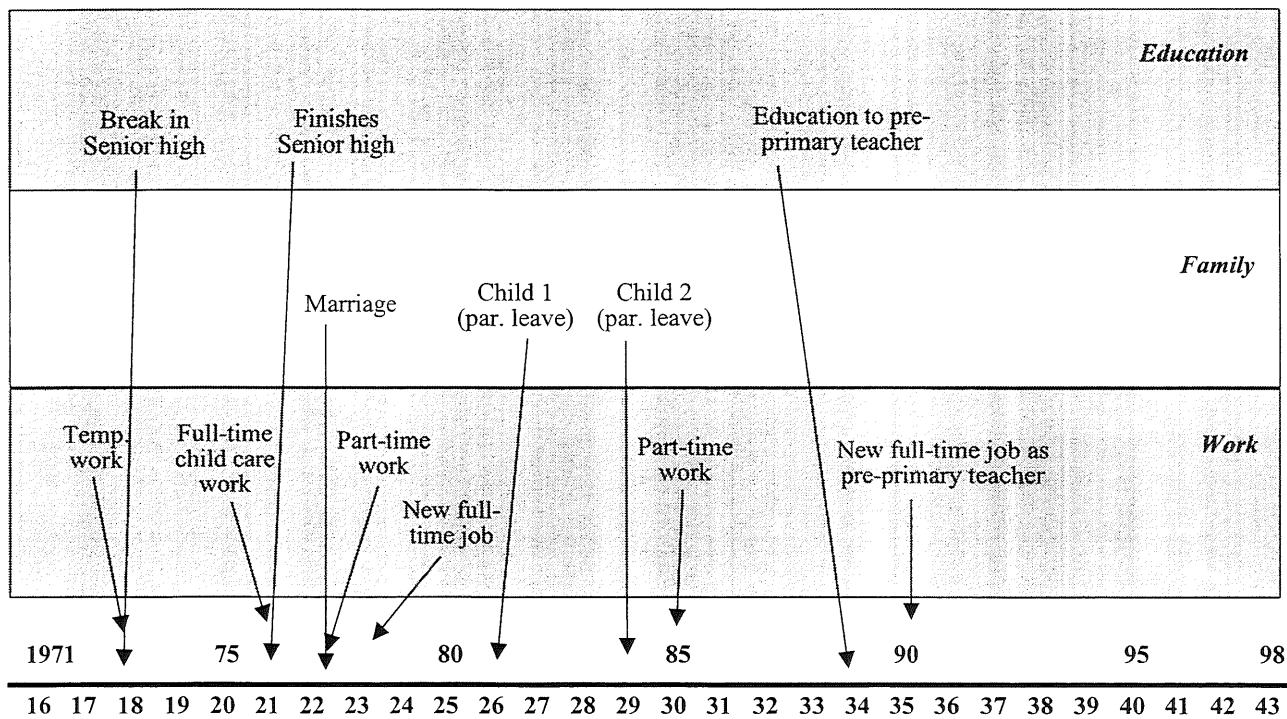


Figure 2. Example of career pattern 2b – “Family and children followed by further education”

Again, however, at least two sub-groups were distinguished. One consisted of women who continued in the same occupation, often with the same employer but with varying intensity, shifting between different levels of work hours. Promotion or change of job titles occurred as experience increased and in adjustment to life stages. Career lines could also take this stepwise and upward shape when women climbed to higher positions within an organisation but without formal education (7 women). These women continued to work in the same occupation over a long time. Getting promoted to become a supervisor and taking a shorter course within the organization is the typical form.

- *Example 1:* Work in a chosen occupation, followed by further study in order to reach a higher position, then child birth, a few years of part-time work, and again back to full-time work. Promotion or some kind of managerial position is not uncommon at this late stage. A typical sequence would be assistant nurse -> nurse -> specialization -> supervisor.

The second subgroup consisted of women who made a more drastic change during the life course by entering a new occupation. Figure 3 presents a typical pattern from this group.

- *Example 2:* Relatively long period of work in a chosen occupation was followed by child birth, then part-time work during the children's pre-school years; further education (part-time) in the occupation of choice or sometimes for a different occupation. When the children reached school age full-time work started again, sometimes in self-employment.

Seven women became managers/supervisors, usually after the most intense child-caring years. Although few have reached top positions, they are managers of groups of 5 to 50 co-workers. Three women in this group were self-employed.

Most women in the sample who had no children can be categorized into this pattern (four out of six). They typically worked full-time continuously and usually took several career steps. The interviews do not provide information on events that may have led to transitions into a new job or into further education for these women.

Turning points: Children and family were seldom described as hindrances by this group. The opposite was rather more common; i.e. to describe the joy of parenthood and husband's support as sources of self confidence encouraging career steps. Again, in a few cases turning points such as divorce occurred as reasons to pursue education and working full-time. Illness or unemployment was also a reason for a change of occupation.

Pattern 4. Delayed career progress or temporary decline in job level (n=8)

The typical line of events in this pattern is characterized by a period of increased family responsibilities after childbirth interspersed in an otherwise successful career. The group includes a mixture of occupations. Some women were professionals with apparent difficulties to work part-time, e.g. engineers and managers. When having children the typical pattern was to "slow down", to take a break from the ordinary job. Instead of leaving the labour market completely, some preferred to take on additional children for day-care while caring for their own during the pre-school years. Later these women returned to other forms of employment. Figure 4 provides an example from this pattern.

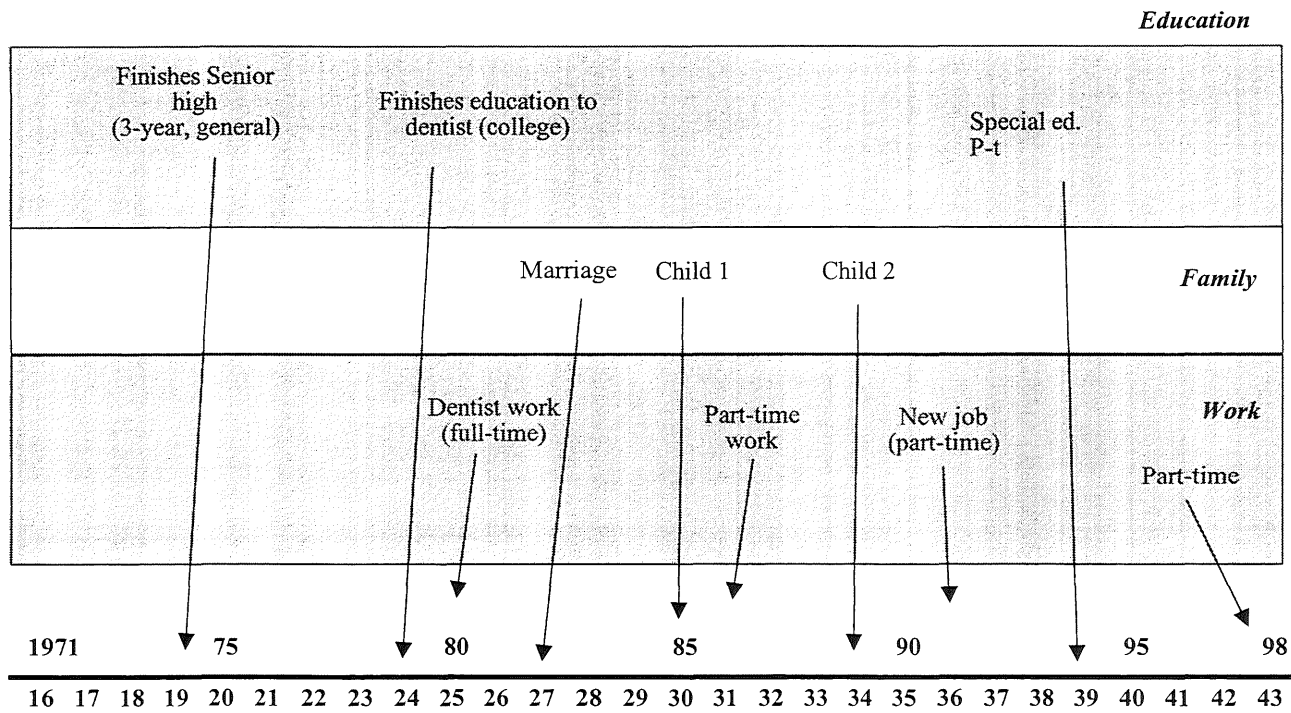


Figure 3. Example of career pattern 3 – “Upward mobility more than one step”

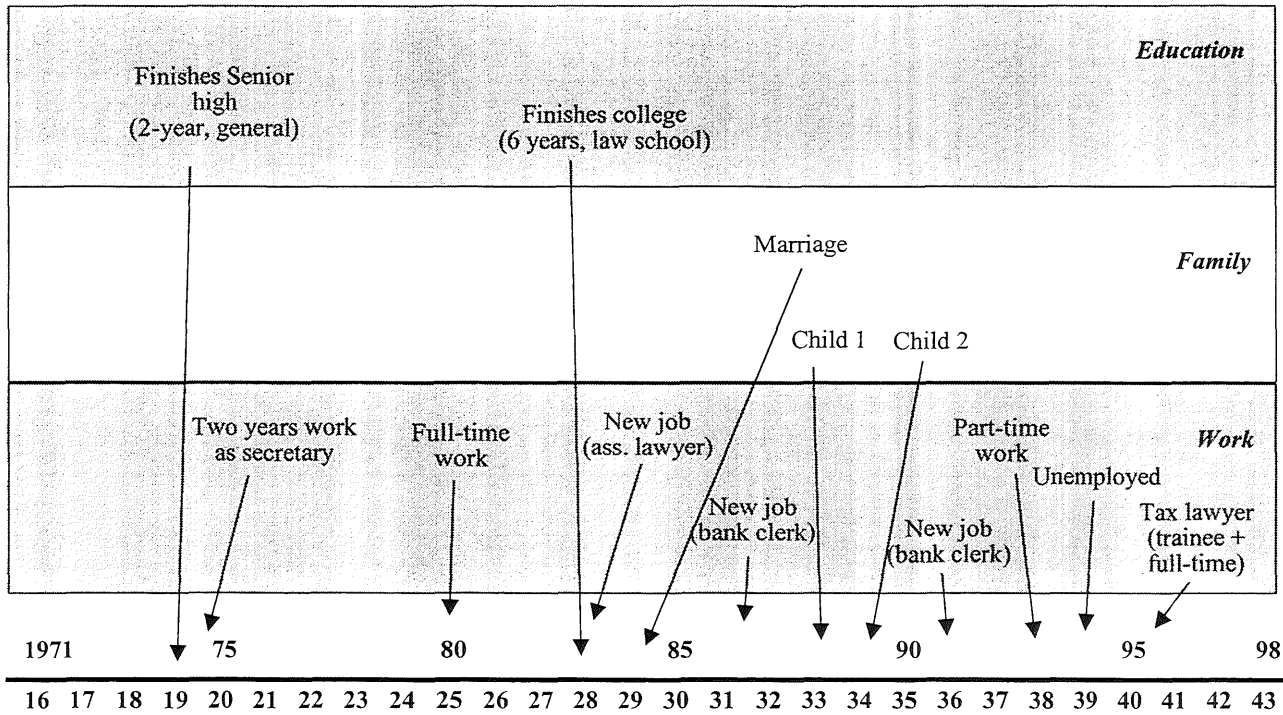


Figure 4. Example of career pattern 4 – “Delayed career progress”

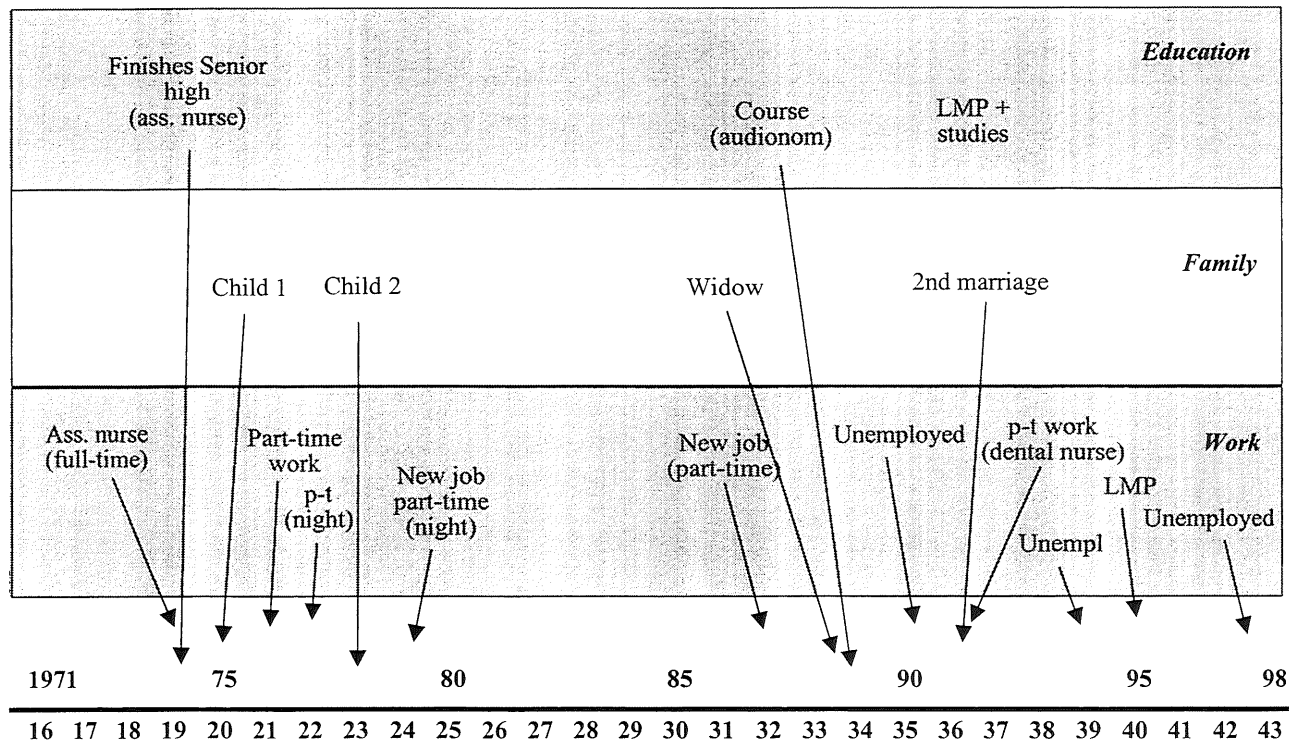


Figure 5. Example of career pattern 5 – “Long-term discontinuity”

Pattern 5. Long term discontinuity (n=16)

The typical pattern in this group includes one or several interruptions for more than one year due to homework, unemployment, illness or combinations of these reasons. A majority of this group seemed to be more family oriented as compared to women in the other patterns. They typically started to work after school but married and had children when they were relatively young. Several women in this group who had more than three children left the labour market for longer periods than the regular parental leave. Most of them returned to work or to education for a new occupation when the children grew older. Work and career jobs are unusual in this group although one or two women pursued a career after childbearing. A few women with long term or chronic illness ran the highest risk for exclusion and definite exit from the labour market.

Not classified (n=8)

The limited size of this sample does not allow a definite conclusion about patterns for some individuals. Among individuals who could not be classified were two women who worked in managerial positions but who left them for lower-level jobs. Such downward mobility may form a career pattern but this has to be investigated in a larger sample. Another reason not to classify all women was a lack of information in a few cases where the interview was only partly completed.

3.2. Analyses based on qualitative data

The career patterns identified from records of work-related activities were subjected to further analysis with a special focus on career satisfaction and career turning points by adding information from the “life lines” that the women had drawn and the written narratives that they provided.

3.2.1. Transitions and turning points affecting career patterns

Having children and a break from work for parental leave is a transition that most women meet in their life. Only six out of the 109 women did not have children. With few exceptions, parental leave was followed by adjustment of working hours in order to meet family demands – thus, a large majority worked part-time for a shorter or longer period. Other kinds of adjustment could be to take on new tasks, a new job title or a different contract on returning to work (e.g., freelance work). This kind of events appeared as normal transitions in patterns 1, 2 and 3, usually followed by a return to full-time work as the children grew older. Individual differences in work involvement were probably the causes behind a corresponding variation in the number of years spent in part-time work. However, this relation is probably confounded by factors such as family economy, husband’s occupation, and the division of housework.

In patterns 4 and 5, i.e., among women whose careers were delayed or described as discontinuous patterns, however, we found several examples of motherhood functioning as a turning point affecting the work trajectories. More or less voluntarily, these women left their positions and had their careers interrupted. The background differed but in some cases the women worked in a sector or a position that did not allow part-time work.

During a deep recession in the 1990s, staff reductions affected some of the women in this group. The impact on the lives of the women seems to have been profound, and the

resulting unemployment seems to have served as a definite turning point for several of those affected. In a similar way, a drastic change of the family life (such as divorce or separation) was sometimes followed by a decision to study in order to improve opportunities for secure employment. Another recession appeared towards the end of the follow-up data collection (ending 1998) but a conclusion about the accumulated impact on the careers of these women would be premature at this time

Although the sample was small, the impression was that some categories of women were more vulnerable to staff reductions and involuntary change of jobs. Education tended to be one of the keys to avoiding unemployment.

3.2.2. Career level related to work involvement and life satisfaction

A common feature for all women in the sample was a shared view on future opportunities in working life. Age 43 was definitely seen as mid-life and most women appeared to be willing to increase both time and involvement in employed work when the children grow up. Some had already started further education and had definite plans to move upwards. This conclusion was supported by the fact that several women (about 5%) took courses and studied at age 43. This proportion of women in education was relatively stable over the life course for the cohort.

Women who made an early occupational choice were usually work oriented, but wanted security and therefore studied and entered an occupation before they had a family. They seemed satisfied with their choice, their goal achievement, and their balance between work and family. Some expressed frustration over high workload and economic problems, which interfered with further education.

A difference between the *stable medium-level group* (pattern 1a) and the *one-step upward mobile group* (pattern 2b) was that the latter group seemed to be more indecisive about their initial choice of occupation. With low motivation for schoolwork, they took unskilled jobs for a few years and, thus, postponed their choice. Later they studied and moved ahead, e.g., from office work to teacher, or from factory work to childcare. The stable medium-level group was more inclined to remain in the occupation chosen already in secondary school.

The two-step group (pattern 3) emerged as the most satisfied group, and – based on objective criteria – the group that reached the highest career level. They seemed to be consistently striving to find an occupation and a job that they would enjoy, and their personal development seemed very important to them. A change of occupation was not uncommon in this group.

Almost none of the women described *children* as a hindrance, despite the obvious effect that motherhood had on their careers. By and large, they perceived their children and family as supportive. They complained about high workload, economy and, sometimes, about their husband working too much. Few expressed dissatisfaction with their achievements, although almost everyone described temporary crises in life. The lifelines described have a long term perspective.

The two discontinuous patterns were quite different from each other. The women in the *delayed career group* (pattern 4) tended to be career and work oriented, and the break or decline in career is sometimes described as extremely frustrating (e.g. banking). The other pattern represented women who continued to work as, for instance, childminders in their own home thus combining gainful employment and housework. This type of work was temporary, and later the women went back into other forms of work.

Females in the *discontinuous career group* (pattern 5) appeared to be family oriented in the sense that they left employment for longer periods than other women did. Some women in this group appeared simply to give up the struggle to combine work and family. A large family with many children was one apparent reason (seven is the largest number of children in the group), giving birth to twins was another. Unemployment was an additional reason to leave the labour market, and combinations of the various reasons also occurred. Women with young children who become unemployed may choose to stay at home longer than they would otherwise have done. Only two women left employed work due to long term illness.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The first conclusion to be drawn from the analyses is that downward mobility was rare and almost exclusively caused by onset of illness, drug addiction or by other very special turning points. Secondly, career patterns or, rather, work trajectories, were more stable than might have been expected, at least in terms of labour market participation. A large majority remained in the labour force during their childbearing years with only short breaks while exercising their legal right to parental leave. However, stability did not prevail in terms of working hours. Stable full-time work from the age of 16 to 43 was highly unusual among these women and limited almost exclusively to women without children. A large majority of the women in our sample worked part-time during the phase in life when they cared for their young children.

If we compare our results to earlier studies of males, we find that some of the patterns identified would probably also be identified among males. These are the stable patterns on one level, and patterns describing a step-wise upward mobility. Women belonging to these categories constituted a majority of the present sample. Due to part-time work, the women worked at lower intensity, but the general patterns were similar to those of men. However, two patterns were identified which are more typical for women. These are the ones in which discontinuity and interruptions occurred due to family responsibilities, and which have been described in previous research.

Two other patterns, described by Han and Moen (1999) on the basis of US data as typical of women – “stable part-time” and “late-entry” – were not retrieved among the Swedish women of this cohort. Stability in terms of staying with an employer over many years and not leaving the labour market after pregnancy appears to have been preserved by legal rights to parental leave and part-time work. In some cases the critical reason could of course be economic necessity because family finances in Sweden usually builds on dual earners.

Career progress in terms of moving to higher occupational levels was another characteristic of this Swedish cohort. Availability of, and economic opportunities for, further education several years after secondary school were utilized by a large number of the women. This served as a means to change occupation, or change occupational level in one or several steps. Three out of the six patterns described included this feature.

Interestingly, motherhood does not seem to be a salient factor for upward mobility. Instead, the choice of occupation emerges as more important. Women who moved to higher occupational levels were almost exclusively found in female-dominated occupations such as nursing and teaching. Those who met career obstacles or interruptions were more often found in occupations with equal gender distribution or with a male dominance (e.g., engineer, lawyer and bank manager).

Several references to the literature can be made on the basis of our results. Referring to Derr's (1986) dimensions, the patterns we see here can be described as similar to "getting secure" (stable career on one level; upward mobility one step), "getting balanced" (would be relevant for all patterns) and "getting high" (upwards in several steps). Motives behind the patterns probably vary for men and women, and the list of dimensions should also be supplemented by a dimension referring to the need for achievement and personal development.

Theories describing an orderly set of career stages over the life course (often building on work by Super, 1990) did not receive any support in our data. Perhaps this way of pursuing a career has become outdated with the increasing individualization of working life. Women in our study seem to change the direction of careers in terms of occupations several times over the life course, during early stages as well as during parental leave and when children grow up. Some kind of establishment phase should probably occur and could be expected to be age-related, but the peak seems to be at an older age than 43.

Among the limitations to this study is of course the relatively small sample size. Results should be validated in other countries and compared for contemporary males. The country where data were collected, Sweden, gives an interesting touch to our results. In many ways we can describe the situation when both the labour market and the family legislation are more career-friendly compared to other countries. Our contribution to theories of female career patterns remains, but the study should nevertheless be replicated in other countries in order to clarify the interplay between organizations, legislation and opportunities for women.

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