



Career transitions in times of social change. His and her story

Ingrid Schoon *, Peter Martin, Andy Ross

*Centre for the Study of Human Development and Well-being, City University,
Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, UK*

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Abstract

Drawing on data collected from two longitudinal Cohort Studies following the lives of over 20,000 individuals born in the United Kingdom 12 years apart in 1958 and 1970, respectively, this paper examines antecedents and outcomes of educational and occupational aspirations of young men and women, covering the transition from dependent childhood into independent adulthood. Two analytical models, a Social Reproduction Model and a Developmental-Contextual Model are tested to assess the processes by which family background and the wider socio-historical context influence work and family related careers. The findings demonstrate the persistent role of gender, social origin and individual agency processes as well as the influence of a changing socio-historical context on career development. Results are interpreted with regard to biographical agency processes linking individual lives with social contexts across the life course.

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1. Introduction

Relatively little is known about the processes by which families and the larger societal context influence individual commitment to and pursuit of a career. Moreover, most of the literature on career development tends to reflect the experiences of men, and there has been

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: i.schoon@city.ac.uk (I. Schoon).

a noted lack of research on women's issues in the workforce (Levinson, 1996; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Philips & Imhoff, 1997). Although women make up almost half of the labour force, proportionately fewer women than men rise to the top of their professions (Farmer, 1997). Women's career development remains more complex than men's because of their multiple family and work related roles (Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986). Adopting a longitudinal perspective this study will broaden existing theories by investigating antecedents of career development for both men and women. We shall place particular emphasis on links between timing of family formation and adult occupational attainment.

A basic proposition made here is that career development is shaped by the interplay between a changing individual and a changing environment. The adopted approach is guided by assumptions formulated within the Developmental-Contextual Model of career development (Vondracek et al., 1986), which draws on ecological perspectives of life-course theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1974/1999). The life course perspective emphasises multiple levels of influence on human development and their interrelatedness, and thus shifts our attention from the static to the dynamic, examining the timing, sequencing and duration of transitions. Moreover, the life course approach allows us to theorize agency as well as social embeddedness of human development; it is thus well suited for a gender sensitive approach.

1.1. A Developmental-Contextual Model of career development for men and women

The aim of this article is to investigate the processes linking socio-economic family background to work and family related careers among men and women in a changing socio-historical context. Two models are tested, the Social Reproduction Model and the Developmental-Contextual Model.

The Social Reproduction Model (see Fig. 1) assumes that the reproduction of social class position from the family of origin to the individual is partly mediated by the timing of the transition into parenthood. It assesses whether the association between parenthood histories and occupational attainment is spurious and can be accounted for by the fact that both are associated with social origin. The model postulates that family social origin is linked to both timing of first child and occupational attainment. It is assumed that young men and women from less privileged backgrounds make the step into parenthood earlier than their more privileged peers, and that the age at first birth effects own adult occupational status, i.e. early parenthood is associated with reduced occupational opportunities,

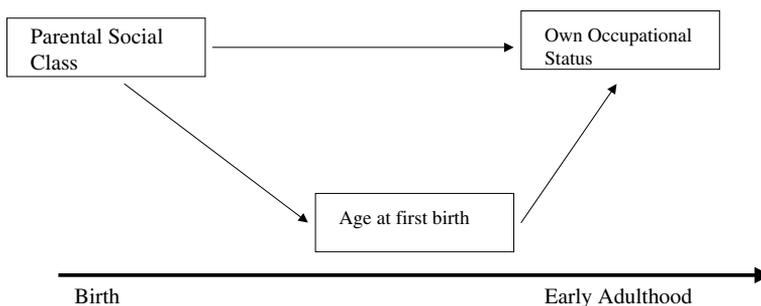


Fig. 1. The Social Reproduction Model.

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