

A Discussion Paper: Gender Differences in Protean Career Orientation  
(PCO)

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Abstract

The trend of protean career is increasingly becoming prominent in turbulent business environment. Individuals are proactively embarking on designing their own career pathways rather than rely on organizational career development activities to cope with the dramatically changing landscape of competitive workplace. This study aims to examine PCO among Gen Yers and how it influences their work behaviors. PCO is a vocational approach in which individuals take charge of their career based on self-directedness and personal values instead of organizational values. Research evidence shows that PCO characteristics resemble much of the working behaviors of Generation Y. Reduction in lifetime employment has triggered Gen Yers to be more alert of the need for continuous skill learning and development; hence they are more likely to proactively plan their own career path. In Malaysia, Gen Yers switch jobs faster than previous generations in the workforce in Malaysia. It is utmost important to seek greater understanding of the factors that determine PCO development and the impact of PCO development on the work behaviors among Gen Yers in Malaysia so as to help inform the best means by which to recruit, engage, and retain them. As compared to men, researchers have found that women are increasingly embracing more self-directed careers while rejecting the traditional long-term employment model. Furthermore, women have been found to engage more often in short-term career planning using incremental career strategies, a typical characteristic of PCO, while men have more long-term career goals, which is more typical of traditional career orientation. Most men and women set off with analogous career preferences; yet these preferences deviate over time due to different life situations. Typically, marriage and pregnancy move women off their original career path early in the tenure of their first job. They need to reset their career goals and adopt short-term strategies that best fit their changing circumstances. Hence, women are more likely to switch jobs for personal or family-related reasons. The research will employ a large-scale questionnaire survey, involving a total number of 400 early career individuals from Generation Y in Malaysia, who have one to three years of work experience.

Keywords: *PCO, value-driven, self-directed, gender, job switching*

1. Introduction

Career patterns have undergone substantial transformations during the last several decades. According to Wilensky (1960, p.554), career is defined as “a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered, predictable sequence”. This conceptualization of career has symbolized the traditional linear career model,

which dominated a large share of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Rosenbaum, 1979). According to MacDermid et al. (2001), male workforce generally dominated the traditional career model. Unlike women who would experience interrupted and non-linear career stages due to marriage life, child bearing, and other family responsibilities. Men tend to work steadily fulltime even for the same employer in some cases for their whole life, always seeking vertical advancement and external rewards (MacDermid et a., 2001). Nevertheless, since two decades ago, technological advancement, reduced family size, increasing education levels, changes in social attitudes and personal preferences have all contributed to an increase in the employment participation rate for women as well as the changing career pattern of women. As a result, the dual-earner family is the new trend in 21<sup>st</sup> century (Stier et al., 2001). Accordingly, the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities while striving for career development become increasingly relevant for both men and women.

To be worth mentioning, a new pattern of career development emerges alongside the increased employment participant rate for women in contemporary society. Hall (2004) asserts that there is a fundamental shift away from the traditional career pattern starting in the late 1980s, to one that is more ‘protean’. Since then, traditional loyalty and commitment to an organization is less important as organizations pursue more transactional relationships with their employees (Maguire, 2002). Indeed, individuals are changing their career behaviors in response to many factors, including increasing lifespans and work lives; changing family structures, including the increasing number of dual-career couples, single working parents, and employees with eldercare responsibilities; and the growing number of individuals seeking to fulfill needs for personal learning, development, and growth (Hall, 2004; Sullivan, 2010). All these factors stimulate individuals to initiate self-directed career development to fulfill personal goals (Hall et al., 2008).

Although Hall (2004) advocates that gender is not related to an individual’s career orientation, other scholars have found that modern women are increasingly embracing more self-directed careers, which in turn reflects protean career adoption. As evidence, quite a huge body of literature suggests that women tend to adopt protean career behaviors while men tend to exhibit more traditional career patterns (Hall, 2004; Reitman & Schneer, 2003; Sullivan, 1999). Generally, women define career differently from men. Evetts (1990) states that men usually employ long-term goal-setting strategies, while women normally engage in short-term career plans and adjust their own goals to their family needs. Moreover, Pascall et al. (2000)

conceptualizes that women are involved in intermittent career strategies, as they always need to opt in and opt out from working life due to other commitments in their life such as being a housewife or caregiver. As such, there is evidence that protean careers may be advantageous for women as it allows women to balance work and family responsibilities more efficiently (Reitman & Schneer, 2003). On the other hand, it is said that traditional career model is more suitable for men, who usually experience continuous fulltime employment under the same employer.

In sum, how career development may differ by gender is an issue that warrants further investigation as this can help organizations to modify their employment policies and management system so as to adjust to the different career patterns and needs of both genders. This subsequently helps inform the best means by which to recruit, engage, and retain them. Hence, this paper seeks to further our understandings of different career patterns of men and women. The following research question is put forward: ‘Does women adopt different career orientation from men in contemporary society?’

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Traditional career pattern*

Few decades ago, much of the research was based on the assumption that careers involve a continuous and fulltime employment with a single employer, and a sequence of jobs characterized by job promotions and increasing levels of pay (Wilensky, 1960). During that period, career development can be explained through the relationship between employees and employer in stable organizational structures in which employees always seek to progress up the organizational hierarchy so as to obtain greater extrinsic remunerations, such as job promotions and monetary rewards (Rosenbaum, 1979). Loyalty and lifelong employment were norms in society formerly as a consequence of employer’s implicit promise of job security to workers (Rousseau, 1989). Additionally, promotion was generally based on seniority and length of service. As a result, career success was always evaluated through status recognition and explicit job rewards, such as salary (Rosenbaum, 1979).

The abovementioned linear career models emerged as a result of the dominance of the male-as-breadwinner and female-as-homemaker family system back in the 1950s (Sullivan & Crocitto, 2007). Traditionally, there was a strong belief in the gender stereotypes. Men were seen as the primary income-earner in a family, whereas women were the family caregivers who

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should stay at home rather than take on paid work (Sullivan & Crocitto, 2007). This social norm persisted until the mid-1980s, whereby nearly half of people embraced the norms of gendered separation of roles, with the men in the breadwinner role and the women in the caring role (Dench, 2010). It is suggested that men tend to hold traditional linear career pattern (Reitman & Schneer, 2003), where they generally work for organizations that were structured with hierarchical systems, whereby upward movement or job promotions within one or two companies were seen as their major career success (Dalton, 1989). Other than that, Levinson et al. (1978) develops a life stage model characterized by alternating periods of stability and turbulence, in which development tasks and problems need to be addressed progressively in order for men to successfully advance to higher level of positions in their organizations. Failing to complete each of these developmental tasks is believed to halt their career progress. In order to achieve their life goals at each stage of development and proceed to higher level, men needed supportive partners, especially their wife, the primary family caregivers, to take care of their children while supporting their husbands' career ambitions (Levinson, 1978), and hence there appear the normative views of women as the homemakers.

Nevertheless, career development process is different for women due to the social norms that stereotype women as the homemakers. The traditional occupational pattern of women can be referred as M-curve employment pattern, which indicates the prevalence of the quit-and-return work pattern for women (Miller, 2003). Women have a high tendency to work in their early twenties, but drop sharply in mid to late twenties around the time of their marriage, and continue to drop further by their early thirties, which is the child-bearing and raising years. Once their children have grown older, women will start returning to work in their late forties as their child-caring responsibilities have diminished (Miller, 2003). As can be seen, unlike the linear career pattern of men, women tend to adopt intermittent and non-linear career pattern that suits their changing responsibilities throughout their lifespan (Reitman & Schneer, 2003). Therefore, Tharenou et al. (1994) argue that it seems questionable that women's careers can be adequately explained by stage models developed with male samples. This is mainly due to the distinct aspects of women's working experiences including sex role stereotyping and caregiving responsibilities, which will interrupt their career progressions throughout the course of their life (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007).

## *2.2 Contemporary career pattern of women*

Since two decades ago, reduced family size and increased education levels among females have triggered them to participate more in the employment sector (White & Rogers, 2000). The Economist (2009) states that there is an overall shift of gender composition of the workforce; women who were once the homemakers, have increasingly gained entry to what there were once exclusively male career pathways, including law, professional sports, the military, and top-level corporate positions. This indicates that millions of women who were once dependent on men have now taken control of their own economic fates.

In early careers, men and women generally start off with similar career preferences. However, due to life experiences, these career preferences will subsequently deviate over time. Life situations such as having children could move women off their original career path (Lyness & Thompson, 2000). Despite the long hours they work outside the home, women still hold the responsibilities for household tasks and childrearing. As such, Burke and McKeen (1994) assert that working women possess higher level of stress than working men due to the social expectations and sex role stereotyping in modern society. As a result, women tend to redefine their career goals and adopt short-term career strategies where they have the chances to opt in and opt out from work life based on their changing responsibilities throughout their lifespan (Hull & Nelson, 2000). Therefore, discontinuous career pathways become the major characteristics of women's career development primarily due to the needs of achieving balance between work and family responsibilities in their life (McDonald et al., 2005).

Lyness and Thompson (2000) also assert that women's career development is characterized as being less-traditional, hierarchical career paths as well as the hierarchical career ladder. Richardson (1996) investigated the careers of women accounting professionals and characterized them as having snake-like careers compared to the ladder-like careers of male accountants. Furthermore, Gersick and Kram (2002) also discover that women in their mid-life characterized their career tracks as a series of "zigzags", defined by personal values, customization and work-life balance. As such, modern women are said to have complex careers, referred to as multi-directional career development (Baruch, 2004), which is distinct from men. Additionally, many women choose to opt out of the workforce due to pregnancy or child caregiving responsibilities, yet most of them eventually return to work once their children have grown up. As evidence, Hewlett and Luce (2005) find that 74 percent of the professional

women who had left work had returned voluntarily, yet only 5 percent of the women surveyed were interested in returning to the companies they left, indicating that many women are increasingly pursuing protean careers that challenge the traditional view of career as a series of hierarchical moves within a single organization (Hall, 1996). Discussion on protean careers will be continued further in the following paragraphs.

### *2.3 Protean career orientation (PCO)*

According to Hall (1996), the 'Protean' term originates from the metaphor of Proteus, the Greek God that is believed to have the capability to change shape at will. Hence, individuals with PCO are said to be able to proactively adjust themselves to adapt to the fluctuating work environment in order to remain employable. Hall (1996) also states that protean career is engaged by individuals that emphasize on self-driven career over organizational control. Similarly, Briscoe & Hall (2006) also explain that protean career is typically dominated by two important dimensions, which are value driven career orientation and self-directed career management. Values driven attitude allows individuals to manage their career progress based on their own values. On the other hand, individuals with self-directed career management tend to navigate their own career pathways via independent strategies rather than depend on others, particularly their employers (Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2009).

Unlike traditional careerists who place their priorities on climbing the corporate ladder (Wilensky, 1960), the protean careerist is constantly and innovatively seeking work challenges in pursuing their own career paths (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). The way protean-oriented individuals define career success is very much different from that of individuals who hold traditional career paths. Generally, the protean careerists put more emphasis on subjective career success. It refers to feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment regarding one's career (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). It is expected that protean-oriented individuals are more actively striving to attain their desired career goals, which in turn makes them feel more successful in their career (Arthur et al., 2005). Besides setting their personal goals for career success, protean-oriented individuals often tend to pursue freedom and own growth that will allow them to engage in continuous learning, which in turn helps in updating their behaviors, such as development in employability (Cheng & Ho, 2001). Additionally, Seibert et al. (1999) claim that protean career is the contract within oneself, rather than between oneself and the organization (traditional career model), leaving much of the career development to people's

initiation and proactivity. Hence, as opposed to the aforementioned traditional linear career model which emphasize on lifelong employment and loyalty towards one or two organizations, individuals with strong protean career orientation tend to engage in high mobility and flexibility across organizational, departmental, and functional boundaries (Hall, 1996).

#### *2.4 Gender Difference in PCO*

Valcour and Ladge (2008) state that women in modern society may go through multiple career exploration cycles so as to learn, master, and create vocations that satisfy their own definition of career success and personal goals. For instance, Shapiro et al. (2008) indicate that women prefer to direct and manage their own careers while rejecting the traditional long-term employment model. Also, they are no longer acting as employees working under the instructions of their employers but rather setting their own terms of employment (Shapiro et al., 2008). Furthermore, women have been found to engage more often in short-term planning using incremental career strategies, a typical characteristic of PCO, while men have more long-term career goals, which is more typical of traditional career orientation (McDonald et al., 2005). This is congruent with the self-directed nature of protean career that often results in greater adjustment of family responsibilities (Hall, 2002).

According to Hewlett and Luce (2006), women are at particular disadvantage when attempting to conform to the traditional career pathways. Most organizational cultures are still based on the traditional notions that assume workers will fully commit their energy and efforts to their job and will not let outside responsibilities interfere with the job. Such organizational culture does not match the lifestyle of modern women. Despite the longer working hours and increased work performance pressures, society nowadays is still expecting women to bear with the burden of household and care giving responsibilities. Hence, women are having hard times to fulfill both their work and non-work tasks (Hewlett & Luce, 2006), and therefore the adoption of PCO. In weighing the costs and benefits of following a traditional career, many women, especially mothers, decide the costs of advancing to a higher level are too high especially in terms of the negative impact on their family life (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Instead, they are picking the career that allows them to be successful on their own terms and to achieve balance in work and family life. Hence, the inflexibility and extreme demands by the employers today have stimulated women to look for alternatives in their working life (Heslin, 2005).

Additionally, Reitman and Schneer (2003) discover that protean-oriented women are better able to combine both work and family responsibilities as compared to women who follow traditional career paths. Hence, women on protean career path are more likely to be married and have children. Moreover, women on PCO generally have equal income as men, whereas women following traditional paths earned 20 percent less than men (Reitman & Schneer, 2003). In terms of quitting jobs, Cabrera (2007) states that most women only quit the workforce temporarily, rather than permanently (Story, 2005). When they return, many women decide to be their own career agents while rejecting the traditional career model that is often impracticable in their lives (Shapiro et al., 2008). Instead of escaping permanently from working life, women are actually quitting from the traditional career model, becoming free managers who can create and govern their own career paths, which in turn allow them to satisfy their changing needs across the life span (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006).

Inceologu et al. (2008) emphasize that women are less driven by objective career success (characteristics of traditional career pattern) that involves monetary reward, status, and promotion. Instead, they pursue the kind of career that enables them to be successful on their own terms and to find balance in their lives (Heslin, 2005). Women's career success outcomes are influenced by their interactions with others in the workplace as well as by their own evaluations of how well they are meeting work role expectations (Valcour & Ladge, 2008). Hence, defining career success subjectively based on fulfilling personal values allows women to experience psychological success, which in turn reflects the adoption of PCO among female workforce. Overall, inflexible work schedules and long working hours make it impossible for many women to achieve balance in both work and family responsibilities, hence they are forced to adopt PCO in order to create careers that allow them to meet these competing requirements (Reitman & Schneer, 2003). Building on the above literature review, we propose that:

*General Proposition: Women are more likely to adopt PCO while men are more likely to exhibit traditional career patterns in their working life in contemporary society.*

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