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Women's sequential and cyclic careers: implications for the career theory

ABSTRACT. The article takes up discourse on the development of the career theory that demands taking into account multicontextual changes in the world of work that pose new challenges for women. The subjective shading of the career phenomenon that treats career as an individual's „property” was clearly stressed. When analysing individual paths of career development for both women and men it is necessary to take its wide scope of conditions into account, as well as inquire into semantic meanings assigned to the reality by the subject in order to interpret and understand past and new experiences. The focus on professional behaviours among women led to considerations on the change of the career concept in its general sense and meaning. Literature on the subject consistently underlines that career patterns will be less and less of a linear character, and more frequently of a sequential and cyclical one. The increase in the role assigned to career forces one to approach it within the category of professional identity development, planning and management skills, and the ability of monitoring one's career in a lifelong perspective.

KEYWORDS: career, career theory, career development, women's careers, sequential career, cyclical career, professional identity

Contemporary processes of globalization of the world economy, its reorganization and restructuring induce us to think about the characteristics and dominant of the neoliberal world order.¹ Undoubtedly, one of the components of the global cultural ecumene are changes in the working environment, work structure, perception of work, as well as in the sphere of features, meanings and values assigned to work. It is a world of strategies that have been individually achieved and made reality; strategies that have to be suitable for the pace of changes that the world undergoes (Ziewiec, 2009, p. 83-92). It is difficult to overestimate the

¹ The narration is a fragment of research on professional careers in the world of „boundless” careers as perceived from the perspective of university students, published in a paper titled *Młodość akademicka a kariera zawodowa* (Cybal-Michalska, 2013). What is more, the topics of globalization on political and economic levels mentioned in the introduction is further developed by the author in a much wider context in the work titled *Tożsamość młodzieży w perspektywie globalnego świata. Studium socjopedagogiczne* (Cybal-Michalska, 2006).

influence of these changes on the quality of building and developing women's careers, and modifying their individualized paths. The multifaceted and multilayer structure of social reality that, according to K. Dąbrowski, means „all the phenomena that occur in the external and internal environment of the man and are perceived by them, expressed and experienced with the use of senses and actions related to thinking, emotions, imagination and intuition, all interlinked” (Tylikowska, 2000, p. 233), points to the special relevance of questions on the meaning and scope of the „identity” notion. Also, in this context, it leads to the necessity to search for answers on the possibilities and capabilities of a subject to plan and create career paths, and shape women's identity in their professional careers. This topic becomes particularly important in the context of curiosities in patterns of women's careers.

Social and cultural changes introduced a novelty to the understanding of a career in the life of an individual. The focus on professional activities among women brought about a discussion on the change in the career concept in its general sense and meaning. In literature on this topic, it is consistently underlined that career patterns will be less and less linear, and more and more sequential and cyclical. From this point of view, a career will be created with a combination of many posts, roles, and tasks undertaken. As a result, a career refers to the meaning an individual (understood as a career creator) gives to the pattern of professional and non-professional activities and possibilities. According to Herr, a career cannot be presented as a synonym for work or profession. Perceiving oneself as a career manager means lifelong management of one's own career. To a large extent, a singled-out view on the career construct resembles the experience of many women. Traditional definitions of career would refer to patterns of male careers. Men used to choose their career paths in their youth and remain loyal to their choice. Female careers were treated as temporary, because it was claimed that a real full-time female „career” was maternity and looking after the household. As a result, many women's careers are a sequence of various posts intertwined with periods for bringing up children. Consequently, the patterns of women's professional behaviour are more complex when compared with men's (according to Super, it will be a discontinued career, destabilized career and a career of repeated attempts), but it does not mean that they are specific. Cyclical and sequential patterns of career reflect the professional experience of many individuals in the world where „the career has a career” (Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 116).

The According to J. H. Greenhaus and S. Foley, being „between” professional and family affairs is not treated as a women's „issue,” but as a state that is characteristic of both women and men who are supposed to be responsible for their professional and family lives. What is more, the participation in the professional *and* family spheres at the same time may lead to psychological well-being for both women and men. This does not mean, however, that it is not worth posing the following question: do men and women have to deal with similar or different experiences when linking professional and family lives. As the authors claim, literature on the subject is a source of few premises to acknowledge that women experience a greater conflict in the context of work and family. It is also difficult to confirm what Pleck claimed about men experiencing WFC (work-family conflict) more, and women experiencing FWC (family-work conflict) more. The explanation for the lack of significant differences between the sexes in the work-family conflict can be found in the fading division between professional and home work, to the extent that men and women experience the same degree of conflict between professional and family roles. Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out, and hypotheses are formulated, that women reduced their engagement in work in order to avoid the conflict with family obligations, or in order to maintain the continuity of their identity are less eager to admit that their work collides with their family role (Greenhaus & Foley, 2007, p. 140-1).

The career theory distances itself from a linear understanding of a career path, channelling the narration into the notion of phases (cycles) that reflect the changing needs of the man in the course of their lives. There are also postulates to juxtapose the archetypically female „spiral” and the archetypically male „arrow” as two patterns that are interlinked and are at the core of professional identity. The linear presentation of career is replaced with thinking about the career domain as a scheme of *sequential* stages; each phase is based on achievements or solving conflicts from previous stages. The process of perfection and adopting new roles (women, in many ways and sequentially, combine work, marriage and maternity: they enter a role, give up their role in one field to take up a new role on a different field) focuses its attention on an individual, feeling of integration and fulfilment, and not on „building” one's image or achieving a better social status (Marshall, 2004, p. 285-6).

The issues of identity crystallize the subject of the path of individual career development and building the professional identity of a person. From this point of view, just like „every other formalized narration, it is something that has to be developed and naturally requires creative input” (Giddens, 2001, p. 107) and a reflective approach to one’s own biography. Identity is a „reflective loop where by starting from oneself, one comes back to oneself” (Zawadzki, 2003, p. 5). In the context of changes in the contemporary world, it seems especially important that women seek and give a precise answer to the question of „Who am I in this fast-changing world?” (a dynamic question). When answering a complex question of a dynamic character, according to their worldview and plans for career perspectives, noticing the pace and intensity of changes, an individual tries to establish the extent to which they are an active subject of prospective changes taking place in cultural and social contexts (Misztal, 2000, p. 158-60).

As women feel that that their lives can be organised around many diverse alternatives (and this feeling is not only observed but also experienced), women are assigned a task of deciding what their relations with this world are, which does not leave their quality of career planning and management, and modifying its individualized paths, unaffected. The significance and dynamics of changes imply changes in the aspects of social life related to identity where women seek and define themselves in a career. In the sense that is of interest for us, crystallizing one’s own identity defines the direction for the development of career perspectives and adds meaning to it. The unprecedented variety of individualized lifestyles understood as „a culturally conditioned method of satisfying needs, habits and norms” (Fatyga & Rogala-Obłękowska, 2002, p. 24) means that it is possible to live with the change and one should live with it, with everyone „having to become a model for the era that we are willing to create” (Illich I., quoted after: Kwieciński, 2000, p. 269). In this sense, the loss and permanent changes in individual points of reference make the problem of new types of women’s careers valid, as well as the issue of „how identity is created and changed” (Jawłowska, 2001, p. 54) depending on the social context and quality of involving women in the process of exploration. Recognizing and understanding oneself in the career is beneficial for developing the feeling of the prime mover and taking responsibility for the prime mover. Undoubtedly, these processes are important when women plan their own careers; a career treated as „property,” i.e. stressing its subjective sense.

A career can be of a „mosaic” structure where the linked net of life experiences „moves the individual forward” on their way to self-fulfilment in the career. In case of women, experiences such as maternity, full-time or half-time employment, or volunteering are also part of this career structure, because they are exemplifications of the self-development of an individual. According to Gallos, a career is not a linear march „to the summit” and is treated as a mechanical training on how to combine maternity, children and work. In their research into future patterns of professional and family life, Hallett and Gilbert selected two models: conventional (the woman is above all responsible for home and bringing up children) and division of roles (both spouses actively create their careers as well as are engaged in taking care of home and bringing up children). On the other hand, Crompton and Harris (1998) proposed a model of women's careers that takes into account women's desires directed at the development of both the „professional” and „family” careers. The authors underline that both in the professional and family lives women's orientation is complex and changeable. As a result, they resemble careers treated as the „property” of an individual. This in turn means that the traditional, linear career concept will also be part of professional experiences of women. From this point of view, there is a need to find a new approach to the career domain and building a career theory that also takes into account life experiences of an individual. An alternative approach to the career is focused on developing the identity in a life career and refers to both men and women. Raynor clearly stated that what we do defines who we are, and who we are determines what we do (Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 117).

In the contemporary individualised society creating new lifestyles, the „new way of thinking about career,” becomes a fundamental issue in general. The conceptualisation of the qualitatively new approach to career as an individual's „property” (coexisting in the vicinity of the traditional understanding of career as a structural property of an organisation or profession) points to a multilayered character of the contemporary discourse that combines the implications of an interdisciplinary dialogue and creates the need to review theoretical considerations on the ways of understanding the career, and conditions and indicators of its shaping.

When trying to define the concept category of „career,” it is difficult to oversee the lack of sharpness and ambiguities in the semantic meanings assigned to this notion. What is more, a characteristic point in

thinking of the career is the diversity of meanings this notion is used in. The scope of the „career” notion can be its subjective and objective sense structure, evaluative (also with negative nuances, such as the categories of „careerist” and „careerism”)² and non-evaluative (that indicates thinking of a career as an individual’s „property”) understanding or presenting the notion from the perspective of an organisation or subject.

A career can be discussed as a social phenomenon. When presenting the topic from the sociological perspective, the career ethos remains closely linked to the values acknowledged in the society, it is widespread in its culture and by transmitting it, becomes localized and deeply rooted in the social awareness. Undoubtedly, it is socially propagated, which does not leave orienting human activity unaffected. As a result, aiming at achieving it is socially accepted (Rokicka, 1992, p. 116). The category of „career” can be defined as a constellation of many roles played by an individual simultaneously or sequentially in their entire life. The roles played by the individual can supplement or replace one another, and they can also be conflicting. As a point of reference in the approach to the notion of „career” discussed, D. Super and M. Bohn adopt a definition of a role that is understood as „a selection of social expectations that a society or social group has towards an individual that has a certain position in this community” (Paszowska-Rogacz, 2005, p. 112). Career development strategies are updated through the social roles that one plays (Paszowska-Rogacz, 2005, p. 107-10). At the same time, as pointed out by D. Super, a career perceived as a streak of events that form a sequence of professions and roles performed by an individual in their life according to their individualised pattern of self-regulation (Szymański, 2010, p. 77) is „an individual’s opportunity to make the concept of oneself real” (Miś, 2006, p. 483), which indirectly stresses the subjective dimension within the considerations on the possible career course of both men and women.

Gottfredson’s model that focuses on the processes of limitations and compromise relevant for women and men is an example of a universal theory. Gottfredson developed the theory of awareness of one’s own identity assuming that awareness is a link between personality variables and environment variables that are combined with the choices related to

² According to Z. Bauman’s systematization, a career is also a moral term associated with a specific evaluation system of life attitudes, relationships with the environment, as well as obligations arising from these relations.

the career. Consisting of the knowledge of gender expectations and social class affiliation, as well as of intelligence, interests and values, awareness interacts with professional images in order for an individual to define the details of their professional preferences, research into professional opportunities and barriers. Gottfredson's model underlines the meaning of socialisation in the roles that are undertaken and assigned, and the influence of gender on the choice of a career. The author arrived at a conclusion that individuals look for a compromise between their preferences and professional reality, and expanded the scope of her research to the meaning of gender in the process of career development. She suggested that there is a need to analyse the factors that determine the „risky” nature of an individual in their choices referring to their career. Among others, the factors include cultural and geographical isolation, and poor education. In this sense, these can refer to both women and men of different ethnic groups. However, it has to be added that – as is underlined by Hackett and Lent – various „risk” factors can affect men and women in different ways, and creating any scheme can bring about some limitations (Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 125). At this point, it is difficult not to refer to Astin's model that was one of the main attempts at proposing a versatile theory that would explain the career development of both women and men. The author believed that the social and psychological model that she had built would be suitable for explaining the professional behaviour of women and men, because she assumed that professional motivation is the same for women and men, but they make different choices due to their different early experiences in socialization and possibilities that they came across in the structure. Astin's model refers to four aspects: motivation, professional expectations, socialization to play a gender role and the structure of professional opportunities. The author decided that the professional motivation of a subject is linked to the need of survival, pleasure and contribution to the society. In this context, in Astin's model choices that are significant for career development are linked not only to the availability of different professions, but also to an individual's expectations in order to satisfy the above-mentioned needs. In consequence, changes in the structure of professional possibilities determine changes in professional expectations of women (Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 124). At the same time, society has become an area for individuals to show initiative, a space with no limit for creation, a bank for many possibilities, opportunities and perspectives available for everyone who is interested in their avail-

ability (Bauman, 1960, p. 15). This thesis matches the perspective currently adopted by psychologists that presents a career as the „property” of an individual. As described by B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss, individuals „wander’ from a status to a status that they co-create in cooperation and interactions with others, with feedback that gives them a confirmation of their own self-conception and the notion of their identity” (Rokicka, 1992, p. 116). This important observation on subjective aspects of a career such as: an individual’s status, self-conception and social reactions to playing various roles make individuals be perceived as an „unstable being.” The relational ego that is created as a result of socialization processes is rather „a multitude of realities than one reality” (Hałas, 2007, p. 115). As far as the notion of career goes, E. Goffman claims that it creates an opportunity for moving „forwards” or „backwards” between the I and society that is important for the I (Blankenship, 1973, p. 92).

Viewing the career as an „individual’s property” means adopting an individualistic assumption that the quality of everyone’s career is unique because it is a „collection of a series of unique posts, jobs, positions and work experiences by an individual” (Bańka, 2005b, p. 23) and the responsibility for building one’s career. A feature of the career is undoubtedly its processual character. In the context of a career defined by the „professional” adjectival marker, the process that an individual undergoes with experience and professional practice is pointed to. On the ground of the well-known theories on the development of career, among others referring to the theoretical perspectives of Miller and Form (1951), D. T. Hall and Nougouim (1968), D. Supper (1980), J. G. Greenhaus and G. A. Callalan (1994), A. Paczkowski (1998), A. Kargulowa (2005), J. Szczupaczyński, „career development begins with the beginning of life and is continued incessantly till its end” (Wołk, 2009, p. 20). A similar direction of research was taken by D. T. Hall (1986). He defined „career” as a life process that consists of a sequence of activities, stances and behaviours that are characteristic of the professional life of an individual (Adekola, 2011, p. 100). In the notion of „career” discussed by the author as a sequence of experiences linked to the role played, the essence rests in the experience mentioned and its influence on shaping and consolidating the psychological processes that according to the researcher include: self-assessment, attitudes, system of values, aspirations, level of satisfaction (Szymański, 2010, p. 79). This course of considerations is also reflected in A. Kargulowa’s definitions. Their subjective shades al-

low the author to assume that career is a „list of events forming life, sequences of professions and other life roles that all together express the attitude towards a person and towards work from the point of view of its complete development process” (Kargulowa, 2005, p. 21).

The view on the career presented is reflected in J. G. Greenhaus's considerations (2000). His views on career were defined by, on the one hand, showing the experiences related to work (decisions related to work, the positions held, duties, functions and professional roles) and on the other hand, subjective interpretations of professional events (pointing to aspirations, values, needs, attitudes, feelings and expectations related to specific professional experiences) in the entire life of an individual (Adekola, 2011, p. 100). According to J. H. Greenhaus and G. A. Callanan (1994), a career is the quality of experiences focused on work setting the direction for the quality of life of an individual (1994, p. 5). As an individual gains experience, the possibilities of planning the career path widen and acquire features necessary for a holistic approach towards it. The theoretical considerations on the subject of a „career” proposed by E. L. Herr and S. H. Cramer are an attempt at getting closer to that approach. Unique for every individual (structurally filled with what the individual has or has not chosen), dynamic and changeable, a career „contains not only one's profession, but also the decisions from before taking up a job and all those the individual takes after professional activity, as well as the connections between work and other roles played by the individual in their family, community and leisure time” (Szymański, 2010, p. 81). When attempting to make a synthesis of knowledge on the current views on the nature of an individual's career, A. Miś underlined that it is a „unique sequence of professions and posts, values and roles played by the individual in their life, shaped by the period that precedes professional work and influencing the period afterwards” (Miś, 2006, p. 478).

The current definition of career is not limited just to aspects related to the practice of promotions, having a particular profession, a satisfying professional situation of an individual or the stability of internal links of the content of the profession that one practices. The notion of „career” denotes and connotes much more; it also includes „apart from a fully professional situation (...), a level of psychological well-being, understood as a lack of tensions that disorganise an individual's activity, economic and social wealth, and a successful family situation” (Bańka, 2005a, p. 8).

Current views on career underline the importance of activities that are not directly related to work, such as: ways of spending leisure time, forms of recreation, education, playing family roles, which are related to employment" (Bańka, 2005b, p. 26). In this less restrictive approach to defining „career,” the importance of building (and not choosing) a career are underlined for designing the quality of life (Maree, 2010, p. 362). From this perspective, according to D. T. Hall, career means a sequence of experiences of an individual (understood as „shaping the individual’s internal processes, such as drives and aspirations, satisfaction, self-images, attitudes towards work under the influence of changing roles”; Miś, 2006, p. 477) related to the professional role they play that builds the history of their professional life. As A. S. King claims, the psychological power of one’s self-identity and the perseverance in aiming at the completion of one’s career objectives represent the main component of motivation and engagement in a career, as well as cooperation within an organisation (Adekola, 2011, p. 104). A person as an individual assigns specific individual meanings to elements of reality selected thanks to the ability of reading cultural codes, creates their own individual history and has history ahead. They build their own lives and, consequently, their personal careers through assigning meanings to their own professional behaviours and experiences in workplaces (Maree, 2010, p. 363), also assigning meaning to the context where these experiences occur. Probably the most characteristic course of considerations focused on the subjective aspect of career (next to stressing the objective aspect of presenting it, characteristic of interactionism) is the Goffman’s category of a „moral career,” understood as reactions of an individual towards themselves in particular situations, causing permanent changes in the conception of their own I. The theoretical orientation presented underlines researching career in an internal dimension, which means studying the changes that occur in the identity of an individual and their self-conceptions, as well as their conceptions on other subjects of social life (Rokicka, 1992, p. 125). Taking up responsibility for searching for the individual’s own role in the profession practiced, whose source according to Ch. Handy, the author of a work titled *The Age of Paradox*, lies in: direction (individual feeling of acting for a good cause), continuity (subject’s faith in the survival and continuation of the results of their work) and connection (participation in a community that we identify ourselves with and that we co-create), is a lifelong process and a task for lifelong learning (Piotrowska, 2006, p. 11). The British scholar also adds that

„the meaning will come upon those who develop their own sense of direction, continuity and connection” (Biolos *et al.*, 2006, p. 30) in what they do professionally.

The essence is a sequential development of an individual (integrated with the development of their career) in the course of the individual's whole life. Not accidentally, taking into account the cognitive practice in building a model of professional counselling, V. G. Zunker assigns the key role in designing a life integrated with building one's career to: the perception of success by the subject, their motivation to work, their individual need of internal satisfaction, roles taken up, quality of relations with other life partners, developmental and contextual changes (Maree, 2010, p. 364). From this perspective, according to J. H. Greenhaus, among others, „career” is described as a „model of experiences related to work that embraces and defines the elementary direction of an individual's life” (Bańka, 2005b, p. 24). In this sense, one can quote after J. Arnold that „a wide perspective on career assumes that it is a sequence of posts related to employment, roles, activities and experiences” (Bańka, 2005b, p. 24) gained by a subject in their lifelong growth.

Acknowledging the need of a multifaceted approach to research on the issue of career and recognition of the quality of women's career domain, referring to new models of its construction casts new light on the peculiarities of discussing the domain of women's careers. From the cognitive point of view, referring to the factor of identity engagement in the subject of women's careers makes it analytically important, because it serves the development of the career theory.

To sum up, it is worth underlining that the clearly subjective, personal traits in discussing „career” are an important element of the discourse. Career is assigned to a specific person, it is their possession and it is the career that gives the individual a specific meaning. It is not the profession practiced that is stressed (e.g. I practice the profession of ...) but „being” a representative of the profession practiced (e.g. I am ...). The profession is merely a context for developing one's own career that is contributed to by everyone who works or even (in case of the unemployed) looks for a job (Bańka, 2005b, p. 25). In this sense, every subjective career has a unique character. It is not strange at all, because individual dreams, desires, longings and conceptions build one's own, most personal model of a life ideal (Bauman, 1960, p. 18). Analysing career from an individual's perspective, as an individual's „property,” and updating the traits that are characteristic of the subject, should be integrat-

ed with their personality features and type of career orientation typical of them. A universal message about the need to update an subject's potential, about the need to update proactive behaviour and shape the pro-growth orientation is a reflection of dreams about the new way of being in the world, a world of individualised careers.

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