Abstract

It has been claimed that many professional career women retire early because they are tired of fighting the male-dominated workplace culture for lesser rewards than their male colleagues. This essentialising view is contradicted by data collected in interviews with a group of professional men and women. In midlife, the women as a group are expanding their public activities, in contrast to the men as a group who have tended to remain in one occupational area. Yet it must also be noted that the career experiences of these people ranged across a spectrum, and that there were women whose careers approximated a "male" pattern, and men who shared the apparently "female" embracing of further challenge. Furthermore there appeared to be little relationship between the kind of career experience a woman had had and her desire to leave the workforce. I argue that to remain within the structuralist paradigm is limiting, and that an analysis of internalised discourses of masculinity and femininity provides a more helpful explanation of the outcomes discussed in this paper.

In her discussion of working mothers, Professional Progress: Why Women (Still) Don't Have Wives, Terri Apter claims that many professional "career" women drop out because they are tired of fighting the male-dominated workplace culture for lesser rewards than their male colleagues. She argues that many women in managerial and professional occupations are immersed in "inhospitable conditions".

The "trick" to spotting the importance of work atmosphere over domestic atmosphere is to look at women in midlife and beyond. Many women who have stuck at their careers throughout the most pressured domestic times - when male partners were typically, working hardest, when their children were, typically, the most demanding, when their own jobs required extreme input, when their own commitment and perseverance were most likely to be challenged by their colleagues and employers, decide in midlife, when these demands are reduced, that the battles of surviving this "alien" culture are not worth the gains. (Apter, 1993:215)

Anecdotal media evidence contradicts this essentialising view. In recent times there have been cases of very high profile women, such as the trade union official, Anna Booth, and federal cabinet minister Ros Kelly, who have drawn back from public life to spend more time with their family, but these cases have been balanced by similar cases of powerful men, such as John Dawkins and the very well-publicised case of Colin Powell's decision not to run for the American presidency. Eva Cox is quoted as pointing out the simplistic biological-determinist assumption that "women who leave are seen as inevitable victims of their hormones, whereas men are seen as 'losing their masculinity as well as their marbles'". The title of the newspaper article in which this appeared, "Women and children first", subtly implies that men forfeit their masculine status to join the camp of the women and children (Horsburgh, 1995).

Apter's argument is partial, essentialising, and unconvincing when the lives of a group of professionals, whom I recently interviewed in the course of my doctoral work on the concept of career, are examined. In this group, men as well as women were found to be opting out. Furthermore, in the group there appeared to be little relationship between the kind of career experience a woman had had and her desire to leave the workforce. This is not to deny
that some women feel alienated by a male-dominated culture in their particular workplace, but an extrapolation of this as a typical female behaviour is to perpetuate an essentialist categorisation of "woman" who is by implication different to men.

What came through very strongly in the stories of the men and women interviewed is in fact almost a reversal of Apter’s thesis: in midlife, the women as a group are expanding their public activities, in contrast to the men as a group who have tended to remain in one occupational area. Yet it must also be noted that the career experiences of these people ranged across a spectrum, and that there were women whose careers approximated a "male" pattern, and men who shared the apparently "female" embracing of further challenge.

There are in fact women who are "opting out", but there are also men who are "opting out", and their experiences and the reasons for their choices are varied. In taking issue with Apter’s essentialism, which runs the risk of entrenching disadvantage by assuming a predictable female response and again placing women on the periphery as non-normative without questioning how men might react, this paper asks what midlife career patterns can be discerned and the extent to which such patterns are gendered.

GENDER AND WORK

The sex-segregated character of the Australian workforce is well documented (e.g. O’Donnell and Hall, 1988). Irrespective of class, women have been clustered in occupations which generally reflect the nature of work in the private sphere, that is, work concerned with children, caring, and domestic tasks, and which stereotypically includes teaching and nursing. Additionally, since the close of the nineteenth century, middle-class women have increasingly entered clerical work, a process which has been theorised as the provision of services as mothers, wives or mistresses to men in superordinate positions (Pringle, 1988). However, for the first half of this century, middle-class women traditionally worked outside the home only for a short period between the end of their schooling and marriage, although working-class women often did paid work for most of their lives. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, Australian women have struggled for greater autonomy and for equity in the workplace (Burton, 1991). In more recent times a minority have reached positions of power relative to men in some fields (Encel and Campbell, 1991).

In the 1970s, a functionalist view of Australian society which was based on Parson’s work on the nuclear family and relied on essentialising categorisations of men and women as breadwinners and homemakers, was replaced by structuralist attempts to understand the processes and complex relationships by which women’s situation has been constructed. Structuralism implicitly accepted the binary opposition of public and private, work and home, focusing on particular institutions rather than the integration of these oppositions in the subjects/agents who move between them. This kind of analysis was applied to areas such as education, technology, and structural discrimination (e.g. O’Donnell and Hall, 1988; Wajcman, 1991). It has until recently been assumed that the gender order, as R.W. Connell has termed the interaction between men and women which both shapes them and is shaped by them (Connell, 1987), has reinforced women's subjectivity as passive and dependent. It has idealised what Connell calls an "emphasised" femininity which stresses women’s sexuality and leads them to define themselves in terms of their desirability in the eyes of men and their position in "the heterosexual market" (Thorne, 1993).

Poststructuralist theory has introduced a new framework which examines the construction of femininity and masculinity across various discursive fields (Weedon, 1987) such as the family, the school and the workplace. It has been argued that gender needs to be
understood as a verb rather than simply as noun (Baron, 1991), and Alice Kessler-Harris (1993) has recently pointed to the need for further investigation of the gendering interrelationship of the workplace and home. These more recent understandings of the pluralities and fluid nature of our social world have shown that femininity and masculinity are not unitary but have a range of potentially changing forms (Johnson, 1993; Connell, 1995). The dominant discourses to which many men and women have accommodated have nevertheless been resisted by others (Anyon, 1983). Thus some middle-class girls growing up in the 1950s and 1960s internalised an understanding of themselves as "strong" women which was founded on the insights of first wave feminism handed on by their mothers and teachers. They were able to resist the ladylike respectability which offered them only the option of "the marriage career", and build careers which paralleled those of men with a similar educational background (Hakim, 1991). In others, this discourse remained latent and has found expression in mid-life. Whatever their choices, many women have demonstrated a skilful negotiation of the contradictory expectations to which they were exposed.

THE PEOPLE WHO WERE INTERVIEWED

The 27 men and 29 women who were interviewed were members of two classes in a selective "Opportunity C" education program in the last two years of primary school in the New South Wales public education system in the mid-1950s. Their backgrounds ranged from working class to professional middle class. With the exception of one woman, all were primarily of Anglo-Saxon background. All had gone on from the opportunity classes to either a private secondary school or a state selective high school, and only five women and three men did not have a university degree by the time they were interviewed in 1993. There was no one who had never married, but about one-third of the group were divorced. One man and three women did not have children.

A significant characteristic of this group was - with the exception of gender - its homogeneity. These people shared a relatively similar ethnic, social and geographical background and they experienced the same selective educational system which tended to flatten out class differences. As one man said, the schooling "gave a poor boy a leg up". Furthermore, the selective high schools "cloned" themselves on the neighbouring private schools, which added to their sense of privilege.

Their schooling had informed members of this group that they had "talent" which should not be squandered, and the conservative nationalism of the 1950s inculcated in them a public service ethic which both men and women internalised. Even those women who did not have a public career while their children were young were nevertheless involved in community organisations.

The women were unusual in that they experienced a selective education which stressed achievement for both women and men, but their education was nevertheless premised on a 1950s vision of the future based on a nuclear family with male breadwinner and a wife and mother at home. As McMurchey et al (1983) have pointed out in their analysis of the period, young women therefore learned that "Working mothers are bad mothers. Good mothers stay at home", and "In motherhood lie the greatest joys of womanhood". In common with other women of their generation, they were receiving mixed messages about their identity. As Mackenzie wrote in Women in Australia in 1962, "A boy's childhood role is consistent with his life career, but that of a girl must serve the double purpose of equipping her as a woman and as a potential equal of the man as a worker" (1962:96).

In the closing stages of the semistructured interviews, I asked both women and men what lay ahead for them. The question was generally phrased in a non-specific way, such as,
"What is ahead?" or "So what do you see in the future?" The lives of these people fell into a number of categories which may be characterised as follows:

* seeking challenge or change 16 women, 6 men
* contentment or status quo 5 women, 8 men
* wanting balance 3 women
* constrained by age 4 men
* anticipating retirement 3 women, 9 men

The categorisations cannot be read as discrete points on a scale, but as permeable affiliations which shade into and overlap with each other. Nevertheless they constitute a spectrum which reveals marked gender differences, although only two categories, "wanting balance" and "constrained by age", are gender specific.

If these attitudes can be conceptualised on a spectrum, then the women are clustered around the idea of change - and talk more in terms of "challenge" rather than merely "change" - while more men are at the other extreme in wanting to "just stop". Those who are happy with the status quo are also slightly differentiated, with some of the men more resigned to their present state rather than expressly contented with it, whereas more women feel positive about what they are doing.

None of the men explicitly expresses a desire for public/private balance and none of the women appears to feel constrained by her age. The men who feel that they are too old for change are generally looking to retire at 55, so they could be seen also to belong in the category of those who are anticipating retirement.

THE WOMEN'S CAREERS

Most of the women were expanding their public life and felt that their lives had not yet reached a plateau. Those who are embracing change and challenge are by far the majority, fitting the pattern described by Carolyn Heilbrun: "We must recognise what the past suggests: women are well beyond youth when they begin, often unconsciously, to create another story" (quoted in Pratt and Hanson, 1993). Sixteen of the 29 women had aspirations for doing something different or more engrossing in the public world: "I'm looking out at the moment for something that will stretch me more... I'm always excited when something changes. I like trying something new." Nine are presently enrolled in university courses.

Eight women could be characterised as maintaining the status quo, but although five of these women were content to continue as they were, three explicitly hoped for more of a balance between home and work. None of this group of eight women had had a "male" career, in the sense of working full-time continuously within one general occupational area with increasing responsibility and status.

The remaining three women were looking forward to retirement. This group included one woman who was particularly occupationally successful and who does indeed fit Apter's description fairly well: she acknowledges that there were periods of extreme stress in her life and a time when "something had to give". However, she is certainly not the only married woman with children who has been in full-time paid employment for much of her adult life, and her reasons for wanting to "opt out" are not due to an "alien" workplace culture, but rather to a culture in which there are expectations of her as nurturer, simply because she is a woman, which challenge her positioning of herself as an autonomous professional. The other two who were anticipating retirement included a teacher who had spent ten years at home with her
children, and a university lecturer who had spent some time at home and had worked part-time for much of her career. Although this last woman would like to retire early, she was pessimistic about doing so because her recent divorce meant that she had an increased economic imperative to work.

The next section provides extracts from the stories of women in each category. All of these women are in professional or managerial occupations, all have children, and all are working at least a forty hour week.

Seeking Challenges: "Look how I’ve changed...And look at what’s happening to me"

I have chosen to talk about two people in this category, compared to one in each of the sections below, because so many women fall into this group.

Pauline and Ruth are both actively engaging with public challenges. Both have worked essentially full-time since they entered the workforce. They differ in that Pauline, who had a lower-middle-class background, made a stereotypically female occupational choice and became a nurse, whereas Ruth, who had professional parents, was less traditional and did medicine. Class background is implicated in those choices, but so is the discourse of nurturant femininity which both women accommodated in their girlhood, wanting to "save the world".

Pauline has recently moved into an administrative job because she decided that, as she says, she didn’t want to "walk the boards" and do night shift forever. She is now involved in management and marketing and at the time of the interview had just come back from an interstate meeting. She is also completing a bachelor’s degree which she has been doing part-time for nine years. Although she won a Commonwealth scholarship to go to university after she finished the Leaving Certificate, she did not take it up because she had been "streamed" at school, being told that she was "only fit for nursing". In the immediate future, she envisaged no boundaries except what she might put upon herself and she sees herself as representative of a wider movement among women whose horizons have expanded:

I always feel that it’s a fairly normal experience that I’ve had. I meet people. I meet wonderful women at the university, doing such incredible things. And there are people who are doing ten times more things than I’m doing. ... I don’t meet too many women who’ve had a charmed life and been able to sit around and not do things and not get on with it. That’s why I think that I, and a lot of people I know like me, we can sit around the table and say aren’t we fortunate. We are the fortunate women. That we haven’t simply been wives and had kids and kept a house going. It may have been hard. And yes, we all get tired, and wonder if it’s all worth it at the end of the day. But somewhere along the line you think, "Well yes it is worth it. Look at what’s happening to me. And look how I’ve changed. And look how my expectations are very different." And I can recall many years ago, I don’t think I had this "happy-ever-after" thing. I think I always thought it would be a bonus if I lived happy ever after. And I don’t know why I didn’t expect to be happy ever after. But I can remember many many years ago saying to Mum and Dad, "I’ve already done better than I thought I would".

Ruth is a medical specialist who is presently also doing an honours degree in philosophy. When she looks back on her life she sees three major constraints: firstly, her denial of her own ability (a discourse in which she and Pauline have both positioned themselves); secondly, the pressure from her husband to have children before she finished her specialist qualifications; and thirdly, sexual harassment and discrimination from within the professional arena. Although she has worked full-time since her children were very small, employing a housekeeper to manage her domestic life, she feels that she has only recently "come into her adulthood". This is partly due to developments in her professional life, but also because she no longer has responsibility for her elderly parents, and her two children are now young adults. Her public life is increasingly taking precedence, to the point where she has bought a unit where she sometimes stays if she wants to work late at night, rather than returning home:
...now I've got an apartment here ... and an apartment down there to work from, so it's like my life's... maybe my own again... My mother's in a nursing home, sort of hostel/nursing home... after Dad died she not only was more difficult than she had been (unclear) But the last eighteen months has been extremely rewarding, to find that I can work with patients where there are (specific) issues and handle them - not as well as I will in another five years. But to feel that as long as there's a reward, it will never be exhausted... And I want to get the thesis finished, because now I know that eventually I want to start a study group, and I've got the ambition to start a centre up here.

Contentment: "I'm quite contented with what I do"

Carolyn, a lawyer, is happy to keep on working without necessarily wanting any changes, arguing that she has always sought interesting work which gives her flexibility rather than power: but she does identify her control of the household as a source of power:

In terms of how I spend my career I suppose I've been successful in what I've wanted it to do. I've made it myself. I enjoy the law. I like working. I don't like doing housework. And I have a sufficient range of different things to do that it keeps me interested. It's probably not successful from a career path point of view, that I'll never be a magistrate or a judge or one of those things, and I'll never be the senior partner of a large firm. But I think probably I'm quite contented with what I do. It's probably not successful financially, but you don't make a lot of money doing those jobs. You'd make a lot more money pursuing a career in a firm, but you don't have the flexibility. And I think I value flexibility more than promotions and power. I guess I'm not terribly interested in power.

She has four children, ranging in age from 9 to 21 - a fact which she identifies as a constraint in itself - and she does part-time teaching as well as working part-time in two different practices. Her comment that, "None of us fit the moulds, do we", underlines a point relevant to the theme of this paper, that the simple concept of work masks tremendous diversity. Carolyn, in all her part-time work, has worked as hard - if not harder - than many career women working full-time:

I quite enjoy the flexibility that part-time work offers. I think you work a lot harder in many ways, and it requires a lot more organisation. But settling down hasn't suited me and I haven't needed the career prospects, so that hasn't been a problem. Because I'm not very ambitious. And with all the children it's difficult. I've had a child every four years and it's fitted in quite well with all these various jobs, because the domestic arrangements haven't become too difficult.

Wanting Balance: "I love my job - I'm not sure that I want to give everything to it."

Julie, a university administrator, could be seen as fitting Apter's model, in that she is disillusioned with the workplace culture. Where she differs is that she has had only a brief career, and that she worked part-time as a research assistant while her children were at school, giving priority to her family commitments rather than her paid work. She has only recently been disenchanted with the "power play" in her workplace and is ambivalent about the future:

I suppose until about a year ago I thought I'm fairly ambitious, maybe I would like to get to a top level in administration. In the last few months, maybe it's all a power play at (university): it's a fairly small place, and even at my relatively low level you see what's involved in being in a higher level job. And I'm beginning to think do I really want that. I certainly don't need the money. To a certain extent, of course, you know, I'd probably like to have the power. But do I really want all that responsibility. Life seems too short to spend all of it on work... Well I like the challenge of a job and I love my job. I'm not sure that I want to give everything to it. So I'm having second thoughts about it.
Certainly she identifies the kind of male culture which Apter has discussed:

They’re about to appoint a new person in the office, so I’ve been acting in that capacity, but I haven’t applied for the job partly because being... acting in that role I found just how difficult it is to play games the right way in a man’s world. And I feel I did make a wrong move last year. I bruised the ego of one of my senior colleagues, and for that reason I probably wouldn’t get the job even if I applied for it. And that, you know, has been a terrible sort of shock to me. Quite a lesson to me. I think perhaps, yeah, it does take a while to learn how these things are played and definitely men have a different way of playing. You know we were talking about feeling responsible, and you know, I think what I did at the time was because I had a genuine feeling of responsibility for the welfare of the office and the students and the academic staff that deal through us. But it wasn’t the right thing to do to have that feeling of responsibility. I should have just been, you know, looking out, watching that I didn’t get stabbed in the back. I should have kept my mouth shut. That’s the way a man would have played it.

However, she defines her success in terms of motherhood, having raised two "wonderful daughters".

**Anticipating Retirement: "I want to retire there and my ideal would be as soon as possible"**

Linda is one of the three women who is looking forward to retirement. As a teenager, she felt the disadvantage of her working class background and resisted female stereotyping, becoming rebellious and delinquent. She left home at 17 but managed to continue her university studies and flouted all the conventions of the time by going to live with her boyfriend and becoming pregnant before marrying. During the early 1970s she adopted an alternative lifestyle but returned to a public career, achieving some eminence in her thirties. Now, however, she is focusing on her family, wanting to retire, and disappointed because her two older children have chosen to live nearer their father. In the immediate future, however, she has taken a job overseas - "opting out" in a way, but not because she has found the workplace abrasive, but because her autonomy is threatened by what she defines as inappropriate expectations of nurturance by her subordinates, both male and female:

I think I’m going (overseas) because I’m pissed off with everybody. I’m pissed off with my whole department. I think I’ve slaved my guts out for them. And I think they’ve thought, thanks a lot. It’s taken care of us very nicely, thanks. Like the captain. I was just thinking, I’ve been playing around a lot with this battleship metaphor lately. Because of this big offensive at home about whether or not to go to (city), and who’s the crew and who’s the captain. And all this sort of stuff, you know. But I was playing around with thinking, the problem is that if you’re the captain, if you’re a woman and you’re the captain of a ship, they think you’re actually the cook. And the role of nurturance and the role of whatever, however you want to read that, gets completely mixed up, you see. So that the things that your own staff, or your students or whatever, they would never put on a man, ever. But if you’re a woman, especially my age, and all the rest of it. "Mummy. Give us the tit", basically.

**THE MEN’S CAREERS**

Most of the men have professional qualifications; for example, seven of the 27 are engineers. Only three do not have at least an undergraduate degree, but given that two of the five women without degrees are presently completing their bachelor’s qualification, there is no difference in this respect between men and women. The striking difference is that the men got their qualifications earlier, and none are presently engaged in tertiary study. This contrasts with nine of the women, which is about a third of the female group, who are currently studying, and at least three women plan to begin another tertiary course.

*Warner-Smith: Crossing Over: Gender and Career at Midlife*
Few of the men have ever had primary childcare responsibility for any significant length of time. One looked after his four school age children for twelve months while his wife was working in another centre some distance away from home, but he is an exception. All are presently employed in paid work. In their late forties most epitomise the successful professional, often having moved into management or academic positions or running their own private practice.

When the men were asked what lay ahead for them, their vision varied from a strong desire to stop work immediately, to an excitement at the challenge of a new business venture. Most of the men initially replied in the context of their public life. Two men who had recently remarried spoke first of joint plans, and one whose marriage was, in his words, "rocky", mentioned that fact before going on to discuss what he saw happening professionally.

Six men of the twenty-seven men interviewed were looking forward to change, while seventeen indicated that their lives had reached a plateau, including nine who were anticipating retirement. A further four felt that their lives were now constrained by their age. There was a range of positive and negative motivation, with varying combinations of two main factors. In some cases they were happy to stay where they were because they liked the work or aspects of their work situation, such as trips to conferences; in other cases they were staying where they were because they felt that at their age there were few options available; and some were motivated by a combination of these push/pull factors.

Those who wished to withdraw to some degree from public life had private interests enticing them. In some cases these interests were related to the family. In other cases they were hobbies such as sailing, travelling or writing. However, when they were asked about the future, they gave priority to their activities in the public world.

As noted above, characteristics around which the men were to some extent clustered, were identified. These categorisations are not discrete; rather they represent themes which characterise the midlife experiences of the men. The metaphors are of linear progression; the men themselves speak in value-laden terms which suggest hierarchies and energetic authority: "plateauing", "expanding", "retiring", "blooming and withering", and so on. These are the discourses which perpetuate career in its present definition.

Seeking Change: "I'd probably look for a career change anyway"

Some men are contemplating a change of direction because their circumstances dictate it, such as an employment contract expiring. However, rather than moving sideways into a private track, they intend to maintain their public life. Nick and Laurie are two of the six men who are not in a state of consolidation, but they differ in that Nick has had a public career, in the literal sense, while Laurie gave more importance to his family in his earlier working life. Although they are coming from different positions, they are both situating themselves quite definitely in the public world, but because of their difference it is valuable to look at both of them.

Nick is in a position which gives him significant status and he finds satisfaction in having a say in government policy. He has no immediate plans to change his job, but his is a political appointment and therefore precarious:

A lot of people seem to like to go back to some sort of study when they retire and I suppose, you know, who knows, that might happen, but at the moment I don't see the need for a structured environment if I want to improve my intellect other than anything I may need to do to practise at the Bar if I decide to have a go at that when I - I mean I'm on a sort of day-to-day existence in my present job and I've lasted four years so far and -

But it's a political whim job, you know, and - I mean it's a small scale, obviously,..., but it's the same as most departmental head jobs around the country these days, you know, one step out of line and bang. If that happens
I'll do whatever I need to do by way of getting re-admitted or admitted as a barrister and then I might try my hand at that for a bit. That would be the only thing; that would be career oriented obviously for that... I'd probably look for some sort of career change anyway, I think, within the next two or three years. I mean I've been doing this job now for four years; I think another couple of years if I last that long will be time to look for something else.

Nick could see a break in his employment as a chance for his wife to pursue a public life:

... if the axe falls on me and I don’t have any other immediate job situation in mind I think I’d at least say to Liz, "This is your - maybe your one big opportunity, you know, do you want to become the primary bread-winner for a while?"

Laurie's life, on the other hand, exhibits what might be described as a more feminine pattern, in that his life has been dominated by his commitment to his family, including twelve months when his wife was away and he had total responsibility for their four children. He does not have a university degree, and his wife is of non-English-speaking background. For both of these reasons he stands outside the main group of men. The only child of divorced parents, in adolescence he ran away from home in order to escape his "smothering" home background which was dominated by his mother and grandmother. In order to do so, he had also to turn his back on a tertiary education. It might be argued that these deviant experiences enabled him to resist the hegemonic discourses which privilege authority and professional achievement.

While he remains in the same technical area where he has been for most of his working life, he is nevertheless becoming more professionally involved and simultaneously less connected to the family - a fact which is causing concern for his wife:

But I suppose... this may be hypocritical in some ways, but the way I feel is, if you make a commitment... you make a commitment to be married, you've got to keep that commitment, whether you like it or not. If you've made that commitment and you have children, I mean that's your commitment and your priority. I mean if you talk to (my wife), you'll find that where she feels I fall down, she feels to even a higher power of that importance to family and commitment to the family. So...whereas I might have a commitment to the family, (her) commitment is even exponentially greater. And so I mean... I presume that's probably fairly common, I suppose. Because, there are times, you see, you do take up outside pursuits, and of late years, I'm in the (x) club. I'm in the (A) Society and the (B) Engineering Society - which are my two professional societies - and so a lot of these things take you away from, take you away from being with the family all the time. And so therefore it can be said that although you're giving lip service to having family priorities you're perhaps not... giving quite what you should be giving to the family. Whereas in earlier years, I suppose... it's easier in earlier years. As the kids are growing up they get bigger [and] you also feel you should let them go a bit.

Apter might see these two men as representative of a stereotypically male career pattern in which they are gathering public power as they move into their fifties, yet they are the product of dramatically divergent experiences.

**Constrained by Age: "I'm too old for a new experience"**

Some of the men remain in jobs where they have been for some time and which still provide them with some satisfaction, but they have no inclination to change and they are looking forward to retirement. Many men appear to have a chronological sense of closure which is missing in the women: they feel that they are too old to change careers, or to take on a promotion.

However, it may also be suggested that having had access to power and/or prestige in their public career, some men are unable to accommodate the idea of a public situation where they would be subordinate. Hegemonic masculinity is firmly linked to authority, rationality and
the domination of younger men by older men (Connell, 1995). It would therefore be difficult for these professional men to return voluntarily to a relatively powerless state.

Martin is an engineer who says that he has "underachieved", despite a position which requires him to travel extensively as a "troubleshooter", and a view of himself as one of a small group within the company who "make things happen". He would therefore seem to have significant status and autonomy. He is now working at the interface of the commercial and technical areas, a situation in which he had imagined himself when he was at school, even if he could not have expressed it that way at the time. But he feels that professionally he has gone as far as he can go, and that career changes need to be made in one's thirties:

I think I stayed in my first job for far too long and, in the expectation that there were new things on the horizon, which didn't eventuate. In hindsight, what I would advise all young engineers these days is to stay with their first employer for certainly no longer than five years... I guess, in hindsight I feel I've underachieved, a tremendous amount, and that's one of the things I'm very concerned about with my children, that they don't underachieve... I think it'd be very difficult, at my age now, to shift into a different career. At now, forty...forty-eight, I'd be most unlikely to shift...there are no other companies in my area in (city)...it'd be most difficult, shifting, with the children and at the stage of schooling they're at. Very difficult to get a job with the seniority I have at the moment. It's just...just too late for that. I think really that sort of move is no later than mid-thirties. I guess the one thing which...the one possibility for me to get involved with, is in consulting but even that sort of area is, in the area I'm involved in, there are not many opportunities in that. Most companies tend to do their consulting in that area in-house, so it's not a field that is wide open.

Status Quo: "I can't see any changes"

This is the theme which pervades the midlife of most of the men. Most accept the status quo - some are happy to remain where they are, others are resigned to doing so. The interesting thing is that quite a few of these men are in actuality expanding or developing private interests, but when they are asked about their plans they tend to focus on their activities in the public world.

Michael is a suburban lawyer in his own solo practice. He owns the building where he works, and lives only ten minutes away. He is in a very happy second marriage, and his wife runs the office:

I like doing this, I like actually being here. It's extremely convenient, it's a great lifestyle, I'm home in ten minutes, I play a lot of sport, I'm working fifty hours a week in a good practice which, you know, which means it's financially sound, and I can't see any changes. The only thing I'd like to do is travel more but, of course, it costs money, you know. But even - I can't complain, I mean, we went to Europe last year.

He enjoys being a suburban "GP" lawyer and his analysis of his position invokes an almost nurturant discourse which has traditionally been translated in the male context as a public service ethic. Michael identifies such a discourse in the expectation of occupational choices promulgated by the selective boys high school: boys were expected to aspire to the professions, rather than "grubby commerce". For this reason he can feel comfortable with not having reached the heights of the law, because he equates that kind of achievement with greed rather than service:

I am quite convinced, as far as what I've done in my life, is that I don't feel I'm a terribly talented person so being a suburban lawyer fits neatly into it. I look around at what else I could do and I can't see many other things. It's just by pure luck I think I've fallen into a profession or an occupation that's been quite successful for me. I'll never be a Queen's Counsel, I don't want to be. I enjoy being a suburban GP. I actually like it a lot. I'll never be a judge, I'll never be a barrister like some of the guys from (high school) .... quite predominant in the legal profession. I'm perfectly happy with that. I'm very happy with this set-up here, it's
close to home and it’s comfortable, it’s a good life and I enjoy what I’m doing... Well one of the things was getting out of town. There’s a vast difference being a lawyer in the city as against out here. All the people who are - it’s uncivilised, the profession in town; it’s a real rat-race. Money is the only thing that matters in town. Being a suburban lawyer is rather like being a suburban GP - you’re helping people and you’re trying to keep - you’re trying to do it at a cost that they can meet.

Anticipating Retirement: "I just want to stop"

Several men felt that their public careers had come to an end: Hugh said that he had virtually run out of steam.

Like Nick who was "seeking change", Hugh is a lawyer who has had a visible public career, but the two men differ in that while Nick believes that he can still "make a difference", Hugh sees himself as having done as much as he can. He has been married twice and has two families of children. At the time of the interview he had just resigned, citing disillusionment with the management style of the organisation where he was employed. The culture of his particular workplace may not be "alien" in the gendered sense conceived by Terri Apter, but Hugh feels he cannot survive in it any longer. However, he is also "saddened" at the lack of change in three areas to which he had devoted a great deal of energy during his working life, such as the plethora of legal systems within Australia as a federation of separate states:

I’ve worked hard on all of those areas and I’m suddenly tired at fifty, I suddenly want to give it all up and just stop, I want to stop working. I’ve worked for twenty-five bloody years non-stop and I’m finished... Look, I’ve been really - I’ve had a fantastic working life. The variety that I’ve had; I’ve had a - I’ve had a scholarship to (overseas university), I’ve worked in two of the best law firms in the country, I’ve worked for the black fellas in the middle of this wonderful native land and I’ve had four fantastic children and married two remarkable women and I mean - shit - what a life. But I’m buggered, I think I need to stop. I mean I’m one of the products of the lucky country.

He had not decided what he was going to do but, like Nick, saw the change in his lifestyle as possibly an opportunity for his wife to develop professionally. Neither of the men apparently considered this as an option under normal circumstances but they expressed concern that their wives may not be able to fulfill their potential in the public world.

CONCLUSION

This comparative view of the lives of the men and women makes three points:

1. The men are more likely than the women to be looking forward to retirement.
2. The rejection of the "alien" culture of the workplace, in a gendered sense, is not strongly implicated as a factor pushing women to "opt out".
3. The majority of the women are clustered around one position, i.e. an anticipation of the expansion of their public life. In this sense, they occupy a narrower field than that of the men, who are split into a number of small groups: one group looking forward to change, another group satisfied with the way things are, a third group looking forward to retirement, and a few feeling the constraints of their age.

As noted earlier, the discourses around femininity were contradictory and constraining for the women. In their early thirties it appeared that the men were well set along the road to progress and promotion, while the women struggled to negotiate the tension between nurturance and autonomy. In their mid-forties, however, it is the discursive pressures of masculinity which can be seen to have disadvantaged the men.

Warner-Smith: Crossing Over: Gender and Career at Midlife
Their "right" to have a career brought with it the "responsibility" to be breadwinner, and they find it difficult to step outside this positioning. Even with a wife who is working - and in some cases making more money than her husband - and children almost grown, they feel a duty to continue to be seen to be, and to feel themselves to be, the primary earner.

On the other hand, the women have found themselves liberated from the narrow path they had envisaged for themselves. In their twenties, despite their education, the discourses to which they accommodated told them that they would do what their mothers had done. In their thirties and forties, they reached back to their education and found the possibility of self-actualisation. As women write their own stories of achievement in midlife, and men 'wind down', each is beginning to colonise the area previously seen to be inhabited by the Other, and thus occurs the 'crossing over' which the title of this paper suggests.

Sexual harassment and discriminatory workplace practices are a reality and have been experienced by many of the women in this group. One third of them have been divorced and understand the economic imperative of breadwinning, although this has paradoxically ultimately served to further their careers. However, to remain within the structuralist paradigm is limiting, as Apter's approach shows, and an analysis of internalised discourses of masculinity and femininity provides a more helpful explanation of the outcomes discussed in this paper.

Works Cited


Kessler-Harris, A. "Treating the Male as 'Other': Redefining the Parameters of Labor History." Labor History 34 (1993): 197-201.


