

**IS THERE A FEMALE CAREER?
UNMASKING PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S CAREERS IN
FRANCE**

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Abstract

This study responds to the call for more research on the under-studied topic of women's careers (White, 1995, 2000; Sullivan, 1999; Gallos, 1996; Belghiti-Mahut, 2004; Laufer, 2004, Yarnall, 2008) and the growing interest for developing new perspectives on careers and career development (Arthur *et al.* 1996; Dyke and Murphy, 2006). This call for research corresponds to the needs of enterprises today to attract, retain and develop female talent notably in typically male dominant industries (Fielden *et al.* 2001; Cromer and Lemaire, 2007) as well as to achieve male/female equality objectives as driven by French legislation. Responding to these calls, we explore the following major research questions on women's careers, career advancement today, and new approaches to investigating careers: Is there a female career? If so, how do women today picture their careers? We conducted a research using a questionnaire with 93 French managers participating in a women's networking event. The first results show that there are multiple perceptions of women's careers as well as several dominant families. Moreover, certain perceptions of women's careers concord with emerging notions of career advancement some of which may have national characteristics, in this case French, and others which indicate more global trends. Inciting women to capture and describe their career by way of pictures may offer an answer to going beyond gender stereotypes in the workplace and creating a dialogue between key stakeholders.

Key-words: women's careers; career models; career development; perceptions; images

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Introduction

This study responds to the call for more research on the under-studied topic of women's careers (White, 1995, 2000; Sullivan, 1999; Gallos, 1996; Belghiti-Mahut, 2004; Laufer, 2004; Yarnall, 2008) and the growing interest for developing new perspectives on careers and career development (Arthur *et al.*, 1996; Dyke and Murphy, 2006). This call for research corresponds to the needs of enterprises today to attract, develop and retain female talent in all kinds of sectors and notably in typically male dominant industries (Fielden *et al.*, 2001; Cromer and Lemaire, 2007). It is also aligned with new legislation driven by the French government (Report of the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Cohesion, 2012) to encourage greater male/female professional equality in the workplace. Recently in January 2014, the law of parental leave was reformed resulting in a reduction of the parental leave for the first parent from 36 to 30 months. The goal is to encourage the second parent, in the vast majority of cases the father, to take a six month leave after the birth of the second child. The French Minister of Women's Rights, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem aims for 100,000 fathers to take the six month parental leave by 2017. Today only 18,000 fathers take advantage of this opportunity (Berhouet, 2014). This recent reform complements the Copé-Zimmerman law of January 2011, regarding the representation of Women on boards (WoB). The law provides a progressive introduction of quotas in order to feminise the governing bodies of large companies. By 2017 the percentage of WoB should reach 40%. These examples from the French national context show that the issues of gender parity and equality are increasingly visible and are challenging today's business world. The high mediatisation of such laws, as well as current practices, aims to build awareness and track the moving landscape. Finally, our study responds to the growing interest for capturing careers by way of dominant images or metaphors (Kram *et al.*, 2012,) and especially those of women (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Naschberger, 2012). In order to respond to these calls, we explore the three following major research questions on women's careers, and new approaches to investigating careers: Is there a female career? If so, using images, how do women today perceive their careers? How may the use of images or metaphors enhance our understanding of women's careers? To investigate such questions, our empirical research is based on a survey of managers participating in a French women's networking event. Our research aims to shed light on the multiple perceptions of women's careers as well as several dominant families. The results show the complexity of women's careers today and the close tie to work-life balance for French female managers. Moreover the images chosen by the women managers reflect the multiple shapes of women's careers today as well as the co-existence of traditional and more complex images with traditional masculine and feminine characteristics.

1. Survey of the literature

1.1. From 'rigid' traditional masculine career models

Most research on careers and career development is based on a traditional linear model to progress in a firm: access to positions with higher status, higher prestige, higher levels of responsibility, and higher salaries (Williams, 2000). Probably one of the most cited career development stage models was developed by Super (1957) who identified four career stages:

trial, establishment, maintenance, and decline. Later, Levinson (1978) elaborated a model of life development: a comprehensive eight phase model associated with one's biological age. Both models and the majority of work written on career stages results from studies of men, and much of that research was done prior to 1990.

1.2 Towards 'flexible' feminine career models

Twenty years after the appearance of the first career models, research has started to include or focus on women's career advancement (Kanter, 1977; Morgan and Foster, 1999; Belghiti-Mahut, 2004; Davidson and Burke, 2004; Dyke and Duxbury, 2011). Some argue while the career development of women has been explored, the concept of career stage as uniquely experienced by women is still not very comprehensive (Yarnall, 2008). Women progress through careers at different rates and in varied succession depending on a number of unique factors, such as, for example, family status and family responsibilities (Mayrhofer *et al.* 2008; Yarnall, 2008). Female career advancement is likely to be compared with a "staircase": career advancement is interrupted by periods of stagnation due to pregnancy, childcare or other care activities. Whereas men typically enter and exit the career exploration stage during adolescence, women may experience the career exploration stage in mid-life for the first time, or they may re-enter exploration as childcare responsibilities decrease (Morgan and Foster, 1999). Similarly, the retirement stage is based on the premise that a man has a lifelong career while women may "retire" or intermittently leave the workforce as pregnancy or other family obligations arise. The same factors, such as parenthood, increasing number of children, or elderly family members requiring care have a negative impact on women's career progression, whereas they have a positive impact on men's career progression (Ferro-Vallé, 2009). Finally women's decision-making about career development is contextual and embedded in relationships (Eagly and Carli, 2007) which contrasts to men's self-driven decision-making. The following table summarizes the characteristics of traditional men's and women's career development pathways.

	Men's careers	Women's careers
Direction	Linear	Flexible
Individual choice	self-driven and independent	self-driven and dependent on family status (Mayrhofer <i>et al.</i> 2008) and relationships with others embedded in context (Eagly and Carli, 2007)
Purpose	aimed at higher status, high prestige, higher levels of responsibility, higher level of salary (Williams, 2000)	personal equilibrium (Laufer and Pochic, 2004), balance between career opportunities and family life
Career exploration stage	begins at adolescence (Morgan and Foster, 1999)	could begin not until mid-life (Morgan and Foster, 1999)
Career advancement stage	steady (Ferro-Vallé, 2009)	according to the "stairway" model: pregnancy, family obligation years (children, handicapped or elderly members

		of the family, sick leave) (Ferro-Vallé, 2009)
Retreat from the labour market (French case)	possibility to retreat for a few days up to 30 months (paternity or parental leave, adoption, care leave)	fixed-term retreat from a few weeks up to 30 months (maternity or parental leave, adoption, care leave)

Table 1 Characteristics of traditional men's and women's career paths

In France, the length of maternity leave depends on the expected number of children and on the number of children already present: from 16 weeks (expecting one child or less than two children), 26 weeks, (expecting one child or more than two children), 34 weeks (expecting twins), up to 46 weeks (expecting triplets or more). Eight weeks are mandatory for women but a collective agreement may provide more favorable conditions. The length of paternity leave is 11 consecutive calendar days (including Saturday and Sunday) in case of single birth or 18 consecutive calendar days in case of multiple births and not compulsory. For both, maternity and paternity leave, the parents receive compensation per diem (www.ameli.fr)

Parental leave is not compulsory in France: up to one year for a child and two times renewable, so three years maximum. As mentioned above since January 2014, the second parent is allowed to take six months of the parental leave. Parents are compensated as it is unpaid leave: from 600 Euros /month (one child) to 800 Euros /month (three children). The compensation depends on the financial resources of the parents (vosdroits.service-public.fr)

Increasingly, men are also adapting their careers to participate more fully in the parenting role and family demands are also likely to impact their career development and career stages (Yarnall, 2008). Some authors argue that the protean career concept (Hall, 1976) may be more appropriate to study women's careers, and could be well adapted to more modern career aspirations in societies where individual aspirations increasingly impact career choices. Protean careers are determined by the individual's values and influenced by our personal identity. Other authors study women's careers by gaining a better understanding of the levers and obstacles for career development (Naschberger *et al.*, 2012). Today, changing professional expectations with respect to careers of both of men and women are shaping the concepts and ideas of careers in the 21st century. In our paper we investigate how metaphors or symbols have been used to understand career development and more particularly career development of women. We are also interested in understanding how women picture and perceive their own careers.

1.3. Picturing women's careers

Pictures, images or symbols, as elements of thought, provide a rich source of information about how people make sense of their lives. The use of symbols for career metaphors can capture certain strong feelings such as frustration or perplexity (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Images are not just descriptors of reality; they reflect cognitive frameworks within which people make sense of their own actions in interaction with others. The work on pictures can be likened to the work on metaphors, which are in essence images conjured by words or groups of words. Images or metaphors can be used to help change mentalities, by identifying the predominant images in place, questioning their meaning, and inciting, when useful, the replacement of images which could be an obstacle to self or professional development. Metaphors are useful for developmental counselling approaches as they encourage clients to

clarify meaning of their experience through a focus on cognitive structures (Morgan and Foster, 1999).

The use of images in gender and career literature is significant although largely used to capture invisible or ordinary obstacles which prevent women from accessing higher level responsibilities in the work place: glass ceiling, glass walls, sticky floor, and asbestos are common examples (Landrieux-Kartochian, 2003; Laufer, 2004; Ferro-Vallé, 2007). The labyrinth image has more recently been identified as an appropriate image of what women confront in their professional endeavors as the metaphor acknowledges obstacles, but is not ultimately discouraging as other common images of women's careers, such as the glass ceiling or sticky floor, tend to be (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Naschberger *et al.* 2012).

White (1995) remarks the predominance of masculine images in career models, and raises the need to conceptualize the careers of especially successful women over time and space to capture patterns of adjustment in order to identify patterns of issues associated with certain ages and stages in life characteristic of women. Several images or schematic representations of women's career development have been proposed over time. Larwood and Gutek (1987) use the tree of possible alternatives, with branches symbolizing combinations of alternatives leading to potentially different outcomes. Rapoport and Rapoport (1980) offer the triple helix image to capture how transitions in life mark the career choices of women. This model portrays regular interactions throughout a woman's life, between the occupational helix, the family helix and the leisure helix. The image of the helix conveys dynamics such as turning points or critical impacts of events in the developmental process and balancing of steady states between transitions.

A useful starting point for career development is to create greater understanding for the individual as to how he or she perceives the notion of career and to assist the individual in projecting him or herself into the future and/or looking back over his or her career history. Common career development metaphors, including the vertical ladder, roller-coaster or more recently the horizontal career ladder, can help individuals explore some of the patterns. Drawing pictures of one's career can be another way of capturing key themes as suggested by Yarnall (2008).

2. Methodology

Our goal was to discover women's perceptions of what is a female career, as well as to understand how they respond to visual images of female career development. To discover these perceptions, the authors co-animated an hour session built around nine research questions on network membership and careers in an auditorium during a women's networking event. Each member of the primarily female audience received and was invited to fill out a questionnaire, at the same time as the questions were raised. As each question was raised, care was taken by the authors not to bias the respondents' answers by choosing not to divulge previous research findings. For the final questions on perceptions of careers, images were projected on a screen in the amphitheater (see Appendix 1) and the participants were asked to choose the image which mostly closely resembled their own career, as they picture it.

The questionnaires were collected at the exit of the conference room. Not at all attending participants returned the questionnaire, however judging by the total number of attendees to the women's day (150 throughout the day), and the observed rate of occupancy of the session on women's careers (approximately 110), the reception of 98 completed questionnaires signifies a high return rate. Out of the 98 returned questionnaires, 93 were completed by women. In this study only the women's responses will be discussed.

To maintain the rich nature of the collected data, thematic coding was used for the analysis. Verbatim were transcribed and coded by a research assistant. Instead of using predetermined categories, all of the themes that emerged from answers to the questions were recorded. As new themes emerged, previous verbatim were reviewed to ensure that all of the relevant themes were captured in all of the answers. To ensure inter-rater reliability, each co-author separately double checked the relevance of the initial coding and if necessary made counter-suggestions. The data was then translated from French to English by one of the bilingual authors. The second bilingual author cross-checked and if necessary provided an alternative translation which was validated by the first author. The translations did not have an impact on the data belonging to the pattern. To allow readers to access the evidence themselves, direct quotes from respondents have been used extensively throughout the analysis to follow. The number of the respondent, as well as the sex, age and number of children are mentioned after each quote mentioned in the following tables.

3. Sample Description

The respondents represented a range of industries, functional areas, organizational levels and ages (see Table 2). Industries ranged from primarily the following sectors: energy, construction, banking, education, communications and marketing.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most represented age brackets in order of importance: 41-50 years (43%), 31-40 years (26%), 51-60 years (18%), under 30 years (12%) • The respondents had an average of 2 children • The most represented level of studies is the high school <i>baccalaureat</i> degree + 5 years (77%) • 93% of the respondents were working and 86% were managers « cadre » • The number of years of professional activity: 11-20 years 38%, 21-30 years 30%, 10 years and under 18%

Table 2. Sample characteristics

The following five career images (see Appendix 1) were given with brief explanations both written in the questionnaire and verbally reiterated : vertical ladder (characterized by vertical progression); horizontal ladder (characterized by horizontal progression); mountain (characterized by different phases: exploration, profession, stabilization and retreat); roller coaster (characterized by a succession of ups and downs); and labyrinth (characterized by obstacles which must be overcome to find the right pathway). The participants were informed that if none of the given symbols fit with their career perception they were to draw their own image.

4. Results and discussion

First we are going to present the results of an individual interpretation of what is a female career and then the leading images of women's careers will be discussed.

4.1. Personal definition of a female career

The authors asked an open question in order to understand the women's perceptions of what is a female career: « According to you, what is a female career? ». The different perspectives are described below using illustrative quotes. A summary of key differences belonging to different age categories and family status may be found in Table 3.

29% of the respondents described a female career « as a challenge of balancing work-life and family life ». 14% said that there are « no differences between men and women thus a female career does not exist ». 11% mentioned that a female career is about « choosing family or career ». For 10% of the respondents a female career is « fulfillment ». 8% consider that there are « more obstacles for women than for men ». 8% respond that « a career is a personal project built over time ». 3% consider that « men's and women's careers are equal except women bear children ». 3% describe a female career as a « battle ». For 3% a female career is « constant adaptation » and 2% think that « it is a privilege not to have a straight career ». Another 2% consider that « a female career is more flexible than a man's career » and another 2% answered « I do not know ». 5% of the respondents did not answer the question at all.

Table 3 provides examples of each category which figure by order of importance

Category	Is there a female career? If so what is a female career? (Examples)
Work-Life balance	« It is great willingness to conciliate private-professional life. It is a constant calling into question, to know which goals one wants to achieve professionally and in what time frame. » (39 yrs. 2 children)
No difference	« There is no female career. It is up to each person to find his/her definition of career and success. » (54 yrs. 1 child)
Choice and dual career	« It's often a choice between family and profession. » (40 yrs. 2 children)
Fulfillment	« Achievement and self-fulfillment in a professional career. » (21 yrs. 0 children)
More obstacles for women	« I don't know. I wouldn't know either how to answer for men. I only know that for women to make a career it is harder to climb, to be paid as much men for an equivalent position. You get tired and stop wanting to fight to climb. » (54 yrs. 3 children)
A personal career built over time	« A chosen, mature career. A female career is built over time with patience, determination and a bit of abnegation...with often the necessity of taking secondary pathways, climbing over mountains, which makes women's careers all the more rich. The taste for adventure and a little bit of « provoc[ation]. » (47 yrs. more than 3 children)
Equal except women bear children	« It's undeniable that a woman's career today is different from that of a man's. But in my opinion there should not be any difference in career between the two sexes (apart from "physiological" differences such as those related to pregnancy, etc. » (41 yrs. 2 children)
Battle	« Today, it is an everyday battle, to show that we can do as much as a man, or even more. To be incredibly strong in character and question oneself in order to advance. To not doubt one's value and capacities. To be able to face adversity, especially macho statements, to leave aside demeaning remarks. » (28 yrs. 0 children)
Constant adaptation	« A constant adaptation between personal desire, following the career pathway of the husband and educating the children. I alternated between periods of training and professional experience. » (64 yrs. 2 children)

Non linear	« Women have the privilege to not be obligated to engage along a straight career pathway. We must make use of this privilege, and extend it to men. » (57 yrs. 1 child)
More flexible than man's careers	« A career which leaves the choice between private and professional life priorities and the choice of rhythm. In reality it's a career which is more flexible, but also for the benefit of men. » (29 yrs. 0 children)

Table 3. Women's descriptions of what is a female career

4.2. Dominant images of women's careers

As mentioned above five career images were given and in the case that none of the given symbols fit with their career perception, the respondents were invited to draw their own image. Table 4 presents the results to the question: « Which symbol best corresponds to your own career? » respecting the order of importance for the respondents.

Image	Number of respondents	%
mountain	22	23,66
labyrinth	18	19,35
vertical ladder	16	17,20
roller coaster	10	10,75
horizontal ladder	3	3,23
others	22	23,66
blank answer	2	2,15
Total	93	100%

Table 4. Images corresponding to own career

The most commonly chosen image was the mountain, followed by the labyrinth, the vertical ladder, the roller coaster and the horizontal ladder. Almost one quarter of the respondents did not choose one of the suggested images, preferring either a combination of the suggested images or different images or explanations of personal approaches to career development. These other images included a multiplicity of occupations, projects, changing occupations and directions. One woman stated that although the activities were in appearance very different, the progression over time, with hindsight, was logical. Explanations of personal approaches include: « vertical progression compared to myself and not within the company ». Another woman observed that because she had first accepted the horizontal ladder she was able to climb very quickly up the management ladder. Another woman could not sufficiently see an image corresponding to a career where one alternates family and professional life priorities. Still another respondent chose a tree, and underlined how much more a woman's career requires greater energy and organization than a man's. Finally, one other woman offered the image of the career of avoiding traps and jumping over obstacles. It is significant to note that

only 2 out of the 93 women did not answer the question. This seems to signify that thinking about careers as images was stimulating for the respondents.

4.3. Discussion

Our results show the multiplicity of what is a female career. According to the personal experiences of the respondents we can observe the strong link between career and work-life balance. In the eyes of French female managers, career questions and the balance between work and family are intertwined. Many respondents mentioned also the fact of being a mother and having a family. In comparison to other countries does this outcome reveal a French specificity? Is a French female career characterised by the requirement to juggle many external factors to succeed and as being inseparable of family obligations? Does this reflect the definition of career success in France? With almost two children per woman, the French fertility rate is one of the highest in Europe (Davie and Mazuy, 2010), and as reported by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) with a small decline of the number of births since 2011 (www.insee.fr). According to statistics of the French National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), the educational level influences fertility e.g. female graduates of higher education have their first child at the age of 32 years (Davie and Mazuy, 2010). Beyond 35 years, female graduates of higher education represent 21% (Davie and Mazuy, 2010), which shows the most important % of all categories (without diploma, below *baccalaureat* degree, *baccalaureat* degree, higher education). The average birth giving age increases with the degree and diploma obtained. Another interesting fact is also that nearly half of the children born in 2008 have a mother who studied (Davie and Mazuy, 2010). From these observations we can conclude that in France having children is part of the culture and managing both professional and family lives is normal. According to personal observations of the author having a family in France is considered to contribute work-life balance. For French female students it is obvious to intend to have a family later on. In a job interview setting, a French recruiter would even get a bit suspect if a candidate does not talk about the conciliation of professional and private life [candidates complain about questions not being job related]. According to Belghiti-Mahut and Landrieux-Kartochian (2008) and Ferro-Vallé (2009) women's careers are negatively influenced by the number of children whereas the opposite is the case for men. Some authors also point out the weight of the dominant dual career model of female managers (Laufer and Pochic, 2004). This situation has also an impact on the way women negotiate with their partner or husband. In many cases it is the female manager who is in charge of family obligations (Ferro-Vallé, 2009). As Laufer (2005) already demonstrated, the choices made between a couple are often in favor of the man's career and in detriment to the woman's career. The next dominant answer category was that there are « no differences between men and women thus a female career does not exist ». Does this mean that for these female managers, adopting the predominant masculine career model seems normal? Or do they do not want to see the difference? Can we talk in this context about women being career blind? Is adopting male career standards one of the strategies to succeed in the French business environment?

The purpose of our study was to better understand how women perceive women's careers by inciting them to answer the question « Is there a female career ? » followed by asking them to choose an image which best resembles their own career. With regards to the age, level of education, and number of years of experience, the women in our sample could be considered as having a certain experience with the notion of career. Across the different age categories and regardless of the number of children, women chose both traditional images of male careers such as mountains and vertical ladders as well as more recent images of female

careers such as the labyrinth. However when choosing traditional images of a mountain or a vertical ladder the women commonly added typical feminine values such as the need to take the necessary time to « advance-pause-advance » in order to « seek family and professional life balance » when moving up a mountain. Furthermore personal « conviction » overrides « power » on the way to the summit. Likewise moving up the vertical ladder requires « character » and « energy » in order to obtain « authority » and « legitimacy » in the quest for « self-fulfillment », all the while balancing family and professional priorities. Finally the explanation for the labyrinth image resonates Eagly and Carli's (2007) observation that although labyrinths represent complexity they are less a source of discouragement than an opportunity to manifest one's « determination » and « choices ».

If the traditional masculine career pathway is inflexible, planned and organized it contrasts starkly with the more flexible, less planned, chaotic feminine career pathway. Masculine values such as being the bread winner, having job security, and conforming to career development norms contrast to feminine values such as putting others' interests before one's own, engaging along a jagged pathway full of surprises, finding order in the complexity and making weighed choices along the way. With the recent developments on a French national context, men may be released from the typical male career model. Men have to cope with strong pressure in their professional life (Tremblay, 2003) to respond to various expectations and it may seem difficult for them to conciliate work and family life. We can raise the question as to whether there will be a real shift for men from the inflexible career model to a more flexible model? Time will tell. This example also shows that men may benefit from equality initiatives. Men will face less pressure to adopt a linear career which was the only model valid in the past. Men will take care of their families through work-life balance initiatives and seeing men taking babies for a walk in the pram will become part of the social landscape. Evidence of parental role-sharing will be socially accepted inside an organization and outside. Until recently, it was not common for men to identify or feel concerned by equality actions however the younger generation is much more sensitive to equality questions and work-life balance.

While some women lament the extra energy expended in their dual career life or over the span of their working life, others see the continuous balancing act and significant psychological efforts of a career as a unique opportunity for personal and professional fulfillment to be marketed in different ways.

Table 5 plots the explanations for the choice of the three dominant images in the study according to the masculine and feminine values previously explained in the literature survey.

Image	Masculine values	Feminine values
mountain	<p>« Chosen, thought-out and assumed » (40 yrs. 2 children)</p> <p>« Chosen, desired, consciously decided, enthusiastic allying pleasure and reward. » (52 yrs. 2 children)</p>	<p>« Adapt progression to choices one makes with progression being characterized by “advancement-pause-advancement” so as to seek professional and private fulfillment. » (43 yrs. 3 children)</p> <p>« In the direction of the summit. A career is based on conviction more than on the need for power. The “plus” [power] is not exclusive. » (42 yrs. 0 children)</p>
labyrinth	<p>« A woman's career is the same as a man's with maybe greater determination. » (63 yrs. 2 children)</p> <p>« I don't know if there is such thing as a</p>	<p>« Dual career » (45 yrs. 2 children)</p> <p>« A career that allows us to assume a balance between our professional and family life - we still have a long way to</p>

	woman's career. » (51 yrs. 2 children)	go! » (36 yrs. 2 children)
vertical ladder	<p>« [Need to] have character because one expends a lot of energy to obtain authority, gain legitimacy. » (41 yrs. 2 children)</p> <p>« Why distinguish between a male and a female career? The expectations and possibilities are the same. Ideally, a career allows self-fulfillment both professional and personal. » (31 yrs. 0 children)</p>	<p>« Conciliate family and career (advance in an interesting job) » (36 yrs. 1 child)</p> <p>« All family life and career advancement » (49 yrs. 1 child)</p>

Table 5. Summary of the three dominant images of women's careers and their male and female dimensions

Our study has several limits. Although it is our belief that women themselves are best placed to capture women's careers a possible bias may be due to a feminine point of view of the topic as the sample is composed entirely of women. Out of the few men attending the event, certain questioned the need to distinguish women's careers and men's careers as they as men had taken turns with their partners in placing family priorities before career priorities. Another factor might be age and work experience: the sample is relatively « mature »: 87% of the respondents are between 41 and 60 years old and 68% have between 11 and 30 years of work experience. Mature women with work experience may adopt more personal expectations as opposed to social expectations of career. Just as Dyke and Murphy (2006) point out that women differ from men in their definition of success placing greater importance of work-life balance than material success, Yarnall (2008) remarks that as workers age they are likely to redefine what is meant by career success.

The administration of the questionnaire without direct face-to-face interaction, as would be the case in one-on-one interviews might also influence and result in difficulties for some of the event attendees to make deliberate choices between the images. Indeed, some images may not have been clear for all and could have been perceived as complex.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand women's perceptions of their own career and to gain greater understanding as to how women picture their careers. We compared previous findings in the literature to data gathered « in situ » during a women's networking event. If careers should be accommodated around the reality of women's lives, allowing them to make a meaningful contribution in both occupational and family roles as proposed by White (1995), should not the same opportunities be open to men as well? The predominant images chosen by women have both traditional masculine and feminine characteristics. In sum, images offer references for understanding the complexities of women's careers, and the challenges women face. They provide a medium for discussion and solution-finding useful at both an individual level as well as on an organizational level. For Eagly and Carli (2007) metaphors matter because they are part of the storytelling that can compel change. Is not the constant adaptation and taking into consideration the needs of different stakeholders characteristic of a more sustainable approach to career development in an unpredictable business environment? To what extent are women's careers, more boundaryless and in phase with individual choices, increasingly becoming the model for men's and women's changing careers in the 21st century?

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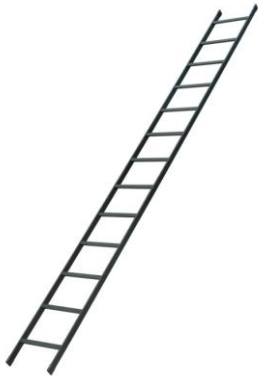
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Website: http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=NATnon02231

Appendix 1. Pictures

Selection of pictures as appeared on slide presentation and to which respondents referred to in the questionnaire.

Which picture best corresponds to your career?



A. Vertical ladder



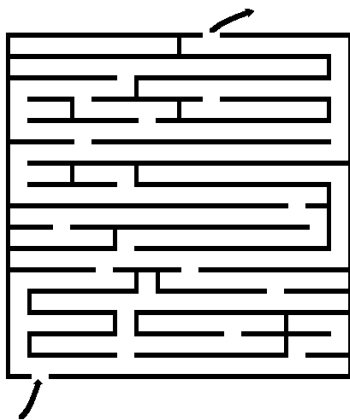
B. Horizontal ladder



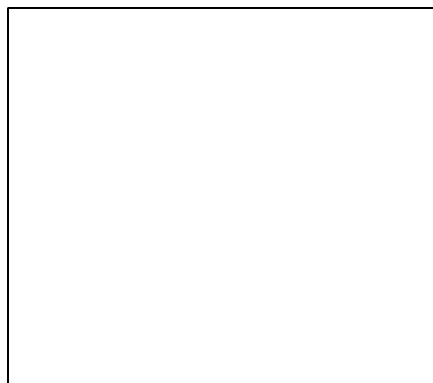
C. Mountain



D. Roller coaster



D. Labyrinth



E. Draw your own picture.