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Presidential Address

Beyond the Career Mystique: "Time In," "Time Out," and "Second Acts"[1]

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The career mystique is the belief that working hard and putting in long hours continuously throughout adulthood is the path to occupational success, personal fulfillment, and a secure retirement. This is a false myth, increasingly irrelevant for most contemporary Americans, given that (1) few employees today have the back up of full-time homemakers, and (2) a competitive, information economy has fostered a global labor market, destroying the implicit contract linking seniority with security. America's 21st century workforce requires a reconfiguration of "time in" paid work, including opportunities for "time outs," as well as for "second acts."

KEY WORDS: career; gender; retirement; workforce; employment; work-family.

INTRODUCTION: CAREERS AS PATTERNED BEHAVIOR

Robert K. Merton (1987) urged fellow sociologists to look for and describe patterned regularities, that is, to "establish the phenomenon" of interest before seeking to explain it. The *careers* phenomenon has sparked the interests of sociologists since the seminal works by Hughes, Becker, and Strauss (see Hughes, 1937; Becker and Hughes, 1968; Becker and Strauss, 1956). Men's lock-step progression from education to continuous, full-time employment to the continuous full-time leisure of retirement—Wilensky's (1961) concept of orderly careers (characteristic only of mostly white, middle-class, married men in the 1950s)—has become the yardstick

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against which most Americans gauge occupational success, even though most workers, male or female, have, in fact, not followed such a lock-step path.

Hughes (1937:413) defined careers objectively as "a series of statuses and clearly defined offices." These "offices" are constructed by employing organizations, professional associations, and legislation (concerning wages and hours as well as ERISA), but they simultaneously represent the biographical paths and experiences of the people occupying them. Following Hughes, I use the concept of careers to refer to *identifiable patterns of movement within and across jobs (and, or organizations) throughout the life course*. Thus, everyone has an occupational "career" in terms of their work history. An example of a disorderly career pathway is an intermittent trajectory, with workers moving in and out of various unrelated jobs, in and out of the workforce (see Han and Moen, 1999).

Hughes also made the important point, often lost in contemporary discussions, that careers need not be just about jobs, but could describe "other points at which one's life touches the social order . . . [that it is] possible to have a career in an avocation as well as in a vocation." Hughes recognized that careers have a subjective side as well, constituting "the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things that happen to him" (413).

WHY CAREERS MATTER

From one vantage point, occupational careers have everything to do with identity and with the location of people within a social hierarchy; they provide not only a way of knowing one's self, but also a way of knowing about other people (Kanter, 1977) and where one stands in the broader society, for workers in all kinds of jobs. Careers also help people make sense of and talk about the temporal nature of their lives: their past experiences, their present circumstances, and their future prospects, regardless of whether their occupational course is orderly, intermittent, or chaotic. But careers are more than shorthand encapsulations of personal biographies; they are located within—and serve to sustain—*a social structure that defines a repertoire of expected behaviors and relationships* (Barley, 1989). The main point is that the *careers* concept provides a dynamic link between institutions and individuals.

The notion of "career" is a historical invention, emerging as a social fact only with the development of corporations, bureaucracies, and the growth of white-collar employment. As Mills (1956) pointed out, prior to the Industrial Revolution most people worked in either agriculture or a family business. Though individual farmers, craftspeople, and family entrepreneurs may have had "life plans," they did not have "careers." As paid work (particularly in corporations and government) became prominent in contemporary society, the idea and emerging reality of occupational careers came to shape life chances, life quality, and life choices in virtually every arena. But equating "career" *with paid* work rendered *unpaid* work—whether in a family business, as housework and family caregiving, or in the form of civic engagement—marginal to the "business" of society and, consequently, marginal to the business of mainstream sociology. Moreover, by the middle of the 20th century, those not in jobs offering mobility ladders, prestige, or security with seniority were seen as marginal to the growing "white-collar" or unionized "blue-collar" mainstream of American society. Sociologists acknowledged these differences by dividing up the labor market into "primary" and "secondary" sectors, with those in the primary sector reaping the health-insurance benefits, pensions, prestige, and mobility implicit in the concept of "orderly careers."

Robert Merton long ago pointed out the ways that concepts shape (1968:145) "our perceptions and, derivatively, our thought and behavior. The concept defines the situation." Thus, the very notion of career "ladders" is both a metaphor and an organizing principle, providing the rationale for the ways the labor market and the state organize and allocate employment opportunities, risks, and resources. The whole notion, for example, of primary and secondary labor markets constitutes systemic patterns of opportunity and constraint tied to (1) educational and occupational credentials, abilities, experience, and training, along with (2) gender, age, and life stage, as well as, (3) organizational employment practices, legislation, regulation, and labor markets (see Baron and Bielby, 1980; Hall, 1976, 1986). Americans embrace a shared cultural model of "career," *whether or not it depicts their own experiences*.

Paid work and career paths are a source of routines and expectations, providing the social organization of time: be it (work) days, (work) weeks, or (work) life. These temporal rhythms shape the experiences of everyone—men, women, and children—whether or not they are in the workforce. One could argue that the whole edifice of life in the United States rests upon a clockwork regime of policies and practices assuming that employees are (or should be) following full-time, continuous work paths. Those in part-time or temporary jobs, as well as those moving in and out of the workforce, are unlikely to have health care, vacation, sick leave, and retirement benefits, much less the status and rewards that are tied to "good" jobs in the primary sector.

As a life-course and feminist scholar, I view the patterned regularities around the normative (full-time, continuous) occupational career, along with those around normative (full-time, continuous) retirement, as systems of rules, relations, and expectations that are fundamental to understanding the *gendered* and *age-based, as well as class and race-based* allocation, socialization, and stratification processes distributing paid work, unpaid care work, and the resources they bring (*see* also Blossfeld, 1986; Elder and Pavalko, 1993; Elder and O'Rand, 1995; Blair-Loy, 1999). The myths of "orderly careers" (an early 20th-century invention) and "orderly" retirement (a mid-20th-century invention) continue to shape 21st century thinking, rules and regulations, even though they are increasingly outdated, unrealistic, and rare.

THE CAREER MYSTIQUE

This common understanding of full-time, continuous dedication to paid work as the path to fulfillment and the good life is what I call *the career mystique* (see Moen and Roehling, 2005). The career myth is closely aligned with the American dream of rugged individualism, of people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, of hard work "paying off" in financial success and job security, of movement up the ladder of particular occupational or organizational hierarchies, or else "ladder-hopping" across occupations or organizations (Wilensky, 1961; Arthur *et al.*, 1989; Han and Moen, 1999; Hertz and Ferguson, 1998). The career mystique embraces both an endurance ethic and a work ethic, both crucial to American values of individualism and free enterprise. "Sacrifice by working hard," the myth goes, and you'll reap wealth, security, status, health insurance, pensions, respect, love, admiration, happiness, and, eventually, the leisure of a retirement without financial worries. The obverse is also true: If success is deserved, the product of a lifetime of hard work, so too is failure. In other words, the career mystique implies that those who don't "make it" simply do not try hard enough. This implicit understanding governs a plethora of policies and practices (such as providing Unemployment Insurance or health benefits only to full-time workers in "permanent" [i.e., nontemporary] jobs, and expecting welfare recipients to "work" their way out of poverty). But the mid-20th-century bargain of trading a lifetime of paid work for a lifetime of income security—never a reality except for a group of middle-class office workers and unionized production workers in the post war economic boom of the 1950s—is probably gone forever.

The career mystique is "false" and problematic for five reasons. First, climbing the ladder of occupational success was never possible for all workers, even in the 1950s. Hard work paid off only for a select group of mostly white, mostly middle-class men.

Second, the feminine mystique provided the platform undergirding the career mystique. It is no accident that those most successful in climbing career ladders in business and in government have been men with either homemaking wives or else wives who put their own careers on the back burner.

Third, the old "contract" that traded continuous, hard work for wage increases and seniority is long gone. Americans must now compete for jobs on a global playing field.

Fourth, neither men nor women want to live the old gender divide. Women have not simply traded one mystique for another, moving from strictures about the "good" mother or the "good" wife to those embodied in the "good" worker. Rather, many American women are trying to have it all— to be the good wife, the good mother, *and* the good employee. Growing numbers of American men are trying to be all things as well—egalitarian husbands and caring fathers as well as productive and competitive on the job. They too find it almost impossible to do so.

Fifth, very few men or women *can* live by the old rules. One job per family—the old breadwinner/homemaker model—is often a ticket to economic privation, since wages have not kept pace with inflation or living costs, the minimum wage is a poverty wage, and "middle-class" in today's consumption economy means something different than it used to, as does "retirement," given the longevity revolution and Social Security, Medicare, and pension worries.

Despite the fact that the career mystique is a false myth, it has served as a "hook" for institutional arrangements, a "glass corridor" of taken-for-granted rules and regulations in schools, homes, workplaces, communities, along with governmental regulations that constrain the clockwork of work to full-time or more hours and continuous employment throughout most adulthood as the only way to obtain the resources key to life chances and life quality (such as health care, retirement pensions, unemployment insurance, overtime pay, holidays, vacations, and other time "off"). But achieving such a full-time, continuous, and orderly career path has never been possible for most women, minorities, immigrants, low-wage workers, and others outside the "primary" workforce. And now, even those in "good" jobs are vulnerable to layoffs, downsizing, and forced early retirements.

The evidence suggests that many members of today's workforce are less apt to be climbing career ladders than struggling to retain their middle-class or working-class status (Moen and Roehling, 2005; Skocpol, 2000). The central thesis of my argument is that Americans confront a major mismatch between outdated career and retirement regimes and the exigencies of (1) family responsibilities (e.g., Becker and Moen, 1999; Bielby and Bielby, 1992; Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000; Gerson, 1985; Moen, 2001), and (2) the risks and uncertainties associated with a competitive, global, and information-based economy (see Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Arthur *et al.*, 1999; Bridges, 1994; Cappelli, 1999; Osterman, 1996; Rousseau, 1995). Unlike privileged workers in the 1950s, members of America's 21st-century workforce find it increasingly rare to have either a full-time homemaker or a secure, "lifetime" job. This mismatch challenges both scholars and policy makers to revisit, research, and rewrite the disparate scripts constituting the rules of the career game.

CAREERS AND THE CAREER MYSTIQUE AS A RESEARCH AGENDA

The career mystique has also shaped social research. Modeling occupational mobility and the pathways to financial and/or status attainment through paid work has been one of the central problem areas in sociology since the middle of the 20th century (e.g., Blau and Duncan, 1967; Kelley, 1973; Kerckhoff, 1989; Sewell and Hauser, 1975; Sewell *et al.*, 1976; Spilerman, 1977; Rosenfeld, 1992). Sociologists have long studied patterned regularities associated with the division of labor, including the separating of occupational work from family care work, and the processes of socialization and allocation perpetuating gender, age, class, and race divides. Many scholars (e.g., Rosenbaum, 1984; Spilerman, 1977; Althauser and Kalleberg, 1981, 1990) have investigated the particular occupational paths, organizational arrangements, and divisions of labor that constitute the patterned regularities of career lines. Others have captured various career processes, such as getting a job (see Granovetter, 1974) or the shaping of workers' personalities (Kohn and Schooler, 1983). Still others have documented structural barriers to career progression (Barker, 1993; Blau *et al.*, 1998; Cappelli, 1999).

Sociologists, especially in the United States, have embraced the premise of the career mystique, studying its promises of ladders to climb, ladders leading to possibilities for inter- and intra-generational mobility, as well as sources of inequality. The discipline has sought to understand the winners and losers in an economic system organized along career lines, seldom questioning the theoretical and conceptual baggage of the very notion of career. Like most Americans, sociologists have tended to equate "success" with the achievement of occupational status, the processes of gaining seniority, and/or upward mobility in terms of prestige and income. The implication is that all Americans desire upward mobility; those not achieving it are viewed either as unwilling or unable to use employment as the path to economic and status rewards.

The problem is that classic career and mobility constructs invoked by sociologists, economists, and psychologists are heavily gendered, typically reflecting men's, not women's, experiences (Bem, 1994; Hess, 1987). Yet women now constitute almost half the workforce. Liberal feminism's quest for equal opportunity failed to address a key premise of the career mystique: that jobs are fundamentally arranged for workers with no family responsibilities. In fact, in the middle of the 20th century, many women defined "success" as *marrying* a man who could obtain the occupational status and mobility that would accrue to the whole family (Clausen and Gilens, 1990). Fifty years ago, most families had an adult at home. Today, achievement and productivity still require continuous, full-time (or greater) commitment to paid work, only now few households have an adult at home to provide the necessary domestic backup.

Thus, "career" commonly refers to moving through a series of (typically related) full-time jobs over the life course, which has in the past been the typical experience of men who had full-time housewives. When scholars focus on women's experiences, they typically constrain the career concept to a more narrow definition, of simply being in or out of the labor force, not an identifiable progression through related occupations. Scholars also incorporate this dual view of careers in conceptions of a segmented (primary and secondary) labor market. Internal mobility ladders are available to those pursuing jobs in the primary sector (with the lock-step career [ladder] paths), while the secondary sector consists of people (women, minorities, immigrants, others with little education) drifting between what are frequently temporary and/or part-time jobs, as well as in and out of employment (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). In their historical analysis of clerks and managers of Lloyds' bank, Savage *et al.* (1995) made the important point that achievement-based careers (the "primary" career paths characterizing the career mystique) were made possible precisely by this ascriptive segmentation of the labor market. When women began to fill the routine clerk positions around 1929, men who had held these jobs were free to move toward positions with emerging career paths.

Scholars, as well as society at large, take as "given" the idea that a career involves a lock-step march from education to employment to retirement—with each of these activity domains (education, employment, and retirement) separated in time and space. Americans hold what Weber (1947) referred to as a "shared definition" of what careers are and how they should unfold. The difficulty is that the rules emanating from these taken-for-granted notions—such as allocating health insurance or paid sick leaves only to certain groups of workers—don't work when most workers now must change jobs and employers many times, when few have the backup of full-time housewives, when seniority no longer guarantees security, and when the minimum wage is a poverty wage.

BEYOND THE CAREER MYSTIQUE

The lock-step career regime—the policies and practices regulating and rewarding conventional employment pathways in the middle of the 20th century—was designed for a workforce that was mostly white, mostly middle-class (or unionized), mostly male, mostly young, and mostly married to full-time homemakers. By contrast, today's and tomorrow's workforce is more diverse: almost equally composed of men and women, more heterogeneous with regard to ethnic, racial, and immigrant status, and older. It is also more varied as to lifestyle—some workers have full-time homemakers, some are single (living on their own or with others), some are single parents, some share parenting, some have chosen not to have children, some are caring for disabled or aging family members. Nationally, nearly one of every four households (23%, or about 22.4 million) is involved in caregiving for persons aged 50 or over. Furthermore, just over half (51.8%) of all caregivers in the United States are employed full time, with almost two-thirds (64%) employed at least part time.[3] The "average" worker today is a member of a dual-earner household. This changing composition of the workforce, in conjunction with outsourcing and downsizing as commonplace practices (Osterman, 1996; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) means that diminishing numbers of American workers now experience the traditional career pattern of continuous, full-time work (primarily for one organization or within one occupation) that was viewed as the "norm" in the middle of the 20th century.

Americans envision work and family as two disparate roles that somehow must be "balanced," with women typically doing the balancing. But, as Merton (1968) points out: "[T]he greater the frequency with which patterned conflict between the obligations of multiple statuses occurs, the more likely [it is] that new norms will evolve to govern these situations by assigning *priorities of obligation"* (437). What we have to date are private adjustments made by individual workers, individual families. The "priorities of obligation" for most men remain with their jobs, while most women's priorities continue to revolve around their families. But new norms can evolve that no longer pit obligations at home and at work against one another.

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[3] National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, Family Caregiving in the U.S.: Findings from a National Survey (Bethesda, MD: National Alliance for Caregiving, June, 1997).

In the following sections I analyze the disconnect between the myth of career and the reality of workers' lives. I draw on three temporal concepts: *time in*, *time out*, and *second acts*.

Time In

My education about work and careers began with my first job at Orkin Exterminating Company in Atlanta, Georgia in the 1960s. I did clerical work for their home office part time each afternoon, while attending Georgia State University mornings. I quickly learned that "time in" only "counted" when you clocked in. It didn't matter if you spent the next half hour or so eating or schmoozing. Workers there taught me their strategies: you clocked in (on the time clock) at the first possible moment, even before removing your coat, and you clocked out at the very end of each day, after collecting your belongings and putting on your coat. The goal was to meet the social expectation of an 8-h day, without actually working 8 h. I also learned that part-timers like me were, literally, beside the point. Not for me were the promotions, raises, and bonuses that came to my full-time co-workers, the "real" employees. I learned firsthand the difference between the "primary" and the "secondary" workforce, between insiders and outsiders, and how these divisions often follow gender lines.

Jobs are replete with such "socially expected time durations" (Merton, 1968), the periods people are expected (each day, week, year, lifetime) to spend in paid work. In the middle of the 20th century, the socially expected duration of employment (for men at least) was from the time they left school (typically at around age 18 or 22) until they died or reached eligibility for Social Security (typically at age 65), whichever came first. This construction of paid work as a continuous career, bracketed only by youth and old age, became fully institutionalized through Social Security and pension policies, ERISA regulations, labor contracts, and seniority provisions. Simultaneously, full-time (40-h, 5-day-a-week) employment became institutionalized through wage and hour laws, health care and other fringe benefit policies, and the subsequent legitimization of the 5-day work week.

The socially expected durations of work days and work weeks have been expanding—through mandatory overtime, increasingly heavy workloads, and easy computer, phone, and pager access to work while at home, in the car, and on vacation. There is also greater life-course variation in the duration of careers—less time spent in any one job or working for any one employer, and often less time in the workforce altogether (due to both more time spent in education and, for some, earlier retirements). In 1977, Spilerman described the importance of constructing typologies based on empirical regularities in actual career lines. He pointed out the discrepancy between career characterizations and accounts on the one hand, and concrete patterns of job sequences on the other. Spilerman's call for empirical accounts of career paths is equally relevant today.

Bottom Line

The career mystique as fulfillment through the lock-step movement from education to continuous, full-time (or more) employment, followed by full-time leisure in retirement, is a myth. The notion of continuous, full-time, paid work may have made sense when employees had someone else —a wife—at home to manage the myriad details of daily living. But few workers today have such backup on the home front. Moreover, even those who seek to follow the career mystique find that, in today's global economy, neither conforming to the conventional rules of the career game nor gaining the seniority resulting from doing so now "pay off" in job security, progressively higher wages, or occupational advancement, much less generous pensions or health care. Many, in fact, reach what should be the apex of their occupational careers in their early 50s only to find themselves facing two options in a downsizing business environment: early "encouraged" retirement or being laid off. The only sure "winners" appear to be CEO's and others at the very top of the organizational hierarchy (Frank and Cook, 1995).

Time Outs

In her book on role exits, Helen Ebaugh (1988) extended Merton's concept of socially expected durations by considering socially expected exit strategies—from getting divorced to retirement. A logical extension of the notion of socially expected durations and socially expected role exits is the concept of socially expected *time outs*. While not systematically investigated to date, time outs do exist as social facts, of course. Most religions reserve a day of rest each week, along with other celebrations, as expected "time outs" from regular routines to be devoted to religious reflection. There are "time outs" from schooling as well—morning or afternoon recesses in grade school, summer breaks, Christmas and other holidays, snow days, teacher conference days. Most families have built in certain "time outs," such as the 1 day a week when dinner can be snacks in front of the television. And "time outs" are ubiquitous in all games, most conspicuously in sports. No one challenges the quarterback who makes a "T" with his two hands. If his team has any of their legitimate "time outs" left, he is free to signal the desire to take one, with no questions asked as to why he might need it, whether he is in fact "committed" to winning, whether he is really invested in his role as quarterback, whether he is having problems managing the multiple demands of the game, whether doing so will affect the productivity of the team.

But one or all of these questions may well be raised when employees want to scale back (take time out) from their work day, work week, work year, or work life. Time outs on the job, aside from official rest breaks, meal periods, holidays, vacations, weekends, and the once "final" time out of retirement, are less institutionalized than are time outs in the world of sports. To be sure, "sick" days and "personal" days off are legitimated "time outs," but only for the core of workers (in the "primary" workforce) who qualify for such benefits. The same is true for the typical 2-week vacation—it too is only granted to employees who are part of the full-time, "regular" workforce. Unpaid time out for family care became available with the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1992. But it too is only available to certain segments of the workforce.

The paucity of legitimated time outs from the clockwork of careers effectively constrains the options of all Americans, even as it perpetuates gender as well as class divisions and inequalities. Workers with family care responsibilities often seek ways to scale back their hours (Becker and Moen, 1999), but they typically have to leave "good" jobs (i.e., those with benefits) to do so, finding temporary or part-time employment in lower-level jobs (offering no benefits or prospects), or else leaving the workforce entirely for a time. Others manage their family responsibilities through shift work: husbands and wives take different job shifts in order to care for their children, meaning that they seldom have "time outs" together (Presser, 1994).

Data from the Ecology of Careers Study (see Moen and Roehling, 2005; Moen, 2003a, 2003b) suggest that even childless adults in today's workforce confront rising time demands. This group may have fewer domestic responsibilities, but they also have no "excuse" to offer themselves, much less others, for not investing virtually all their waking hours in their jobs. We find that younger (under age 40) workers (especially women) who have not had children tend to have the highest workloads. This is an example of the ways that being single and/or not having children "frees" workers to take on both longer hours and heavier loads on the job. It also suggests that having to manage family as well as paid work responsibilities, while difficult, nevertheless offers a "time out" of sorts—a more or less essential respite from work. Still, chronic and combined pressures from job demands and family demands can take their toll on workers' energy and enthusiasm, both at home and at work.

People often leave the workforce because there are no other ways to achieve any sort of "time out." Older workers who would prefer to work fewer hours are more apt than whose who are satisfied with their work hours to subsequently retire (Moen, 2003b). They effectively have but two options: continue their (often more than full-time) employment or else move "cold-turkey" to full retirement.

Women's lives are often a patchwork of self-orchestrated time outs to care for children and aging relatives. But achieving them typically means leaving one job and starting over in another. In our Ecology of Careers Study of middle-class couples over a 2-year period, more women (8.2%) than men (6.7%) left the workforce altogether between interviews. Of those who stopped working, a third (33.6%) were mothers with a preschool child at home, a fifth (20.7%) retired, and more than a third (36.7%) were caring for an aging, infirm family member. Another 6.4% of the women we interviewed left the workforce but had gone on to work for different employers by the time we interviewed them 2 years later.

Reasons for leaving the world of work differ by gender. Forty percent of the men in our study who left the workforce did so because they retired. Three out of ten men left because they were either laid off or their jobs were eliminated. Women also give these reasons, but 14% left for family reasons (typically to stay home to care for children) and 9.4% became pregnant or else stopped work in order to become pregnant. Another 7% of women left their jobs because they were moving out of the area, typically following their spouses' career moves. Some women (5%) reported that they left because they didn't care for their work, their employer, and/or the general work environment (compared to only 2.5% of the men who left the workforce for those reasons). More men than women say they left for a better or different kind of job (13.4% to 8.6%), but since they were still not employed when we interviewed them the second time, this may have been a more socially acceptable explanation for being laid off or "downsized." Or they may have been seeking a (better) job with greater flexibility but having difficulty finding one.

Even though they may have left for other reasons, almost half (47.1%) of the men in our study who left the workforce called themselves "retired," as did one in five (20%) of the women we interviewed. Almost half (47.6%) of those men who left the workforce and who do not consider themselves retired did so because they were laid off or their jobs were eliminated. More than half (54%) of the men who left the workforce but were not retiring still had children under the age of 18 at home. Family demands are rarely the explanation for men's job exits. Only one man in our sample reported dropping out of the workforce for family reasons or to stay home with a child.

Many retirees would like to work for pay, only part of the year and/or part time, but few jobs provide them the options of such time outs. Similarly, growing numbers of employees would like to go back to school, but can only do so by quitting their jobs.

My mentor, Reuben Hill, used to describe families as the great *burden carriers* of the nation—not only caring for children, the infirm, and the elderly, but providing the rest and restoration necessary for employees to be able to sustain their efforts on their jobs. I first heard about R&R (rest and relaxation) from my father, who was a career army officer. Then soldiers were permitted to take a "time out" (R&R) half-day a week. Soldiers are also eligible for time outs through furloughs. "Time out" in the form of sabbaticals is an enormous perk for those of us lucky enough to hold tenured academic jobs. Retirement is the most institutionalized work-related time out, fulfilling several purposes: a reward of leisure at the end of the work life, a way of opening up jobs for new cohorts of workers, a way to terminate workers whose skills are obsolete or whose abilities are declining.

There are, to be sure, more punitive "time outs": for children as punishment, for hockey-players as penalties, for employees as lay offs or forced early retirements. Many employees fear that the family-friendly "time outs" (such as flextime or reduced work hours) that do exist in their workplaces become signals of reduced commitment, messages they do not want to send to their employers in these times of downsizing and restructuring. Accordingly, many are unwilling to take advantage of the "time outs" available to them.

Bottom Line

"Time outs" are legitimate, taken-for-granted respites in sports, but far less legitimate in occupational careers. In fact, some workers we interviewed didn't even take "all" of their earned vacation time, given the demands of their jobs. The absence of time outs from paid work and more flexible work options comes from policies and practices assuming that most workers live with at least one other, nonworking, adult. But few Americans now have the luxury of such full-time backup on the home front.

Second Acts

There is little in either the lock-step clockwork of careers or in the scholarly literature that suggests the possibilities for "second acts." And yet opportunities to "start over" are also social realities. Perhaps the most consequential social policy supporting "second acts" in occupational careers was the G.I. Bill, which permitted, indeed paid, veterans of World War II (and the Korean Conflict) to go back to school. Life-history interviews reveal many stories of the great significance of this second chance, this "second act." Glen H. Elder Jr. (1979), along with others, has documented the value of the G.I. Bill in dramatically changing and improving the life courses of World War II veterans and their families.

The women's movement, along with generous student loans in the 1970s, made it possible for women to imagine and realize second acts for themselves following years of childrearing (Bradburn *et al.*, 1995). I was one of the beneficiaries. Today, the notion of "going back to school" as preparation for a second act in a new or different career has increasing legitimacy, even though most universities still see their primary "customers" as between ages 18 and 24.

Two major social transformations suggest the need to make "second acts" an integral part of a sustainable career regime for the 21st century. The first is a global information economy that renders today's skills quickly obsolete. Moreover, communication and transportation technologies make the shifting by corporations of jobs "offshore" seem an effective and profitable labor strategy. This means that Americans must now compete for jobs on a global stage, requiring that they obtain ever higher levels of training and retraining. The global economy has also routinized periodic bouts of restructuring and downsizing, meaning that even those in "core," primary-sector jobs (that is, following the career mystique by working full time on a continuous basis) are now vulnerable to displacement.

The second key transformation is the aging of the population, which results from the confluence of three forces: medical advances promoting longevity, the aging of the baby-boomer cohort, and declines in fertility. Given that growing numbers of Americans either choose retirement or find themselves retired from their primary "career" jobs in their 50s and early 60s, the period they spend in retirement may be longer than their tenure in their "career" job. Americans in their 50s, 60s, and 70s today are typically better educated, healthier, more vigorous, and "younger" than were their parents or grandparents at those ages. Most want to retire from high-pressure jobs with long hours, but many also want opportunities for (typically more flexible, part-time) second, third, or fourth careers.

Few Americans approaching retirement age want to keep on "keeping on" in their existing jobs, facing long hours, high demands, and often few rewards. Many talk about public service, about fulfilling their desire to "make a difference," to "give back" to their communities. A few may decide to run for public office. Some may shift to less demanding, less skilled activities that may be less challenging but nevertheless provide structure and routine. Still others may start their own businesses as a way of gaining control over the hours and the effort they put into their work. Others may seek additional training in order to do what they always wanted to do but couldn't because of family or career obligations. For some this may be paid work, as a teacher, a firefighter, a public servant. For others it may be volunteering for a religious community, a neighborhood school, or a particular cause.

Kohli (1986) and Riley (1987; Riley *et al.*, 1988) describe how social policies created the lock-step segmentation of the life course into education, work, and retirement. Most contemporary Americans don't want retirement to be a permanent "time out," effectively a "second childhood" of boundless leisure. Rather, many would like to retire from one job, possibly have a bit of a vacation from any obligations, and then move into something less taxing but more enjoyable or meaningful, a "second act." What many older Americans want are opportunities—for meaningful work, for making a difference, and/or for simply having the income, routine, and relationships a part-time or part-year job can provide.

Bottom Line

There are a number of "school to work" programs to help adolescents and young adults make that important transition. What's missing are *work to school* programs that could facilitate and subsidize periodic episodes of schooling throughout one's life course, to better prepare Americans of all ages and life stages to perform their existing jobs or to move to new career paths as their "second acts." Missing as well are institutionalized *work to service* programs offering Americans in their 50s, 60s, and 70s opportunities for civic engagement that can be both rewarding and flexible. Finally, there is a need for mechanisms for moving *back to work*—from a job displacement, from spending time caring for kids or aging parents, from a period of disability, from retirement. The one way sequence of first education, then employment, then retirement is obsolete, a cultural relic of a society that no longer exists. What is required is a thoughtful reappraisal of existing life patterns. This could lead to a reconfiguration of the life course in ways that create more options and more variety for men and women in all phases of their lives.[4] Third parties—whether unions, employment agencies, contracting out organizations, alumni groups, or professional associations—could become key institutional arrangements for matching people to jobs and service, and vice versa, at all stages of the life course.

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[4] See discussions by Best, 1980; Kahne, 1985; and Harriman, 1982. Sweden is trying to offer such flexibilities to working parents. See Moen, 1989.

SUSTAINABLE CAREERS: "ALL THE KING'S HORSES . . ."

Social science has fostered an unreal view of lives, segmenting roles and actions and treating them as independent of (or only linearly linked to) one another. But in contemporary society, one role becomes the context for another, or even for the possibility of another, in an incredibly complex riff. Sewell (1992:16) and Giddens (1984) point out that many structures shape society and individual lives, existing and operating at different levels and in different modalities, with different logics and dynamics. Thus, individuals are simultaneously members of both families and workplace organizations, as well as communities. It is this interconnectedness of the multiple dimensions of the life course that is missing—in scholarship, in occupational and organizational policies and practices, in theorizing about careers. Yet interconnectedness is taken for granted in real life, as Americans everywhere try to accommodate to the disjunctives between the rules and regulations, demands and expectations, of the many institutions and people in their lives.

We in the United States now stand at something of a crossroads. Customary institutional patterns (at home and at work) based on the career mystique make combining the successful parenting of young children (or caring for aging relatives) with successful employment both frustrating and exhausting. Traditional institutional arrangements also foreclose less than full-time, more flexible employment (and other role) options for older workers approaching retirement, or for retirees seeking second acts. Competing in a global labor market, means that even highly skilled, highly educated, white-collar American workers find themselves at a comparative disadvantage. And yet, as we saw in the case of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, the shift in women's roles personified by Rosie the Riveter during World War II, the postwar G.I. Bill, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, traditional institutional arrangements *are* alterable. What is difficult is coming to terms with the need to do so.

What may push Americans toward rewriting the lock-step life course embodied in the career mystique is that the nation is, once more, in a time of social and economic crisis, a critical juncture with outsourcing, downsizing, burnout, and strain, not to mention the coming age wave, challenging traditional ways of thinking and conventional policy solutions. Americans are not only living longer, but are also experiencing more discontinuities than continuities—in their occupational careers, their families and personal lives, their sense of security, safety, and possibilities for the future. Men and women are increasingly likely at some stage of their lives to experience the dislocations of downsizing, divorce, retirement, disability, and geographic mobility; the specter of poverty; the strains of two-job or single-parent families and/or the caregiving of aged or infirm relatives; and the isolation of living alone.

We as a nation have not been responsive to this unraveling of the social fabric. The challenge to sociologists, to social scientists in general, and to policy makers is to understand the social, technological, demographic, and economic transformations shaping contemporary life choices and life chances, and to foster more responsive and realistic social innovations and institutions. Americans have been much more adept in responding to technological challenges than to social challenges, such as the way work and retirement paths and passages are organized. What is needed are new policies and practices more in line with the new realities of the contemporary American experience, borne of a new frame of reference that incorporates greater flexibilities in work, education, civic participation, and retirement throughout the life course.

Powell (1990) points out that existing social arrangements feel "comfortable," providing as they do a guide to action and a world of shared expectations. Attempts to change existing arrangements are often resisted because they threaten the status quo. New and more appropriate policies and practices will come about only when the economic and social costs of doing nothing outweigh the costs of change. Today, outmoded conventions and stereotypes constituting the career mystique operate as a real impediment. Still, what is troublesome is not how to alter existing structures, but recognizing the need to do so.

From my vantage point this will necessarily include a loosening of the expected durations of work days, work weeks, and work lives. I propose two avenues for change: (1) the development of legitimated time outs at work as much as on the playing field, and (2) the possibility for second (or third, or fourth) acts (opportunities for Americans of all ages to reinvent their career paths and themselves through schooling, service, or employment).

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