

Articles

Older Professional Women's Views on Work: A Qualitative Analysis

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This qualitative study reports on the career experiences of older professional women using consensual qualitative research. Thirteen women over age 50 were interviewed regarding the influences of gender and age on work. In general, all participants reported career adaptability, and many participants also reported specific subthemes of career adaptability (i.e., concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) as resources. These subthemes denote participants' future orientation, self-discipline as evidenced by their conscientiousness in career decisions, active information seeking, and certitude that they have the ability to solve career-related problems. Relationships with colleagues were also considered critical, and participants acknowledged the benefits and drawbacks of being a woman and being older. These women were able to achieve flexibility and autonomy in their work and spoke about the importance of work-family balance and boundaries. Practitioners are encouraged to consider how career adaptability is manifested within the interplay between gender and age, because this can influence career counseling with older women.

Keywords: aging, older women, career development, career adaptability

The number of older workers in the United States has increased in recent years and projections indicate that by 2018 nearly a quarter of all workers will be age 55 years and older (Toossi, 2009). Brewington and Nassar-McMillan (2000) asserted that older workers face a multitude of work-related concerns and that this population should be of interest to career counselors. Robson, Hansson, Abalos, and Booth (2006), however, contended that career theorists have neglected the career development of older workers. Although there has been significant interest in the career development of women in the past 30 years (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Walsh & Heppner, 2006), in their review of older workers, Hansson, DeKoekkoek, Neece, and Patterson (1997) found very few studies related to the experiences of these women. Because the population of workers in the United States is increasingly female and over the age of 50 years, research is needed to understand the working lives of older professional women in the labor force. The purpose of

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the present study was to explore the experiences of older professional women by using qualitative methods to identify themes used to describe their working lives.

Life-space theory (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), one of the few career theories that address older adults' life-span, espouses a perspective on careers as developing over the entire human life cycle. Maintenance—the career stage that includes the developmental tasks of sustaining, keeping up, and innovating—is typically associated with individuals who are 45 to 65 years of age. This can be a renewal period in which the individual updates skills and knowledge or discovers new challenges (Super et al., 1996). In career construction theory, Savickas (2002, 2005) updated and advanced Super et al.'s (1996) seminal theory by using social constructionism as the metatheory in which to reconceptualize vocational development. According to Savickas (2005), “career construction theory, simply stated, asserts that individuals construct their careers by imposing meaning on their vocational behavior and occupational experiences” (p. 43). A focus of the present research project was to examine the meaning that older professional women attribute to their work and current career stage. Savickas's (2013) career construction theory has three major components: vocational personality, life themes, and career adaptability. Career adaptability emphasizes the coping processes individuals use to connect social roles and construct their careers. Whereas vocational personality addresses what career an individual constructs, career adaptability deals with how an individual constructs a career. The current study investigates how older women construct their careers.

McMahon, Watson, and Bimrose (2013) suggested that a systems perspective should be applied when conceptualizing the career development of older women. The systems theory framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006) applies a systemic model (see Bronfenbrenner, 1994) contextually to career development consisting of interconnecting layers that include the individual, social, and environmental–societal systems (McMahon et al., 2013). The addition of a systems theory framework is novel within the career literature because the conceptualization of the worker moves beyond her individual experiences and considers the interplay between systems within her immediate surroundings and macrosystemic influences, such as politics, the employment market, and globalization. Similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1994) inclusion of the chronosystem, this model also considers the passage of time as a factor that affects the career development of older women workers (McMahon et al., 2013). The chronological impact of multiple systems is an important consideration when contextualizing the career development of older women, who may have been affected by societal forces in different ways at different times. The present study investigates older women's viewpoints regarding current influences on their work and considers systemic influences on the meaning that older women attribute to their careers.

In one of the few studies that has focused on the career development of older women, McMahon, Watson, and Bimrose (2012) used a grounded theory approach to study the career adaptability of women between the ages of 45 to 65 years. Focusing on career transitions, they found that, across all participants' stories, career adaptability was evident in periods of transition and also in other facets of the participants' careers. Their

findings indicate that career adaptability is deeply contextually embedded at many levels and represents a recursive interplay of women workers, their social networks, and the broader sociopolitical systems in which they live. They also found that the specific construct of career adaptability manifested itself differently in the stories of the various older women. Finally, McMahon et al. (2012) discovered that the five subcategories of career adaptability (i.e., concern, control, curiosity, confidence, and cooperation) were not coded equally across the participants and there was variation in the frequency reflected in the participants' stories. McMahon et al. recommended additional inquiry related to the career development of older women.

Our study expands on the work of McMahon et al. (2012) in three ways. First, we used a different population. Our sample was from the United States, not from Australia, England, and South Africa, and comprised only professional women. Second, our focus was not on older women's career transitions, but on their current work situation and career issues. Third, we incorporated consensual qualitative research rather than grounded theory. Our study also was influenced by both career construction theory (Savickas, 2013) and a systems theory framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Our analysis of the vocational experiences of older professional women addressed three research questions. First, how do older women describe and attribute meaning to their current work and career stage? Second, what factors influence the career decisions and development of older women workers? And third, how do age, gender, and relationships influence the working lives of older women?

Method

Research Design

The present study was conducted using the consensual qualitative research (CQR) method (Hill et al., 2005). CQR is appropriate when researchers want to collect consistent data across individuals with the intent of a thorough and in-depth examination of individual experiences. CQR varies from other qualitative methodologies in that the consensus process in data analysis is central. This approach is based on the assumption that complex constructs can be understood more fully from multiple perspectives and levels of awareness. CQR involves multiple judges that take an inductive or bottom-up approach to data analysis in which results emerge from the data. Because of the inherent biases that can occur in attempting to make meaning out of people's narratives, CQR requires a team of judges to analyze the data and come to consensus on the results.

Participants

Thirteen women from a midwestern state who self-identified as professionals participated in the study. Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) contended that, to intimately understand the studied group, researchers using CQR should narrowly define their selection criteria for participants. Therefore, we restricted our study of older women to those over 50 years of age, which is consistent with the sample used by August and Quintero (2001). In terms of denoting professional occupations, we

selected the commonly used criterion of having a college degree. All 13 participants were over the age of 50 years, with an age range of 50 to 66 years ($M = 59.62$, $SD = 4.84$) and all had college degrees (eight with a master's degree or less and five with a PhD or a JD). Eleven reported their ethnicity as European American, whereas two identified as African American. Participants who were not over 50 years of age, did not have a college degree, or were not working full time were eliminated from the study. The occupations reported by the participants were attorney, systems analyst, coding specialist, professor of astronomy, executive vice-president, social worker/art therapist, art teacher, professor of music theory, professor of biology, museum director, clinical nurse specialist, city attorney, and case manager. We recruited the participants primarily using a snowball sampling technique, in which participants recommended other potential participants who were then contacted to see if they were willing to be interviewed (Noy, 2008).

Researchers

We conducted the study in a collaborative format consistent with the CQR methodology. The research team comprised four members: a vocational psychologist, a counseling psychology doctoral student, and two master's-level students in counseling. The researchers ranged in age from 23 to 60 years, and the racial composition was three European Americans and one Native American. The research team was trained in the theory and method of CQR by the first author, who had experience using CQR. All team members read Hill et al. (1997, 2005). According to Hill et al. (1997), all CQR team members must be passionate about the topic, and all four team members were impassioned by the topic of women's career development. It is also recommended that researchers examine and discuss potential assumptions, biases, and expectations before data analysis (Hill et al., 1997, 2005). Potential assumptions and biases of the team members included perceptions that participants would find aging difficult, that participants might be disengaging from their careers, and that social support may play a role in career satisfaction. Having articulated these biases, the team was sensitive to addressing them directly as the consensual process unfolded. Also, the auditor was aware of potential biases and oversaw that these biases did not influence the final results.

Procedure

We contacted potential participants either by e-mail or telephone to determine if they were willing to be interviewed. Participants received a copy of the interview questions and a study information sheet before they provided their consent to be interviewed and audio recorded. To ensure reliability, all interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author, and they lasted from 47 to 65 minutes, with an average length of 52.38 minutes. Consistent with CQR methodology (Hill et al., 1997), we developed a core set of open-ended questions for the interviews, which addressed topics of job satisfaction, influences of age and gender on work, interactions with others, and influences on career decisions. Sample questions in the interview were "How do you think your age influences your current work?" and "What influences your current decisions that you make at work?" Individuals with expertise in

qualitative methods and women's studies reviewed the questions before the interviews. The interview protocol may be obtained from the first author. The interviewer also used standard probes, such as "tell me more about what you mean," to delve into sensitive and potentially rich topics. We then transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. As a final check for accuracy, the interviewer checked the transcriptions to verify that they were indeed correct.

Data Analysis

Like many other forms of qualitative research, data analysis using a CQR approach is an iterative process. Consistent with the recommendations of Hill et al. (1997, 2005), we independently reviewed all transcripts from the interviews and identified potential domains or themes. Although we kept the interview questions in mind, we approached the analysis of each interview with a fresh perspective to determine if new domains emerged. We then came together as a group and reached consensus on the domains that best represented the data. Domains represent clusters of common notions derived from the data, whereas categories are subthemes within the domains. We met for several meetings to identify core ideas, which are definitions of the domains and categories that are extracted from the cases that clearly and concisely describe the domain and categories so there is more clarity in the data analysis process. The auditor reviewed the domains, categories, and core ideas.

Then, we independently coded each transcript for domains and categories using the core ideas for clarification. We met and consensually agreed on the coding of the transcripts. We addressed initial differences and ambiguities until consensus was reached. The auditor reviewed the final categorization of the data, and then we used a cross-analysis procedure. In the cross-analysis procedure, we examined the prevalence of the domains and categories across all participants.

Results

Table 1 presents the number of cases assigned to each domain and category, which are the results of the cross-analysis procedure. Based on the recommendations of Hill et al. (2005), we assigned frequency

TABLE 1
Domains/Categories and Frequencies of Older Women's Attitudes Toward Career Development

Domain/Category	<i>n</i>	Frequency	References
Career adaptability	13	General	51
Confidence	8	Typical	18
Concern	8	Typical	13
Control	6	Variant	9
Curiosity	6	Variant	8
Interpersonal relationships	12	General	47
Being a woman	12	General	36
View of age	11	Typical	58
Flexibility and autonomy	10	Typical	15
Balance and boundaries	9	Typical	23

categories: (a) general if they applied to 12 or 13 participants, (b) typical if they applied to seven to 11 participants, and (c) variant if they applied to two to six participants.

Career Adaptability

A theme emerged regarding adaptability and suppleness in adjusting to changing work issues within every participant's transcript. Although labeling this domain as career adaptability was not originally intended to mirror Savickas's (2013) construct of career adaptability, the similarities between the domain and the construct became more evident as data analysis continued. Consistent with Savickas's conceptualization, we defined career adaptability as a psychosocial construct that denotes individuals' resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, and traumas in their occupational roles. The women in this study reported high levels of willingness and the ability to perform behaviors that address changing work conditions. This concept of career adaptability as a psychosocial resource is shown in an astronomer's statement: "It has always been unclear to me, but I have usually managed to, I don't know, find a set of stairs that no one else has discovered off to the side somewhere and climb over the glass ceiling." Another participant, the case manager, reflected on her abilities to overcome an occupational trauma and indicated, "My sort of responsibilities are decreased and my status is decreased over what it was. And that was hard at first, but it just enabled me to focus more on what I do best."

According to career construction theory, career adaptability represents an aggregate of resources related to self-regulation (Savickas, 2013). Savickas and Porfeli (2012) identified four subcategories in their international quantitative assessment of career adaptability: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. We frequently found these four subcategories that constitute career adaptability in our interviews with our sample of professional women. It should be noted that we did not start the data analysis with the expectation of finding these four subcategories of career adaptability, but through data analysis, these categories emerged. To code accurately, the team used the definitions from Savickas (2013) for these four categories.

Confidence. Savickas (2013) defined confidence as certitude that one has the ability to solve problems and overcome obstacles. This category was found in eight interviews, so it was a typical response. The following quote from the attorney represents these findings:

I don't feel insecure in the job. I just feel like they know that I'm capable, and I've been doing this for a long time, and I know a lot of stuff, and I may not do everything perfectly, but you know the bottom line is that they're going to want me to stick around at least for as long as I want to.

Another quote from the executive vice-president also represents the category of confidence:

I began to take assignments that I just didn't think I could do, ya know. And back then it was like you won't make it. My thought was just watch me! I love a good challenge or those sayings like kiss my grits.

Concern. Career concern denotes a future orientation and a sense that it is important to prepare for tomorrow. This category was reported by eight of the participants and, therefore, was also a typical response, as illustrated by a quote from the museum director: “But one of the things I feel like I really have to do before I die with this place is leave it in a sustainable form, financially and operationally.” Another quote from the biologist represented concern: “I am really looking towards the end of my career, and I would like to go out as a winner.”

Control. Career control encompasses the extent of self-discipline, as shown by one’s conscientiousness and responsibility in making career decisions (Savickas, 2013). Control was identified as a category in six of the participants’ interviews and, hence, was considered a variant response. An example of a control response from the executive vice-president is “I can still make the decisions based on what I know and still move forward.” Another example of control came from the case worker’s quote: “But when I make decisions [long pause], you know, I’m aware of what my role is and what my responsibilities are.”

Curiosity. According to Savickas (2013), the primary function of curiosity is to reflect the focus of many prominent career theories on the developmental tasks of exploration and information seeking. Furthermore, career curiosity concerns an inquisitiveness about and an exploration of the fit between oneself and the world of work. Six of the participants reported information that was categorized as curiosity, and an exemplar of this variant category came from the case manager:

I’ve started a class, well, a series of classes about dementia. Because I think usually when I start feeling like maybe I’ve gotten stale on the job, I need to learn more, and then, if I learn more, it becomes more satisfying again.

A quote from the astronomer also represents curiosity:

Whether I am going to learn something, or whether it is going to add to my skill set, or whether it is going to allow me to move in a new direction that I find just interesting. So I tend to choose activities, choices; whether I agree to do something or not agree to do something is based on how much I think it is going to interest me.

Interpersonal Relationships

We defined the domain of interpersonal relationships as guidance and connection with individuals in a work environment. Almost every participant ($n = 12$) identified interpersonal relationships in the work environment that positively affected her vocational experiences, thereby constituting a general-level response. Participants frequently identified colleagues or coworkers as important interpersonal relationships and positive aspects of their work environments. The art teacher stated, “I think my coworkers think of me as somebody that they can talk to and that they care for; I felt a lot of love and support over my time.” Another important interpersonal relationship concerned supervisors ($n = 6$). During the transcript review, we noted that participants’ positive comments regarding supervisors were limited to instances when the supervisor was a woman. Although it is possible that participants had favorable interactions with male supervisors, when examples were given, participants frequently used the words “she” and “her.” The coding

specialist said of her female supervisor, “I have the right supervisor, you know somebody that really appreciates what you’re doing and thanks you for it. Wow, that’s nice.”

A somewhat less prevalent category within the area of interpersonal relationships concerned the importance of mentoring others. Three participants mentioned mentoring others, thus the construct of mentoring was variant among our sample. For the purpose of this study, we defined mentoring others as advising, coaching, and guiding coworkers and students. As an example, when discussing decision making, the museum director noted, “I also make decisions based on trying to bring up and support the younger staff members and develop them in their careers.”

Being a Woman

Another domain we identified was being a woman, which addressed the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman in diverse work environments; role expectations, particularly regarding the differences between being a woman as compared with being a man; and the nurturing role these women frequently reported as being fundamental to their work. Twelve participants discussed the impact of being a woman, which indicates this represents a general-level domain.

Seven participants recognized both positive and negative aspects of being a woman in the workplace. Women spoke of concerns regarding gender within the social and environmental–societal systems. One participant who was employed in a science-related field stated,

Being female has had, I think on the whole, a positive effect on my career. It has allowed me to have opportunities that I probably wouldn’t—that the average man probably would not have had. Because I am female, I have taken advantage wherever I could of society’s need to broaden participation.

In contrast, another participant engaged in a scientific field expressed an opposing viewpoint. She said,

I feel like that I don’t have the respect that I should have for a researcher of my position. That if I were male—I know this, if I were male and taller my colleagues would treat me differently. They would listen to me differently. They would treat me with more respect, and I am sorry to say it, but it is perfectly clear that being an older woman is being a low-status position.

Within the domain of being a woman, our participants often noted differing duties and roles in the workplace that did not favor women, as the coding specialist explained:

I think that the perception is that they’re not going to be as effective as a man, so I see, seriously I see, some women in this company that they put in way more hours than the men and they’re still not regarded equally.

This category of differing expectations for men and women was noted in the interviews of six participants, which made it a variant category. Concomitant with differing expectations was salary differentials between men and women, a category that was addressed by three participants (i.e., a variant category). As the system analyst said in an exasperated tone, “I feel

that being a woman in the workforce, you are always under paid. A male is always paid more than you are, and you work just as hard or harder.”

Although many of the categories under the domain of being a woman addressed differences between men and women, one exception to this trend was the finding that five participants emphasized the nurturing role of women. Although caretaking and supportive roles of women were not addressed in the interview questions, these women noted the function of women as nurturers in the workplace. The clinical nurse specialist said, “I bring the woman’s perspective on. . . . I am a nurturer type; women are nurturers, and I think that helps me see in people what needs to be seen.”

View of Age

Most of the interviewees expressed complex and sometimes contradictory views about the aging process. We find it interesting that 11 participants voiced a positive view of age, and 11 participants made comments that we coded as a negative view of age, which means that we categorized both polarities as general. In terms of a positive view of age, the following quote by the executive vice-president represents many of the participants’ feelings: “I also feel I bring something special to the table just because of my age; the knowledge that this age brings; the experience that this age brings; and, uh, the, uh, information that this age brings to this company.” As indicated earlier, not all comments were positive, and the following quote from the biologist represents the negative views of age: “I am not as good at multitasking as I used to be. I don’t remember details of things as well as I used to.”

Flexibility and Autonomy

Although closely related to career adaptability, the theme of flexibility and autonomy (a typical domain) is more specific and narrow and addresses self-determination in scheduling, decision making, and task selection. Ten of the 13 participants expressed that they had flexibility and autonomy in their work, which are represented in the following statements: “I pretty much write my own ticket,” said the professor of music theory, and the astronomer said, “I have always been given a fair amount of independence, a lot of opportunity to choose my own path.”

Balance and Boundaries

The domain of balance and boundaries was a typical category endorsed by nine participants who discussed the importance of work–family balance in their lives. Participants talked about an equilibrium between work and nonwork activities but also stressed the importance of separation or boundaries between work and family. For example, the attorney stated,

I want a work life, and I want a home life. And I want to garden, and I want to quilt. I want to have hobbies. I want to have friends. And I don’t want to have my work to be a part of that. When I am at work, I don’t want all my friends or my quilting at work. I wanted a separation—right or wrong—I don’t know if this is healthy or not, but I wanted a separation. When I was at work, I wanted everything to be about my work, and when I was home, I wanted no work.

Other participants discussed the importance of not taking work home as a strategy for keeping a boundary between work and family.

Discussion

The present study was designed to explore a nuanced view of the meaning that older women in professional occupations attribute to their work and career stage. During the analysis process, we identified the domain of career adaptability in the transcriptions of all participants. This finding reinforces McMahon et al.'s (2012) findings that career adaptability is not a construct limited to adolescents and young adults, but is also prevalent in older adult women. The consistent findings with McMahon et al. also contribute to the trustworthiness of our findings. Congruent with Savickas's (2013) definition, the participants in this study all reported the use of psychological resources for coping with both current and projected vocational tasks, occupational transitions, and work-related traumas. Resources are considered psychosocial because they reside at the intersection of person-in-environment, which was also evident in the interviews with these women as they discussed a proactive approach to addressing issues within their unique work environments. Although there are perceptions that older workers lack an orientation toward flexibility, innovation, and change, our results are consistent with van Veldhoven and Dorenbosch (2008) in that older workers appear to be proactive and, within our sample, exhibit high levels of career adaptability.

Furthermore, we frequently found the four subcategories (i.e., confidence, concern, control, and curiosity) of career adaptability in our interviews. Both confidence and concern were typical responses, with eight of the interviewees endorsing psychosocial resources related to career confidence (i.e., the anticipation of success in addressing challenges and overcoming obstacles) and career concern (i.e., a future orientation in which one is prepared for tomorrow's tasks; Savickas, 2013). Moreover, six of the interviewees made statements indicating the use of control and curiosity. Control denotes a significant influence over one's own vocational future, whereas curiosity concerns an inquisitiveness about and an exploration of the fit between oneself and the world of work. It may be that these women exhibited the subcategories of confidence, concern, control, and curiosity so frequently because of their level of professional attainment and by virtue of their age and experience. These findings support the appropriateness of career adaptability and its four subcategories as a framework for conceptualizing the career experiences of older professional women.

Although our findings support McMahon et al.'s (2012) results regarding the career adaptability of older women, our findings may also contribute in several distinctive ways to the literature in this area. First, we expanded on McMahon et al.'s sample by including women from the United States. However, we also differentiated our sample by including only older professional women. Perhaps the most unique contribution was our focus specifically on the current impact of age and gender. Unlike McMahon et al., who focused on retrospective accounts and significant transitions, the questions used in our interview protocol reflected a here-and-now approach, encapsulating the vocational development of women specifically during the later stages of their careers.

Furthermore, McMahon et al. limited the reporting of their results to include only career adaptability; we went beyond career adaptability and the four subcategories and identified other elements that older professional women found meaningful within their working lives.

Our results also confirmed Robson et al.'s (2006) identification of positive relationships as instrumental components of successful aging in the workplace. All but one of the participants spoke about the importance of interpersonal relationships in their work, and relationships with coworkers seemed particularly salient to these women. In Richardson's (2012) counseling for work and relationships perspective, she proposed that there are four major social contexts through which individuals construct their lives: market work, personal care work, personal relationships, and market work relationships. According to Richardson, researchers and clinicians often have neglected the importance of market work relationships. Our findings signify that work relationships were indeed important to the participants in our study. Moreover, our findings provide some insight into the types of relationships older women find satisfying because participants talked about egalitarian relationships with coworkers as being more influential in daily activities than supervisors or mentees.

The advantages and tribulations of being a woman was a general theme found in 12 of 13 of the interviews. Within this domain, the comments centered on both the benefits and disadvantages of being a woman, with participants noting the differing expectations for men compared with women. Whereas some of the women specifically addressed the well-documented salary differential between men and women (e.g., Fassinger, 2008), others mentioned discrimination regarding promotion, recognition, and assignment of occupational duties. We observed that women in our sample who were engaged in traditionally male-dominated professions, such as science and higher education, voiced more opposition to the differing expectations between men and women. This supports past findings indicating that women in academia (Kalet, Fletcher, Ferdman, & Bickell, 2006; Stout, Staiger, & Jennings, 2007) and scientific fields (Settles, Cortina, Malley, & Stewart, 2006) experience barriers to advancement in their work settings. In contrast, several participants who were in female-dominated careers (e.g., teaching and social service) spoke of the nurturing tendency they exhibited as women, identifying this attribute as an asset within their occupational settings.

One of the prominent findings from this study was the complexity and bifurcation in which the participants viewed the aging process, with an equal number citing positive and negative aspects of aging. According to Kirk and Belovics (2005), older workers tend to view themselves with self-conceived biases and general negative stereotypes; however, we found that negative conceptions were only a portion of the picture and these women often voiced positive aspects of aging, such as having a substantial knowledge base, experiencing less anxiety, and being viewed as a resource. We find it interesting that our sample of older women workers rarely mentioned health concerns as a limitation related to age, which contrasts Armstrong-Stassen and Cameron's (2005) finding that health status was a significant predictor of career satisfaction for older women. A possible explanation for these contradictory findings could be the dissimilarities between their sample (which included only

women in the public sector) and our sample with diverse, professional occupations. Participants' valuing of flexibility and autonomy may also have been influenced by the makeup of our sample, which was highly educated and in professional occupations. It may be that the women in nonprofessional occupations would not have the same degree of volition in their work (Blustein, 2006).

Research has shown that work–life balance continues to be an important factor for women beyond the age of 50 years (Emslie & Hunt, 2009). In our research study, nine of the 13 interviewees brought up work–family balance under the domain of balance and boundaries. Whereas some of the women in our sample spoke about caring for children and elderly parents, others discussed the desire to spend time with significant others. The women in our study also endorsed the need to create boundaries between work and home. Ammons (2013) found that the most prevalent boundary strategy was protecting family, which was a subtle theme through many of the interviews because several participants talked about the importance of leaving work at work.

Implications for Practice and Research

As indicated earlier, McMahon et al. (2013) argued that a systems theory framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006) offers practical applications for career counseling with older women. The systems theory framework stresses an individual-in-context perspective, with the contextual system consisting of the social and the environmental–societal systems. The social system considers the individual in the context of peers, families, workplaces, and communities. Our findings indicate that the social system should be considered in career counseling because many of the domains we found (e.g., interpersonal relationships, balance and boundaries) were relevant to older women's career development.

At a broader level is the environmental–societal system, which considers the individual within the context of socioeconomic status, geographic location, geopolitical trends, and globalization. The career development of older women has historically been restricted by these environmental–societal factors, and this was alluded to by many of our participants when they discussed the constraints of being a woman and the view of age. However, it should be noted that issues of gender and age were not viewed entirely as constraints because many of the participants also reported positive aspects of being an older woman. From a systems theory framework perspective, McMahon et al. (2013) recommended approaches to career counseling, such as narrative career counseling, that emphasize relationships and stories. Narrative career counseling is predicated on a therapeutic alliance between the counselor and client, whereby the counselor facilitates the telling of client stories from which the counselor identifies themes and patterns that are relevant to career development. We concur with the recommendation of narrative career counseling because it may be more suited to career counseling with older women than traditional approaches that tend to focus on career choice. Women in our sample were focused on telling their stories within the contexts of reflection, connection,

and attribution of meaning to experiences in the world of work. A narrative approach to career counseling is also espoused by Savickas (2005, 2013), which is also consistent with our findings that career adaptability is a relevant construct for older women. In our view, the major findings of the present study that should inform practitioners are that the participants viewed themselves as having career adaptability and as possessing the necessary resources to actively construct a meaningful work life.

Our results in the category of interpersonal relationships also support the use of Schultheiss's (2013) relational-cultural model, which emphasizes the importance of considering interpersonal relationships within a cultural context when providing career counseling to women. Informed by feminist theory, Schultheiss encouraged the consideration of ethnicity, race, sexuality, and social status when conceptualizing the vocational development of women, because the intersecting characteristics can lead to further oppression and marginalization or to a more privileged status. We would recommend that practitioners and scholars also consider the unique interplay among gender, age, and social status.

After completing a comprehensive review of research on women's career development, O'Neil, Hopkins, and Bilimoria (2008) contended that future research should focus on giving voice to women's specific career and life experiences, which was the intent of this project. Thus, there is a need for additional qualitative studies of older women's career development because little research has been conducted with this population. In particular, there is a need for research on women in low-paying, low-status jobs because this study focused on the career development of women in professional occupations.

We used the CQR process defined by Hill et al. (1997, 2005) to conduct an in-depth investigation of the personal experiences of older professional women, which we hope will inform future research and practices. However, our chosen method does have limitations. The 13 women who were identified using snowball sampling do not necessarily represent the overall population because most of them reside in a town heavily populated by affiliates of a large public university. Thus, our sample may be more highly educated than the U.S. population of older professional women, thereby limiting the generalizability of our results. Future studies of professional women could include a larger percentage of women with bachelor's degrees and more women of color.

In conclusion, the results of this study offer a qualitative understanding of older professional women's career development. In particular, the finding that all participants reported career adaptability is noteworthy and adds substantially to our existing knowledge of older professional women's career resources. Another important finding is the frequency with which these women also reported the subcategories of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. In addition, the results of this study indicate that relationships, particularly relationships with coworkers, are important to older professional women. Another notable finding is that these women also expressed both positive and negative views of being a woman and of aging and saw themselves as women in a complex sociopolitical environment.

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