

Introduction

Research on careers has become more diverse as well as complex. Such a complexity has evolved along two dimensions. One is connected to the *timeframe* (the analysis of the individual's career throughout the life cycle, from birth till death); the other is connected to the *life space* (the individual's career overflows of the occupational domain including the private and family lives) (Eaton & Bailyn, 2000; Moen & Han, 2001).

This paper assesses the extent to which there is an interdependent relationship between the two life domains (career and family), and it also examines how such interdependence and mutual influence takes place. We interviewed academics of both genders in an attempt to understand how they experience their work and family lives, and what this tells us concerning the shape of their academic career development. Overall, forty men and forty-seven women from all subject areas were interviewed in five different Portuguese public universities.

A brief literature review on work-family balance

Numerous mechanisms linking work and family have been identified (e.g. for a comprehensive review see Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Evans & Bartolomé, 1984; Zedeck, 1992). The *segmentation* approach argues that work and home are independent and separate spheres that do not affect each other. Originally, segmentation was viewed as a natural division of work and family that served two different functions. This view was early questioned by some researchers (Kanter, 1977; Voydanoff, 1987) who demonstrated that work and family are intertwined by several structural and psychological work and family characteristics. More recently, segmentation has been conceptualised as an active process whereby individuals maintain some kind of boundary between work and family (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996).

According to Ashforth *et al.* (2000) the boundary theory describes the transitions between life domains involving the crossing of a set of boundaries on a daily basis. The borders are lines of demarcation between different life domains and can take three forms: physical, temporal and psychological. Individuals create and maintain boundaries as a way of ordering and making sense of what surrounds them. The authors theorize about the micro-transitions that may occur between the various domains (e.g. the way someone takes care of a child in the morning while in the afternoon is occupied with a work meeting). When segmenting individuals benefit from solid and thick boundaries between the various domains, and when integrating they possess porous and thin borders between them. While those segmenting will experience a high degree of contrast when crossing between borders (both physically and mentally); those integrating do not experience such contrast and will feel less confounded by the domain transition. The identity concept is also central in this theory because it affects the degree of contrast when an individual makes a transition between different domains, and it refers to the socially constructed definition of ‘self’ (who am I as a parent, as a professional...) (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000).

On the other hand, many studies are concerned with the decaying working conditions that academics are now facing in their careers (Hagedorn, 2000; Hermanowicz, 2003; Kinman & Jones, 2003; Lacy & Sheenhan, 1997; McInnis, 2000a & 2000b; Rosser, 2005; Santiago & Carvalho, 2008; Winter & Sarros, 2002; Ylijoki, 2005). In Portugal, the worsening of academics “conditions of employment, as public higher education institutions are increasingly adopting a model of economic rationalism, ‘product-oriented’, individual productivity (mainly based in the research outputs), and flexibility resulting in loss of job security” (Santiago & Carvalho, 2008, p.208), poses new challenges to the family and private realm. The studies above underline the lack of time availability felt by academics to simultaneously do research, teaching and management tasks, and the unrealistic goals

concerning research performance outcomes. And like happens with Finn academics' (Nikunen, 2011), the changes in the working conditions of Portuguese academics' affects how men and women experience the work/family or work/life balance.

An outline of the main findings

Different narratives were found with regard to the interviewees' emotional and cognitive attachment to work and non-work activities. Those narratives are especially related to the experiences of parenthood and the intensity and work pace of the academic career and how both realms in life affect and shape each other. Gender differences were also found in this study, with women more constrained in their academic careers by the responsibilities of motherhood and the combining of an academic career that demands full time and commitment (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Currie, Harris, & Thiele, 2000), creating in women, more than men, feelings of inadequacy and career inability in a time of increased competitiveness and having to prove that you belong in academia.

In the data analysis three different groups of academics emerged. A group of career-oriented academics that describe the career as an important source of personal fulfillment and times and spaces of work and family as being very merged and fused. However, the family borders (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Clark, 2000) seem to be more permeable to the intrusion of work into the family, but both domains seem to enrich each other, in spite of work often encroaching too much into family and personal times. Secondly, we have a group of family-oriented academics. The interviews with this group are pervaded by the theme of accommodation of work demands to family needs, and by the time pressure due to the multiple tasks that have to be completed simultaneously in the family and career domains. In this group, most academics are parents of relatively young and/or dependent children. Both groups of academics seem to be struggling with the

changes brought by the impact of the new public management practices on academic work conditions (Santiago & Carvalho, 2008). And finally, the data reveal a third group of academics that is characterized by a clear prioritization of the career or the family. In this group, those who prioritize the academic career above any other realm in life are more at ease with the logic of the competitive and meritocratic career model.

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