This is a repository copy of *Flexible careers across the life course: advancing theory, research and practice*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/119337/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Tomlinson, J, Baird, M, Berg, P et al. (1 more author) (2018) Flexible careers across the life course: advancing theory, research and practice. Human Relations, 71 (1). pp. 4-22. ISSN 0018-7267

https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717733313

Flexible careers across the life course: advancing theory, research and practice

Jennifer Tomlinson
University of Leeds, U.K.

Marian Baird
University of Sydney, Australia

Peter B. Berg
Michigan State University, U.S.A.

Rae Cooper
University of Sydney, Australia

Introduction

The world of work in the 21st century continues to change in ways that demand new perspectives and concepts to understand and explain the reconfiguring of employment relations and careers across the life course. Capital mobility, technological change, developments in business strategy and the dominance of neo-liberalism in policy-making over the last half century, alongside new and established forms of precarious work have altered jobs, occupations, industries, and economies. In addition, gender, age and generational shifts in the labour force, as well as changing dynamics of care, have altered what people need and expect from their work experience over the life course.
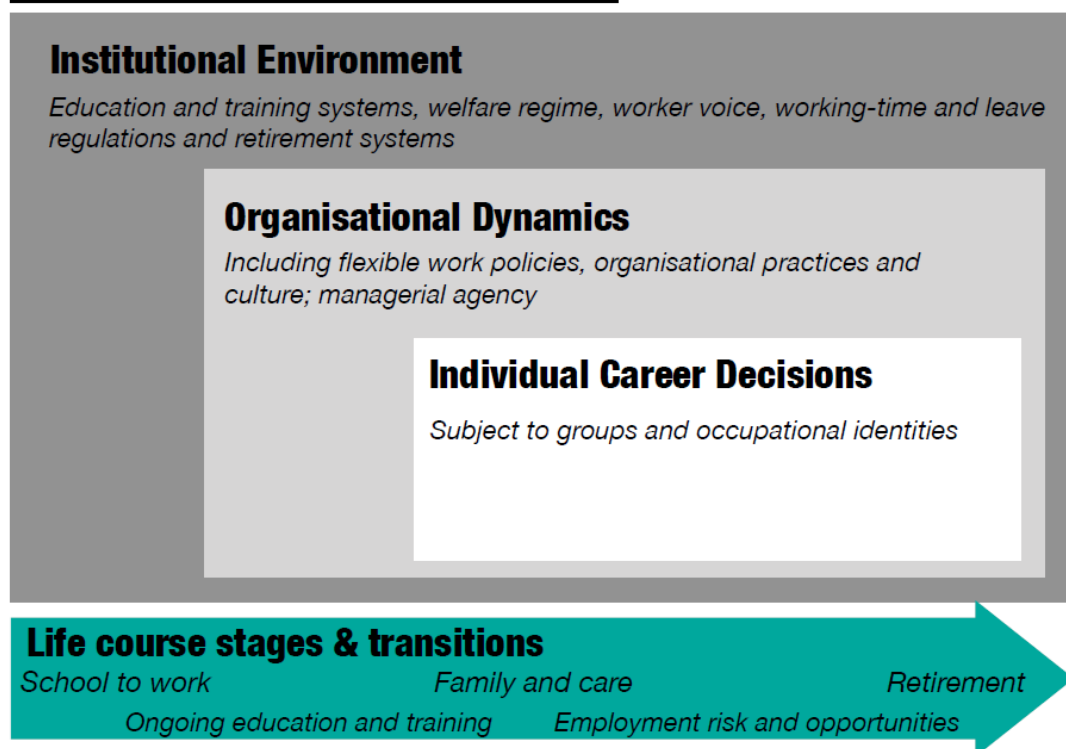
Despite debates generated by the rise of the gig, platform or sharing economy and the demise of traditional employment-based relationships, employment within organisations remains the dominant experience for the vast majority of workers. In many advanced economies including Australia, Germany, Japan, the UK, USA and Canada the proportion of those in employment (as opposed to being self-employed) has risen over the past few decades and as of 2016 was within the range of 70 to 75 percent (OECD 2017). Organisation-based employment remains very important and it is within this context that we situate our research agenda of 'flexible careers'.

Given these patterns of change and continuity, it is timely to revisit and more fully develop the concept of flexible careers, also articulated by others (Moen and Sweet, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004). In our analysis, we pay specific attention to the altered structural conditions and temporal dimensions of work as well as more firmly establish the role of multiple actors in career theory and research. Recent career concepts, notably the boundaryless and protean career concepts, focus on independent and free career agents. In contrast, we contribute to career theory and research by identifying a range of actors and institutions with the capacity to shape career experiences and trajectories over the life course.

1

Many important contributions of late focus on the precarious characteristics of flexible jobs (Kalleberg, 2011). In contrast, our attention is directed towards the conditions, including the institutional arrangements and the organisational policies and practices that can support individuals to construct flexible and more sustainable careers across the life course. In this introductory article and in the contributions that follow, we address these issues and ask: What are flexible careers? Who are the (multiple) actors determining flexible careers? How do institutions and organisational settings impact upon and shape the career decisions and agency of individuals across the life course? While employment relations and organisational theory scholars have examined questions of individual agency and environmental context for some time, connecting a life course dimension with the concept of career has often been absent. In this special issue, we integrate a focus on institutional, organisational, and individual-agentic dimensions and offer a framework for researching flexible careers across the life course.

In Figure 1, we illustrate the framework that guides our examination of flexible careers in this article. The key outcome we seek to explain is a 'flexible career'. A flexible career is one that meets the individual's needs and preferences for flexibility and sustainability as life circumstances change, and is influenced by the institutional environment, organisational factors as well as individual career decisions.

Figure 1: Determinants of a Flexible Career

Institutional Environment
Education and training systems, welfare regime, worker voice, working-time and leave regulations and retirement systems

Organisational Dynamics
Including flexible work policies, organisational practices and culture; managerial agency

Individual Career Decisions
Subject to groups and occupational identities

Life course stages & transitions
School to work   Family and care   Retirement
Ongoing education and training   Employment risk and opportunities

Our framework developed in response to the literature on careers, which focuses on the decisions and motivations of career actors. We argue that this literature is highly individualised and overly agentic in its approach to studying careers. We highlight two factors lacking in recent career literature. First, we argue that more emphasis needs to

be placed on the roles of multiple actors and stakeholders in the process of shaping and defining careers. Various actors – including governments, regulatory bodies, employers, employer associations, employees and their representatives – shape institutional environments and the organisational contexts in which individuals make career decisions. Organisational policies and practices, nested within institutional environments, affect the extent to which individuals can achieve flexible careers. Second, we recognize that gender and other social categories such as ethnicity and socio-economic status and occupational identities shape the decisions of career actors. Our framework emphasises that achieving a flexible career emerges through the interaction of an individual's career decisions with organisational factors and institutional environments across the life course.

We advocate taking a life course approach to analysing flexible careers. The thick arrow at the bottom of Figure 1 depicts the life course stages and key working-life transitions. Moving left to right along the arrow depicts the passage of time through the life course. Within the arrow, we indicate key stages and transitions individuals experience throughout their life span. The transition from school to work, family and care transitions, notably starting a family, experiencing employment risks and opportunities, ongoing education and training, and retirement are key stages. We stagger and overlap these experiences to emphasize that these stages and transitions do not necessarily happen sequentially or in the same order for individuals across social groups, notably by gender. The transition from school to work typically begins a career and retirement ends it, but much happens in between. Certainly employment brings with it risks, such as periods of unemployment, as well as opportunities for promotion, new skills training, and new career paths. In addition, to depicting these life course stages and transitions, we emphasize later in the paper that the life course is not merely an individual moving through a series of uniform transitions and stages. Rather, it is a social experience where individuals are linked to others through social ties. Further, a life course approach acknowledges the experiences of groups of individuals, thus explicitly recognizing that gender, age, socio-economic status or ethnicity, for example, are important and that these groups interact with institutional and organisational settings.

The box above the arrow show how individual career decisions are influenced by the work practices they experience within organisations. In addition, organisational policies and practices are nested within a broader institutional environment, which also influences the types of organisational policies and practices and individual career decisions. A large body of research recognizes the importance of institutions in shaping experiences of work. Experiences of employment and careers take place within an environmental context of laws, rights, responsibilities and norms. Multiple actors operate within this environment crafting public policies and representing employer and worker interests. Key institutions at the national level such as education and training systems, welfare support for working families, retirement systems, regulations governing working-time practices and worker voice have a strong influence on individuals' career options, the flexibility within which one can move through the labour market, and the sustainability of one's career.

In addition, it is well established that the institutional environment, government regulations, collective bargaining, and employer action can influence policies and practices at the organisational level, where individuals work. Organisational policies and practices, such as flexible work arrangements, are often also shaped by the

3

decisions and behaviors of key agents in the workplace. The structure of these organisational practices, and the extent to which they provide options and control to a select or a broad group of workers, is critical in determining whether these practices have a positive or negative effect on careers. Norms about who should have access to flexible working arrangements, and in what circumstances, can extend or limit flexibility to groups and individuals. Managerial behavior is an important organisational factor affecting the extent to which individuals have the capacity to meet their career needs and preferences. The role of supervisors as gatekeepers restricting access to flexible work arrangements or imposing penalties on workers for accessing specific practices must be taken into account in studies of career flexibility. As a whole, the organisational level is at the nexus of the employment relationship where workers experience and, sometimes, negotiate their working conditions, their schedules, and the degree of flexibility in their jobs. It is a key site of action and also a contextual factor in constructing or inhibiting flexible careers.

The three boxes span the length of the life-course arrow to indicate that individuals are making career choices within this nested structure at each stage and transition in the life course. This framework, therefore, provides a guide to researchers as to the key variables affecting flexible careers and demonstrates the importance of analysing the effects of these variables at different stages and transitions in the life course. For example, educational institutions may be particularly important in shaping career decisions early in the life course during the transition from school to work, but have less influence later in the life course toward retirement. Along the same lines, organisational policies and practices are likely to have a strong effect on a flexible career when forming a family or dealing with employment risks and opportunities. The rest of the article discusses the elements of our framework in more detail beginning with a critique of the career literature.

Contemporary career concepts

Careers were traditionally articulated as a set or series of work experiences with a linear, steady, upward trajectory often within a fixed organisational setting. Advancement, security and stability were key features of an organisational career. Careers were, and remain, gendered in a masculine form. Those committed to career advancement were expected to conform to an uninterrupted work-career involving long and sometimes unpredictable hours of work (Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1991). While many feminists and gender theorists challenged and problematised this notion of careers, many of these characteristics associated with career-focused individuals remain pervasive.

Since the 1990s new ways of theorising careers emerged driven by changes in workforce demographics, in the employment relationship, psychological contract and structure of organisational hierarchies. Contemporary theories propose innovative ways of articulating the 'new realities' of careers. In a recent review, Gubler et al (2014) note that in the past 15 years or so, career scholars have offered over a dozen new career concepts. Only two, they argue, have really gained traction: the boundaryless and protean career concepts. While they are certainly widely used, we argue that neither concepts, nor current alternatives, adequately situate individual career agents within a context of multiple actors, varied opportunity structures shaped by socio-economic forces, most notably institutional environments and organisational settings.

The notion of a boundaryless career is central to new understandings of contemporary careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Arthur et al., 2005; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). The boundaryless career places emphasis on change in both the psychological contract and organisational forms and hierarchies which are more permeable, facilitating greater opportunity for employees to craft careers through inter-organisational mobility. Together these changes result in both employees and employers understanding that their employment relationship is temporary, that employees may seek opportunities for growth beyond their current organisation, seeking independence from, rather than dependence on, traditional modes of career advancement (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Accompanying this shift in logic are the emphases placed on self-fulfillment, independence through extra-organisational career support, subjective notions of career success and a landscape to accommodate greater adaptability through flatter, less hierarchical, organisational forms (Arthur et al., 2005). Only fleetingly are structural constraints acknowledged, then largely disregarded (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996).

The robustness of evidence of boundarylessness and inter-organisational mobility has been challenged empirically (Rodriguez and Guest, 2010). Furthermore, we argue that little attention is given to how individuals, who vary in terms of their social characteristics and privilege, fare in terms of their ability to achieve a boundaryless career. While Sullivan and Arthur (2006) note that some individuals have greater 'career competencies' than others, this still falls short of acknowledging that social and economic forces and institutions shape the career capacities and mobility of individuals.

While the boundaryless career centres on mobility, both in physical and psychological form (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006), the protean career hinges on motivation, in particular, motivation to achieve subjectively-defined career success. The protean career, first outlined by Hall (1976) depicts a career that is subject to frequent change through self-invention, and one that is characterised by autonomy, proactivity and self-direction. It is thought to be highly relevant in a volatile global economy and fits well with the emphasis on proactive and personal control over career development and employability (DiRenzo et al., 2015).

Two 'meta-competencies' are emphasised in the protean career: identity and adaptability. At the turn of the 21st Century, Hall claims the protean career has 'emerged fully blown' (2002: 5). While authors acknowledging similarities between the protean and boundaryless career concepts (Briscoe, 2006), Hall (2002) emphasises subtle but significant differences between the two, stating that the protean career does not deny the existence of boundaries but rather argues that boundaries such as organisational forms and levels, projects, functions and locations, have become more permeable. Transitions across boundaries have become more accepted and frequent. Boundary changes rather than boundarylessness is central to this analysis.

The protean career places emphasis on both career as a process and the subjective definition of career success and satisfaction, arguably more so than the boundaryless career construct. In doing so there is potential for analyses that focus on greater "concern for seeking a sense of personal meaning and purpose in one's work" (Hall 2002: 6) and in doing so can better connect to issues of gender, life course and work-life integration (DiRenzo et al., 2015). While having greater potential to integrate context and transitions across boundaries, problems remain with the protean construct.

As Hall explains (2002), the career metaphor is taken from the name of the Greek god Proteus, who could change form or shape at will. Such a metaphor does not, however, do justice to the dynamics of agency and structure across the life course.

Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) and others (Sabelis and Schilling, 2013) extend the vocabulary of new career concepts through critique of the boundaryless career. They argue that for those researching gendered careers, and in particular the sideways movements, discontinuities and interruptions women face in their careers due to caring, parenting and discriminatory tendencies of employers, means that the boundaryless metaphor is unsatisfactory both conceptually and empirically. Mainiero and Sullivan propose an alternative metaphor, that of the kaleidoscope career, in which women reject "the concept of a linear career progression, preferring instead to create non-traditional, self-crafted careers that suit their objectives, needs and life criteria" (2005: 109).

Moreover, Mainiero and Sullivan (2005: 111) emphasise a strong relational dimension of women's careers, which are "part of a larger and intricate web of interconnected issues, people and aspects" (also see McDonald, this volume). The authors use the Kaleidoscope metaphor to invoke images of new arrangements, rotating patterns and priorities as parts of their lives change shape and evolve: "one part moves, other parts change" (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005: 112;).

While it is very useful to think of careers as relational, a key concern remains that the lack of acknowledgement of how institutional environments shape and structure career formation over the life course. While the notion of employers having discriminatory tendencies is acknowledged and more so in recent work by Sabelis and Schilling (2013), who speak of frayed careers, little is said about the broader contexts in which careers are experienced. A similar critique has been made of boundary management theories by Piszczek and Berg (2014) who argue that regulative institutions have not been sufficiently accounted for in the use of boundary theory to understand work-life integration. We extend this type of critique to the study of careers, and in doing so propose greater clarity on what is meant by flexible careers.

The Importance of Institutions

Scholars studying work and employment have long recognized the importance of institutions and the environmental context in shaping employees' work experience (Budd, 2004; Dunlop, 1993; Hall & Soskice, 2001). "Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. In consequence they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic" (North, 1990:3). Work-related institutions are devised and sustained by multiple actors that include government, employers, individual workers and their representatives. The interaction among these actors creates an environmental context of laws, rights and norms that shape career experiences over the life-course and provide opportunities and constraints to organisational policies and practices.

The institutional environment is most often conceptualized at the national or macro level. Countries are typically classified into various groups, which have differential institutional effects on employment outcomes (Anxo, Bosch, & Rubery, 2010; Berg,

Bosch, & Charest, 2014; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hall & Soskice, 2001). What constitutes the institutional environment related to work or careers can be quite broad. Budd (2004: 50-57) maintains that a variety of environmental factors shape the interaction of employees and employers to produce outcomes including wages, hours and other terms and conditions of employment. These include employment and labour laws, the economic and political environments that shape the power relations between employers and employees, the social environment that contributes to social identification and workplace policies, systems of corporate governance, and the role of community groups and worker representatives.

For our purposes, we focus on five key aspects of the institutional environmental that directly affect the ability of individuals to construct and adapt their career experiences to their needs and preferences over the life course, namely education and training systems, worker voice, working time and leave regulations, welfare supports for parents and carers, and retirement systems.

Flexible education and training systems are key factors that affect the ability of workers to obtain initial skills at the beginning of their working life and obtain new skills necessary to change their career paths over time. Differences exist in education and training institutions across countries. More liberal economies offer school-based systems with public and for-profit education options. Certification and the quality of education varies widely across these options (Bailey & Berg, 2010). School-based systems are often weakly connected to the labour market and job experience plays a prominent role in shaping the career trajectories of professionals and non-professionals. Germany, in contrast, has a highly developed post-secondary school and apprenticeship system that cuts across a wide variety of occupations. Its certifications through these institutions are tightly connected with the labor market. The apprenticeship system in particular combines experience with certification, which lowers the likelihood of becoming unemployed upon completion, but can also result in less flexibility to change over the life course given the importance of certification (Bosch & Charest, 2010). Education and training systems differ across countries, but the extent to which they effectively transition people into the labor market and mitigate employment risks later in life should be taken into account when assessing and analysing flexible careers.

Worker voice addresses the question of the extent to which institutions provide opportunities for workers to have a say in how their jobs are organised and conducted. Participating in and influencing work decisions can affect flexible careers throughout the life course by creating worker-favorable conditions that support adaptability to changing life circumstances. Budd (2004: 23) defines voice as the ability to have meaningful input into decisions. Institutions that support meaningful worker voice provide the ability to influence general working conditions, such as pay, hours of work, and schedules. It is upon these general working conditions that career trajectories exist and move. These conditions form the floor for transitions across the labor market.

Institutional environments that support strong trade unions or works councils encourage forms of collective voice. This form of worker voice gives employees more power and more effective say and leverage over working conditions. Thus, institutions that support collective worker voice increase the likelihood that workers can negotiate terms in their favor, such as predictable schedules, overtime penalty rates, and/or employment security.

Collective rights associated with worker voice are usually established through legal regulations and norms that define the employment relations and voice systems. The depth and breadth of collective worker voice varies widely across countries (Katz & Darbishire, 2000). More liberal market economies such as the United States put more emphasis on individual rights whereas coordinated market economies such as Germany emphasize collective forms of voice through labor unions, works councils, and codetermination rights within governance structures (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Some systems operate more as a 'hybrid' between collective systems and processes and individual rights, increasingly the case in Australia (Cooper, 2010). Worker involvement and input into corporate governance is another form of collective voice. Institutional environments that support stakeholder participation in corporate governance give workers another means to obtain information about and participate in company strategic decisions. Individual voice also can be provided through laws or norms that grant individuals rights at the workplace, such as the right to request a flexible schedule, a phased retirement scheme, or to participate in workplace decisions for example in relation to rostering arrangements. With respect to careers, institutional environments that provide workers with more voice (both collective and individual) increase the probability that workers will be able to build their career experiences and transitions on working conditions that meet their needs and preferences over the life-course.

Working time and leave regulations affect the ability of workers to shape the duration and timing of work to fit their needs and preferences at various life stages. For example, working time regulations include standard hours of work, the extent of paid parental leave, annual leave, the right to request a flexible schedule, and access to and use of various flexible work arrangements. Some of these regulations may be particularly important when building a family, caring for others, or nearing retirement. An important aspect of working time regulations is the extent to which employees have control over their working time. Berg, Bosch, and Charest (2014) discuss three different national institutional configurations that shape control over working time: unilateral, negotiated, and mandated. In the unilateral configuration, the employer implements working time practices to fit its interests where the work schedule, the duration of work, and the length of leaves is set by the employer. The unilateral configuration is characterized by high diversity of working time practices and exclusivity where only a small and varying share of the workforce are able to exert control over their working time.

The negotiated configuration is characterized by negotiation between the employer and worker representatives. Working time practices in the negotiated configuration manifest the compromise of employer and employee interests achieved through bargaining and are most likely found in institutional environments that support collective bargaining. In addition, working time practices in the negotiated configuration are more likely to be standardized across the economy with differences between industries depending on the level of bargaining present in the country. In the mandated configuration, the state plays a strong role in shaping a variety of working time practices for employers and employees as well as general employment regulations. The state dictates particular working time practices such that autonomous collective bargaining institutions are weakly developed because of low union membership density. Because of the dominance by the state, working time practices in the mandated

configuration tend to be more stable and uniform across the economy. Who has control over working time practices depends on the mandates from the state.

The institutional differences associated with these configurations influence employee control over working time in different ways. Within the unilateral configuration, employees with high skills in high demand are likely to enjoy more control over their working time throughout part or most of their careers. Lower skilled employees, in contrast, are likely to experience much less control over the scheduling their work hours (Lambert, 2010). In contrast, the negotiated and mandated configurations are more likely to provide a broader portion of the labor force with control over their working time, giving people an important resource to use throughout various stages of the life course.

Generosity of welfare support for parents and carers also varies cross-nationally and shape the capacity for women and men to work and forge careers across the life course (Anxo, 2017). The sustainability of careers is influenced by how governments facilitate transitions between different critical life points, notably those connected to parenthood, but also as families and households reconfigure for other reasons including responsibilities for elder-care. Maternity, paternity and parental leave and pay and the way governments support men, women, families and households with the costs of child and elder care, informs individuals' sense of entitlement to support (Lewis and Smithson, 2001). Government or public policy provision for parents and carers also inform career plans of men and women individually and at the household level, shaping experiences of careers at the organisational level and the extent to which careers are viewed as sustainable at different points across the life course (Moen and Sweet, 2004).

Retirement systems have an important effect on the career decisions near the end of one's working life. Typically, older workers face the decision of whether to continue working or exit the labor force as they approach retirement age. Increased longevity and ageing workforces across the developed economies have put pressure on retirement systems to raise retirement age eligibility and extend working life. The decision to keep working or to retire earlier is ultimately an individual decision that is influenced by one's health, wealth, family demands, as well as rules and incentives of the retirement system. For example, rules requiring mandatory retirement effectively limit the ability of retirees to work. China's current mandatory retirement ages are gender based: 50 for women and 60 for men in labor intensive occupations (Haacke, 2015). Other aspects of retirement systems such as incentives for phased retirement provide options for workers to continue working at fewer hours and still receive part of their retirement benefits. A number of European countries provide such an option for workers (Eurofound, 2014).

As indicated in our framework, we strongly encourage researchers to incorporate institutional effects into their analyses of flexible careers at various stages throughout the life course. Whereas we maintain the five institutional aspects we discuss above are critical in influencing flexible careers, we encourage the exploration of other institutional factors than those we have emphasized above.

Organisational-level policy and practice

A growing body of research confirms that organisational policies, practices and culture have a powerful influence on the ability of employees to access the flexibly they need

in their careers. In the interests of understanding how flexible careers are generated, we focus on the connections of organisations with institutional environments and the agency of individuals. Organisations are nested within an institutional context and this has a potent impact on the behaviors and priorities of organisational actors and, in turn, on the capacity of the individual to develop a flexible and sustainable career that meets their needs and preferences over their life course. Employing organisations, and the ways in which they interact with the flexible career, are both porous and generative. That is, rather than being impervious to external forces, they are a key site where broader rules and norms in relation to flexibility are brought to life, mediated and enacted.

In studies of the enablers and inhibitors of flexibly, two critical themes – organisational policy and managerial agency – emerge. Organisational policy in relation to flexible working has been the subject of increasing research scrutiny in many national contexts. Numerous academic and leading practitioner studies of the incidence of policies to allow employees to put in place changes in hours, schedules and the place of work abound, and increasingly these studies show a growth in the adoption of such policies (eg Catalyst, 2013, DCA, 2013). Organisational policies are important for framing who can (and cannot) access flexibility, the types of flexible working arrangements available to employees and the circumstances in which employees can (and cannot) access these options (see Kossek and Thompson, 2016). These organisational policies reflect and incorporate broader societal norms about ideal workers and ideal careers which are gendered (Acker, 1990) and, rather than challenging gendered assumptions, serve to entrench and reproduce them. We see this for example in the occupational downgrading of mothers with young children when they take up flexible working arrangements or part-time hours (Tomlinson et al., 2009) while for men and fathers issues may be connected to perceived legitimacy to use and limited access to flexible working arrangements (Harrington at al., 2016).

The interactions of flexible working arrangements with other human resources policies, for example in relation to pay, performance management and promotion, can either align to build access to flexibility or create tensions, undermining access (Cooper and Baird, 2015; Ryan and Kossek, 2008). Sometimes the design of organisational flexible working policies mean that they are open to work group interpretation, thus limiting access to flexibility in practice (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002).

The accessibility and practice of flexible working arrangements is shaped by managerial agency. Managers can impact the ways in which flexibility is practiced, the ways in which employees who work flexibly are managed and rewarded, and can shape the way flexible workers are perceived by their colleagues (McCarthy et al., 2010). It seems that this is critical even in circumstances where well-developed organisational policies and robust institutional regulations are in place (Kossek et al., 2016). Kelly and Kalev (2006) argue that rather than deviating from the intention of policy that, often, policies are designed to establish and entrench managerial prerogative. They characterise the policy outcome as 'formalised discretion' for managers, leaving flexible work arrangements to be dealt with as 'negotiated perks available to valued workers if and when managers choose to allow them' (2006; 379).

Flexible working has emerged as a key theme in employment relations and human resource management scholarship in the past decade (Bessa and Tomlinson, 2017),

however, we argue that studies suffer from two important limitations. First, there is a tendency to concentrate on the use of single items of flexible working practice at a particular career stage rather than taking a life course perspective and second, the ways in which scholars have sought to understand how flexible working is accessed and used in the workplace is somewhat divorced from analysis beyond the workplace, notably the wider institutional and cultural context.

Recent scholarship on flexible working arrangements has given us insights into how employees and organisations establish various flexible working arrangements and how they are used. This includes studies of part time working and job sharing, flexible scheduling and remote working (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Maxwell et al., 2007; Chung and van der Horst, this issue; Gascoigne and Kelliher, this issue). We also have a growing understanding of both the positive outcomes as well as the barriers and traps faced by flexible workers in relation to career advancement, access to meaningful work and penalties in earnings (Coltrane et al. 2013). However, to date, there has been a tendency to investigate the implementation and impact of single flexible working 'items' and sometimes bundles of practice in isolation and at key moments, rather than to take a more holistic approach to the suite of flexible working arrangements that exist and attempting to understand how they are put to use across working lives. Ultimately this limits the our understanding of how flexible working interacts with individual needs and preferences as they change across the life course as well as our understanding of the ways in which it can more sustainably meet individual preferences and needs.

A second key limitation relates to the tendency to investigate workplace flexibility in a way that is divorced from the broader macro/institutional setting in which it is nested. A narrative which privileges the workplace, and foregrounds key actors within it, without attempting to understanding of the interactions and interconnections of workplace phenomenon with broader institutional and cultural contexts restricts our understanding of the ways in which flexible careers might develop. Critically it means that we miss what Susan Lewis called the 'conditions under which broader culture change may be achieved' (1997, p 13).

Organisational policies, practices and culture frame and shape the ability of employees to access the flexibility they need. However, we argue that organisational-level activity cannot be understood in isolation and, as such, we offer a model which connects the organisation to broader institutions and social forces. We also need a better conceptualization of how flexibility might be adopted and made sustainable across careers and the life course.

Applying the Life Course

Through our framework we argue that a life course approach provides the underpinning mechanism to integrate individual agency with macro/institutional influences and micro/organisational policies and practices. A life course approach explicitly recognizes that individuals exist in categories or classes (determined for example by occupation, gender, age or nationality), and that access to institutional or organisational support will affect their capacity to act and make decisions at key transition points in life. In this way the traditional linear career, which as discussed earlier is strongly associated with the male breadwinner model, is quickly exposed as not being applicable

to or attainable by all groups. Furthermore, when these groups are studied separately, the parallel running of careers with other responsibilities (for example, studying and work; motherhood and work; elder care and work) and interruptions in careers (caused by migration, care work, illness or economic crisis) are much more evident. The need to link career experience and flexibility with institutional and organisational policies and practices also becomes much more pronounced (Moen and Sweet, 2004; Erikson et al 2010; Jung, this volume).

The life course literature stems from early work in sociology and social psychology (Elder Jr et al., 2004) which developed to understand the effect of major social events such as the Great Depression and immigration on people's lives. Elder argues the concept of the life course 'provides a framework for studying phenomena at the nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social change.' (Elder, Jr et al, 2004: 10). Mortimer and Shanahan (2004, xi) define the life course as 'the age graded, socially embedded sequence of roles that connect the phases of life.' Importantly, while Elder and colleagues identify the principle of agency, they do not apply this in isolation of context (historical and social) and relations (networks and interdependencies). Thus key concepts associated with life course theory are social pathways, 'linked lives', trajectories, transitions, and turning points. Each of these concepts highlight the dynamic and interrelated reality of people's lives and events, an analytical approach similar to that taken by McDonald, this volume.

The origins and rise to prominence of the life course paradigm lies partly in the well-documented societal changes starting in the 1960s and partly in the methodological advances which allowed the collection of large surveys and longitudinal data, tracing individuals' life experiences and allowing population level analyses. Initially there was considerable interest in life course studies of children, youth and criminals, with the application to working life only coming later, largely with the advent of women's increased workforce participation and the rise of the work-life dilemma.

Moving from the sociology and social psychology fields to the domain of work, Moen and Sweet (2004: 17) argue that

> 'The life course intersects with studies of work and organizational policy around the concept of 'career.' … What a life course perspective brings to both research and policy agendas is recognition of the fact that, as currently configured, occupational career building and family career building occur simultaneously, even though they are often studied and legislated about, separately.'

Moen and Sweet note that the market plays the primary role in framing the life course in the USA, whereas in Europe the state plays the major role. Turning to the role of the state, Anxo, Bosh and Rubery (2010) use the life course to assess the impact of different European welfare and work regimes on the equity and social inclusion of different groups defined by class, gender, age and generation.

Anxo et al (2010:5) distinguish five transitions in working life which are both individually and socially constructed: school to work-career; from home to independent living; family formation/parenthood; employment risks in prime age; and retirement.

Despite the surge in interest in life course approaches to understanding career trajectories, there is still much less on the intersection of age and gender. Age is often used as a proxy for career stages, and while age may have been applied adequately to men's careers given they tend to experience more linear career paths, age is not a good

proxy for women's work or career experiences, and women's career stages do not necessarily map to same ages as men's.

Following women's increased labour market engagement from the 1970s, interest in work and family interactions grew and different theories developed to explain the connection or disconnection between the two. Developmental theory (as per Levinson, in Chi-Ching, 1995) adopted a dynamic, life-stages approach that recognised the relationship between work and family changed over time, that career salience was different for men and women and developed in opposite directions. For instance, Levinson and others argued that men's career orientation was greatest around the ages 30-40, whereas women's family orientation was higher then, and career salience occurred after early parenting, in the 40-50 age period.

In a study of Singaporean women, Chi-Ching (1995) found these patterns were not so clear for all classes of women and contrary to developmental theory, women in non-career jobs did not increase their attachment to career, but maintained an attachment to family. The relevance of this and the Erikson study to our understanding of flexible careers in the 21st century, is to recognise the need to be open to greater variety and less assumed homogeneity in career orientation among men and women over the life course. As women are increasing their educational attainment and qualifications, they are also increasingly entering the labour market earlier, having babies later and fewer of them, and returning to work earlier, albeit often with career penalties as a consequence of returning to lower status jobs or part-time working patterns. There is considerable empirical evidence for the changing participation rates of women in all developed economies supporting the notion of a 'new life cycle' for women (Goldin and Mitchell, 2017), but the question of how women's careers are affected rather than their participation rates per se needs much closer examination.

In summary, while the 'life-course' term is well known there are surprisingly few studies that genuinely and systematically apply the life course approach to careers and flexibility. While there is not full agreement on what the stages are in the life course, life course approaches do recognise the interplay of structure and agency. Studies such as Anxo *et al's* link institutional arrangements (welfare states) to labour market outcomes and while this allows for a focus on policy settings and comparative analyses between countries it does not incorporate, as our framework does, an organisational or workplace level analysis, arguably the site where individual's careers and lives really play out.

Contributions in this volume and concluding remarks

The aim of this introductory article is to argue for and outline a multi-level approach to the study of flexible careers which integrates institutional and organisational dynamics within a framework that emphasizes a range of career actors across the life course. We have argued above that analysis of each of the four dimensions (institutions, organisations, individual career actors and the life course) is required to more comprehensively understand the dynamics of flexible careers, but little research yet takes this holistic approach.

This special issue aims to begin to bridge this gap and the contributions selected for this Special Issue each take a multi-level approach, illustrating the importance of

different dimensions and levels of analysis. Table 1 outlines key findings against the different levels of analysis in our framework.

Table 1. Contributions in the Special Issue on Flexible Careers

Theme	Contribution
Institutional environments	Chung & van der Horst – frames British panel research with reference to welfare regimes and working-time regulations Gascoigne & Kelliher – explores how institutional contexts of UK and Netherlands working time regulations, coupled with organisational policies, shapes individuals negotiation of reduced workload and time i-deals (or idiosyncratic deals).
Organisational settings: actors, policy and practice	Chung and van der Horst – uses border and boundary management theories to examine whether flexible working arrangements at the organisational level, specifically connected to the location (telework) and scheduling of work (flexi-time) can help women sustain employment and working hours following maternity. Gascoigne & Kelliher – argues that two forms of organisational structural constraint prevent reduced workload and time i-deals being effective: a) routine expectation of unpredictability and b) absence of substitutability and collaboration in resource planning Jung & Takeuchi – explores how organisational supports and developmental HR policies and practices co-shape individuals' career self-management strategies McDonald – emphasises that workplaces and industrial sectors afford both structural constraints and opportunities which shape career goals.

Individuals, identity & career actors	Gascoigne & Kelliher – identifies a fourth dimension in individuals' crafting of i-deals, extending Rosseau's three stage process
	Jung & Takeuchi – focuses on how individuals, as career agents, shape their career success, but critically in the context of organisational supports - integrating a managerial perspective to which interacts with the individual-agentic driven process of career development
	McDonald – demonstrates that anticipated career trajectories are shaped gender relations and identity, education and social class.
Life course dynamics	Chung & van der Horst – finds that women who have access to flexi-time are less likely to substantially reduce their hours after maternity, which is a critical life course stage for women in terms of their employment participation and career sustainability
	Jung & Takeuchi – explores how individuals' career satisfaction varies at young, mid and later life course stages, interacting with organisational supports and developmental HR practices.
	McDonald – argues that relational, structural and temporal dynamics across the life course shape career intentions and ambitions

While they do not all explicitly engage with each of our four dimensions, these articles are illustrative of a multi-level approach and identify a range of relational career actors and stakeholders in the construction of flexible careers. They also each draw on institutional environments or organisational dynamics to frame their analysis. The contributions to this special issue, taken together, provide emphasis on and firmly locate the importance of a multi-level approach and a life course perspective to advancing research on flexible careers. The conditions under which careers can meet employees' expectations and needs for flexibility across the life course is an critical line of enquiry in labour market analysis, and research on the future of work and employment relations.

We encourage researchers to use our framework to examine, incorporate and account for the influence of institutions and organisational policies and practices on individual

career decisions through various stages of the life course. In particular, we encourage studies within and across countries that can demonstrate the differing effects of institutions at different stages of the life course. Moreover, it would be instructive to learn what organisational policies and practices work best in meeting the needs and preferences of individuals in different occupations at different stages of the life course. We urge researchers to take up this challenge to develop the field both conceptually and empirically to further enhance our understanding of flexible careers.

References

Aasave A Billari FC and Piccareeta R (2007) Strings of Adulthood: A Sequence Analysis of Young British Women's Work-Family Trajectories, European Journal of Population, 23(3): 369–388

Acker J (1990) Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organization. Gender and Society, 4(2): 139-158.

Anxo D Bosch G and Rubery J (2010) 'Shaping the life course: a European perspective', in The Welfare State and Life Transitions, Edward Elgar, pp1-77

Anxo D Bosch G and Rubery J (2010). The Welfare State and Life Transitions: A European Perspective. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing

Arthur M and Rousseau D (1996) The Boundaryless Career. New York: Oxford University Press

Arthur M Khapova SN and Wilderom CPM (2005) Career success in a boundaryless career world, Journal of Organizational Behavior, 26(2): 177-202

Bailey T and Berg P (2010) The Vocational Education and Training System in the United States. In G Bosch and J Charest (Eds.), Vocational Training: International Perspectives. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bailey, D. E., & Kurland, N. B. (2002). A review of telework research: Findings, new directions, and lessons for the study of modern work. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 23(4), 383-400.

Bessa I and Tomlinson J (2017) 'Established, accelerated and emergent themes in flexible work research', Journal of Industrial Relations, (forthcoming May)

Berg P Bosch G and Charest J (2014) Working-time Configurations: A frameworks for analyzing diversity across countries. Industrial and Labor Relations Review 67(3)

Blair-Loy M and Wharton AS (2002) Employees' use of work-family policies and the workplace social context. Social Forces 80: 813-845

Bosch G and Charest J (2010) Vocational Training: International Perspectives. In G Bosch and J Charest (eds) Vocational Training: International Perspectives. New York, NY: Routledge
Budd J (2004) Employment with a Human Face. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.

Catalyst (2013) The Great Debate: Flexibility vs. Face Time Busting the Myths Behind Flexible Work Arrangements, New York, Catalyst.

Chi-Chin Y (1995) 'The Effects of Career Salience and Life-Cycle Variables on Perceptions of Work-Family Interfaces' Human Relations, 48(3): 265-283

Coltrane, S., Miller, E. C., DeHaan, T., & Stewart, L. (2013). Fathers and the flexibility stigma. Journal of Social Issues, 69(2), 279–302.

Cooper, R (2010) 'The 'New' Industrial Relations and International Economic Crisis: Australia in 2009', Journal of Industrial Relations, vol.52:3, pp. 261-274

Dunlop J T (1993) Indsutrial Relations Systems. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

DiRenzo MS, Greenhaus, G and Weer CH (2015) Relationship between protean career orientation and work-life balance, Journal of Organizational Behavior, 36, 538-560.

Diversity Council Australia (DCA) (2013) Working for the Future: A National Survey of Employees, Sydney, DCA.

Elder GH Jr Johnson MK and Crosnoe R (2004) 'The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory' in Handbook of the Life Course, eds Jeylan T. Mortimer and Michael Shanahan, Springer, New York, pp 3-22.

Erickson JJ Martinengo G and Hill EJ (2010) 'Putting work and family experiences in context: Differences by family life stage', Human Relations, 63(10): 955-979

Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). The Tree Worlds of Welfare Capitalism. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Eurofound. (2014). Progressive Retirement in Europe. Retrieved May 30, 2014, from http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2001/09/study/tn0109184s.h

Fudge J and Vosko L (2001) Gender, Segmentation and the Standard Employment Relationship in Canadian Labour Law: Legislation and Policy, Economic and Industrial Democracy, 22(2): 271-310.

Goldin C and Mitchell J (2017) 'The New Life Cycle of Women's Employment: Disappearing Humps, Sagging Middles, Expanding Tops', Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(1): 161-182

Gubler M Arnold J and Coombs C (2014) Reassessing the protean career concept: empirical findings, conceptual components and measurement. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 35, S23-S40.

Haacke O (2015) China's Mandatory Retirement Age Changes: Impact for Foreign Companies. Retrieved January 22, 2017, from https://www.uschina.org/china's-mandatory-retirement-age-changes-impact-foreign-companiesHall B (2001) Careers in and out of Organizations. New York: Sage

Hall B (1976) Careers in Organizations. Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company.

Hall P and Soskice D (2001). Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harrington B, Humberd D Van Deusen F (2016) Work-Family Issues for Men, in Allen T and Eby L, Oxford Handbook of Work and Family, pp 441-452.

Kalleberg A (011) Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarised and precarious employment systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s, New York, Russell Sage Foundation.

Kanter RM (1977) Men and Women of the Corporation, New York: Basic Books

Katz H and Darbishire O (2000) Converging Divergences: Worldwide Changes in Employment Systems. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press

Kossek E and Thompson R (2016) 'Workplace Flexibility: Integrating Employer and Employee Perspectives to close the research-practice implementation gap', in Allen T and Eby L, Oxford Handbook of Work and Family, 255-270.

Lambert, S (2008) Passing the buck: Labor flexibility practices that transfer risk onto hourly workers, Human Relations, 61(9) 1203–1227

Lewis S (1997) 'Family friendly' employment policies: A route to changing organizational culture or playing about at the margins?, Gender, Work & Organization, 4(1): 13-23.

Lewis S and Smithson J (2001) 'Sense of entitlement to support for the reconciliation of employment and family life'. Human Relations, 54 (11) 1455-81

Mainiero LA and Sulliavan SE (2005) Kaleidoscope careers: an alternative explanation for the "opt out" revolution, Academy of Management Executive, 19(1): 106-123.

Maxwell, G., Rankine, L., Bell, S., & MacVicar, A. (2007). The incidence and impact of flexible working arrangements in smaller businesses. Employee Relations, 29(2), 138-161.

Mortimer JT and Shanahan M (2004) 'Preface' in Handbook of the Life Course, eds Jeylan T. Mortimer and Michael Shanahan, Springer, New York, pp xi-xvi.

North D (1990). Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press

Moen P and Sweet S (2004) From 'work–family' to 'flexible careers', Community, Work & Family, 7(2): 209-226

OECD (2016) OECD data: Employment Rate https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm. Accessed May 2017

Perlow LA and Kelly EL (2014) Toward a model of work redesign for better work and better life, Work and Occupations, 41(1): 111-134.

Piszczek M and Berg P (2014) Expanding the boundaries of boundary theory: regulative institutions and the work work-family management, Human Relations, 67 (12), 1491-1512

Rodrigues RA and Guest D (2010) Have careers become boundaryless? Human Relations, 63(8)1157-1175.

Ryan A and Kossek E (2008) Work-life policy implementation: Breaking down or creating barriers to inclusiveness? Human Resource Management, 47, 295-310.

Sabelis I and Schilling E (2013) Frayed Careers: Exploring Rhythms of Working Lives, Gender, Work and Organization, 20(2): 129-132.

Sullivan S and Arthur M (2006) The evolution of the boundaryless career concept: examining physical and psychological mobility. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 69(1): 19-29.

Tomlinson J Olsen W and Purdam K (2009) Women returners and potential returners: a case study of the UK, European Sociological Review, 24(2): 1-15.

Tomlinson J (2004) 'Perceptions and negotiations of the 'business case' for flexible careers and the integration of part-time work.' *Women in Management Review,* 19(8): 413-420.

Venue R (2010) 'Longer to Launch: Demographic changes in Life-Course Transitions', in 'Ways of Living, Work Community and Lifestyle Choice', eds Paul Blyton, Betsy Blunsdon, Ken Reed and Ali Dastmalchian, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke Hampshire, pp 75-98.