

Crafting careers in accounting: redefining gendered selves

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Abstract

Purpose – While women are increasingly in senior positions in accountancy firms, a century after gaining entry to this once exclusively male field, they are still struggling to achieve career success. The concept of possible selves and a model of career crafting are activated in an analysis of how a set of New Zealand professional accountants have pursued their careers. This paper aims to focus on how people actively craft career selves in the context of organisational and gendered constraints, some of which are self-imposed, and therefore, can be modified and revised.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews with 36 male and female accounting professionals in New Zealand – 21 working in private firms and 15 in academia identify how careers are shaped by contexts, cultural understandings of gender, organisational structures within which accountants are located and wider environmental factors.

Findings – Women accountants in this study are both agential and responsive to a range of constraints they encounter. These women challenge the notion that professional achievement requires single minded allegiance to a career; their strategic career crafting demonstrates how career and family commitments are not irreconcilable but can be skilfully integrated to nurture multiple selves. Their strategies are considered alongside those of a comparable set of male accountants.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature on possible selves and the complexity of gendered lives through the application of a career crafting matrix to explore how accounting professionals forge careers and construct multiple selves.

Keywords Gender, Careers, Success, Accountancy, Constraints, Possible selves

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The question of how selves are constructed and reconstructed has been of considerable long term interest (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). The individual is not oneself, but many selves and each encounters periods of transition. Individuals are not static fully informed identities; rather they shift through various positions during their lives (Del Corso and Rehfuß, 2011). While they may aspire to be different selves, the activities involved in activating those selves may conflict. Developing a sense of what one might



become involves choices – some voluntary, others forced (Oyserman and Fryberg, 2006). Moreover, not only do various selves wax and wane with different life stages but also intertwine and overlap, setting up competing demands on individuals.

The concept of possible selves proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954) has complemented conceptions of self-knowledge. Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, who they would like to be and what they are afraid of becoming. Wurf and Markus (1991) identified two basic processes – the construction of possible selves and the validation of these selves. Possible selves were conceptualised as psychological resources that are instrumental in motivating individuals in the course of adult development (Cross and Markus, 1991). Another study by Ruvolo and Markus (1992) affirmed the important role played by positive representations of possible selves as an important component of effective personal change.

This paper is based on recent research on career progression among accounting professionals in New Zealand. Developing possible selves is likely to be gender-specific in accounting as it has been a significantly male dominated profession (Anderson-Gough *et al.*, 2005; Anisette *et al.*, 2017). Jeacle (2011) has claimed that a century on from gaining entry into this once exclusive male field, women are still struggling to achieve career success. Despite some significant gains, there remains a set of issues to address in relation to women's progression in their accounting careers (Ball and Brewis, 2008; Haynes, 2017). This paper highlights the utility and complexity of understanding self-production within the accounting sector. A career crafting matrix was developed based on the textual analysis of 36 interviews with male and female accountants (Authors, 2016). This matrix is used to reactivate the concept of possible selves with a focus on gender and its relevance to career trajectories.

Possible selves and career

The concept of possible selves is used in research relating to careers (Ibarra, 2004; Meara *et al.*, 1995; Taber and Blankemeyer, 2015; Vignoles *et al.*, 2008, etc.). Possible selves are conceptions of one's selves in the future, including, at least to some degree, the experience of being an agent in a future situation (Erikson, 2007). Ibarra (2005) proposed that altering work activities, changing social interactions and sense-making of events can lead to an exploration of possibilities and facilitate the activation of possible selves. Considering different career trajectories is acknowledged as a useful framework for people to manage changes in themselves. Imagining possible selves and careers is a means by which young people visualise futures, and explore activities that will facilitate a transition (Hardgrove *et al.*, 2015). Particularly with career progression, possible selves have been identified as a powerful resource for proactive career behavioural change (Plimmer and Schmidt, 2007). Crafting a new work role in an effort to provide more financial security, better life balance, more learning and growth (Seibert *et al.*, 2016) is an example of this process.

The ways in which selves are actively constructed and reworked is a complex process. Savickas (1997) has used the term “cognitive compass” to refer to how individuals navigate career opportunities that are essentially congruent with their changing strengths and weaknesses, shifting beliefs, attitudes and future aspirations. This is consistent with a social constructivist paradigm that explores how people actively construct their own reality using available understandings of possible selves (Brown, 2002; Savickas, 2011).

Gender and possible selves

Gender has strong implications for developing possible selves (Anthis *et al.*, 2004; Curry *et al.*, 1994; Kossek *et al.*, 2017; Papafilippou and Bentley, 2017). Researchers have found a significant degree of variation in the level of development of possible selves for males and

females (Brown and Diekmann, 2010; Knox, 2006). Societal gendered expectations may affect the possible selves that women and men develop (Lips, 2007). This can produce what Blair-Loy (2009, p. 2) calls a “family devotion schema” that defines marriage and motherhood as a woman’s primary commitment. A study exploring undergraduate women’s thinking about potential professional careers, especially with regard to gender salient occupations, found that the participants seemed to believe that they might have to sacrifice higher ambitions to balance work and family life (Chalk *et al.*, 2005). Another study examining young women’s expectations about gender equality in their future careers and marriages found that even those with an advanced degree and full-time employment expected to have less salary and more domestic work than their husbands (Fetterolf and Eagly, 2011). Researchers have examined the relationships among possible selves, gender and science and engineering careers (Buday *et al.*, 2012; Packard and Nguyen, 2003), but it is hard to identify research in this field relating to accounting.

This paper examines how a set of New Zealand accounting professionals generated multiple selves using career crafting and how these selves are gendered. It investigates the opportunities for agency in the career development process in the context of the constraints associated with personal relationships, professional work organisations and wider social environments. The tension between individual agency and constraints on careers is considered. The main focus of this paper is on how people craft career selves while engaging with constraints, some of which are self-created/imposed, and therefore, can be modified/ revised.

Accounting context

Gender inequality at higher levels is a widely discussed issue in accounting, with several studies reporting on the lower representation of women at partnership levels (Adapa *et al.*, 2016; AICPA, 2017; Catalyst, 2018). According to these international studies, at the entry-level more than half of the accountants are women, but they comprise 19 to 24 per cent at the partner level. Women’s position has changed, but that change has stalled. While they experience greater success and new opportunities, they still hit what has been referred to as the “glass ceiling” – a set of often invisible barriers to success (Broadbent and Kirkham, 2008). Moreover, a gender pay gap persists across all levels of employment (Brody *et al.*, 2016). Carmona and Ezzamel (2016) argue that accounting workplaces reflect gender divisions, and reaffirm and perpetuate these divisions through the profession’s practices and technologies. Thus, the reasons for women’s advancement and their disadvantage are to a great extent institutionalised (Broadbent and Kirkham, 2008).

Several reasons have been identified for these persisting gender inequalities – expectations associated with motherhood has been identified as a prominent reason. The approved organisational path to partnership is characterised by linear, constant upward career mobility and women with children often have to identify alternative paths to balance their professional and family aspirations (Lupu, 2012). One child(ren) become part of the family structure, women generally take more responsibility for their care, and consequently work fewer hours, take more time out from their jobs, and have lower career aspirations (Whiting and Wright, 2001). As a result, in general, those who follow a male linear career model with a work first attitude (whether women or men), demonstrate higher levels of career success (Whiting, 2008). Structural constraints such as expected working hours, networking obligations and types of clients make it difficult for anyone wishing to play an active role in their children’s lives and maintain a senior career (Whiting *et al.*, 2015). The Big Four firms are signalling a move away from homogeneity and increasingly promote diversity, however, there is evidence that the old values and practices still operate as barriers (Edgley *et al.*, 2016).

This affects the motivational power of the future self as it is attuned to context (Oyserman *et al.*, 2015). Positive, desired possible identities are more motivating in contexts that are perceived to be success-likely, and undesired ones in contexts that are more failure-likely. In the accounting context, it is highly relevant to apply the concept of possible selves in an analysis of how the women holding senior positions in accounting have achieved those roles and what career crafting strategies they used in developing the multiple selves that facilitated their career progression. In this paper, we discuss how they select, maintain, and reframe selves as they pursue their careers. The following sections review the research questions that framed this paper, explain the research methods adopted and present the career crafting matrix used in the analysis of in-depth interviews. The succeeding sections discuss the findings, and finally, reflect on the implications of this research.

To understand how the participants developed their possible selves using career crafting, this paper addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1.* How do accounting professionals exercise agency in the pursuit of career goals in the context of gendered, familial, organisational and environmental constraints?
- RQ2.* What career crafting strategies do men and women use as they articulate, activate and reconcile their multiple possible selves in pursuit of career progression?

Method

As the career crafting concept entailed attention to the understandings and meanings that participants brought to career progression in their field, in-depth interviewing was identified as the best research strategy. The main characteristics of qualitative research – emergent, interpretive, holistic, exploratory and collaborative (Bernard and Ryan, 2010; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Schensul, 2012) – were significant in investigating how the participants articulated their career pathways. This approach focuses on exploration that emphasises discovery, description and meaning, characteristics identified by Laverly (2003) that are critical to a deeper understanding of the career decisions of research participants.

Sampling and recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy was used with sector (accounting firm/academia), position (senior management/tenured academic position) and gender as primary sampling criteria, and a target of 36-40 interviews. No other personal information such as ethnicity, marital status, age or parental status was used in sampling. Recruitment began after receiving approval from the Human Ethics Committee at the researcher's institution. An email message was sent to 99 prospective participants using corporate and university websites requesting their participation. The message outlined the research purpose, a request for an interview of 45-60 min, conducted at a place and time of their choice. Interviews were set up with 36 respondents who replied affirmatively and whose time preferences could be accommodated in the interview schedules.

Procedure

All participants chose to be interviewed at their workplaces. All the interviews were recorded (except one, as the participant did not want it to be recorded) with the consent of the participants. Participants were first asked to complete a one page questionnaire with demographic and professional questions. An interview guide with open-ended questions relating to further education and their career history was used. This ensured that each interview covered substantially the same topics (Remler and Van Ryzin, 2011), but still

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allowed for participants to contribute their observations, reflections and insights. Pseudonyms were generated for the participants to ensure their anonymity in reporting the information.

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Profile of participants

Although women and men were equally represented, more accounting professionals agreed to contribute than academics. All of the practicing accountants were employed at the management level in their firms, though one person was in a lower level managerial position. Seven of the 21 professionals were partners in their firms (3 women and 4 men), indicating a strong and enduring focus on career achievement. Of the 15 academics, four had achieved the highest rank of professor (1 woman and 3 men). Although the ranks of “partner” and “professor” represent the top-echelon positions in business and academia respectively, they are not directly comparable. Nearly, all of the samples were married and nearly all were parents. All but two participants were between 30 and 60 years of age (Table I).

Total participants	36
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	18
Female	18
<i>Accounting firms</i>	
Assistant manager	1
Manager	—
Senior manager	7
Executive director	6
Partner	7
Total	21
<i>Academia</i>	
Assistant lecturer	1
Lecturer	1
Senior lecturer	6
Associate professor	3
Professor	4
Total	15
<i>Age range (years)</i>	
30-39	5
40-49	18
50-59	11
60+	2
<i>Marital status</i>	
Single	2
Married/in a relationship	30
Separated/divorced	4
<i>No. of children</i>	
None	6
Accounting professional participants' profile	4
1	12
2	14
3+	

Table I.

Accounting professional participants' profile

Data analysis

Several researchers have outlined the benefits of transcribing the interviews personally to ensure familiarisation with the data. It is also recognised as the first step in data analysis, as transcribing of the interviews by the researcher offers an opportunity to be immersed in the interview material (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

A thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software. A mixed inductive-deductive approach was used: issues identified by participants were considered alongside literature relating to the study aims (Bernard and Ryan, 2010). Individuals' accounts of their career pathway formation were used to contextualise their career crafting strategies. Coding enabled labelling concepts, themes, events for ready retrieval and examination of all of the data units that refer to the same subject across all the interviews (Schensul, 2012). Internal validity was achieved through triangulation (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), by cross-examining interpretation of the data using two other researchers. Feedback on external validity (Gobo, 2008) was achieved by discussing the summary of findings with some of the participants.

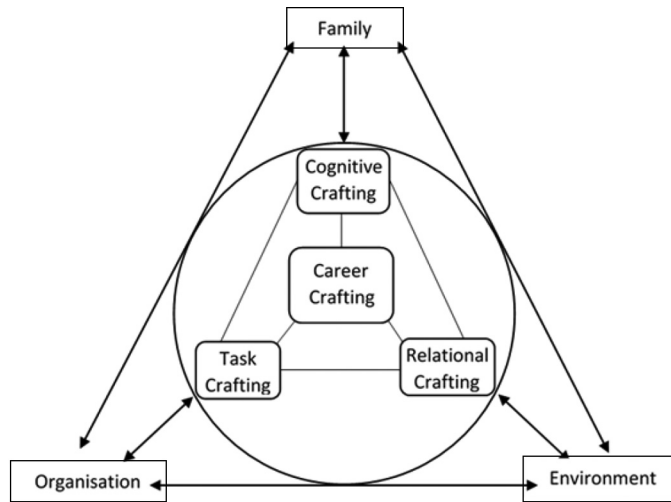
Career crafting

This paper uses a career crafting matrix that was developed to investigate the career progression of accounting professionals in New Zealand. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) proposed job crafting as a proactive approach that focussed on the agency of individuals at workplaces to alter the jobs within given constraints to make them more meaningful. They presented the three elements of job crafting as cognitive, task and relational crafting – changing the way employees view their jobs, altering the number, scope or type of job tasks done at work and changing the quality, amount or nature of interaction with others at work. The concept of job crafting was extended to develop a “career crafting matrix”, a model that explores the linkages between contextual factors and career pathways – past, present and future (Authors, 2016). Adopting a holistic approach, it captures the overarching connections between personal life and career development. This is particularly important as historically and socially situated roles and institutions shape self-assessment and preferences, interpersonal relationships and structural opportunities that influence career pathways (Sweet and Moen, 2015). Therefore, career crafting focusses on agency in the context of wider social constraints (such as gender) and the environments in which individuals work. In this paper, we decided to explore how combined attention to both the concept of possible selves and the career crafting matrix could advance our understanding of the career strategies of professional accountants.

Job crafting research is equivocal about the impact of gender differences. A meta-analysis of job crafting indicated that women engaged to a greater extent in job crafting than men (Rudolph *et al.*, 2017). Another project suggested that women were more likely to exhibit expected task behaviours in their work environments (Demerouti *et al.*, 2015). Another study found that the job crafting scores for men were higher than the scores for women, except with respect to task crafting (Gu-Ne and Lee, 2016). Other research recorded higher scores for women in relational crafting (Slemp and Vella-Brodrick, 2014). However, in another study, they scored lower than men on career competencies and job crafting (Akkermans and Tims, 2017).

The career crafting matrix (Figure 1) illustrates a model of relationships between factors that shape career outcomes; factors that individuals must negotiate as they craft their careers. This matrix was developed on the basis of analysis of the text of participants' interviews. The career crafting triad in the centre of the model intersects with the external factors of family, organisation and environment that significantly affect career decisions.

Figure 1.
Career crafting
matrix



Crafting is a deliberate activity by individuals who aspire to bring about change in their career environment and/or achieve a different future within a profession or vocation (Grant and Ashford, 2008). The central tenet of career crafting is the invention or adaptation manifested by individuals in a given situation as they create new opportunities or adapt to change in the pursuit of personal success. Via career crafting, individuals develop desired selves, which are contextual and strategic and require negotiating the constraints they encounter. The dynamics of the matrix is illustrated below through attention to participants' accounts about how they engage in career crafting and realise possible selves.

Cognitive crafting is associated with thinking, understanding, learning and decision making. It results in prioritising, conceptualising ideal career goals and reframing goals as desired outcomes are pursued. Sue formed her academic career goal while she was studying accounting at the university and also working as a tutor. She said, "I saw that they were short staffed [in the department] and so I decided I will make that my aim to become a lecturer". This decision is linked with her self-awareness – "I'd never actually practise as an accountant in a firm because I think teaching is my thing".

Relational crafting focuses on managing personal and professional relationships, altering the nature and extent of relationships, and selecting and nurturing relationships with key people. Managing relationships is a dynamic and two-way process, which depends on the people involved and the circumstances. Sharon consciously created good relationships with her superiors – "I've always been really well supported within the firm, whichever firm I have worked with the partners, I did actively build relationships[1]".

Time is a valuable resource as it is fixed and task management is vital for achieving desired outcomes. With task crafting, individuals select and manage tasks to achieve desired outcomes to balance personal and professional demands on their time. Personal activities mainly refer to family, hobbies, physical fitness, leisure and social activities; professional activities include routine job duties, developmental and social activities associated with the workplace. Jane has organised her day so that she can balance family and work:

Now I leave here [work] at 2.45 pm, and then till 7.30 pm it's family time. I take my daughter to her classes, I pick my son up from school, and then, from 7.30 onwards, however much work I have got to do, I do.

Families of orientation and procreation have a major influence on initial and later career development, particularly on an individual's career orientation, focus and pathway. Families entail responsibilities, as well as support, sometimes acting as a limiting or a facilitative factor. Ruth did not pursue accounting, as, "My father was an architect and he definitely looked down on accountants." However, Cheryl said, "I had wanted to be an accountant since I was maybe ten or so". Her supportive parents were proactive about introducing her to the practical world:

Those meetings that I always went to with my parents were always about tax. So mum and dad used to sit down and explain things in the financial statements to me.

Initial career decisions are often shaped by the way schools/universities facilitate careers through skill development, quality instruction and career counselling services. Carol pursued accounting later as she noted, "No, accounting was not offered at my school at that time". In later career decisions, workplaces and flexibility in those environments can be a key factor in influencing career goals. At the time of the interview, Carol was with a Big Four as an executive director, she said, "It still is quite a tight male network, it has slowed down my progress I think". Carol's experience affirms findings by [Mueller *et al.* \(2011\)](#) that good work alone will not ensure career success. In accounting visibility and exposure is necessary and networking and interpersonal interactions facilitate promotion.

The term "environment" refers to a variety of external factors that are often uncontrollable, but influence career progression. Examples of such factors include social norms about gender, prevailing employment laws[2], economic conditions, technology relevant to particular professional practices. [Stead \(2004\)](#) asserted that people create and are also created by cultures in a complex matrix of interweaving relationships. Therefore, possible selves are shaped by environments from the past, present and future; the interaction of the person with these environments; and the way the environments are observed and interpreted. Mary said, "At that time in the 70s when I got married, everyone was going to [. . .] stay at home and have children". She further noted, "I have studied later, after I have had my children because I wanted a better position [. . .] and a career".

Thus, the external factors of family, organisation and environment are influential; but the way these intersect is also determined by the crafting practices of individuals. Research findings illustrate the way cognitive style affects the career focus of accounting professionals and is augmented by task and relational crafting.

Results

I cannot be singly focussed on just working and I do not want to be. I want to be a good mother too, and a good wife.

Sally's comment resonates with the women accounting professionals with children who frequently talked about the need to construct multiple selves and integrate their professional and domestic lives. Doing this can entail tension between possible desired selves as they are not sequential, but are intertwined and overlapping. Pregnancy and childbearing had an impact on the careers of all the mothers in this study, additionally, wider socio-cultural and institutional beliefs acted as limiting factors in crafting their different selves. Does the "mother self" emerge with childbearing or do women adopt ways of defining motherhood or ways of being because of current expectations of mothers? Possible selves are grounded within developmental, interpersonal and socio-historical contexts while often being experienced as uniquely personal.

The key possible selves that the participants developed via career crafting for personal success were identified as educational, professional, spousal, parental, personal and

community selves. These different dimensions of the career crafting matrix are illustrated in accountants' stories about their career strategies that are set out below ([Appendix](#)).

Educational selves

Developing educational selves is vital for desired professional selves as completing formal qualifications as an accountant is necessary. Taking on such tasks does not only depend on external factors (such as societal gender expectations) but also self-perceptions and the capacity to imagine possible selves. For all participants, personal and external factors played an important role in developing early educational selves and in conceptualising initial career goals. Family support or the lack of it determined early career direction. For example, Carol's initial career goal was to be in the police force, but her family opposed her choice of profession, they did not consider policing suitable for a woman.

Schools were also often instrumental in forming initial career aspirations as the opportunity to study a particular subject depended on what was offered by the school. For example, older female participants who went to all-girls schools reported that their schools offered academic subjects and embroidery, typing and shorthand but not accounting. Ruth noted, "No one ever suggested accounting as a career option. I don't think any girls from my class became accountants". This was not the case for those in coeducational schools, but, some schools streamed the classes, and students in the top stream could not do accounting. Sue said, "[...] back in those days you were streamed, and so I was in the top stream and the top stream did either science or languages". The younger participants did not face such hurdles. Alice, (30-39 age group) recollected that "Ever since I was 13, I think I wanted to become an accountant". She further said, "I just always liked numbers, and then I took accounting in third or fourth form. I had an influential accounting teacher, just really good".

The women participants who pursued accountancy qualifications later in life did this in ways that were consistent with their commitments as mothers. Sue recounted her experience of going back to university to pursue her accounting degree while she had primary and high school-aged children:

It took me five years to get my bachelor's part time. It was like they [the children] almost lived here [university], and we used to sometimes have meals in the cafeteria, and I'd go off to a tutorial, and they would play around, talk to the café ladies, and I'd come back again.

On the other hand, when Nathan joined the university to get his accounting qualification after a series of jobs, his wife worked full time so that he could completely focus on the studies:

I could have done a part time [degree] but we made a decision that was probably smarter to just get it done, and power it out. So I was doing ten papers a year, so eight during normal semesters, and then doing two during summer school in both years [...].

Upon graduation he joined a Big Four firm; they started a family, she left paid work and became the primary care giver for their children. The experiences of these research participants illustrate the educational constraints they encountered and also how, with the collaboration of other family members, they achieved educational goals and remade themselves in the pursuit of professional lives as accountants.

Professional selves

The prevailing socio-cultural environment had an adverse impact on the careers of women participants belonging to the 50+ age group; in the early days, they found it difficult to imagine professional selves. They developed their educational and professional selves once

their children were older. As noted earlier, the norm was for mothers to stay at home and look after the children. Younger women participants were more likely to challenge expectations that their career aspirations would be shaped by children. Cheryl, in her early 30s, could confidently declare:

No children, but a dog. My husband would like to have children, but at the moment I am focussed on my career, so I have no plans for having children in near future.

Most male participants, regardless of their age, were confident about focussing on career progression and often had partners who did not pursue their careers while they had young children. Roger could develop his “professorial” self because of the support from his wife. He said:

She stopped working [...] and almost recently just this year, in January, went back to work, full time. She had 14 years out of the workforce, yes, but she’s back now [...].

Accountants develop their professional selves and achieve promotion in their field by conforming to a model of behaviour typically characterised by masculine traits (Flynn *et al.*, 2015); the male accountants interviewed exhibited these traits. Analysts have used the concept of “impossible selves” to describe the models for career success that many junior [and senior] women find unattainable (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016). Some of the women participants did not see becoming partners in their Big Four firms as viable possible selves. Laura said, “Unless you are willing to put in the hours and the time, it will be quite hard to become a partner”. For Carol becoming a partner in her Big Four firm was an impossible self. She did not aspire to be a partner:

because I see how the partners here just devote their life to their job pretty much and that’s not me, because I have to balance that still with my family.

Career crafting can facilitate developing professional selves to suit women’s personal and career goals. A number of the women with children resisted this prioritisation of career over family and sought to integrate their professional and parental selves. Research indicates that female accountants often shift to smaller firms that are more hospitable to mothers (Whiting *et al.*, 2015). Mandy shifted to a smaller firm to craft her career as a partner. She said:

It was a very rigid environment [at the Big Four]. It started with the previous CEO saying, ‘Look if you want to be a Principal, you can’t work part time’. How ridiculous, how ridiculous is that, if you are a Principal you need to be working 70 hours a week; it’s quality not quantity.

Therefore, Mandy searched for a firm where she did not have to work full time to be a partner. She enjoys the flexibility her new firm offers her. She said:

So that freedom, and me feeling truly comfortable that I can come and go when I want to [...] that freedom is massive. As a woman, you can imagine with children, that freedom to be able to say [to your boss], ‘it’s school camp next week; I want to take a day and a half off, [and they say], ‘fine’.

Mandy is highly satisfied with a decision that has enabled her to reconcile her parental and professional selves.

Women leaders can play an important role in shaping other women’s career expectations (Stam *et al.*, 2014). This is particularly effective in “gendered” accounting where an “impossible” self is potentially reworked to generate “possible” professional selves. Yvonne said, “[...] seeing her (her female boss) progress and become a partner that sort of motivated me, if she can do it, then there is a pathway for it”. Thus, the female participants who had a female boss could visualise a possible “partner” self.

A number of the participants who were academics chose academia for the freedom and flexibility it offered and the possibilities of work–life balance. Of the fifteen accounting academics, ten used to work in accounting firms, but they shifted to academia as they were not happy with the rigid and rigorous routine of accounting firms. They used career crafting to fulfil their aspirations for professional success while at the same time achieving the flexibility they wanted. Albert switched from a Big Four firm to academia. He said:

I don't like clocking in basically. You do accept a lower salary and a lower standard of living in an academic world, but then again I've got lot more freedom.

Sarah found the reality of working as an accounting practitioner challenging. She said:

I was quite naïve. I thought that it'd [accounting job] leave me completely free for family obligations. But what I had underestimated was that accounting is very demanding, it's not family friendly.

Therefore, she shifted to an academic position where she could better fulfil her professional, as well as her parental role. Albert and Sarah's motivations for pursuing academic careers in accounting illustrate the relevance of gender differences in accountants' career strategies.

Interviews with both male and female accountants highlighted the ways in which the construction of professional selves as accountants required active career crafting in ways that reconciled their professional selves and other dimensions of self that were important to them. Men generally found it easier to define themselves in terms of conventional expectations of accountants in large, prestigious accountancy firms, but some of them wanted the flexibility that women accountants with children sought as they integrated their professional and parental selves.

Spousal selves

Spousal relationships, particularly who plays the primary caregiving role, is important for career development as a family and work responsibilities make demands on time. It is observed that 7 of the 17 married women participants redefined their spousal selves and had a stay-at-home/part-time working partner. Career crafting played a key role in couples' working arrangements. This involved a complex interplay relating to their different earning capacities, their career aspirations and communication strategies. These were powerfully determined by women's level of education and their drive for success. Sue said, "He [husband] is learning; I am getting him trained. Every now and then he reverts back to the traditional roles, but I've got him fairly well trained". Sally has consciously developed her professional selves by reframing her spousal selves:

Because of my kind of experience of taking time out of the workforce, my marriage [first] breaking up, you know, I was quite vulnerable, I had no money [...] and at this stage [second marriage] I only had short maternity leaves [...] I was much more focussed on work, because I was going to stay at work.

Virginia was the only female participant who did not take a career break for family responsibilities. She very deliberately challenged expectations about gender, work and family:

We sat down and we had a wee bit of discussion about this, and I couldn't give up the job at that time, as even at that point I was earning \$20,000 a year more than he [her husband] was [...] [and] I'm far more ambitious than he ever will be, or ever has been.

Therefore, VA's husband assumed the primary care-giving role for their son. She said, "I was back to work in six weeks [after the delivery]", but she indicated that this arrangement of role reversal was, "[...] *much to my mother-in-law's disgust* [emphasis added]".

The prevalence of male breadwinner expectations might be diminishing, but the ideology retains a hold and has an impact on identity and expectations (Warren, 2007). In a study of 1,500 working couples, Sweet and Moen (2015, p. 199) discovered that individuals mould their lives to accommodate the existing structures and are less likely to challenge these structures. In the present study, participants were also likely to accept prevailing gender expectations, even when women are the breadwinners. Virginia said, "Even with him [husband] at home, there are still things [I must do][...] There's still things that only mums can do".

Yvonne's partner works part-time while she is full-time, but they have negotiated certain role adjustments. She said:

My husband cooks during the week, and then I take over at the weekend. I do the laundry in the morning; my husband brings it in and folds it. We've got into a nice routine.

Consciously developing a spousal self that challenged gendered expectations facilitated a career pathway for some of the women interviewed. However, they often continued to fulfil crucial household duties, whereas most male participants could unequivocally focus on their careers because of their wives' support. James said, "So she [his wife] works school hours now, so nine to three o'clock, still around after school [...] for me it works perfectly".

Parental selves

For participants with children, organising child-care was a key component of career decisions. How to care for children adequately when parents need or want to work outside the home is a powerful challenge. Recent research indicates that undergraduate women are affected by complementary stereotypes about men and women when envisioning their futures, long before there is a practical need to negotiate the trade-offs of career and home life with a partner (Croft *et al.*, 2018). Women's expected future roles, and especially their involvement in economic providing, are complementary to what they believe men's roles will be. This can have a major impact on their career choices.

Among participants in this research, it was mainly women who prioritised their parental selves over their professional selves. As stated earlier, all but one of the female participants with children started their career later or took a break for family responsibilities. Carol stated, "I started my family, and then I did actually resign [...]" When Sue started her career, she formulated a way of working when her children were younger. She said, "So I'd come back (to the office) after they were all in bed at nine at night, and did a couple of hours [...] worked then". While combining motherhood and a career has to a certain extent become more possible, crafting their integration is still an important consideration for women in employment.

Nancy has a dominant professional self, but she has reframed her career goals a few times in response to how she has defined her parental self. She gave up her top position at a financial services firm when she was pregnant:

I had this thing in my head that I would be this real earth mother, because I enjoyed arts and crafts, but after a year I had itchy feet [...] if I have to do this for the next 20 years, I will kill myself type of thing.

Upon realising that she was not fulfilled just being a mother, she visualised a new professional self after attending a motivation course in Sydney. She started an accounting

firm. After running it successfully for a few years, she again redefined her professional self when she realised she needed to devote more time to her family. She sold her firm to a bigger firm, and as then she has been working as a partner within the same firm. Through career crafting, she achieved the balance between her professional and parental selves that she considered important.

Sharon said, "I didn't really feel like I could go to for partnership while the children were very young". When the children were a bit older, Sharon and her husband decided that he would opt out of the workforce. She said, "We just didn't feel like we could sustain two careers and bring up three children at the same time". Her husband's support was crucial to the process of crafting Sharon's accounting career, although, unlike most of the men interviewed, this support from her spouse was not assumed. It had to be negotiated and required a re-definition by her husband of his parental self.

Most male participants did not talk about reconciling their parental and professional selves as women did; their wives/partners usually assumed the primary responsibility for the care of young children and facilitated men's professional success. Daniel recalled:

I was probably more the traditional, misogynistic, very much it fell on the traditional lines, that my career came first, and in terms of responsibility [...] cooking, cleaning, and stuff like that my wife would do that.

However, after separating from his wife, Daniel adjusted his parental and professional selves. He said, "Well, I have joint custody of the kids, so basically [...] so this week is not my week so I can work longer". Separation, in this case, prompted Daniel to consciously integrate his parenting and professional selves in different ways and become more reflective about how this was to be achieved and when he could have more time for work.

Keith is the only male participant who has consciously crafted his parental and professional selves. His wife is in full-time employment, and he actively integrates his academic work and his family responsibilities:

This job is more flexible than her job, so I mean I can [adapt]. As long as the work gets done, and I have done the classes, and did the lectures and I do the marking, then it doesn't really matter when I am here, so I can pick her [baby daughter] up or be late or whatever, you can be flexible.

While female accountants with children were most likely to reflect on how they reconciled their parental and professional selves, men whose family circumstances changed, or men who had partners with very demanding jobs, also had to juggle their multiple selves as they crafted their careers.

Personal selves

Personal selves can be developed in different ways. In this study, they were defined as including family relationships (apart from those of spouse and parent), fitness, health, hobbies, socialising with friends, neighbours and those with similar interests, etc. Most women participants with young children experienced constraints on their opportunities to develop desired personal selves. They had to prioritise their parental and professional selves.

Carol noted:

I have found my life up until this point has been all absorbed with either the children or work. And I am aware that some of those things [hobbies] I have neglected, because I have not felt I had the time to do it.

Women in the 50+ age group admitted that they can now focus on their personal selves as their children are independent. Ruth said, "I value my leisure time terrifically. Gardening, my local community, going to movies with friends, my favourite TV programmes [. . .]".

A few participants were able to develop and fulfil their personal goals while crafting their careers and being parents. Yvonne has made time to pursue personal goals. She said:

I like to run; I do half marathons on occasion. So I go out running in the morning which is more of a sanity time as well as physical benefits. Twice a week I'll run with some other friends, we meet up somewhere, and we run together, so there is a social side as well.

Mandy carefully searched for a firm where her personal goals were respected. She said:

I had to travel for sport and he [her boss] said, 'Fine, we'll see you back when you are back. Let me know if there is anything I can do'.

Mandy and her husband have hired a nanny to assist in caring for their children and Yvonne's husband works part-time and is the primary caregiver.

While most of the women accountants indicated that their professional lives and their parental responsibilities meant that there was little time to focus on their personal aspirations, a few of them, in collaboration with the fathers of their children and by hiring caregivers, were able to pursue personal non-career goals.

Community selves

In this study, men developed their community-selves based on their personal interests, while women tend to do community work around their children's activities. Laura said:

The kids are involved in BMX, my husband is also involved in BMX, so I do a bit of the stuff for BMX club. I am a treasurer for that.

Yvonne said:

The toy library was one of the first ones I did when the children were young [. . .] the treasurer of the toy library! And now I am on the school board of trustees, I am a treasurer on the board. My ten-year-old daughter just loves it. It was nice to be involved in the school and be able to contribute because you can't obviously go and be a parent help because you work, so it takes something like that, it's a satisfying role.

While Scott said, "I am on the golf club board, and I look after a portion of the [. . .] an off-shoot of the Chamber of Commerce." Similarly, Jeremy said, "I am involved with the local rugby here, in an administrative role." The women interviewed developed their community-selves in conjunction with their parental selves, whereas the men's community involvement was more likely to align with their personal interests.

Discussion

This paper has explored the relationship between gender, career crafting and possible selves. The notion of possible selves is useful in understanding how these accounting professionals crafted their careers. The process of developing possible selves is both individual and interactive. We construct and create selves; and become selves because other people position us in certain ways. We adopt ways of defining ourselves in the context of cultural expectations and organisational processes and structures, including expected hours of work and the dynamics of professional environments. Self-definition is also iterative in the sense that developing some aspects of self may contribute positively to crafting other

selves, and vice versa. This interaction between different selves is illustrated in [Figure 2](#) below.

The possible selves available to individuals depend on family background, workplace and environmental factors, and also how people see themselves and how motivated they are to make changes to achieve desired outcomes. In the process of crafting selves external factors matter, but participants who actively engaged in career crafting achieved desired outcomes within the given constraints. Those who were well aware of their passions and strengths could set goals and searched for opportunities and were better equipped to craft their jobs ([Akkermans and Tims, 2017](#)). The career crafting matrix facilitates analysis of the strategies individuals use to assert themselves and the incremental and sometimes radical changes to their multiple selves as they respond to workplace and family circumstances. Although gender was influential in the lives of all participants, this research highlighted the different ways in which it had an impact on their possible selves.

These results are consistent with the findings of other researchers, which indicate that women are more likely to want to encompass several life domains, and how the importance attached to the different domains may influence their future career planning. The interdependence and conflict between possible selves is evident. Particularly, conflicting expectations to be both a nurturing caregiver and a breadwinner may be difficult to resolve ([Chalk et al., 2005](#); [Fetterolf and Eagly, 2011](#); [Knox, 2006](#)).

In the present study, 14 out of 15 married women participants with children started their career later or used career strategies such as sequencing ([Sullivan, 1992](#)). This involved typically being in employment before having children, then leaving paid work to focus exclusively on childrearing, and returning to employment when their children were older ([Whiting, 2008](#)). Some women used off-ramping ([Hewlett and Luce, 2005](#)). This meant they took time off from paid work to care for their young children, but maintained ties with their former employers and re-entered the workforce at a later date.

Some female participants found that there is greater flexibility in smaller accountancy businesses than in the Big Four. And there is an interesting contradiction here. Larger businesses could accommodate greater flexibility, but larger often means stricter adherence to bureaucratic rules and less flexibility. Smaller companies need to retain the expertise of their partners and employees and interpersonal familiarity enhances opportunities for flexibility that was clearly valued by some of the women interviewed.

Overall, these findings are consistent with other research that highlights how career pathways are influenced by individual, family and organisational contexts and societal norms ([Holton and Dent, 2016](#); [Lupu et al., 2017](#)), with gender having strong implications for developing possible selves ([Kossek et al., 2017](#); [Papafiliippou and Bentley, 2017](#)). As a result, compared to men, women have to juggle the careers they want within the contexts in which they operate, although with cognitive, task and relational crafting they can redesign different selves in response to particular circumstances.

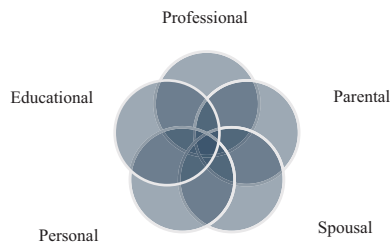


Figure 2.
Multiple possible
selves

Self-efficacy and an ability to envision other ways of being are crucial to the development of possible selves. Adaptation to changed situations or the pursuit of new pathways facilitates this process. Consistent with previous research, this study found that existing gendered scenarios shape the possible selves that men and women envision (Anthis *et al.*, 2004; Brown and Diekman, 2010; Knox, 2006). Marriage and parenthood are entrenched in many career decisions (Chalk *et al.*, 2005; Fetterolf and Eagly, 2011; Whiting and Wright, 2001) and men and women differ in their work and family devotion schema (Blair-Loy, 2009). Women with children who pursued career advancement actively negotiated support from their partners, while their male counterparts did not discuss the negotiation of such support.

It is observed that 7 of the 17 married women participants redefined their spousal selves by organising more support at home, which enabled their career advancement. They overcame the traditional constraints by contesting male stereotypes (Dambrin and Lambert, 2012), and by “de-essentializing” mothering and extending the nurturing role further into the expectations set for men and others (Longhurst, 2008). That their male partners agreed to make life decisions that challenged gender norms was crucial to this process.

Other women crafted their careers in different ways, but all of them had to negotiate aspects of their gendered, parental and professional selves. Men also had to reconcile a variety of possible selves but were generally less reflective about the tensions between their gendered and parental selves and the development of their professional lives.

Future research directions

The accountants interviewed for this study were overwhelmingly Pākeha (of European descent). Future research that investigates the pursuit of accounting qualifications and career advancement by Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) could provide crucial information about the intersections of ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status in the field of professional accounting. It could also inform strategies directed at improving access by under-represented ethnic minorities to careers in this field. The availability of this data could facilitate a feminist intersectional analysis of accounting careers in the New Zealand context (Haynes, 2017, p. 119).

Findings from this study highlight the intersection of multiple selves (Figure 2) as individuals engage in career crafting and also demonstrate the impact of parental and spousal selves. Some women’s successful career trajectories depended significantly on the ways their male partners crafted their careers and recrafted their parental selves. Research that included interviews with the partners of participants could provide a more detailed understanding of the interface between partners’ careers and the career strategies of accountants of both genders.

Conclusions

This research offers a unique insight into the process of developing possible selves and crafting careers. It highlights the different ways in which men and women pursue their careers in the context of cultural expectations and organisational processes and structures. Their personal characteristics such as age, gender, marital and parental status, education, earning capacity, etc. interact with factors such as family background, workplace and environmental factors, their self-concept and levels of personal motivation.

While individuals might wish to be different selves, activating those selves may conflict, and lead to the redefining of possible trajectories. Attention to the crafting of gendered selves involved a range of choices and compromises as participants selected, maintained and reframed possible selves. This involved interactions across the family, workplace and socio-cultural environments.

Accounting as a career has been male-orientated, but, most of the women who participated in this research actively crafted their careers in accountancy despite the constraints they encountered. They honed their qualifications, identified suitable organisational environments and negotiated family arrangements consistent with their career goals. These women challenge the notion that professional achievement requires single minded allegiance to a career; through their crafting, they demonstrate that career and family commitments are not irreconcilable, but can be skilfully integrated to nurture multiple selves.

Notes

1. Informal mentors are positively associated with job performance (Viator, 2001) and career development support is found to be an important component of the mentoring experiences of accountants from large firms (Herbohn, 2004).
2. UNICEF (2019) report looks at family-friendly policies in 41 high- and middle-income countries. New Zealand is ranked third-worst for the amount of paid parental leave currently available to mothers in paid work.

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Appendix. Thematic analysis

Main theme: possible selves	Sub-theme: crafting matrix	Illustration
Educational selves	Family	“It was dad who put the seed of accounting in my head. He really convinced me that that would be a really general degree that would have wide applications that would be really useful”
Professional selves	Organisation	“This is a great environment. [The present firm] is just fantastic. [The boss] is fantastic to work with. I have to acknowledge that the environment, the atmosphere, the culture, the people here are so supportive, so supportive, quite different from the [previous firm] culture”
Professional and parental selves	Environment	“I remember thinking at the time . . . of the women at my firm who were reasonably in senior roles, something ridiculous, like 90% of them had premature babies, and there were lots of women who did not have any children”
Parental selves	Cognitive crafting	“For me it really does come down to the kids, are they getting the time they need?”
Spousal and professional selves	Relational crafting	“My husband knew who I always was, right from the start that I was not going to be somebody who was going to stay at home. I was very upfront about that”
Personal selves	Task crafting	“I get up at 5 in the morning, at 5.30 I am on the rowing machine for an hour, or I go for a run for an hour and a half. Sort of 5.30 in the morning that’s my time to do what I want to do”

Table AI.
Managing the possible selves and the operation of the career crafting matrix is illustrated by Mandy’s discussion

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