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Canterbury Christ Church University

<u>*Work and Intimacy: reassessing the career/couple norm through a narrative case approach*</u>

Abstract:

It is argued that 'career', as linear progression through one industry or two, and 'coupledom' as hetero, cohabitive, and moving towards marriage, have both been undermined by alternate arrangements for work and intimacy (Chudzikowski, 2012; Kirton, 2006; Roseneil, 2006). In the face of these changes, this article considers how the hallmarks of coupling and the tenets of career manifest themselves in everyday interactions within partnerships. The article uses a narrative case approach to explore these interactions in depth. It not only reveals the persistence of normative assumptions within couple relationships, but also how the 'work' of couple relationships draw on particular expectations surrounding what it means to negotiate a successful 'career'. The paradigm of progress transects career/couple narratives, blurring the already opaque boundaries between productive and personal realms. This entanglement presents challenges for individuals, limiting prescriptions for what are considered 'acceptable' narratives of work and intimacy.

Introduction

This article interrogates the intersection between career and coupling. I explore how 'career', as progressive movement through the successive stages of a working-life (Chudzikowski, 2012; Kirton, 2006), is conceived and practiced, and the way some individuals in cohabitive partnerships employ career tenets as a means of negotiating these relationships. My interest is in how the principles of normative coupling are realised through the architecture of the traditional career model, and what that might tell us about the way certain templates for work and intimacy can be enacted in concert. Being in a partnership, marriage, or cohabitating relationship, while having and pursuing a career, are often interdependent processes. 'Career', in this sense, is understood as more than productive activity taking

place over the course of working-life, or as a means to a remunerative or material end, but as providing a normative regulatory framework within which interpersonal relationships are negotiated and maintained.

I situate my argument within the broader conceptual parameters of what has been labelled the 'new sociology of work'. Scholars such as Coulson (2012), Fincham (2008), and Pettinger (2005) have sought to problematize the limits of 'work', and in so doing move 'away from the fixed boundaries of occupation' (Pettinger et al., 2005: 4). Pettinger's research demonstrates that the distinction between 'public' and 'private' is not as clear-cut as is often assumed, and that this 'blurring of boundaries' challenges theorisations of work and non-work that are static and impermeable (Pettinger, 2005: 55). Similarly, Fincham's research on bicycle messengers draws attention to the dichotomisation of 'work' and 'life', highlighting the interrelationship between what are often conceptualized as distinct and juxtaposed arenas (2008). My argument here explores some of these ideas about the work/life continuum in the context of couple relationships.

This article is based on research undertaken at an intellectual moment when 'non-traditional' ways of being in intimacy have become commonplace. Dual-residence couples, those in distance relationships, and those who live apart together (LAT) reflect individuals who 'draw on existing practices, norms and understandings in order to adapt to changing circumstances' (Duncan et al., 2013: 337). It has been argued that these intimate arrangements represent a growing phenomenon (Roseneil, 2006). The intention of this article is not to provide a counter-claim to those assertions, or to engage in the dichotomisation of 'change versus persistence'. Instead, I examine how the 'work' of being in intimacy can at times draw on particular sets of expectations surrounding what it means to negotiate a (productive) working-life. No attempt is made here to undermine the argument that 'non-traditional' arrangements pose 'a significant challenge to the dominant regimes of gender and sexuality' (Roseneil, 2010a: 80). However, my research suggests that those dominant regimes, particularly as they are realised through intimate coupling, are negotiated through discursive repertoires suggesting that working-lives

be progressive and forward moving. This is not a structural argument but a notional one: that the 'normal career' remains an integral parallel medium through which normative repertories might be achieved. Those repertoires are far from benign, but reinforce hegemonic representations of intimate partnering. Those representations assume male/female coupling, and equate relationship 'success' with progressive movement through the rungs of 'normal coupledom'; namely cohabitation, marriage, child rearing, and home ownership. In turn, the progressive advancement of the 'normal couple' requires economic capital (Manning and Smock, 2002), and is thus enmeshed in the perceived remunerative gains of an advancing 'career'.

I further draw on Roseneil's framing of the contemporary couple moment, arguing that normative regimes for intimate coupling have persisted (2010b). The 'couple norm' has thus proved resilient, and this is despite numerous pertinent changes to the social and cultural sphere (Roseneil 2010b). Distinct from Roseneil's rendering, my interpretation of this persistence – 'tenacity' as Roseneil has coined it (2010b) – is that it takes place, at least in instances, in collaboration with (the) 'normal career'. As such, my understanding of the 'couple norm' is not as a standalone cultural phenomenon, but one that is embedded in a particular 'career' formation.

These findings form a small part of research undertaken between 2010 and 2013 which focused on the narratives of middle-class men and women who underwent significant work-life changes. The research explored the negotiation of work and career considered precarious and alienating, and how 'normal' expectations for a working-life impinge upon the way we understand ourselves and those around us. Invariably, that negotiation involves areas of social life extending beyond the productive realm, and it is at this intersection – of the productive, personal, and interpersonal – where this article picks up on that previous work. I explore how the hallmarks of coupling and the tenets of career manifest themselves in everyday interactions within partnerships and marriages. While other areas of scholarship have skirted the margins of this confluence (see for example England, 2010; Hochschild, 1989; Smock, Manning and Porter, 2005) my analysis pays closer attention to the interpersonal negotiations taking place at the

career and couple crossroads, and the persistence of social expectations that are an inevitable outcome of that juncture. I focus in detail on narrative material drawn from one specific case study; in order to explain the nuances of language to provide deeper insight into emotion, self-realization, and aspiration.

First, I briefly highlight the primary literatures framing the career/couple norm. After outlining issues of methodology, the third part of the article will focus on a detailed analysis of empirical material. I conclude by highlighting the entanglement of the career/couple norm. I examine how negotiations between partners are filtered through the progressive needs of a traditional career-path; and where the paradigm of 'upwards and onwards' is mapped onto intimate relationships. While linearity may be present or absent from either dimension, progression - through careers and coupling - is often contingent on both.

Persistent 'career'

The nature of careers are changing, yet the expectation of what it means to have a career, in particular one that is deemed 'successful' or 'normal', remains persistent. The literature arguing for the former abounds: the individual (in place of the organization) increasingly finds him/herself at the epicentre of the 'new', 'boundaryless', 'portfolio', 'protean', or 'post-corporate' career, as the job-for-life paradigm ignores the fractured, piecemeal, and disparate trajectories that more accurately portray the tenor of contemporary work-life narratives (Chudzikowski, 2012; Inkson et al., 2012; see also Platman, 2004). Sennett contributes to these arguments, suggesting that the notion of career as 'progressing step by step through the corridors of one or two institutions is withering' (1998: 22). This ubiquitous thread of literature understands economic and organizational changes as responsible for an emerging agentic career actor; one who takes on employment risks that the organization can (or cares) no longer to afford (Chudzikowski, 2012). While the extent of these career changes has been questioned (see for example Smith and Sheridan, 2006), their reporting in the careers literature is voluminous.

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These changes are in the foreground of what I would argue is a rhetorical or discursive persistence of career understandings – or frameworks – that might be described as 'normal', 'traditional', or 'organizational' (Potter, 2015). While the traditional career model is thought to have been supplanted by career trajectories that are more individualistic – and thus fragmented and subject to frequent change – normative *understandings* of work and career, or what Ulrich Beck calls the 'normal career' (2001: 267), remain pervasive (Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Dries, 2011; Gold and Fraser, 2002; Potter, 2015). This pervasiveness is possible, in part, due to the reification of what is commonly understood as a 'successful' career (Dries, 2011) – characterised by, for example, increases in pay, rank, status, or promotion (Gunz and Heslin, 2005; Heslin, 2005). These criteria are embedded in more traditional (or organizational, or hierarchical) career models; models that lend themselves to work-life trajectories which are 'linear' or 'progressive'.

This should be considered an ideal – one based on the premise that careers are about the individual, and that they are linear, progressive, based solely on human capital, take place primarily within bureaucratic and hierarchical organisations, and are akin to a journey that has a purposively connected beginning, middle, and end: 'Everyday usage of the term *career* usually refers to paid work, especially at a managerial or professional level, and the popular metaphor of the *career ladder* conceives of careers as linear and hierarchical in nature' (Kirton, 2006: 47; emphasis in original). The emphasis here on 'progress' is important in that it reflects a work-life orientation that has been 'deeply embedded in our Western consciousness' (Cohen and Mallon, 1999: 333).

Some research suggests that 'the prevailing norm of upward and onward' continues to frame the expectation of what a career should look like (Cohen and Mallon, 1999: 333); that this rendering of career remains the focus of ambition for many (Dries, 2011; Gold and Fraser, 2002). In this way, the rhetorical ghost of progressive forward movement, as promised within the 'normal career' form, remains influential as a discursive social medium through which working-lives can be made 'successful', or 'good' (Potter, 2015). Dries argues that this is possible in that careers, as social processes, are not

'real' or 'fixed' but subject to a process of reification (2011). As such careers are 'reality-defining', meaning that collective norms of the 'normal' or 'successful' career persist, and do so despite the emerging omnipresence of diverging career experiences and trajectories (Dries, 2011: 378).

The Heterosexual imperative

The persistence of the career/couple norm makes clear the continued perseverance of male/female coupledom as the hegemonic form of intimate partnering. The potency of this construct persists in that marriage, as the ultimate material and discursive expression of heteronormativity, 'presents an idealized and standard package for sociosexual relationships' (Wolkomir, 2009: 494; see also VanEvery, 1996). Marriage infuses 'a particular configuration of sexual and gendered practices and ideas with "a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy"' (Wolkomir, 2009: 494). As the institutionalized and normative expression of coupledom, heterosexuality (particularly marriage) has the power to regulate and marginalize (Jackson, 2006), framing 'identity, subjectivity and everyday life' within both implicit and explicit assumptions regarding acceptable forms of intimacy (Jackson, 2011: 13).

To fulfil the couple norm requires adherence to its hegemonic expression, an 'achievement' that exceeds the baseline requirement of male/female participation, and in turn includes specific ways of being and doing coupledom. Similarly, as other scholars have suggested, heterosexuality surpasses sexual relations, intersecting with multiple and varied institutional dimensions of social life (Jackson, 2011). Prominent amongst these is social class and the way class affects 'how heterosexuals live and how they organize their domestic lives' (Jackson, 2011: 15). How and *who* we love is classed (Johnson and Lawler, 2005), and the (classed) dimensions of desire and intimacy can become enacted within the social, economic, and cultural capital requirements of 'normal' career trajectories. Moreover, practical and economic circumstances are invariably intertwined with our pursuit of a 'successful' career, so it is unsurprising that we would include practical and economic considerations in choosing the 'right' intimate other (Johnson and Lawler, 2005). Notions of compatibility, of 'who is 'right' for us are influenced…by our position' (Johnson and Lawler, 2005: 9). As a social organizing principle the couple

norm, therefore, is well aligned with the precepts of the 'normal' career; reinforcing the rigidly narrow parameters surrounding the 'right way' of 'doing' career, and/or 'being' in an intimate partnership.

Moreover, within the hierarchy of heterosexuality, for heterosexuality to be considered 'normative' it needs to be monogamous (Seidman, 2005), and lifelong monogamy lends itself to the requisite progression of 'normal' career/couple trajectories. Add to this the privileging of the traditional family form, as well as the persistence of the sexual division of labour, and a particular type of heterosexual relationship appears to be the cultural and institutional backbone of Western society: 'lifelong, monogamous, cohabiting relationships, legally sanctioned through marriage and producing children' (VanEvery, 1996: 52). The teleological assumptions of advancing and progressive coupledom (Roseneil, 2006) thus appear at the heart of the heterosexual imperative, and it is the 'tenacity' (Roseneil, 2010b) of the value (or emphasis) that we place on these types of trajectories that is at the heart of this article. As has been argued by numerous scholars, this hegemonic form is increasingly being undermined by alternate manifestations of intimacy and partnering (Holmes, 2004; Roseneil, 2006, 2010a). I interrogate not the fact of change itself, but instead the lingering imperative to 'progress' – through careers and coupledom – that I argue continues to inform and frame the interaction between the two.

Roseneil points out the increased prevalence of individuals not living with a partner (2006). As I've stated, this paper argues that those changes do not exceed the greater social arena in which notions of career 'success' and 'normality' have been reified (Dries, 2011). As such, at the intersection of the career/couple norm notions of progress and linearity loom large. Moreover, that intersection is arguably sexed and gendered, and therefore doubles as a site within which heterosexual (male/female) intimate relationships are upheld as the hegemonic form.

Methodology

My analysis, while empirically driven, is exploratory; and based on a subset of 30 in-depth narrative interviews with middle-class, middle-income professionals. Carried out between 2010 and 2013 and set

primarily in London and the Southeast of England, the research question at the heart of that study sought to explore how men and women narrate significant changes to their working-lives; how self-understanding and personal identity are negotiated within shifting biographies. These men and women, for a variety of institutional, organizational, and personal reasons underwent significant changes in their careers. Some had reached the limits of promotion, some left jobs they found alienating and constraining, others did so for personal reasons. All of my participants exercised a measure of agency in 'choosing' to change careers; none were forced to change by way of, for example, redundancy or personal circumstance.

Narrative interviews were analysed 'in terms of continuity and process' (Bryman, 2004: 412) as events and incidents within transitional narratives were interpreted in relation to what came before and after, and as such were understood as connecting disparate areas of work-life experience – in the case of this article, work and intimate relationships. My approach to narrative interview material 'assumes' that men and women are actively making those connections (Coffey and Atkinson 1996); that indeed, the process of their lives is *about* making those connections.

I understand narrative interview data to be the outcome of 'co-production'; where the researcher and researched 'creating' meaning in tandem. The data presented here is not intended to produce generalizable assertions, but to make an initial exploration of the conceptual parameters of the problem. My emphasis is on a supported single narrative case, following the story of Samita as she transitioned from a job in marketing to becoming a freelance artist. This approach is used to explore the idealised expectations of the career/couple norm; showing how they are embedded in the interactions of partners and spouses. As these interactions were prevalent throughout my research I introduce supporting empirical examples at the conclusion of Samita's story.

Qualitative narrative method was useful in disentangling the experiential aspects of the career/couple norm (Hamel et al., 1994). A focus on individual narrative cases allows us to explore interaction in

depth; eliminating the distance associated with the 'positive approach' (Burawoy, 1998: 5) and illustrating how 'the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events' (Yin, 2003: 2) are embedded in articulations which are 'selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience' (Riessman, 2005: 1). The stories from which this research was drawn attempted to bridge periods of work-life uncertainty. As narrative accounts they are revealing of the way that these men and women attempt to make sense of their experience, and what that sense making process tells us about the intersection of biography, history, and society (Riessman, 2003).

I understand an individual narrative 'case' approach as suggestive of both the *process* and *product* of inquiry. By taking up this strategy I attempt to show how social structural and discursive factors are expressed in the minutia of intimate interaction. Such a close inquiry willingly sacrifices qualities conducive to a more generalizable study (Hamel et al., 1994). Yet the approach is beneficial not merely in that it excavates the intimate and interpersonal qualities of the career/couple norm, but in that it assists us in linking more specific pieces of 'data' with theories and concepts (Ragin, 1992), and more personal 'stories' with social and historical factors (Riessman, 2003). In 'extending out' from a specific case my goal is to highlight the 'discrepancies between normative prescriptions and everyday practices' (Burawoy, 1998: 5). My aim is not to present definitive empirical evidence of the career/couple norm, but to give an account of the relationship between these competing and complimenting social arenas at a moment when it is argued both are changing.

Samita and Peter

Samita is a forty year old artist and photographer. Before becoming an artist she worked in the marketing division of a major petroleum company. As such Samita left a career that was stable and secure – where she 'was being earmarked for directorship level' – and found herself immersed in a more tenuous situation. To her dismay Samita found people astonished by her decision to pursue a career in art: 'A number of people were just saying, you know, this is absolute folly, you're a business

woman, you're doing very well on the career path'. Interestingly, Samita's biggest critic happened to be the person she was closest to:

> 'Peter came home and I think I said to him, "I want to do this" (go to art school), and, uh, I'm pretty sure he hit the roof, I mean, there were quite a few hitting the roof kind of occasions, it was like, "How are you going to do this"? And I just thought, I'm going to figure it out, if it means taking out a bank loan, if it means working weekends and mornings and evenings and being in debt and struggling, I just thought, I want to go. And the other thing I thought was, well what am I staying here for? I'm not in a relationship that's working because we both want two very different things; he wants the Samita that he had before and I am just not that person, and he feels like I've reneged on some contract, and I cannot get him to understand that that's not the case. It's like we were two different people. So I said, "Let's part"…I just didn't feel that there was another option. And shortly after I remember my brother calling me up and saying, "You know, when you graduate you are going to be thirty-two, single and broke, and is that what you want for yourself"? And I just laughed because I thought, he's trying to, you know, he's trying to frighten me, and that's the best he can do is say to me, "you'll be thirty-two single and broke", and I'm like, *yeah*, is that the worst that's going to happen to me, I was expecting that already.'

The passage depicts how Peter and Samita's relationship is mediated through a particular understanding of 'career'. They grapple with expectations embedded within being a 'dual-earner couple'. In turn, the dynamic between them is strained as their investment in the 'dual-earner' ideal becomes inequitable. Here the social ascription of 'dual-earner couple' is expressed interpersonally, manifesting in the way they relate to one another. Yet Samita and Peter are not oriented towards their dual-earner roles as having social origins, as being the product of ideals that exert pressure on their relational dynamics. Rather, they perceive those expectations as personal, as about one another. As a result their perceptions of each other change over time. The tension between Samita and Peter reflects the extent that their

choices adhere to or contradict what is socially understood as normal for individuals on the 'career path' and in 'dual-earner' relationships. There are practical ramifications of Samita's decision. But the strain between her and Peter appears less to do with relational dynamics and more with the degree to which they are in breach of a social agreement – 'he feels like I've reneged on some contract'.

Similarly, Samita's brother's threatening remark, that when Samita graduates she will be 'thirty-two, single and broke', uncovers the way gendered roles are embedded in understandings of 'career' (Hochschild, 1989). If 'career' based social expectations run parallel to the construction and maintenance of heteronormative gender roles (Hochschild, 1989), we 'expect' Samita to no longer be single by the age of thirty-two, and Samita herself must show indifference to those expectations – '…I was expecting that already'. This reinforces the extent to which heteronormativity is made manifest in more conventional constructions of a working-life; with movement through a linear career-path mirroring the successive phases of normative coupling. Samita's brother makes no distinction between the 'right' way to pursue career and Samita's prospects for partnership; reinforcing the power of the heterosexual norm to order and regulate multiple areas of social and personal life (Jackson, 2011).

Furthermore, implicit in this familial pressure is the suggestion that women of a certain age should be having children. So Samita, being 'thirty-two, single and broke', diverges from what are more conventional assumptions about womanhood. These productive and personal pathways run parallel, and are made distinct by various phases, achievements, and watershed moments, what in the case of coupling Roseneil describes as a 'teleology' (2006). Samita's divergence suggests that understandings of 'career' are deeply embedded in the maintenance of a heterosexual imperative, and that non-linear trajectories continue to be impacted by normative influence, colouring our perceptions of ourselves and those around us.

Samita's brother's assertion also highlights how capitalist ideology upholds a social structure that is intrinsically patriarchal (Seidler, 1994); his rhetorical warning underlining (still prevalent) assumptions

about the role women might play within coupledom and in a market society. Within this assumption, women's fulfilment is subsumed in 'serving the needs of men and children' (Seidler, 1994: 117), so Samita's brother's assertion that she'll be 'thirty-two, single, and broke' merely explicates the machinations of gender, sexuality, work, and capitalism. The heterosexual imperative is intertwined with capitalist social organization (Ingraham, 1994), so being both single *and* broke are direct consequences of violating what are complimentary organizing principles.

Samita's decision to leave her middle-class professional career appears a rejection of the 'dual-earner' ideal. Leaving marketing constitutes a symbolic breech of the career/couple norm, and Samita and Peter's struggle attests to the overlapping currents of progress and linearity running through both:

> 'Peter was very very upset that I would want to leave, because it just meant I was backing out on a supposed agreement that we had: the idea that we would have two professional incomes, and eventually the great big house, and the two cars, and, you know, that, that picture. And you get better furnishings, you have children, and you're on that, you're on *that path* to having *that* kind of a life where, you know, you just keep upscaling the, the nice car and everything, and you keep getting the promotions, and you earn more money. And me coming out of that in my late twenties to go to art school was just, you know, considered madness.'

Within cohabiting relationships the expectation of home ownership can be intensive (Smock, Manning and Porter, 2005), and thus become embedded in assumptions of promotion and pay rise within 'normal' career trajectories. Owning a home, especially for professional couples such as Samita and Peter, contains symbolic value, in part because it is a tangible measure of 'progress'. The tension between Samita and Peter arises when his expectations of that progress are not met. According to Samita, these expectations were based on a 'supposed agreement' – 'that picture'. And when Samita gives her description of 'that picture' we get a better sense of 'career' based social expectations and their

inflection on normative coupledom. Striking here is Samita's use of the word 'the'. Her reference to '*the* great big house*' and '*the* two cars' suggests shared meanings, underscoring how mainstream understandings of 'career' still act as powerful social and cultural referents (Dries, 2011). Those referents suggest that 'career' comes with an established set of socio-cultural prerequisites and potential outcomes. In so far as they reinforce specific renderings of coupledom these prerequisites are liable to be enacted in intimate relationships. Samita clearly understands these shared cultural values; that the idealised promise of having a career is inseparable from the (idealised) trajectory of her relationship. She articulates 'career' not as an individual pursuit, but as integral to her and Peter's collective identity.

Embedded within Samita and Peter's contract are expectations associated with achievement, progress, and success 'that a lot of people aspire to'. The confluence of having children and getting better furnishings is understood less an expression of affluence or aspiration, and more as an articulation of the progressive prerogative running through the heart of the career/couple norm. The teleology of normative coupling, in this way, slots into the material imperative associated with having a 'successful career'. Linear narrative time runs through both as career and coupledom are negotiated in successive steps and stages.

Moreover, career based social expectations suggest not only pragmatic issues, such as how much one should earn, or that one should earn progressively throughout the course of a working-life, they also impinge upon gendered identity and notions of self-understanding, particularly as they are enacted within partnerships. Samita's brother's warning suggests that disruptions to 'normal career' carry consequences that exceed the productive sphere; being 'thirty-two', 'single' and a woman a far cry from the linear teleology of the couple model (Roseneil, 2006).

Popularly assumed to be the essence of (contemporary western) work-life narratives, these ideals hold powerful socio-cultural resonance. They reflect idealised aspirations of 'becoming', affixing into coherent constellations normative renderings of identity, status, lifestyle, marriage, and 'career' (Berger

et al., 1977). In turn, what is essentially a social agreement becomes an issue of personal significance (Hochschild, 1989), and Samita and Peter's relationship becomes a medium through which institutional expectations are upheld and maintained.

That 'progress' is the implicit prerequisite of those institutional expectations suggests that the social, cultural, and economic implications for the career/couple entanglement are classed. Samita, who had worked in marketing, and Peter who was a solicitor, were at the razors edge of these ideals. As middle-class professionals their constellations of identity, status, lifestyle, marriage, and 'career', as Berger et al (1977) have suggested, needed to remain coherent, progressive, and forward moving.

'In between' relationships

Disruptions to career progress manifest as diversions seemingly antithetical to the progressive logic of the couple norm. In fact, which path Samita and Peter have strayed from, the relational or remunerative, is unclear as the regulatory power of normative couple configurations casts a shadow over decisions having to do with the personal *and* the productive. In the absence of 'career', relationships appear a logical medium through which to maintain narrative coherence, and coupling doubles as a site where conventional norms maintain a grip. The overlapping landscapes become fraught with the dearth of those more normative narrative devices, reminding Samita and Peter that they have strayed beyond the acceptable scope of 'normal' work-life trajectories:

> 'It was a Pandora's box in that things came out that shouldn't have. I felt that Peter was never going to be open to my interest in art. So there was tension in our relationship, and there were more arguments going on. But one night a week he would be away because he was working in Bristol. And I loved that night a week I had to myself because I would work on art until midnight or one o'clock in the morning, trying to make the most of every single moment he was away. And when he was home he didn't take it too well if I wanted

0to disappear into the spare room and be reading or making work. When he came home he wanted me to be around him, and I was like, ah, *I just want to do this other thing* [whispering].'

Samita's strategy is to tiptoe around the tension; hiding her artistic work so as not to upset the relational status quo. Her narrative is punctuated by reminders that her decision breaks with idealised notions of productivity. Faced with this narrative crossroads Samita ducks and dives; sustaining her appetite for artistic endeavour, but only when the pervasive pressure of work-life normativity, embodied by Peter, is not looking! She hides the creative process, suggesting an inherent tension between the auspice of a conventional trajectory and the precariousness of being off 'that path'. Their competing narratives prove untenable; his reflecting the remnants of a 'dual-earner' ideal, hers the ambivalence of breaking away from norms he continues to endorse.

Ups and downs

On completing her degree at art school Samita took up a Master's of Fine Arts in Chicago, Illinois. Peter remained sceptical as he still expected Samita to uphold her end of 'the deal':

> 'For him, you know, he was upset because he always said that when he hit forty he wanted to have a house. And while we were in America house prices were going up and he was like, "Oh god", you know, "We don't have a house. In these last two and a half years I have not saved anything". And it was very difficult for our marriage because he was like Jekyll and Hyde, one minute he would be nice and affectionate and the next he would be horrible. And for him it was just that, he loves me [pause], but he also saw me as the reason why there was so much instability in his life, you know, there was just so much risk going on.'

The uncertainty of Peter and Samita's status as dual-earners, that it is susceptible to fluctuations in the housing market, becomes manifest in Peter's 'Jekyll and Hyde' temperament. Economic trends are in

this way expressed interpersonally: 'Problems between husbands and wives, problems which seem "individual" and "marital", are often individual experiences of powerful economic and cultural shock waves that are not caused by one person or two' (Hochschild, 1989: 11). At face value this make sense; undulations in personal finances understandably lead to potential strain on relationships. Yet the very fact that macro changes are expressed interpersonally – that Samita employs the language of 'risk' – becomes a point of inquiry. 'Risk' means not just the practical implications of being a single income household, or the symbolic failure of having not met the dual-earner litmus, but the emotional reality of being on the margins of the couple norm.

In the above passage, Samita moves seamlessly from issues that are beyond her and Peter's control to those that are intimate. That Peter 'always said…that when he hit forty he wanted to have a house' underscores the extent to which 'career' has extra-organisational manifestations; that embedded within the career norm are social ideals regarding watershed 'achievements' of the life-course. These 'achievements' are not only entrenched in the teleological linearity of the couple norm, but embedded at the emotional and material epicentre of Samita and Peter's relationship.

That the social becomes conflated with the personal helps us contest a rigidly work-centric reading of 'career' (Pettinger et al., 2005). Once we include the interpersonal within our conceptualisation we must begin to look at the interdependent tenacity of the career/couple norm. This reflects a fragmentation surrounding the way individuals' lives are played out. Indeed, the literature support this; arguing that the progressive step-by-step career trajectory is withering (see for example Kirton, 2006; Potter, 2015), and that non-normative coupledom has for some time been taking hold (see for example Le Feuvre and Roseneil, 2014; Roseneil, 2006, 2010a). In this sense – as with Samita and Peter – it is the *expectation* of linearity and 'progress' that remains entrenched.

We see this in Samita's story; her negotiation of a fractured career path continually undermined by her struggle to see eye to eye with Peter. Yet over time, as she moved through her degrees and eventually began selling her artwork, Peter slowly embraced the scope of her work-life change:

'Isn't that funny? He loves the work that I make, I mean, he loves the [name of work] work that I made, he absolutely loves it…I love the fact that he's respectful of [very long pause], that I'm making the work, and he lets me do that and he doesn't, like before sometimes he would shake his head and think, what am I doing, I'm completely crackers, like some of the, you know, like when I had him shovelling helicopter seeds out of the top of the bedroom window, and I was down here with my camera facing upwards and he's like, '*what is she doing'?* Then when he saw the end result, and he saw these gorgeous photographs, and he's seen how they've been selling, you know he's been, uh, and he loves the work in and of itself anyway, but then he's been seeing, you know, the prices these works have been commanding [pause], um, he's very different about it now. Now he'll be something like, "You know, if you need help, I'll come out with you and help move the equipment around"…You know, he said to me last year, he said, "You know, I'm not one for praise, but you've exceeded my expectations". And now he's a bit more open about it…I remember we were in the elevator just before we were going to the opening at the [name of gallery] gallery, and he said to me, he says, "I'm proud of you" [softly], you know, I probably would never hear those words from him again in my lifetime, I might hear them once again, but he doesn't say things like that. So for him to say something like that, you know, it really means something.'

Samita's success has repositioned her within the 'dual-earner' ideal. She is again able to uphold her end of 'the agreement'. In turn, Peter has become invested in Samita's artwork as her success as an artist facilitates a support he previously seemed incapable of. We again see the convergence of career and coupling; Samita pleased with Peter's support, yet struggling to differentiate between his feelings for

her, the work she is doing, and the price that work commands on the market. This is not to suggest that Peter's feelings are somehow inauthentic, only that their relationship is mediated through a discursive framework where remuneration and social mobility are symbolic prerequisites for successful cohabitation and coupling. Love and intimacy – seemingly intangible, highly subjective qualities of relationship – become entangled with the entrapments of 'career'.

I would argue that Peter's acceptance of Samita's artistic work appears subsumed within a model of working-life premised on rational notions of progress and forward movement (Berger et al., 1977); tenets of modernity steeped in more masculinist and normative renderings of how a life should be lived. This suggests that intimate emotional capacities are often contingent upon achieving levels of social conformity and normative achievement. Thus, when Peter tells Samita that she has exceeded his 'expectations', we are inclined to question the source of those 'expectations'.

Samita's hesitancy about where Peter's support stops, and where his appreciation of the price her works command begins, suggests the extent to which expectations of career/couple 'success' have become embedded between them. Expressions such as 'love', 'commitment', and 'emotional support' can be understood (somewhat cynically) as falling under the purview of cyclical economic movements (Hochschild, 1989), or the cultural connotations of conspicuous consumption, or mainstream notions of 'success' in a capitalist economy. The perseverance of the career/couple norm is thus partly explainable as a capitalist economic imperative; that on the one hand progressive, measureable, and durable forward movement is a fundamental tenet of successful capitalist economic narratives (Dries, 2011; Heslin, 2005), and on the other, patriarchal capitalist societies are dependent upon institutionalized hegemonic heterosexuality as a social organizing structure (Ingraham, 1994).

Additional Cases

The following additional cases provide empirical support for the themes emerging from Samita's story. In his forties Michael traded in a teaching job to pursue a career in sustainable building. While Michael's

narrative focused around the goal of realising sustainability within his work as a builder, bisecting that story were the uncertainties of being a father and husband while giving up a stable career trajectory. Those uncertainties underpinned 'a sort of push and pull thing' between Michael and his wife, and when I pressed him to elaborate on the 'push and pull' he articulated the relational dynamics emerging from his decision to change career:

> Well, financially it's been quite difficult in a sense, well, I don't think so but my wife thinks it has. We just don't, um, like our boiler needs replacing, so we don't just call in a plumber, we have to make sure we scrimp and scrape. So financially it's been harder I think, but it hasn't worried me. But I think that it does worry my wife. We were just talking about it this morning, and she said, when I was teaching, 'oh, it was so lovely', and I said, 'even though I used to moan every night that I didn't like what I was doing'.

'Sustainability' in Michael's narrative takes on a doubled-edged meaning; reflecting both an ethos at the heart of his work as a builder, yet also the 'scrimp and scrape' nature of household finances. A resulting balancing act occurs; Michael pursuing 'a kind of ideology about sustainable building' on the one hand, while negotiating that pursuit through the 'push and pull' of his marital relationship on the other. We see in the 'push and pull' narrative elements of Samita and Peter's 'agreement'; an implicit understanding that career advancement – even if only notional – is often a requisite feature of 'successful' coupledom. As Michael discovers, violation of that understanding encroaches on a core tenet of the couple norm, and is ultimately generative of conflict within his relationship.

Unlike Samita and Michael, for composer Oliver it was the *end* of a relationship which proved the impetus to change:

So I worked as a dentist for a while, and I suppose it was a blessing in disguise when my

eight and a half year relationship ended, full stop, with marriage in the works. That gave me

the guts to leave, to decide that that wasn't, I mean, I finally had the guts to say, no, no, this

is time to do something else. I never thought much about it but maybe because in the long

term relationship you feel a bit tied down, and I need, I need to not think too much about

myself, and get the stable job, etcetera, for the sake of the whole life together. So when that

ended I bought a one way ticket to New York and I thought, I'll try to start my life there.

Oliver interprets the financial stability of dentistry as operating as a symbolic prerequisite to long-term

partnership. As with Samita and Michael, the expectations of career and the trajectory of coupling

become embedded as the parameters surrounding career encompass the codes of conduct within

coupling. A biographical contingency occurs, with Oliver's choices regarding distinct arenas informing

and imposing themselves on one another. In turn he finds the constellation of the personal – the 'need

to not think too much about myself' – and the productive – the 'stable job' – difficult to pull apart. And

when Oliver says that he 'finally had the guts', it's not clear if he's referring to the courage it took to

leave dentistry, or the difficulty of separating with his long-term partner.

I would argue that it is not possible to separate relational dynamics from social ascription; that there is

no line of demarcation where social expectation stops, and something more elusive like feelings begin.

The accoutrements of 'career' carry implications extending well beyond the material and remunerative,

shaping how we feel about ourselves, and how we communicate feelings of love and commitment to

those around us. At the same time, normative coupling supersedes the relational dynamics of intimacy,

impacting orientations towards productive and economic lives. It is not enough to merely highlight the

way in which 'normal' career tracts are actively gendered, or how they maintain heterosexual coupling

as the privileged form of partnership, but we need to look at the constellation of gender, sexuality, and

career, and how that intersection upholds taken for granted assumptions about how a life should be

lived.

Conclusion: changing 'careers', changing couples

These stories illustrate the degree to which the personal, familial, and relational impact and are expressed through 'work'. Long understood as separate realms, 'work' and 'family' need to be understood 'not as distinct sets of activities people do but as enmeshed yet competing emotional cultures' (Hochschild, 1997: xx). We can interpret this in a literal sense, in that work often takes place in the home, but also in that decisions about 'work' and 'career' are often negotiated through idealised notions of the family. As such, the persistence of particular career and couple forms is much more about the interdependence of disparate work-life arenas than the continued availability of specific productive and intimate trajectories.

The 'traditional hierarchical career' is thought to have been replaced 'by a proliferation of more fluid and individual career choices' (Cohen and Mallon, 1999: 329; see also Chudzikowski, 2012; Heslin, 2005; Inkson et al., 2012). However, although structural changes have undoubtedly altered the way individuals work (Rifkin, 2004; Sennett, 1998; Sennett, 2006), I argue that traditional understandings of 'work' and 'career', especially considering the sustained reification of the 'normal'/'successful' career (Dries, 2011), continue to act as powerful referents (Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Dries, 2011; Gold and Fraser, 2002; Heslin, 2005; Potter, 2015).

The Chicago School of Sociology – in particular Clifford Shaw and Everett Hughes – understood career to be a more holistic process; using the term as a 'heuristic device applicable to a wide range of life activities' (Kirton, 2006: 48). This more inclusive conceptualisation interprets career processes as fluid, and the boundary between work and the rest of life as permeable (Pettinger, 2005). We thereby begin to render 'career' as more encompassing, including an individual's spiritual and political orientations, their relationships with the people around them, the way they perceive themselves, as well as their role in their communities and societies. This more inclusive understanding interrogates the organisational and work-centric model still commonly cited in much of the literature (Pettinger et al.,

2005). Salient to these entanglements is the institutional and cultural persistence of hetero-normative gender roles – how the intersection of gendered identity and work informs not only men's and women's expectations for the type of (public and private) work they do (England, 2010), but also the tenor of interaction, emotion, and negotiation within intimate relationships. Moreover, the negotiation of career and coupledom reinforces the hegemony of heterosexual orientations; the narrative template of 'successful career' maintaining the symbolic, practical, and everyday privileging of hetero-normative (male/female) coupling.

The implications of this analysis highlight how the reification of the 'normal career' parallels the tenacity of the couple norm (Roseneil, 2010b). It reveals the intersection of competing paradigms in that 'progression' through career and coupledom are often facilitative of one another, and in that expectations of linear progress run against the increasing prominence of non-linear trajectories (Beck, 2001; Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Platman, 2004), as well as the emergence of non-nuclear and non-cohabitive intimate arrangements. There is an undeniable symbolic capital embedded in work-life arrangements that are (or appear) linear, stable, and upward/forward moving (Drier, 2011; Heslin, 2005). The challenge of career/couple norm persistence is thus this: that normative models for career and coupling are not just intertwined, nor do they merely present limitations in terms of sexuality, gender, and intimacy, but that they reinforce work-life arrangements which are restrictive in their prescriptions of what a 'normal' or 'successful' life should look like.

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