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# Understanding Women's Transitions – Exploring how we can best support our clients at work

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“ women face unique and complex transitions in their lifetime which can have a big impact on their careers, examples of which are motherhood or midlife. ”

# UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S TRANSITIONS

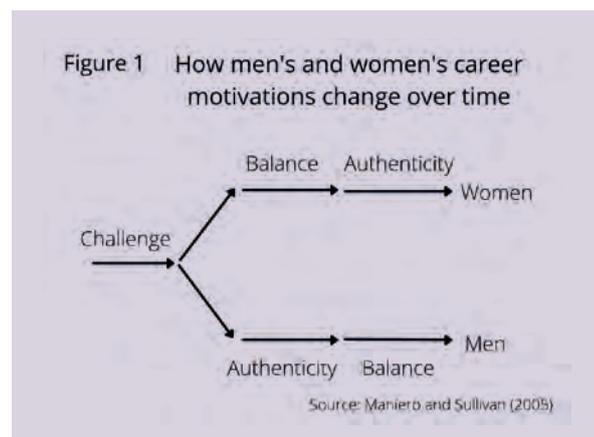


**CATHY BROWN  
AND FRANCES  
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EXPLORE HOW  
WE CAN BEST  
SUPPORT OUR  
CLIENTS AT WORK**

**W**hen working with clients to support them through career transitions, we see much commonality in transitions experienced by both men and women, such as life stages (leaving education, turning 40), redundancy or changing career. However, women face unique and complex transitions in their lifetime which can have a big impact on their careers, examples of which are motherhood or midlife. Within this article, we aim to enhance our understanding and explore how we may best support our clients.

### Learning from theory

Career theory can help us to make sense of these transitions. For example, the evolution of motivations through our career can vary for men and women. Here, Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005) kaleidoscope model of careers provides a useful overview of these motivational changes and helps to put the transitions into perspective. They assert that, while both men and women are motivated by 'challenge' at the beginning of their careers, the transition to mid-career sees women more motivated by 'balance' while men are more motivated by 'authenticity' - whether they can be themselves following career decisions. The transition to late career sees this switch, with women looking for more 'authenticity' and men for more 'balance.' Interestingly, the authors felt the model applies regardless of whether women had children.



As well as differences in motivations, relationships can have differing significance in career decision-making for men and women. In O'Neill and Bilimoria's (2005) model of women's career development, three differences are highlighted, namely: weight placed on family responsibilities, developmental psychology (including neuroplasticity which is the ability of the brain to form and reorganise synaptic connections, especially in response to learning or experience or following injury) and the lack of role models at higher organisational

levels in certain industries. Of particular interest is the importance of relationships in women's career decisions at different stages in their lives.

### Making sense of transitions

Transitions can be confusing times. Therefore it can be useful to understand more about them so that we can manage them better in our work and lives. As well as career theory, career texts can deepen our appreciation. Gratton and Scott (2017) emphasise how transitions can also be both restorative and reinventive, reassuring us that although disorientating, transitions can also be a time of growth.

For women transitioning to motherhood, this time brings a period of neuroplasticity unlike anything seen since adolescence. The brain rewires in response to both the pregnancy hormones and maternal experiences. As nature changes women to ensure the survival of their babies, this isn't always compatible with their careers. They see a change in their identity, priorities and values combined with their shifting motivations to find 'balance.' They feel the opposing forces of wanting to be the best mother they can, focusing on their relationship with and bonding with their baby, against the need to maintain a sense of self, distinct from that of being a mother through continuing with hobbies, interests, and a fulfilling career. They might also see the biggest drop in confidence they have experienced in their lives so far.

As well as motherhood, women can face challenges when moving into their mid-life (45-60 years old). The reason why women's mid-life may be such a challenging experience can be explained by the unique multi-layered shifts taking place (Gothard, 1996). These can take the form of inter-connected external (economic and social) and internal (physiological, biological and psychological) changes. Whilst challenging for men and women alike, women can often experience particular dynamics. Women often shoulder shifting caring responsibilities of children leaving (or arriving back), as well as for ageing parents. Biological changes associated with the menopause can have compounding physical and psychological implications, including fatigue, poor concentration and anxiety. Such changes can often lead us to desire more authenticity and question ourselves fundamentally: 'Who am I?' 'What do I want?'

### What can support us through transitions

There is much that can support these transitions. Firstly, stepping back and understanding the complexity of what is going on at these times in women's lives can be hugely beneficial. This period of transition naturally brings uncertainty and can feel very messy and confusing. There are useful concepts and ideas that can help understand these transitions, such as the Bridges Transition Model.



Following this it can be useful to develop our self-awareness: putting the transition into context from a personal perspective. This is likely to bring a variety of emotions and reading about or talking about these can help normalise them. This is where a coach, as well as family encouragement, can be hugely supportive.

Finally, it can be useful to visualise a successful transition, to bring clarity to what an ideal future will look like, before focusing on the transferable skills and habits that will help a successful transition.

### Implications for career practitioners

We can draw upon a range of insights to enhance our client's transitions by:

- becoming more familiar with the landscape of transitions, so that we can help our clients with their sense-making;
- recognising that when working with our clients it will be beneficial to take into account their whole life context - it isn't just about work;
- walking alongside them for a while on their journey of discovery, realising that the value that we can add is through exploring, rather than getting to a particular destination.

### Tips for career practitioners

When preparing to work with clients to enhance their career transition there are certain practical things to bear in mind, including:

- investing time in understanding in more detail the psychological landscape of transitions, including the phases, associated emotions and beneficial activities for example through reading Bridge's (2020) book
- building up your library of resources that help you to understand more fully the changes at play during women's career transitions, for example Brown (2016), Brown and Wond (2020) and Cushway (2021)
- cultivating your own network of career coaches who are working in this field so that you can share insights and resources to support both yourself and your clients.

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