Meaning and Identity Implications of Age 30: Experiences of Women Professionals from India

Supriya Rakesh

Abstract
Age is an important aspect that influences women's career choices and identities. For employed women, age 30 is often associated with gendered discourses around reproductive time-lines, work–family conflict, stalling of careers or ‘opt-out’ from the workforce. However, age is often ignored in research on women's careers as well as organisational diversity and inclusion practices. Through an interpretative study of corporate women professionals from India, this article examines the meaning and identity implications of age 30. Findings point to tensions and contradictions in social norms at the intersection of age and gender, and age 30 as a barrier or outer limit for participants’ realisation of strong career identities.

Keywords
Women's careers, opt-out, diversity, age identity

Introduction

(The) biggest point of realization...is the way society reacts to you...how people react to you when they know your age...like, if I did not tell people how old I was, their reaction would be different...the moment I would tell them I’m 28 or 29 years old, their reaction would be very different to me. (Participant 5)

Through the aforementioned statement, a woman expresses the puzzling effect of age in her lifeworld and the conflict she experiences between how she sees herself and how others see her.

In theories of lifespan development as well as in popular discourse, age 30 is represented in complex and sometimes in contradictory ways. It is the time for responsibility and commitments—buying a home, building a stable career, marriage and parenthood (Panchal & Jackson, 2005). It is the time to develop a young adult identity (Arnett, 2000) and also the beginning of physical decline referred to as ‘ageing’. More recently, age 30 has come to signify a phase of self-questioning and life change commonly referred to as the ‘quarter-life crisis’ (Panchal & Jackson, 2007).

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For women, age 30 takes on additional meanings associated with the gendered discourse on reproductive timelines, that is, the proverbial biological clock and the related concerns over health, fertility and body image (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000). Especially for women pursuing careers, issues of ‘work–family balance’ may first become significant as they experience identity conflict between their two roles (Panchal & Jackson, 2005). There are concerns over burnout and women’s careers stalling by age 30 (Ranklin, 2013) and the ‘opt-out’ of highly educated women from the workforce (Belkin, 2003).

As we move into a VUCA world, upholding ‘Diversity and Inclusion’ is foremost on the human resource agenda. The workforce demographic is changing, as are forms of careers—traditional notions of employment are giving way to flexible forms of work also known as ‘boundaryless’ careers. In addition to attracting and retaining a diverse workforce, an important concern for organisations is crafting inclusive policies and practices so as to provide a conducive environment for diverse employees to thrive at the workplace. Gender is an important dimension of workplace diversity; yet, our understanding of gender and its career implications is at times limited and static. Often, we do not take into account the evolving life context and dynamic sociocultural context within which individual careers unfold.

Age is an important aspect that influences women’s self-defining choices and their identities; however, it is also an aspect that has been ignored in most research on women’s careers (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). What does it mean to be a woman turning 30 in a particular cultural context? How do societies construct age meanings and how does the individual perceive and respond to these meanings? How do these socially defined meanings influence individual identities? What are the implications of age on women’s careers and organisational lives?

These are some of the questions that this article explores through an interpretative study of women professionals from India, employed in corporate careers. The aim of this research is to examine the meaning and identity implications of age 30 in these women’s lives. While previous studies have examined women’s engagement with their careers across career stages (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005, etc.), my study offers an in-depth account of the early career years and captures women’s career priorities evolve in relation to age identities.

**Context of the Study**

It is important to emphasise the role of ‘context’ in such a study, as roles and tasks for adults in particular societies are often prescribed culturally (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). These include age markers for significant life events as well as scripts for different life stages.

In gendered societies, traditional social norms and role standards are often more precisely defined and rigidly applied to women (Rajadhyaksha & Smita, 2004). In emerging countries like India, ‘career women’ are themselves a recent, urban phenomenon. India today can be described as a society in transition, at a confluence of multiple forces and discourses. This is also true with respect to norms about the role of women in society (Srinivasan & Gupta, 2013). Hence, research on age and women’s careers, undertaken from a purely Western perspective, cannot be extended to the Indian context.

The women in my study are, in a sense, privileged; they belong to urban or semi-urban families and have enjoyed opportunities for higher education and employment. While career opportunities for such women professionals are rapidly expanding, social mores around gendered role expectations, especially in the family domain, are still rooted in tradition. In this cultural context, family welfare is seen as primary, and social roles are structured along patriarchal norms (Rajadhyaksha & Smita, 2004).
This study throws light on how social norms relate to both gender and age and the contradictions inherent in these norms. Age is associated with certain social norms that change over time and differ across cultures (Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007). While ‘age’ in the Western world would imply a discussion on the ageing population, in India with a primarily ‘young’ demographic, life changes at age 30 have individual and organisational implications. Such a study enables a comparison across cultures to understand how the meanings of age and age-related identity work vary across cultural contexts.

**Theoretical Background**

Early developmental psychologists discussed the implications of age on psychosocial development and formation of adult identity. Erikson’s (1963) theory highlighted ‘generativity’ as a developmental task for the 30s, especially biological reproduction for women. Levinson (1996) described the ages 27–32 as a transitional period in women’s lives—as a time of reviewing decisions taken and commitments made in the early 20s, that is, ‘novice adulthood’—with respect to marriage, vocation and the priorities assigned to the two.

A number of early studies on age 30 (Reinke, Homes, & Harris, 1985; Roberts & Newton, 1987) found that women often reversed priorities between work and family to add the ‘missing’ component that was under-emphasised in their 20s. This was described as a time of emotional upheaval and major life changes also characterised by psychological growth and emergence of a more individuated adult identity.

However, these observations of adult life are subject to social contexts and the roles men and women occupy in these contexts. A major criticism of theories linking age to stages of development was their lack of recognition of sociocultural and generational differences (Cafferrella & Olson, 1993).

For instance, the more recent research on ‘Emerging Adulthood’ by Arnett (2000) shows that in developed societies, individuals now enjoy an extended period of exploration (after adolescence). As a result, crucial choices and commitments in life with respect to career or family are not made till late 20s or 30s. Thus, age 30 marks the entry into adulthood and is a time of making, rather than reviewing adult commitments.

In summary, existing research shows that age is associated with certain socially prescribed roles, role-related behaviours and normative life events. It is these norms that influence individual age meanings and identities (Johnson et al., 2007). Psychological theories that describe (or prescribe) identity tasks specific to age tend to ‘reify’ these norms, rather than reflecting changing realities. Very often, they ‘normalize’ certain life tasks like marriage, therefore, the lives of ‘single’ adults are ignored in research or treated as non-normative life tracks (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Additionally, the research on development in adulthood is characterised by an under-representation of samples from emerging economies, like India, where meanings of age may vary.

Hence, as my theoretical lens, I draw upon the broader role identity theory (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In role identity theory, the ‘self’ is seen as a ‘collection of identities composed of meanings that people attach to their multiple social roles’ (Stryker, 1968). Common sources of identity for most individuals are their work and family roles, such as employee, spouse or parent. These roles vary in their salience for the self, and the identification with each role can vary across individuals—these aspects may change over time and across situations (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

I use this theory broadly to make sense of the participants’ life experiences—their priorities, preoccupations and choices. I also use concepts from role identity theory to arrive at the themes in my final analysis and to develop the theoretical framework in Table 1. This helps me illuminate two aspects of age identities: exploration and commitment to adult roles, and gendered concerns around prioritising between work and family.
**Approach and Methods**

The study broadly follows a phenomenological approach; the aim is to understand the meaning of age 30 in the individual’s lifeworld. I chose the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds, and the meanings, particular experiences and events relating to age hold for them.

Typically, IPA studies are conducted on small, homogeneous samples selected through a set of predefined criteria. Six women participants were chosen from ages 27 to 32, all with higher/professional education, living in urban areas and employed with large organisations in the corporate sector, across functions such as human resources, supply chain and finance. To add further nuance to the study, I chose an equal number of married and unmarried participants—to compare and contrast the identity work relating to their choices. As a researcher, I was conscious not to label them as separate categories like homemakers and career women in Levinson’s (1996) study. Instead, I sought to examine whether and how these social labels influenced their self-definitions.

In-depth interviews (lasting 2–3 hours) with each participant were used to trace their life experiences from the early 20s till the present—important life events, key concerns and priorities and the women’s evolving self-conceptions through these changes. This approach and the age range of participants were outlined so as to capture a range of perspectives on age 30—from young women professionals approaching this age and those who have crossed it. This was also done to avoid an assumption of the significance attached by women to this particular age marker (as opposed to another) and to instead allow insights to emerge from data.

Based on detailed guidelines by Smith et al. (2009), the analysis of interview transcripts was aimed towards developing a detailed interpretative account of the cases. This involved in-depth engagement with each individual case as well as examination of similarity and differences between cases. The process of analysis involved moving from particular to shared aspects and from descriptive to more interpretative themes.

Starting with the first transcript, the first step involved multiple iterations of reading and noting in the form of free textual analysis. Initial notes were then transformed into emergent themes by focusing on discrete chunks of the transcript. The emergent themes were examined for patterns and connections, keeping in mind the purpose of the study. Similar themes were then clustered together and defined by higher-level conceptual categories.

The process of analysis was repeated with each case, treating each participant’s account on an individual basis. Thematic structures of individual cases were then compared to examine patterns and connections across cases. These revealed commonalities in participants’ experiences at a conceptual level—a temporal flow with relevant age markers, normative life events, engagement with roles at work and home and implications for individual identity. Finally, a theoretical framework was developed to capture the shared aspects of participants’ meanings and experiences, drawing on concepts from role identity theory (Stryker, 1968) and research on age identity (building on Erikson, 1963).

**Findings**

The theoretical framework in Table 1 presents the key findings of the study—the shared aspects of the age-based meanings and experiences of the participants.
**Table 1. Theoretical Framework: Experience of Age 30 and Identity Implications for Women Professionals from India**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Markers</th>
<th>Role Expectations</th>
<th>Normative Life Events</th>
<th>Identity Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early to mid-20s</td>
<td>Preparation for adult roles</td>
<td>Entering world of work Living with parents</td>
<td>Absence of identity exploration Foreclosure based on social scripts Early formation of career identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 25</td>
<td>Entering adult roles in work and family</td>
<td>Marriage Career progression/job change Living independently*</td>
<td>Self-identification through ‘career’ or ‘family’ choice External locus of identity Centrality and development of career identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 30</td>
<td>Deeper commitment to adult roles</td>
<td>Marriage* and motherhood Career break or slow-down/ shift to alternate careers</td>
<td>Identity conflict—society vs. self Salience of family and personal identities Reduced salience of career identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** The author.

**Note:** These are relevant to the single women in the sample.

The findings show that ‘Age markers’ play an important role in participants’ early career experiences—they are socially provided directives or guidelines which both guide and constrain personal and career choices. There were two important age markers that the participants encountered—at age 25 and then at age 30. These markers signalled a new phase in their lives; subjectively distinct in terms of perceived role expectations, life events and priorities, and implications for identity. How the women responded to these normative role expectations defined their experiences and shaped their identities.

The early 20s were experienced as a period of extended adolescence, characterised by the absence of responsibilities, commitments or normative expectations other than those in the role of a daughter. All the participants lived with and were strongly influenced by their parents who actively encouraged their education and careers. Hence, this period had a preparatory quality to it, similar to what is described as ‘novice adulthood’ in the existing developmental literature (Levinson, 1996).

Subsequently, participants made the transition from education to employment and experienced early development of a work identity. However, there was the absence of identity exploration at this stage, either in career or relationships. This is in contrast to Western literature on adult development which emphasises identity exploration as key to moving from adolescence into adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Most of the women describe having very low clarity on career goals and were just going with the flow, following the approved ‘life script’—education, employment with a reputed organisation and finding a life partner.

The participants first encountered gendered social norms around the age 25; it was considered as the ‘appropriate age’ for marriage, for the women in this cohort. Some of the women (the married participants) made the choice to marry at this time, whereas the others explicitly or implicitly decided to delay marriage to focus on their careers. This decision had implications on whether the women (provisionally) identified themselves as ‘family-oriented’, ‘career-oriented’ or ‘wanting both’.

This was a time for major demographic transitions for most participants as they took on adult roles in work and family domains. These included job change, relocation to a new city, living independently for the first time and marriage. Work identity grew more salient, and focus on career grew at this stage leading to greater clarity on career goals. The participants describe feeling more comfortable in and identifying themselves more with their work roles than their other roles—careers were experienced as
familiar territory. This was also true for the (recently) married women, trying to adapt to their new and unfamiliar roles in the family domain.

At this time, the women were more externally focused in their self-definition; they saw themselves in relation to and tried to adapt themselves to ‘role identity standards’ (Stryker & Burke, 2000), that is, expectations of significant others at home and in the workplace. For instance, one participant describes becoming more mature and balanced through feedback and experiences in her work role. There was ongoing identity work between role expectations and evolving self-definition, that is, who I am expected to be and who I see as me.

With the advent of age 30, this identity conflict was intensified. The participants encountered stronger normative pressures to make deeper commitment to adult roles, accompanied by an equally strong desire for self-exploration and individuation.

These pressures were perceived most strongly by single women who had earlier resisted the age-related norms pertaining to marriage. Age 30 was viewed as the deadline by which this must be accomplished, leading to an increasing sense of urgency to identify a life partner. This expectation was reinforced within the family, by same-age peers, and to their surprise, even in the workplace. However, these women found it difficult to reconcile their identities as independent ‘career women’ with traditional gender role expectations in ‘arranged’ marriages. For married women, age 30 signalled the next normative phase of motherhood and brought forth concerns regarding health and conception, and anxieties over their future lives and careers as employed mothers.

At this time, the previous distinction in self-identification as a ‘family’ or ‘career’ women seemed to blur, as personal relationships within family as well as self-realisation became predominant concerns. The career identity linked to their current career paths in corporates became less salient as most participants anticipated or planned a temporary ‘slow-down’, a career break or a shift to a more satisfying and less demanding alternate career in the next 3–5 years.

Conclusion

This study examines the implications of the age 30 for individual identities based on experiences of young women professionals from India. It sheds light on gendered meanings of age and age-related identity work in this context. It reflects the tensions inherent in social norms at the intersection of age and gender and sheds light on the dynamics behind the ‘opting out’ of young women from mainstream corporate careers.

Previous researchers have noted the culturally rooted processes that reinforce centrality of marriage and motherhood for Indian women—including norm of arranged marriages, gendered responsibilities for household and stigma associated with singlehood, divorce and childlessness (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001; Srinivasan & Gupta, 2013). The findings from my research point to age 30 as a barrier or an outer limit for realisation of a strong identity anchored in career, for this particular cohort of women professionals. As employed women progress towards this age, a focus on career role is made increasingly difficult by normative pressure to take on and prioritise family roles.

This study also reflects the strong influence of family on educational and career choices of Indian women—both in facilitating and inhibiting careers. This has implications for women’s careers and career identities, although their professional worlds appear to emphasise egalitarian, achievement norms. For the women in my study, a major source of conflict was the emphasis on education and career achievement until a certain age (from family, peers and significant others) and the shift to more traditional role expectations subsequently.
By age 30, women are expected to take on their ‘real’ roles in the family sphere and balance their careers with these roles to the extent possible. However, by this age, a career identity has already taken shape and is an important source of self-definition. As evident from the findings, women may at times conform to or even internalise age-based norms or they may resist them at the cost of social stereotyping and internal conflict. It is this ongoing work between balancing self-identity and role-based identities—at times adapting, at times resisting—that symbolises age 30 for these women.

What does this mean for organisations, employment and the role of human resource professionals? The first implication is that rapid change in the business environment is also accompanied by dynamism and complexity of societal and cultural change. Even when organisations adopt a progressive agenda, some social conventions may be more resistant to change than others. These will reflect in employment trends, evolving career structures and workplace behaviours.

Second, while gender is recognised as an important dimension of diversity, it is important to understand the nuances of gendered experiences of employed women. Supportive policies may have limited impact when career identity itself is a site of conflict.

Finally, the career priorities and needs of individuals, both women and men, may vary across age, life and career stages. While remaining sensitive to this evolution in the life course, it is important for organisations to not ‘reify’ social conventions and common assumptions. Instead, diversity can be cultivated by allowing and supporting a multiplicity of life choices and career paths.

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