Career concepts in the 21st century

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https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-24/edition-2/career-concepts-21st-century

PUBLISHER

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VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

LICENCE

REPOSITORY RECORD

21st Century Career Concepts: Magic, Measurement, and Career Capital

(title as rendered: 21st Century Career Concepts: Magic, Measurement, and Career Capital)

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August 2010

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21st Century Career Concepts: Magic, Measurement, and Career Capital

For most people the meaning of "career" probably includes an implicit contrast with "job". Career includes notions of status, advancement, and intrinsic satisfaction, whilst job means something you do (probably somewhat grudgingly) to earn a living. Especially in recent years, most psychologists have tried overcome this divide by defining career more inclusively. For example Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989, p.8) have provided a now widely used definition "The evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time", whilst Collin and Watts (1996, p.386) offer "The individual's development in learning and work throughout life". The notions of time and sequence, not status or advancement, are what differentiates career from other work-related concepts.

These inclusive definitions of career are intended to legitimise everyone's journeys through the labour market. They are also a response to a widespread view that for many people careers are less predictable and secure than they were in the post World War 2 era (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999). They open up to careers psychologists the possibility of studying and facilitating the work lives of everyone, not just the privileged. To some extent they also incorporate life outside work. For example, leading US vocational psychologist Mark Savickas refers to "life design" in preference to career choice or career development (Savickas *et al.*, 2009).

Two 21st Century Career Concepts

There is a clear and long-established divide between on the one hand the study of decisions about what occupation to enter (often called vocational psychology), and on the other hand the study of careers in organisational settings, which is part of organisational psychology (Erdheim, Zickar & Yankelevich, 2007). Some argue that better communication, if not integration, of these two traditions would be helpful (Collin & Patton, 2009). However, there are major barriers to that. The training, academic background, sources of funding and job opportunities tend to be quite different. Even so, in recent years some key concepts have been developed that can be used in both

vocational and organisational psychology. In my view most (not all) of the recent innovative thinking in careers psychology has originated in its organisational wing. This is probably because the late 20th and early 21st century technological and economic changes in the world of work have produced turbulence in the ways in which careers in organisations are played out.

More specifically, much of the agenda has for the last 15 years or so been dominated by two influential but speculative concepts of career. The first is the *Boundaryless Career* (Arthur & Rousseau, 1989). This is presented as a contrast to what had traditionally been considered a career. It is seen as transcending the boundaries of organisations and occupations, sustained by social networks, inter-twined with other parts of people's lives, and under personal control if a person chooses to exert it. Note the reification here: the Boundaryless career is portrayed as an entity, something "out there" waiting to be discovered.

The other new career concept is the *Protean Career* (Hall, 2002). In fact it is not so new because Hall first mentioned it in 1975, but many years passed before he developed it further. The Protean Career is said to be self-directed and values-driven. Self-directed means that the person both takes responsibility and has the power to shape the form his or her career takes. Values-driven means that the responsibility and power are exerted in order to express what matters most to the person. The default values are freedom and growth.

These two concepts have shaped research in careers psychology in at least three ways. First, many writers use them as a backdrop – an uncontroversial description of the way things are and a reason to focus on phenomena related to them. This is common. Despite scholars' claims that they are taking a critical approach, the Boundaryless and Protean career concepts seem on the whole to have found acceptance with remarkable ease (see for example a recent review by Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). This may however be undeserved. In a rare test of the assumptions underlying the concepts, Rodrigues and Guest (2010) examine data on job stability and find that, contrary to much of the rhetoric, mobility between employers has not been increasing during the nineties and noughties.

Second, a few writers have tested the concepts by investigating the extent and ways in which the careers experienced and enacted by people match with the concepts. For example, analyses of the applicability of the Protean and Boundaryless career concepts to somewhat less individualist cultures have not surprisingly revealed some limitations (e.g. Pringle & Mallon, 2003). Third, some scholars, especially Arthur, Hall and close colleagues, have expounded further on the nature and implications of Boundaryless and Protean careers and tried to develop measures of them (e.g. Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006). By measures, I mean questionnaire assessments of the extent to which individuals endorse the two concepts and/or experience their careers in ways which reflect them.

Pros and Cons of the Protean and Boundaryless career concepts

In my view the concepts of the Boundaryless and Protean career certainly have their merits and their uses, as I will explain further below. Yet they are problematic in many ways as bases for guiding research and practice. My colleague Laurie Cohen and I have discussed this in some depth (Arnold & Cohen, 2008), and recently a very good overview of issues surrounding the Boundaryless career concept has been provided by Inkson et al. (2010). There is confusion and ambiguity regarding whether the Boundaryless and Protean concepts (i) provide descriptions of how careers are these days or prescriptions of how they should be; (ii) offer analyses of observable behaviour or of states of mind; (iii) represent unitary constructs or clusters of specific features of careers that may or may not co-occur; and (iv) construe people's career behaviour as unfettered individual action or a creative response to the unpredictable demands of free-market economies.

The last of these is partially addressed by Hall (2002) who positions the need to know one's own values as part of a discourse of personal flexibility whilst hanging onto one's core sense of self in times of unpredictable change. The location of this in an individualist free-market economy is confirmed by his statement that "…we must consider both the person's path with a heart and the employer's path to profits" (Hall, 2002, p. 303). There is also an obvious tendency to focus on people with marketable skills and experience (see also "career capital" section below) whilst neglecting those with less room for manoeuvre, and indeed arguably also overlooking the ways in which

even more privileged people dance to tunes played by those in economic power (Hirsch & Shanley, 1996).

Despite the problems noted above, the Boundaryless and Protean career concepts clearly resonate with many people, at least in western liberal democracies. My colleague Martin Gubler has found in his doctoral research that they capture the interest of potential participants in his study of IT professionals' careers in three European countries. One problem is how to turn the Boundaryless career and Protean career into constructs and measures that meet social scientific requirements. As yet this is unresolved. As one US researcher said to me: "It seems you can either have the magic or the measure, but not both". The reference to magic supports what many readers may already be thinking: that there is a lot of management guru type hand-waving and references to poorly defined but appealing concepts. Indeed there is, and it's not a new phenomenon in careers. On the other hand, by picking up on what "real" people are thinking and saying, careers scholars are at least offering the possibility that this particular tributary of social science will engage with the public.

So what exactly do these two concepts offer? In my opinion they focus attention on some significant phenomena within careers that have sometimes been noted but rarely pursued. One of these is the interplay between sequences of work experiences and what is happening (and what the person is seeking to do) in other arenas of his or her life. There are interesting discussions about how work and other arenas of life may interact (e.g. Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). These extend the well-established work-family conflict literature (see for example Byron, 2005) and explicitly consider the ways in which facilitation might occur. They also potentially expand the arena of careers psychology beyond the study of sequences of roles to include interplay between contemporaneous ones. More empirical research on how these arenas of life affect each other over time would combine the sequential and contemporaneous perspectives, as well as facilitating a much-needed rapprochement of career and life-span developmental psychology (Lachman, 2004; Posthuma & Campion, 2009).

Another service done by the two career concepts is to encourage more attention to the role of boundaries in careers. Writers on the Boundaryless career see them as bad because they hem people in, but are rather unspecific about what is meant by boundary

(it seems as though they really mean barrier) and fail to examine carefully the possibility that boundaries might be good in some ways. For example, they may provide a much-needed cognitive map that helps people construct narratives of their career. Indeed, the construction of satisfactory and satisfying narratives is seen by some as a key career development task these days (Hartung & Taber, 2008).

A third phenomenon is how people navigate and experience the mix of individual action and structural constraints, the ways in which they feel they can be self-directed, and the values they pursue in doing so – are these necessarily freedom and growth? Schein (1993) developed a scheme of eight clusters of values that he referred to as career anchors. Investigation of how each anchor does or does not fit with the pursuit of careers that can be described as Boundaryless or Protean is long overdue. Also, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) have discussed what they called job crafting, which refers to the ways in which people seek to do their job in their own way. They may mould the job to fit their personal preferences and plans, and often of course this can be in service of their future career beyond this present job (Fried et al, 2007). Again, the notion of job crafting speaks to the ways in which individual agency and structural features of the workplace interact in practice. But although the Wrzesniewski and Dutton article is frequently cited, empirical research on job crafting is thin on the ground. Similar potential is evident in the increasingly popular construct of career adaptability (Savickas, 1997; Savickas et al, 2009). This is defined as self-regulation in response to the need to adapt to disequilibrium, and has four proposed components: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. If embraced rather than ignored, the tension between individual agency and personal development on the one hand and the dictates of the labour market on the other, can lead to theoretical and practical advances.

Career Success

Rather direct indicators of how a person makes sense of career are the criteria he or she uses to evaluate his or her career success. Career success (but not failure) is a longstanding and hugely popular research topic. This is probably because most of us are interested in knowing how we could be more successful. In a meta-analysis, Ng, Eby, Sorensen and Feldman (2005) found that variables reflecting personality and social

support or affirmation tended to be correlated with career satisfaction but not salary whilst the reverse was true for socio-demographic and human capital variables. They also found that men were paid higher salaries than women on average, though the gap was smaller in more recent studies than in older ones. In the UK, eye-catching headlines such as "Gender equality is 57 years away" (from the Chartered Institute of Management in August 2010) suggest that the gap reduction is a slow process indeed. According to Ng et al, levels of career satisfaction did not differ between men and women, but some predictors of success did differ. For example, education, hours worked and "Agreeableness" were stronger correlates of women's salaries than men's.

Unfortunately much of this research is fairly unimaginative in that success is usually measured by position in and/or progress through an organisational hierarchy or pay structure. Career satisfaction is most often measured in terms of satisfaction with status/pay and/or unspecified other criteria. Ironically given the prominence of notions of sequence and time in career, most research on career success (and careers in general) is not longitudinal, so what are often referred to as predictors of success would be better described as correlates. More sophisticated and differentiated operationalisations of career success are needed, such as that offered by Dries, Pepermans and Carlier (2008). This includes additional criteria that many people appear to value, such as (for example) being creative, making a meaningful contribution, and job security. Work of this kind is especially important if we are taking seriously the general point in the Protean and Boundaryless career literature that people need to, and often do, define their own personal criteria of career success.

The career success literature is also crying out for a stronger and more generally applicable theoretical framework in which to interpret the many potential predictors. Without it much research begs as many questions as it answers. A favourite of mine is an article by Judge, Cable, Boudreau and Bretz (1995) who calculated the cash value of various predictors of the salaries of a sample of American managers. They found that being a graduate of a top US university was worth an impressive $31,000 and having a non-working spouse $22,000 (predictors were not cumulative!). Working one evening a week over and above normal work hours was worth a more modest $4,000. Of course, the question in each case is, why? I find that the generation of possible explanations and ideas for how to test them is a helpful route for students into the topic of career success.

The possible explanations revolve around what is usually called career capital. This refers to people's accumulations of assets that can help them to be successful. These include not only personal attributes but also social contacts and relationships, and their significance depends on how an individual deploys them and how other people evaluate and prioritise them. Recently, the notion of capital has been developed further by Forrier, Sels and Stynen (2009) who refer to movement capital and locate it both in personal attributes and social structures. Given that moves between jobs are often undertaken as a means of achieving more career success, it seems helpful to examine predictors and outcomes of such moves. One much-studied arena in this respect is corporate expatriation, where much research has focused on who is selected for international moves, who accepts them, what happens upon return, and the ways in which expats (and their employing organisations) gain and/or lose career capital and future prospects (Harvey & Moeller, 2009). These moves do not always live up to the "it will be good for your cv" sales pitch. Regarding moves between employers, recent work by Hamori and Kakarika (2009) suggests, perhaps surprisingly, that on both sides of the Atlantic sticking with one or a small number of employers is better than frequent moves for making it to the top. Note again how easily the researchers construe careers in the narrow sense of hierarchical advancement.

Social aspects of careers

For many years there has been something of an obsession amongst both researchers and practitioners with the role that mentoring can play in careers, primarily for the person being mentored, but also on occasions for the mentor. Enthusiasm has frequently outstripped empirical evidence, but meta-analysis does suggest that receiving mentoring does have (typically modest) career benefits for the mentee (Allen *et al.*, 2004). Building on this, there has been increasing interest in so-called "developmental networks" which reflect the entire array of relationships that can contribute to a person's career development. However, the impact of these networks has not yet been examined thoroughly even though here again there is a tendency to assume that developmental networks must be a good thing.

The role of social networks in career success is a topic of longstanding interest, but again somewhat limited rigorous research. There are some interesting questions regarding the ways in which network features such as structural holes and weak vs strong ties might affect career success. Some of the theorising here is quite sophisticated (e.g. Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001), but at the same time the majority of empirical research is cross-sectional. This is also true of careers research in general, and is a serious limitation given the centrality of sequence and time in definitions of career. In a simultaneously refreshing and chilling piece of research, Harris and Ogbonna (2006) have exposed the dark side of careers by eliciting the "surreptitious career strategies" that staff in two organisations reported using. Most of these were social in nature and included creating a sense of obligation in the boss by doing him/her a favour, and subtly undermining rivals in conversation with influential others.

In a more wholesome vein, in recent years research has begun to examine what it is about relationships and interactions at work that make them helpful for career development (e.g. Kidd, Hirsh & Jackson, 2004; Bosley, Arnold & Cohen, 2009). This reflects a welcome expansion of career thinking from intrapersonal to interpersonal. It also alerts us to the potentially crucial nature of relationships in careers, as well as (more broadly) the social construction that goes into our understanding of our own career and the careers of others. Along with large-scale cross-cultural longitudinal studies of how careers unfold, these are much-needed developments if careers research is to fulfil its potential.

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