

Promoting career studies in theory and practice

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The purpose of this paper is to anticipate and help promote a growing conversation around the field of career studies. It is a conversation relevant to both scholars and practitioners, to social scientists of various disciplines, and to regional and global employment arrangements. We will briefly review the field of career studies, show how it complements ideas on ‘vocational guidance’, examine the emergence of the global knowledge-driven economy, and highlight the existence of separate – rather than shared - conversations among careers scholars. We will close with an appeal to promote and sustain future interdisciplinary conversation, as well as greater interaction between the arenas of theory and practice.

The meaning of ‘career’

Let’s begin with the term career. Take a moment to look at the five definitions provided in Table 1. What do you notice about them, and about the differences among them? The first and second definitions are both from the Oxford English Dictionary, and emphasise advancement on other people’s terms either in society at large or in a particular profession. The third definition is from a collection of invited chapters on ‘Career Choice and Development’ (Brown and Brooks, 1996) based on the work of Frank Parsons (1909), the originator of vocational guidance in the United States. The fourth definition is one of several definitions used by Donald Super (1996) who was influential on both sides of the Atlantic. The fifth and shortest definition is that most commonly used in the field of career studies.

Why adopt the fifth definition? In contrast to the first two definitions, it avoids any reference to the attainment of status in a career. It allows us to study status, but it does not oblige us to do so. In contrast to the third definition, it does not limit us to issues surrounding vocational or job choice, and also insists that we consider the passage of time. In contrast to the fourth definition, it makes a clear distinction between work roles and the (typically) larger set of life roles that people take on. However, in common with the fourth definition, it offers a broad invitation for social scientists from different specialisations – psychology, social psychology, sociology, organisational studies, economics, political science and so on – to join our inquiries.

A further distinction between the last two definitions is that only the fifth definition adds to our lexicon. If we were to give up on seeing careers as sequences of *work* experiences, we would be missing a term that directed us to the significance of those sequences - in learning new things, developing new skills, building new relationships, being introduced to new opportunities, and so on. Yet, these phenomena seem essential to what we would like to discuss. Let us settle, as others have done (e.g. Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989; Gunz and Peiperl, 2007; Inkson, 2007), on the definition of career as ‘the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time’. In turn, let us define the field of career studies as the body of work that illuminates our understanding of careers.

Career studies

How, though, has the field of career studies come about? Early work on vocational guidance by Parsons (1909) and various European pioneers provides one point of departure. A second point of departure stems from work initiated at the University of Chicago, now known as ‘Chicago School of Sociology’. A principal contributor to this school was Everett Hughes (1937, 1958), who used a definition of

TABLE 1: Some Alternative Definitions of “Career”

A person’s course or progress through life esp. when publicly conspicuous, or abounding in remarkable incidents.
A course of professional life or employment, which affords opportunity for progress or advancement in the world.
The consequence of “vocational choice” – understanding the self, the requirements for success, and reasoning between these.
The sequence and combination of roles that a person plays during the course of a lifetime.
The evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time.

career similar to the one above but added some relevant clarifications. One was that the career had both a subjective side (concerned with how an individual saw his or her own career) and an objective side (concerned with how others saw that career). Also, these two sides were interdependent with one another; how we see ourselves affects how society sees us, and vice versa. Hughes and his colleagues also stressed the relevance of individual *identities* and social *roles* in mediating between the subjective and objective sides, and in turn encouraged the examination of both career processes and career transitions. Their work foreshadowed, for example, that of later efforts by US social psychologist Karl Weick (1996) and UK sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) to paint a more dynamic picture of how careers unfold.

Let us move to the 1970s, and an initiative taken by scholars at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) – most prominently Lotte Bailyn, Edgar Schein and John Van Maanen. In looking back on scholarship since Hughes' earlier work, Van Maanen and Schein (1977, p. 44) observed that there remained a 'curious hiatus' between psychological approaches ('People make careers!') and sociological ones ('Careers make people!'). The MIT group wanted rapprochement and greater interdisciplinary conversation. Witness, for example, this definition of career development:

[A] lifelong process of working out a synthesis between individual interests and the opportunities (or limitations) present in the external work-related environment, so that both individual and environmental objectives are fulfilled.

Van Maanen and Schein, 1977, p.36

Like our adopted definition of career, the above definition is open to examining a wide range of phenomena from a variety of different disciplinary perspectives. Not only does it accommodate organisational careers, occupational careers, careers in public service, careers in industry clusters (like that of the so-called 'Silicon Ditch' in the Thames Valley) but it can also serve for us to examine more recent ideas about career-relevant networks, knowledge-based careers, Web-enabled careers, and so on.

Unfortunately, this carefully crafted definition was never widely adopted, and an opportunity to promote greater interdisciplinary collaboration was lost. Soon, Schein (1978) was focusing solely on organisational careers and using career development to mean 'the interaction of the individual and the organisation over time'. Some psychologically-grounded writers (like Brown and Brooks, cited above), began to re-label vocational choice as career choice, and in turn to describe career development as a series of choices. The rapprochement that the MIT group sought never caught on.

One thing that the MIT initiative did trigger was a growth in Management and Business School scholarship. By 1984, a separate 'Careers Division' of the Academy of Management had been established charged to examine

career-relevant phenomena and quickly began to assert itself. In particular, three successive anthologies can be noted. First, the *Handbook of Career Theory* (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989) offered nine chapters on 'current approaches' – one of which was on 'trait-factor theories' – and eleven more chapters on 'new ideas'. This placed vocational guidance thinking, represented by the trait factor theory chapter, as one of twenty alternative approaches through which careers could be examined. Second, *The Boundaryless Career* (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) pointed out that careers could be studied in wider contexts than the single organisation (or for that matter the single occupation), again broadening the range of approaches that could be taken. Most recently, the *Handbook of Career Studies* (Gunz and Peiperl, 2007) is organised to bring expanded treatments of the contexts and institutions relevant to careers, and to offer a closing section on 'synthesis' across the range of treatments on offer. Each anthology in turn seeks to further broaden our understanding of relationships between careers and the circumstances in which those careers unfold.

Two continuing traditions

While the above developments have been unfolding, scholars in the vocational guidance tradition have not been idle. The outcome, at this time of writing, is that the great majority of scholarship on careers still comes from two separate traditions. One is practised largely (but not exclusively) in Schools of Education and the other largely in Schools of Management. As shown in Figure 1, one tradition has focused on occupations and the other on organisations (although both traditions now see that their focus can be on multiple organisations or occupations respectively). Writers across both traditions have become mindful of the rapidly changing economy in which contemporary careers unfold. However, to this day there has been relatively little conversation between the separate sets of writers.

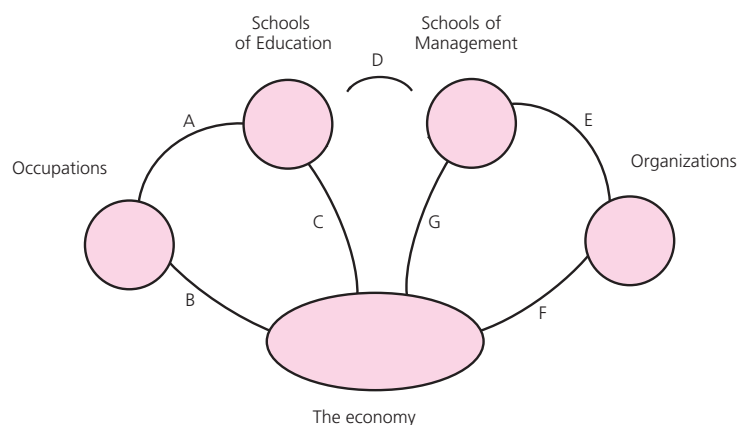


Figure 1: Two Traditions in Examining Careers (Arthur, 2008)

Can a conversation about 'career studies' help us build bridges between these separate traditions? Two situational factors offer some encouragement. One, as mentioned above, is an apparent level of agreement about the

dynamic nature of (and at this time of writing recession in) the host economy. The second factor is that Schools of Education and Management are 'professional' schools, each more concerned with the direct application of scholarship than they are with the separation of academic disciplines. There seems little reason why such schools would not be open to wider interdisciplinary conversations. Having established such conversations, it may also be possible to get our social science cousins – from, for example, departments of economics, political science, psychology and sociology – to join in. Let us look further at each of these factors.

The global knowledge economy

Around twenty years ago, I was asked to visit the University of Warwick to join a study of international human resource management practices. I came to realise most people's careers were far more mobile than I had previously assumed. For example, the Japanese 'salaryman' popularised by business writers was much more the exception than the rule. Most Japanese employment was in small- to medium-sized firms, and the average employment period in any one firm – as in most so-called 'developed' countries – was less than ten years. 'Outsourcing' and 're-engineering' were changing the employment landscape and driving related growth in inter-firm networks. Strategic management guru Michael Porter (1990) was just finishing his opus on 'The Competitive Advantage of Nations'. His primary lesson reinforced economic geographers' views that our focus needed to shift to regional clusters of firms – like Silicon Ditch – rather than stay on struggling large firms like IBM.

IBM has since recovered, and a few small firms in places like Silicon Ditch and its counterparts around the world have become large firms. Yet many of the lessons from the early 1990s persist. The progression from small entrepreneurial firm to global leader (witness Google) can be faster in present times than ever before. Opportunities for collaboration through the World Wide Web – for individuals, communities, organisations, even terrorists – are greater than ever. What have we learned in the past twenty years?

It seems we have learned a great deal. For example, we know much more about knowledge based careers, how those careers unfold and how they can contribute to wider economic outcomes (like for example, Proctor and Gamble relying heavily on outside knowledge workers in its commitment to 'open innovation') (DeFillippi *et al.*, 2006). We know more about virtual careers that contribute, for example, to the open source software movement and products such as the Linux operating system (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). We know more about how people self-organise into 'career communities', across both physical and virtual space (Parker *et al.*, 2004). We have taken on and hopefully laid to rest old assumptions that further identity development is unlikely after adulthood (Ibarra and

Deshpande, 2007). We better understand the usefulness of social capital, both for finding other people's support (bonding) or making fresh connections (bridging) (Burt, 2005). Also, we are starting to see the set of communications and managerial skills that underlie what might be termed 'global careers' (Makela and Suutari, 2009). There is reason for careers scholars to take pride in this learning, at the same time as we realise how much we still have to learn.

A further point is that careers scholarship is open to criticism for being too willing to give up on the hard-earned gains of the twentieth century – lifetime employment, secure pensions, and increasing wages – that we began to see as entitlements. There is no simple answer to these criticisms, and it's hard to oppose the social goals that brought those gains about. However, it also behoves us to be aware of the new opportunities that the contemporary economy provides. If we don't have our fingers on the pulse of that economy, it's hard to imagine us being effective.

Building an interdisciplinary perspective

Let us return to the earlier suggestion of playing with alternative ideas and try a brief thought experiment. Suspend further reading for a moment, and imagine or reflect on a recent conversation you have had with a contemporary worker about his or her career. A typical story is likely to include such things as chance encounters, significant relationships, unfolding networks, economic circumstances, social background, educational and on-the-job learning activities, political influences, organisation culture, managerial decisions, and more. Now imagine what kind of expertise you would like to draw on to help that person develop his or her career. Our thought experiment can quickly lead to the conclusion that we need all the insights we can gather, and that no single academic discipline has a monopoly of relevant ideas. Rather, a spirit of *inter*-disciplinary inquiry is urgent if we are to deliver better value to present and future workers, and to the economy that they seek to serve.

Recently, a group of us have been working with ideas about 'intelligent' careers, intended to help us focus on careers in the emerging knowledge economy. The intelligent career approach suggests that three concurrent questions underlie our careers: 'Why do we work?' 'How do we work?' and 'With whom do we work?' Those questions can be represented by three 'ways of knowing', namely: knowing-*why* (reflecting our motivations, identities and interests); knowing-*how* (reflecting our skills and knowledge); and knowing-*whom* (reflecting our relationships and reputation). Moreover, the three ways of knowing are interdependent, for example a person can be motivated to pursue further education (knowing-*why*), leading to the development of new skills (knowing-*how*) and further connections with other people (knowing-*whom*). Those connections can in turn reinforce or

challenge subsequent motivations to work (knowing-why), or influence further skill development (knowing-how) and so on (DeFillippi, Arthur, and Lindsay, 2006; Eby *et al.*, 2003). The model offers a way to try to track some of those stories about contemporary workers' careers.

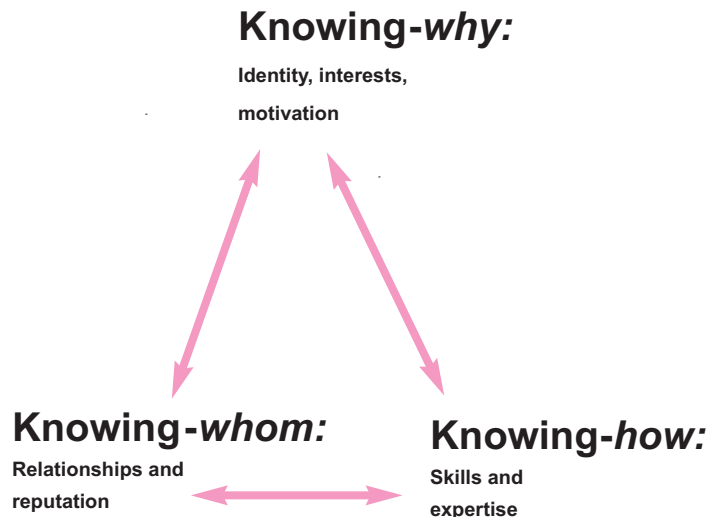


Figure 2: The Intelligent Career Framework

However, if you use the framework to examine the career-relevant contributions of other scholars, the links among the three ways of knowing suggests different insights. Take, for example, the connections between knowing-why and knowing-how. One conversation is among vocational guidance scholars whose approach, after Parsons (1909) and others, draws on a branch of psychology concerned with individual differences and their consequences. This conversation is interested in the effect of knowing-why on knowing-how. In contrast, another conversation takes place among proponents of effective job design, who draw on a different branch of psychology, humanistic psychology (e.g. Maslow, 1954) to suggest that a consistent approach to job design can have widespread motivational consequences. This conversation is interested in the effect of knowing-how on knowing-why.

We can go on: leadership theory is interested in the link from a leader's skills (knowing-how) to his or her followers (knowing-whom); in contrast, socio-technical systems thinkers are concerned with the way group characteristics (knowing-whom) can influence overall job performance (knowing-how). Traditional sociology is interested in the effects of social reference groups (knowing-whom) on individual identities (knowing-why): psychological ideas about affiliation suggest that our personalities (knowing-why) influence the friendships (knowing-whom) that we form. These and other examples suggest a large number of scholars participate in conversations about one of the six separate links identified by the intelligent career framework, while neglecting the other five (Parker, Khapova and Arthur, in press). In doing so, they leave it to

the individual – or the career counsellor who works with that individual – to try to sort out the overall lessons careers scholarship provides.

One more point here is that the research methodologies largely used in each of the six conversations also contribute to the problem. Most research involves linear modelling, which assumes that relationships among variables don't change. Most research is also cross-sectional, thereby neglecting the dimension of time across which we might be able to gain greater insights. Then there's a question about competition among academic schools of thought - but let's not get into that here!

What future for career studies?

What does the above mean for the future of career studies? Let's reaffirm the bad news. It's tough to keep in touch with the global, knowledge-driven economy in which we participate. It's also tough to watch people struggle, and to determine which of the gains from a previous economic era are still worth having. Most research relating to careers has been pursued through separate conversations. Relatively few scholars have sought to bring those separate conversations together to seek better answers to the challenges contemporary careers present. As a result, the career actor and his or her career counsellor have been left largely to sort things out on their own.

The good news, though, is that we have now come together. The organisers of the September, 2009, Symposium on Career Studies at the University of Reading have done a remarkable job of inviting speakers with a shared passion for improving the status-quo. They have also brought together a healthy mixture of career theorists and practitioners to help build a shared conversation. Let us therefore celebrate the opportunity to begin that conversation - and pledge to keep it going!

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