

The new career studies: metaphor in theory and teaching

Kerr Inkson

There is bad news: vast gaps of non-communication currently separate discipline-based approaches to theory, research and study in careers (Arthur, 2008; Collin & Patton, 2009).

There is good news: new initiatives are being taken to begin to unite different disciplinary approaches to careers under the single banner of 'career studies' (Gunz & Peiperl, 2007; University of Reading, 2009). Such integration is sorely needed. And metaphor provides a means.

Career metaphors

We think and talk about careers in terms of *metaphors*. In theory and research in career theories, and in everyday discourse about careers, metaphorical language abounds, for example 'career ladder', 'square peg in a round hole', 'story of my life' (Inkson, 2007).

Metaphors provide opportunities for new insights. In *Images of Organization* Gareth Morgan (1986) analysed organisations through the lens of a series of archetypal metaphors – the organisation as a machine, as an organism, as a brain, etc. In the multiple metaphor method applied to careers (Inkson, 2004, 2007), careers are consecutively and then integratively represented as different metaphors, and note is taken of the ways in which careers correspond, and do not correspond, to the metaphor. Each metaphor acts as a fresh lens on careers, through which one can see things that are not apparent using other lenses. Thus, different theories and research traditions each utilise different underlying metaphors. None of them is wrong, but none of them is the whole truth. Metaphor thus provides an opportunity to develop a broadened understanding of the multifaceted nature of careers, and a wider and more functional curriculum for career studies.

Consider the following instances of contrasted career metaphor.

- A significant tradition in career studies – and the oldest one (Parsons, 1909) – is to consider careers from the practical perspective of finding a good *fit* between individual and occupation (Holland, 1985). The fit metaphor provides a pragmatic basis for much practice in vocational counselling.
- The growing social consciousness of the last fifty years, particularly the rise of feminism, has drawn attention to influence that societal institutions such as class, gender, race, and education impose on careers (Johnson &

Mortimer, 2002): the metaphor of *inheritance* illustrates the inescapable lot of individuals as they commence their careers.

- Another potent metaphor is that of the *cycle*. The concept of an adult life cycle is central to Super's (1990) career development theory, while the metaphor of the changing seasons (Levinson *et al.*, 1978) portrays the changing human energies that individuals devote to their careers as they and it develop and change.
- In the growing field known as 'human resource management' careers are considered as *resources*: accumulated parcels of expertise which can be effectively utilised either by individuals seeking to impose themselves on the world of work (Inkson & Arthur, 2001), or as sources of competitive advantage for organisations (Boxall & Purcell, 2008).
- A potent metaphor is that of the *role*, with its imagery of the perpetual struggle between personal identity and externally-imposed purpose. For example, in one study of contemporary careers, individuals eschewed organisational 'scripts' for their careers and imposed themselves improvisationally and to good effect on the unpromising ground of their employment (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999).
- The most common metaphor of all is that of the career as a *journey*. Much contemporary career theory seeks to determine the parameters of career journeys, for example, predetermined trips along marked routes according to public timetables; or 'boundaryless' career journeys that cross easily between organisations, occupations, geographical locations and other social spaces (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). The metaphor of a 'landscape with travellers' (Inkson & Elkin, 2008) encourages the consideration of career travellers in interaction with a changing economic, social, occupational, organisational, etc. landscape, as representing a properly integrated career studies.

Career studies, metaphor and education

How can metaphor contribute to career studies? To answer this question, we first need to consider why the idea of career studies is important.

For many years, academics interested in careers have used their limited views of careers to serve limited interest groups (Collin & Patton, 2009). The career development movement (e.g. Brown & Associates, 2002) has served the counselling and guidance profession, whose clientele is mainly young people with immediate choice decisions to make. Vocational psychology tends to focus on internal psychological factors such as individual differences,

life-span development and decision-making, particularly in young people, and to pay relatively little attention to the complexities that the environment imposes on careers, and the ways in which careers develop over time. Organisational scholars (e.g. Schein, 1978) have focused on the management functions of organisations and have failed to utilise adequately the insights of vocational psychology. Sociologists have operated at a distance, seeing careers as trivial by-products of wider systems and serving perhaps policy analysts and activists for change (Johnson & Mortimer, 2002). In all this, I believe *career actors* have been poorly and indirectly served. But if we all can come together, in theorising, in research, in education and in practice, to make *Career Studies* properly interdisciplinary (Arthur, 2008), we can potentially provide a vital background to individuals striving to develop their careers and to those who assist them.

I believe career studies has a vital role to play in the curriculum, particularly the tertiary curriculum. If we accept Michael Arthur's definition of career as 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence., 1989, p.8), then it is apparent that everyone in today's society has a career. Further, the career ranks along with family life and in some cases religious experience as one of the most important components in most lives, as well as a wellspring of both the psychological and the economic well-being of our society. So, what arrangements do we have to educate our citizens in the forces that govern this critical facet of their lives? The answer, in most cases, is none.

For example, I have spent much of my life teaching management in business schools. From time to time I wonder about the wisdom of teaching management as a required course to 18-year-old undergraduates who are unlikely for some years to have anything to manage. Yet we plough on: we not only teach them general management, we also teach them financial management, marketing management, operations management, services management, event management, and of course human resource management. We do not teach them self-management, and we do not teach them career management. We thereby offer guidance to students on how to manage others' lives before they have learned to manage their own.

If I had my way I would put 'self-management' and 'career studies' somewhere near the centre of every academic curriculum in business schools, and make this available to students from all other disciplines. A possible Career Studies curriculum including psychological, organisational and societal influences on career is shown in Figure 1

Figure 1: Elements in a career studies syllabus

The context of careers
Economic, labour market, technological, institutional, social etc.
Career landscapes and boundaries, e.g. professional, organisational, industry, geographical, psychological, gender etc.
Work-non-work interface and balance
Contemporary and future forces affecting careers; future opportunity structures
Adult development and life-cycle
Psychology of individual differences
Abilities, aptitudes, personality, interests etc.
Relationship to work roles and occupations
Career planning and decision making
Role and identity; work-role transitions
Career structures and types: occupational, organisational, boundaryless etc.
Career success – objective and subjective
Careers and organisations, including HRM
Careers and networks
Career discourse and narrative
Career practice – planning, improvisation and action

This template can be accomplished through the use of key metaphoric themes. The career studies course I teach in New Zealand focuses on the landscape of environmental factors affecting careers as well as the personal dynamics of the traveller, and makes use of nine key career metaphors, career as inheritances, as cycles, as action, as fit, as journeys, as roles, as relationships, as resources and as stories. Each enables fresh theoretical perspectives to be introduced and each, I believe, adds fresh insight to the student's understanding of how careers work (Inkson, 2007). See how many of the above metaphors – plus 'landscape' – you can fit to the curriculum in Figure 1.

Some teachers make the student's own career central to learning about careers. Reardon *et al.* (2006) offer a template for an undergraduate programme that grounds students in the essentials of career decision making and the landscape of environmental conditions affecting career development, and then uses 'analyse myself' exercises to enable each one to develop his or her strategic plan for early career. Further insights can be gained by encouraging students to apply metaphoric frames to their own career aspirations and expectations (Inkson, 2007). But students' careers, particularly those of young undergraduates, may be quite limited, and may not enable them to envisage realistically the manner in which careers unfold over time and the myriad influences that may bear on them. Analogous to the use of business cases in management

studies, my own course (like my book) makes extensive use of career case studies, which the students may analyse from a range of different metaphorical or disciplinary perspectives.

An exercise I have found of enormous value is getting each student to interview one of their parents or another senior family member, to write that person's career up as a case study, and analyse it based on whatever metaphors/theories seem appropriate. In many cases this exercise results in intense learning because of the way it enables students to reflect on the effects of the passage of both personal and societal time, and to fit the fragments and themes of developing careers into their experience of the non-work lives of someone they have known intimately since childhood.

The most difficult problem I have faced in developing such courses is the inherent conservatism of students. Even when I've cleared academic barriers to enable arts and science students to include career studies in their programmes, they have been unwilling to take any course situated in the business school. Here, the challenge is for faculty members from different disciplines interested in career studies to work collaboratively to offer joint courses, and/or to encourage students to think more laterally. Here again, the idea of metaphor offers additional engagement of the student's curiosity.

Let us all hope career studies is truly on its way. Let's start talking to each other – and, more important, listening to each other, and working together, in every sphere: theory, research, pedagogy, and practice. Here's to metaphor and the new, creative possibilities that it brings. And here's to our new, interdisciplinary, discipline: career studies.

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For correspondence

Kerr Inkson
Adjunct Professor, Strategy & Human Resource
Management
University of Waikato, New Zealand
kinkson@mngt.waikato.ac.nz