Embracing occupational history: a doctoral research study investigating the career aspirations of older workers

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An overview
What are the career aspirations of older professional workers in business advisory services? How does their career history influence their aspirations as they navigate toward retirement? These are the principal questions underlying the doctoral research programme showcased in this article. In contemporary society the concept of retirement is being challenged as the population ages and the government review their social strategies. ‘Traditional’ career pathways of older professional workers reflected an ascendant career which embraced their expertise and service, but now, with continuing organisational turbulence, some face a changing environment where their career path looks less certain. This article illustrates some of the main issues facing a new doctoral researcher; it is written at the beginning of the second year of research and addresses some critical questions that a new researcher needs to consider when they set out on their research journey. This reflective article takes Rudyard Kipling’s (1902) ‘six honest serving-men (sic)’ as its framework:

I KEEP six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

In the early months of this research programme, the author spent many hours questioning the purpose and aims of his research and, following periods of reflective questioning, realised that the clarity of the research programme emerges from an iterative cycle of continual enquiry, discussion with others, writing and re/interpretation to identify and make sense of the research purpose.

WHAT is the purpose? Locating research focus
The focus of this research is the career experience of older professional workers who are in the later stages of their employment; specifically accountants, lawyers and management consultants. It seeks to address the question of what their aspirations are, pending their transition toward occupational disengagement, commonly known as ‘retirement’; a contested notion in contemporary social thinking. I decided that I would research older workers in the age range 50 to 65 as this represents the period within occupational existence when a person is starting to think about workplace disengagement. This age range locates the commencement of a life-stage, often known as the third-age, defined by Ford as ‘starting at 45+, because 45 is now the approximate point at which age can begin to present both men and women with significant (and for many, acute) problems in securing suitable employment’ (1996: 1).

This life-stage is a period when the professional worker is caught between the ascendancy of the first half of their occupational progression and their potential descendancy or future slowdown; some organisations, perhaps unintentionally, discriminate against their older workers by minimising or downgrading their occupational experience. Ainsworth notes that, “ageism directed against the old is hostility towards a future self, not a clearly differentiated ‘other’” (2006: 316). The challenge for older workers is how to continue their career journey without losing their occupational inheritance; one of my principal propositions is that ‘all third-age professional workers can utilise their occupational history to give direction to their future’ (King, 2010: 2).

In figure 1, I have illustrated my primary research foci – memory extraction, analysis and interpretation of occupational narrative. Cochran argues that, by recollecting occupational experiences, one can illuminate the future by disentangling the past:
The basic function of a representation of the future is to create a meaningful narrative of the future that a person can live out. A decision situation is one in which the future is in doubt. One’s path has become entangled, and the way is no longer clear. The task of the decider is to pierce through the tangled present to envision a path ahead... either way, piercing through the tangled present is a matter of straightening out a future narrative’ (1997: 9).

This observation suggests that older workers can determine futurity, that is their future state of occupational anticipation, by untangling their past trajectory. They often project themselves through a web constructed from their perception of self and characteristics assumed from their institutional allegiance; this cloak of professional identity is a mantle which reflects how the individual perceives them self, described by Giddens as ‘reflective understanding’ in the following citation, ‘self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by an individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography’ (author’s italics, 1991: 53). This first question then – What is the purpose? – suggests that researchers locate a clear focus for their research by finding their research boundaries in terms of both subject and population.

**WHY is it important? Identifying research context**

There is limited value to be gained from research conducted in a conceptual vacuum – political, economic and social (PES) determinants have contributed to the emergence of this research. A major driver is globalisation which is positioned by Beck in terms of ‘... a number of dimensions... of communications technology, ecology, economics, work organization, culture and civil society (author’s italics, 2000: 19). At the heart is the economic challenge, highlighted by the financial downturn (late 2008) which required governments worldwide to support their ailing economies – Cable describes “this conjuncture of extreme events and an increasingly hostile political environment... as a ‘perfect storm’” (2009: 8). This research context, business advisory services, now operates in a world defined and regulated within a global architecture, a phenomenon which increases an organisation’s capability to operate transnationally. Through knowledge distribution and economic realignment, professional environments have continually changed, requiring professionals to refocus their expertise.

In Britain, the notion of retirement emerged out of the social agenda of the early 1900s; until then, people generally worked until they were no longer able to, or ceased as a consequence of health problems or death. In contemporary society a state pension is paid to men at 65 and women at 60, although this is changing under current pension reforms. However, because of changing demographics (an ageing society) and economic conditions...
(increasing national debt), the government is re-examining state pensions. In addition to the PES considerations, older workers may face obligations, for example family, financial and health issues, which mean that they need to re-orientate their occupational engagement to reflect the demands these obligations place on them.

Vickerstaff et al. (2008) note that ‘a small number of respondents were not looking forward to retirement; however, the great majority articulated strong cultural assumptions about retirement as a deserved right and presented a common vision of what retirement should ideally entail: a period of freedom and choice’ (page 85); it seems that, for many, retirement is anticipated with enthusiasm. As Feldman (1994) notes, retirement is not so much a matter of reaching an age prescribed by government, but ‘withdrawal from an organisational position or career path of considerable duration, taken by individuals after middle age, and taken with the intention of reduced psychological commitment to work hereafter’ (cited in van der Heijden et al., 2008: 90). The ages at which people disengage from the workplace are often opportunistic, based on personal circumstances, rather than government directive; most older professional workers now have greater choice when determining their occupational destiny. The question posed in this second section seeks to encourage researchers to identify the context of their research.

WHEN will it help? Exploring research data

As older professional workers consider their career future, it will help to reflect on their occupational history, that is experience of their past career trajectory, but where can this experience be found? Thompson (1988) describes memory as a warehouse or ‘a potential quarry… a natural repository from which to extract ‘boulders’ of life experience’ (cited in West, 1996: 13). This metaphor suggests that all workers have a natural source from which they recall their memories, which Conway describes as the ‘autobiographical memory’ (2001: 1375); this is the main depository which stores one’s occupational memories and associated experiences.

I have illustrated the constituent elements of the autobiographic memory system in figure 2. This shows the different zones of the autobiographical memory as ‘long term’ and ‘working’ memory containing episodic memory and knowledge respectively. Conway (2001: 1375) suggests that the autobiographic memory contains:

- episodic memory EM which ‘represents the experienced self… and retains access to associated episodic memories’, that is long term multiple memories that an individual holds about episodes – distinctive periods or phases of their past experience,
- episodic knowledge EK that is ‘recent experience… yet to be integrated with the autobiographical memory… the immediate past of the experiencing self’ and that this ‘recollective experience... is induced by images, feelings and other memory details that come to mind during remembering’, that is present experience recently acquired.

When recalling occupational experience, the professional worker can extract occupational memories by ‘consulting’ their autobiographic memory, the principal depository within which is stored a wealth of occupational experience and associated memories. This autobiographic knowledge,
when reconstructed as an occupational narrative, offers a rich account of a professional’s career experience. In this third section, I have suggested that researchers understand when their main research data source should be valued.

HOW does it work? Valuing research methodology

Moving on, how does the researcher initiate a process enabling older workers to retrieve their occupational memories? In this research I used ‘auto/biographical interviewing’ to enable professional practitioners to recall their occupational narratives. Crites describes this as a process for ‘consulting our memory’ (1971: 299), and, reflecting on the deliberations of Augustine of Hippo, he notes that ‘this chronicle does not need to be recollected strictly, but merely to be recalled: I need only call up again the succession of images which stand waiting in memory in the order in which I experienced them’ (Crites, 1971: 299). In addition to adopting a narrative methodology, I encouraged participants to plot their occupational history noting the ‘high and low points’ in their career trajectory – Cochran describes this technique as ‘the life line’ (1997: 74). By reflecting on this visual recollection, the participant sees a graphical representation of their career trajectory – this takes a unique form depending on the individual’s career emergence. I also asked participants to isolate their career episodes, which are distinctive periods of their occupational experience.

Riessman suggests a simple definition of personal narrative as ‘talk organized around consequential events’ (1993: 3) and Law et al. (2002) explain that ‘narratives are structured by episodes, putting events into significantly linked passages, presenting turning points, where problems must be solved or dilemmas resolved’ (page 435). Narrative is a tool for enabling a reflexive conversation with oneself about past experience, and for analysing and interpreting the ‘text’ to derive meaning. Creating an occupational story is an approach to reflexively understanding occupational self through a process involving recollection and interpretation of the story told. This fourth question – How does it work? – positions the importance of clarifying research methodology.

WHERE will it lead? Determining research outputs

One research aim is to find out whether third-age professional workers will be able to use their occupational story to determine their future career direction. My principal objective is to capture a story which creates a representation of self; Morris (1994) emphasises that ‘the self is not an entity but a process that orchestrates an individual’s personal experience as a result of which he or she becomes self-aware and self-reflective about her or his place in the surrounding world’ (cited in van Meijl and Driessen, 2003: 20) – an outcome of this social construction is the meaning that it conveys to the story teller. Occupational identity is the mantle assumed by an individual, reflecting both personal and professional characteristics and traits.

The coherence of an occupational narrative reflects its authenticity, but Bruner, citing Bartlett (1932) cautions that ‘the past is a reconstruction rather than a recovery... the secret of history is forever lost’ (1983: 5). This underlines the relativity of our occupational existence in that ‘we are never the complete author of our destiny for our career narratives are a co-construction within the context of our social reality’ (King, 2007: 42). Thus, we can never expect to accurately recover our past experiences, they are merely a present construction – a fragment of our former trajectory. The question reviewed in this section recommends that researchers consider where there research may lead in terms of anticipated outcomes.

WHO is the author? Placing research authorship

Etherington suggests that readers should be ‘informed about the position we adopt in relation to the study and by our explicit questioning of our own involvement’ (2004: 32); she argues for ‘authorial participation’ in the research process, contending that, if the author’s role in the research is identified then the reader is more likely to understand the research environment. Following early supervision, I was challenged to identify my position in this research as it had been instrumental in determining my research purpose, process and population; having initially omitted to place ‘self’ in this research, I resolved to do so.

Over thirty-five years, I worked as an organisational development consultant in various business consulting firms where I delivered a range of organisational learning and development interventions, travelling throughout the UK, Europe and North America. For most of this period, I realised a satisfying occupational experience as my career emerged in an ordered and ascendant manner from trainee through to director/head of learning. I had strived to achieve high organisational position, which, in the late 20th century, was often seen as a principal driver for career success, but, as a result of organisational turbulence, I disengaged from the workplace and, at this time, reflected on the writing of Francis Bacon who observed that ‘the rising unto place is laborious... the standing is slippery, and the regress is either a downfall, or at least an eclipse...' (1960: 44). My occupational journey had taken a detour, but I found a way back through academic endeavour which led to participation in the doctoral research outlined.

This has opened a new academic pathway which includes reading, research, writing and teaching undergraduates and postgraduates. It also links to my earlier commercial existence creating occupational coherence – I have discovered the term ‘portfolio educator’ described by
Fenwick as ‘a term adopted to represent people engaged in adult education activities, who create portfolios of self-employed work arrangements to contract their skills in a variety of contexts’ (2003: 165). This last section has centred on the importance of placing self in the research, that is confirming authorial participation within the research process.

Summary

In this article, I have showcased a doctoral research study which investigates older professional workers, their occupational transition and the linking concept of ‘retirement’. In addition to describing my research, I have framed some of the principal questions that a new doctoral researcher might consider when starting their research. Rudyard Kipling’s (1902) ‘six honest serving-men’ have provided a framework on which to hang my reflections and, for the new researcher, their contemplations when determining their research direction. The author trusts that potential doctoral researchers will find answers through the illuminations offered in this article.

References


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