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DESTINY, DRAMA, AND DELIBERATION

Careers in the Coevolution of Lives and Societies

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The richness of the career field is astonishing, as this volume testifies. Indeed, many contributors point out that there is much more out there that we could be writing about and researching. Casting one's mind back a few decades to the first collected volumes of writings on careers, one is struck by the contrast—then the field was dominated by a few quite distinctive approaches yet with a strong sense of future possibilities. Well, the future arrived, and how much better off are we? Is the field richer or just denser? Where are the big ideas, or is that an immature longing in a field where a thousand flowers are already blooming?

COROLLARIES OF THE CONCEPT OF CAREER

If there is a problem, it lies in the seductions of the concept and its inherent difficulties. Candace Jones and Mary B. Dunn (Chapter 22) remind us of the brave new dawn being hailed by Barley decades ago for its excitement and promise to be at "the vanguard of organization studies" by linking persons and institutions. I have argued similarly that the career concept provides a unique and dynamic link between identities and social structure (Nicholson, 2000; Nicholson & West, 1989). Jones and Dunn do not directly answer the obvious question about whether Barley's prophesy has been fulfilled, but arguably, it has not. Yet the careers field is a cornucopia for sure. The nexus that Jones and Dunn discuss has certainly been a source of the field's fertility and dynamism. It is an intersection that is constantly changing, as social structures evolve, forcing individuals to find new pathways. However, this also makes the notion of career quite hard to keep in focus, and when one looks at the work represented here and elsewhere, one can detect several consequences:

- It is bifocal between individualism and institutionalism. Careers are possessed by individuals and are defined by social structures. Cohorts may share many of the same career sequences and experiences but in the manner of individuals in a bus queue. The concept of the group is almost absent and, most importantly, so is the family, for arguably, families have careers too.
- The field has multiple centers of gravity. One can focus on individual lives, organizational environments, social structures, and a range of processes affecting career development, such as mobility. There is little scope for theoretical integration between these centers.
- It is mainly descriptive. An important role of careers scholars is to chart the shifting landscape of career development and its contexts, but the field badly needs durable theory. Many so-called theoretical forays could be said to be heavily disguised descriptive essays insofar as predictions have quite local and ultimately ephemeral temporal boundary conditions.
- It is pluralistic rather than interdisciplinary in methodologies and approaches. There are exceptions, but for the most part, scholars are drawing on distinctive empirical and theoretical traditions. The most durable contributions are arguably those that are less "careers" oriented than disciplinary in anchorage and contribution. (This, incidentally, is true of many other areas of organization studies, such as marketing, HRM, and strategy).

There is nothing inherently "wrong" in these attributes, but one does wonder where the field of careers will go next—these elements augur centrifugal development, for it seems likely that these properties of the career concept decree that there is little prospect of a common core at the heart of the area around which theory can coalesce and to which empirical approaches can refer for validation.

That being said, there is better research and a greater richness of ideas to be found now in the field than ever before, for which we may all rejoice. They seem to be clustering around some centers of gravity, on which I shall briefly make comment. This I shall undertake, drawing on an evolutionary psychology perspective, under two headings: (a) identity and destiny and (b) context and coevolution.

THEMES IN CAREER RESEARCH

Identity and Destiny

Destiny is an unfashionable and unpopular notion, entirely absent from this volume. Even in its looser usages it is likely to be disliked as overly deterministic. Let us revisit it briefly. Early approaches to the study of careers were more open to the idea, if not the usage, of the concept of destiny. This was to be found in the idea that (a) individual differences are determinants of career destinations and (b) life chances are determined by accidents of birth—that is, social class, place, and resources. The former clearly continues to matter, as is implied by Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (Chapter 4) in their discussion of personality. The human capital perspective, advanced by many writers here, would seem to discourage the latter idea of life chances being inherited and socially determined. But arguably, as wealth inequalities increase, not just in the West but in many of the emerging markets of the 21st century, the concept of destiny has undiminished relevance inasmuch as it denotes the forces that govern opportunity, choice, and constraints beyond an individual's control. The counterpart to destiny is *drama*—non-normative life events (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsett, 1980) that intervene and disrupt the flow of automaticity in career decisions (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Lying in the space between destiny and drama is *deliberation*—that is, the reflective self, the evolved capacity that separates humans from all other species and that makes us uniquely able to apprehend and intervene to change our destiny (Leary, 2004).

The micro level of career analysis should be in this space—the area of self-awareness that leads many people not to submit passively to their "destiny." But many do, and the analysis of their unfolding careers is simple, predictable and of little scholarly interest. So, arguably we should concentrate our attention on those areas where personal development emerges as an unpredictable outcome of choice (Young & Rodgers, 1997). There is almost nothing in the literature on the psychological triggers for such decisions as migration, career change, downshifting, or any other strategies by which individuals lay claim to their careers. At the micro

level of analysis, theory and research here could focus on the processes of self-regulation by which people alter their goals, or alter their perceptions and strategies to sustain their goals (Karoly, 1993). Within this domain lie the well-documented snares of cognitive bias and heuristics that also have barely featured in writings on career decision making (Bazerman, 1994; Gigerenzer, Todd, & ABC Research Group, 1999). For that matter, neither have analyses of motives. Careers theory could benefit from renewed attention to this micro level of analysis of cognition and motivation.

At the level of the individual person, the idea that reflexivity is a key to agentic processes in careers falls within the ambit of the study of identity and transitions (Ibarra, 2003). As Moore, Gunz, and Hall (Chapter 2) show, life-space, life-span approaches were once a dominant perspective in the field—the idea of career as part of a life story, possessed by an individual, driven by his or her unique attributes and experiences, and rooted in processes of identity formation. If we are to assume that this volume is representative of the field, it would appear that this biographical approach is seriously out of fashion. There is reason for this. We seem to have little faith in the theoretical presumptions that spawned this early work. However elegant they have been, biographical approaches have often delivered little more than over-interpreted narratives under the dense cover of varieties of personological theorizing. We are no longer content with mere storytelling dressed up as theory.

But there also is a loss here. The virtue of the biographical approach is that it takes cognizance of a variable curiously undervalued in a field that it defines—namely, time (as Lawrence and Tolbert also note in Chapter 20). Taking account of time with respect to the dimensions of a human life has the merit—in a field prone to great abstraction—of dealing with the essential, irreducible, and central elements of career processes. The bottom-line is (a) that our lives are finite, (b) that it takes time to acquire the attributes that will underpin our fitness, and (c) that we will use them for the benefit of ourselves and our kin. This is the true meaning of the Latin tag *Ars longa, vita brevis:* It takes a long investment to develop the arts and skills for living, and life is short.

This paradox embodies one of the most interesting, important, and neglected challenges for career theory: How do people make trade-offs in their life choices? As the gag has it, experience is something you don't get until just after you need it. Lives are interesting because maturation processes are inexorable. The timetables for key life events may have become much more irregular, but they have not ceased to operate sequentially for most people. In many contexts, they conform to quite compelling local norms and, in aggregate, have the appearance of cultural universals—reflecting enduring aspects of the human condition (Brown, 1991). It is all too easy to atomize human attributes in a field that is concerned with lives through time.

My own bias, as an evolutionary psychologist, is for a revival of biographical approaches to careers. We can now be a lot sharper in our analysis of life-span development via the advances in knowledge that have been accruing in the areas of individual differences, self-regulatory processes, and cognition. An overarching question from an evolutionary perspective is how do people attempt to optimize between risk and career success in their life choices. Career success in this context, as I have discussed elsewhere (Nicholson & De Waal-Andrews, 2005), is not so much to do with subjective well-being as the material utilities of status, wealth, and related variables that underpin life expectancy, life quality, and reproductive fitness. This arguably supplies a framework for a more systematic approach to the analysis of lives through time than we have hitherto been able (and willing) to undertake.

Context and Coevolution

There was a stream of books in the last decades of the 20th century foretelling the death of jobs and careers as we know them. The notion of boundarylessness became common currency in the careers field and elsewhere (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). This volume reflects the degree to which these scenarios were both right and wrong. They were right inasmuch as the expectations, structures, and contracts of employment have altered dramatically in the Western world. The landscape is indeed radically different, with many new opportunities coupled with a loss of the traditional "climbing frames"

(as Gunz, 1989, memorably called them) in many occupations and professions. Many chapters in this book supply chapter and verse for the substance of these changes.

Yet, as both Guest and Sturges (Chapter 16) and Prasad, D'Abate, and Prasad (Chapter 10) point out, many traditional occupational patterns persist outside the world of professionals and elites on whose existence the greater part of the careers literature concentrates. But even in these ranks, there is far less mobility and uncertainty than is being assumed by many writers. Cappelli and Hamori (Chapter 17) are surely right to point out that there has been a shift from bureaucratic to human capital orientations, but this has only made some organizations cling more tenaciously to their human assets. Lifetime employment has not disappeared in the Western world, and in many other regions managers continue to expect and receive a contract of loyal and long-term engagement.

But perhaps the important question is not so much which predictions are correct or incorrect as what are the consequences of the changing landscape. This is where theory needs to be built, as several contributors to this volume recognize. In the Darwinian framework, the issue can be construed as one of coevolution (Janicki & Krebs, 1998). The starting point for this analysis is the evidence, from the empirical literature, that we have in contemporary society a greater plurality of career systems and operating models for the design of jobs than ever before. This implies that there is scope for greater selection—the clustering of "people like me," as Lawrence and Tolbert (Chapter 20) put it—in sectors, occupations, organizations, and even national cultures. Again, the missing level of analysis in the careers literature is the group. In many societies, indeed, lurking within our own in the unfashionable yet highly prevalent domain of family business, there are kinship groupings and networks that locate "careers" within systems of shared fate for people whose interests are intimately connected. The individualism of the careers field seems predisposed to conceive of us all as lonely self-willed actors (though this volume also shows the desire to transcend this perspective, as in Greenhaus and Foley's contribution, Chapter 8).

The duality of coevolutionary processes is the cyclical relationship between (a) people selecting, adapting to, and changing environments to achieve an optimal "fit" with them and (b) environments selecting people who will fit into the culture, thereby enhancing the homogeneity of the aggregation of their human capital, i.e. their culture (Chatman, 1991; Graen, 1975; Schneider, 1987). Writers in this volume argue that careers shape organizational culture and capability (Ibarra and Deshpande, Chapter 14; Higgins and Dillon, Chapter 21). It is the case that the opposite perspective—how cultures shape careers, principally via processes of socialization—has previously been somewhat simplistically absorbed with the over-socialized conception of how employee attitudes and orientations are molded, rather than one that comprehends the coevolution of careers and institutions.

Where might a bolder analysis of coevolution take us? Thomas and Inkson (Chapter 23) accuse career theory of both individualism and parochialism, a charge that certainly seems justified by the neglect of cross-cultural perspectives in the field, and their framework is a helpful stimulus to thinking afresh about culture. However, arguably more is needed to help us escape the tendency to lapse into further descriptive analysis. A coevolutionary perspective points to the possibility of explaining, for example, patterns of migration, the convergence of business subcultures around the world, and how the ideologies that characterize industries and occupations evolve to accommodate the orientations of the human assets to which they have access and seek to retain. What are the adaptive processes to be found in cultures that exist to solve fitness problems? Such a research program would consider how values, perceived opportunity structures, and access to networks emerge as communal characteristics and as solutions to the challenge of adjustment to environmental pressures. This would require a genuinely interdisciplinary orientation, bringing together labor economists, sociologists, and psychologists to model these processes.

INTERACTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

To put these two perspectives together is to entertain a quite sophisticated kind of interactionism, one that applies at various levels of

analysis. It implies that the dynamic between individuals, and organizations and institutions is more than a "psychological contract" between notional equivalents. Rather, it is a kind of game played by willed individuals in regulated arenas of interests and incentives. The missing concept of groups—that is, where the interests of economic actors are closely combined, as among couples, families, and communities—also supplies a micro context within which choices are constrained and opportunities created. A notable example of collective careers is to be found in the influential Marwari community of North Indian entrepreneurs, who have been highly instrumental (among other groups) in the wave of economic development that has been driving the subcontinent in recent times. My own recent ethnographic reflections on the Maasai in Northern Kenya make the same point: People's fates are often inextricably intertwined by tight bonds of kinship, social rules, and maturational timetables, leaving spaces (very small in this case) for them to find and then mold their destinies (Nicholson, 2005)—yet many of them do.

The destiny-drama-deliberation model also helps us consider afresh the role of third-party interventions in career development and decision making. There is a long tradition of work on vocational guidance and career counseling that Kidd (Chapter 6) reviews comprehensively. The astonishing growth of executive coaching seems to betoken people's increased determination to make rather than be shaped by their destiny in the face of increased environmental uncertainty. Kidd and other contributors point to the growing role of intermediation, through executive search and similar agencies, mentors (see Chandler and Kram, Chapter 13), and the growing use of the Internet as a labor market place (as discussed by Cappelli and Hamori, Chapter 17). Again, the whole area of third-party interventions seems to be under-theorized, where we might conceive, for example, of analyzing the preconditions, triggers, and facilitators that lead individuals to seek and accept intervention and intermediation.

In the same vein, the approach I am advocating would lead us to take an interest in career errors and failures, and the learning and readjustment that follow them—or should follow them, for often it does not. People's need for emotional self-protection and an escalating commitment to the sunk costs of career investments can easily cause inertia, magical thinking, and self-justification to triumph over analysis, insight, and innovation (Cannon, 1999; Frese, 1995).

END THOUGHT: BEYOND CAREER ILLUSIONS AND DELUSIONS

In brief, I see the need for both a more deterministic *and* a more agentic conceptualization of the careers field than we have at present. We need to confront more fearlessly the fact that much apparent choice is illusory and highly predictable from the givens and knowns in people's lives, and yet by acts of will, people are capable of confounding the forces of destiny.

The deterministic position starts with the idea that choice and decision are often rhetorical games that help sustain the illusion that our futures are more self-determined than they are, or that opportunity and choice are more random than we would like to think. An early shock in my own career research came when we found how executives in a large longitudinal cohort were extremely poor at predicting their own job moves over one calendar year (Nicholson, West, & Cawsey, 1985). Most of those who changed jobs hadn't predicted they would, and most of those who predicted they would change jobs didn't. The only way the Time 1/Time 2 correlation achieved statistical significance was because of the large number of people who predicted no change and were right!

My Darwinian bias tells me to suspect that many narratives are ex-post rationalizations of people who are sleepwalking into the future. Actually, this metaphor is incorrect. It would be more accurate to say we walk backward into the future, seeing only the road behind and only imagining the road ahead. We are adept at bolstering our confidence in our agentic powers and self-regulatory skill through a hardwired hindsight bias (Fischhoff & Beyth, 1975).

If one does the thought experiment of imagining oneself to be a rather superior alien observing, with wry amusement, human destiny, drama, and deliberation from an elevated position and in possession of detached knowledge of the causal forces and contingencies bearing

down on the person (i.e., being god-like), then human choice looks rather different. Much of it appears to be a game, where we go through the motions of agonizing deliberation when all along the odds were obviously stacked in the direction of one option over another. Putting together the psychological profile of individuals, the state of their bank balance, the networks of influence they have access to, the time and place of their existence, even observers much less omniscient than a god might not find it hard to predict the choices a person agonizes over. Or to put it another way, we as agents and actors are much more influenced in our prospective choices by our fears and wishes than by dispassionate self-observation and analysis.

Of course, what are not predictable are often the consequences of our choices. So it might be externally more predictable to others than to ourselves that we will choose this partner/job than what this partner/job will turn out to be like for us. It is the adjustment processes to the unintended outcomes of predictable choices that lend the careers field much of its excitement.

The other source of excitement comes more directly from genuine drama and deliberation—where predictable choice is jettisoned, the presumptions of destiny are challenged, and remarkable transformations are achieved by acts of will and choice. It is curious how uninterested careers theory and research seems to be in these events—which often shape the course of human history—compared with our attention to the more commonplace phenomena of career development.

Within the boundaries of destiny, drama, and deliberation, there seems to me to be great scope for theory that will enhance the rich descriptions we are accumulating about the changing content and context of careers.

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