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Introduction to Special Section: Careers in Context

Abstract
[Excerpt] Career scholars regularly cite Hughes' (1937: 413) dictum that the study careers as "the moving perspective in which persons orient themselves with reference to the social order, and of the typical sequences and concatenations of office – may be expected to reveal the nature and 'working constitution' of a society." Yet the greater part of the careers literature typically ignores this by focusing, largely, on the careers of individuals and influencing factors mainly linked to the person and his or her immediate context, to the neglect of the broader context within which the careers are lived. However, large-scale economic and organizational changes that have affected most industrial societies in recent decades – the rising amount of business activity across national borders (Anderson & Cavanaugh, 2005), the increasingly global arena for entertainment and media, the influence of the internet in economic, social and political affairs, increased labor force participation by women and concomitant changes in family roles, and the emergence of distinctive forms of employment relations across countries (Whitley, 1999; Barley & Kunda, 2004) – make neglect of the social and political contexts in which careers unfold very problematic.

These developments have reshaped the multitude of settings in which work careers are lived: the communities of organizations, occupations, geographical areas, and so on. Specifically, the broad social context that provides the canvas on which work careers are painted, rather than the immediate organizational context as discussed, for example, by Johns (2001), is an important, yet partly neglected factor for understanding work careers. The immediate context may, of course, form a link between career and the broader context. However, it is the latter and not the former type of context that is a primary object of interest in this respect. We suggest that research exploring the broad context within which work careers are lived helps us understand better the nature of career in an Internet-based, globalised economy and how these careers, in turn, influence developments in the context.

Keywords
careers, organizations, labor market, occupations

Disciplines
Labor Relations | Organizational Behavior and Theory | Work, Economy and Organizations

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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL SECTION OF ORGANIZATION STUDIES, CAREERS IN CONTEXT

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Career as a social and political phenomenon in the globalized economy

Career scholars regularly cite Hughes'(1937: 413) dictum that the study careers as "the moving perspective in which persons orient themselves with reference to the social order, and of the typical sequences and concatenations of office – may be expected to reveal the nature and 'working constitution' of a society." Yet the greater part of the careers literature typically ignores this by focusing, largely, on the careers of individuals and influencing factors mainly linked to the person and his or her immediate context, to the neglect of the broader context within which the careers are lived. However, large-scale economic and organizational changes that have affected most industrial societies in recent decades – the rising amount of business activity across national borders (Anderson & Cavanaugh, 2005), the increasingly global arena for entertainment and media, the influence of the internet in economic, social and political affairs, increased labor force participation by women and concomitant changes in family roles, and the emergence of distinctive forms of employment relations across countries (Whitley, 1999; Barley & Kunda, 2004) – make neglect of the social and political contexts in which careers unfold very problematic.

These developments have reshaped the multitude of settings in which work careers are lived: the communities of organizations, occupations, geographical areas, and so on. Specifically, the broad social context that provides the canvas on which work careers are painted, rather than the immediate organizational context as discussed, for example, by Johns (2001), is an important, yet partly neglected factor for understanding work careers. The immediate context may, of course, form a link between career and the broader context. However, it is the latter and not the former type of context that is a primary object of interest in this respect. We suggest that research exploring the broad context within which work careers are lived helps us understand better the nature of career in an Internet-based, globalised economy and how these careers, in turn, influence developments in the context.

Of course, this opens a broad range of different aspects on which context-sensitive career research could focus. A first aspect deals with the question of how the concept of "career", and career patterns of a given occupation, reflect national differences in social structures, economic and labour force policies, as well as differences among individuals with different social backgrounds. This is an issue because career research typically assumes that "career" is a universally-shared concept. But work and careers are embedded in national economic and institutional environments (Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007) which are crucial for individual career paths as well as for career patterns of larger groups, especially within an occupation. We have only limited understanding of the interplay between context and career patterns, and of how

social backgrounds affect the perception of work and of one's movement through different social positions, so theoretical arguments as well as empirical findings shedding additional light on this interplay and on the career concept are very much needed.

Second, at many times in history – and the current one is no exception – scholars have assumed that the era in which they are living is especially dynamic. The change in careers as reflected in discussions of so-called 'new careers' is largely taken for granted (Inkson, Ganesh, & Roper, 2010). Managerial and everyday rhetoric often claims that "the present is always an exciting, challenging time to be contrasted with a stable past" (Collin, 1998: 412). However, is there any historical evidence that career patterns and processes have been substantially reshaped by globalized economies? Some researchers raise doubts (Guest & Davey, 1996; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010) and disagree about the extent to which careers change and about the volatility of "present times" (Eccles & Nohria, 1992: 25). However, empirical evidence for such a rhetoric is not exceedingly strong, indicating that these are not truly revolutionary times, but shaped incrementally (Eccles & Nohria, 1992: 25). A closer look reveals that many aspects of new careers such as moves beyond organizational boundaries, multiple careers or self-crafted career paths are not entirely new, have existed throughout history and sometimes even are the norm outside for-profit organizations (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). Studies empirically analyzing the extent to which change due to globalization has actually occurred will make a significant contribution to the career discussion.

Third, compared with the situation a few decades ago, new forms of living together, as well as the role of women in society and in the working domain, have clearly changed. This leads to the question of how changes in family and family partnership forms and women's labour force participation rates changed both men's and women's career patterns. While there are a number of studies illustrating various facets of the consequences for careers (e.g. Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007), in-depth studies of the consequences of these changes for careers are still scarce.

Fourth, many existing conceptual frameworks of careers such as the model of personality and career success (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007) or the frameworks used to describe the effects of mentoring on careers (see the literature in Chandler & Kram, 2007) either have their focus on the individual or de-emphasize the relationship between contextual factors and career. This increases the need for conceptual frameworks which allow the integration of social and political phenomena in their description and explanations of individual careers or career patterns of a larger group. Contributions that elaborate on contextual frameworks taking into account multi-level factors and demonstrating their descriptive and explanatory potential for career analysis are strongly needed.

Fifth, different aspects of multinational corporations, including international careers, are well-researched. Examples include the careers of expatriates (for a historical overview see Harvey & Moeller, 2009) or permanent transferees, i.e. individuals moving from one international assignment to the next (Suutari, 2003). However, as businesses at all levels become more global and specific forms of global co-operations - such as networks, alliances or joint ventures - emerge, the issue of career relevant consequences becomes increasingly salient. In addition, for large groups of global organizations outside the world of business there is little career related research. This raises the issue whether there are new career patterns associated with the economic dominance of multinational organizations, including organizations that coordinate

international relations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the UN, and health-services organizations such as the World Health Organization.

Finally, for some professional groups such as diplomats or politicians, global elites have a long history. However, related to world-wide business activities, the issue of a global business elite with specific rules governing their respective career arenas has gained new importance (see Murphy, 2006; Mendenhall, Kühlmann, & Stahl, 2000). Yet some basic issues arise: Is there an emerging global elite? If so, what do their careers look like, how do they relate to the global economy and what are the rules of the game here?

While related to careers, these various issues point both towards the importance of more general theoretical frameworks which help to explain the relationship between context and intra-organizational phenomena, careers being part of them, and towards the reception of context in career research. We will deal with these issues in turn.

THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY

In sharp contrast to the perspectives that have traditionally guided career studies, dominant paradigms in contemporary organizational theory do focus largely on context – broad environmental conditions and interorganizational relations that shape organizational outcomes. This focus reflects a shift in the field that occurred in the late 20th century, usually denoted as a change from a closed to open systems perspective. This shift opened the door for organizational scholars to examination of a vast array of forces – ranging from market conditions (the industrial demography of suppliers, buyers and competitors) to broad cultural conditions (formal and informal social expectations and prescriptions) – that affect organizational processes and outcomes..

However, this shift in focus did nothing to alleviate, and may have exacerbated, the classic conundrum of how to link macro-level and more meso- and micro-level organizational phenomena (see Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Long-standing and continuing debates about how to incorporate notions of agentic action into macro-organizational analyses reflect this perennial dilemma (Child, 1972; DiMaggio, 1988; Zilber, 2008). Studies of careers offer one potentially important vantage point for addressing such concerns (Lawrence & Tolbert, 2007).

Consider, for example, the question: How are the environmental conditions and changes studied by macro-organizational theorists connected to decision-making processes within organizations that lead to mergers and acquisitions, adoption of new structures and practices, and firms‘ persistence or declarations of bankruptcy? There is at least some research to suggest that career patterns provide important insights into these connections. Thus, Fligstein’s classic study (1990) of large U.S. corporations indicated that routes to the top of these organizations shifted over time, in tandem with environmental changes; while positions in engineering and operations served as key springboards in earlier eras, those in finance departments became central in later time periods. Juxtapose this with Boeker’s (1997) research on firms’ strategies for entry into new product markets. This research indicated that such strategies were significantly influenced by the backgrounds of the firms’ chief executive officers. Taken together, these studies illuminate how environmental conditions shape career paths, and how career paths shape

decision-making processes that produce macro-level patterns in organizations. Thus, they provide a succinct illustration of the utility of more career-focused research as a means of understanding the organizational processes that link environmental conditions to organizational outcomes and actions.

By the same token, more attention to organizational and environmental contexts can also help us better understand the nature of and shifts in individual career patterns, to which we turn next.

CONTEXT IN CAREER RESEARCH

Careers are typically described as, for example, "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989: 8) or "the sequence of employment-related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person" (Arnold, 1997: 16). Experience, position, role, or activity all imply a social context in which they happen, a context that defines them in the way that an occupation is defined by the technical, social and economic arrangements in which it is embedded. So to separate analytically careers from context is, to some extent, sophistry. For example, to describe the careers of medical students (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961) without describing the context in which they learn their profession – their medical school, the hospitals they train in, their professional body – is to miss out on a proper understanding of the meaning of those careers. Careers are the product of social structures such as organizations or institutions and, in turn, produce and reproduce these structures. To that extent it is hard to talk about context as a construct distinct from career; yet, as we noted above, that is what much of the careers literature does.

That said, the influence of context have indeed been studied from a variety of approaches. Mayrhofer et al. (2007), for example, distinguish between four levels of context in an onion-skin model in which each succeeding level surrounds its predecessors. The levels comprise work, the origin of the individual, national society and culture, and global context and developments. Within each level they examine the various issues that can be identified in the literature. In the context of work these issues include external labour markets, new forms of working and organizing, and social relationships. In the context of origin they include class and social origin, educational socialization and individual work history, and current-life context (the personal life situation of the individual). Issues that have been worked on in the context of society and culture include gender, ethnicity, demography and community factors.

Mayrhofer et al. go on to point out that a full analysis of the context of careers must recognize, *inter alia*, that these issues have changed in meaning over the course of time – social class, for example, has changed in character with the societal changes that have taken place over the past decades – and that contextual issues are more meaningfully studied as configurations rather than as individual variables. By this they mean that the greater the number of different pieces of information one has about the context of a given career actor, the greater the explanatory power that derives from the pattern that these pieces of information form.

The significance of context to career – their inseparability – becomes even more evident when one turns to grand sociological theory. Max Weber, for example, traced the origins of work careers to the Calvinist-derived capitalism that gave rise to the economic conditions for the

mobility of labour (Moore, Gunz, & Hall, 2007). Pierre Bourdieu's work has had great attraction to careers scholars (e.g.Corsun & Costen, 2001; Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Meyer, 2003; Lindh & Dahlin, 2000; Whitley, Thomas, & Marceau, 1981) because of the way it combines the concepts of field (crudely, the social context within which actors try to follow their life strategies), habitus (dispositions and competence, continually shaped by experience, being shaped by the field and in turn shaping it), and capital (the resources, many acquired over the course of a career, available to the actor). And Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration recognizes the mutual dependency of structure and agency, which goes to the heart of the way in which careers shape, and are shaped by, the social forms in which they take place.

Context, then, is crucial to an understanding of career. Next, we briefly introduce the papers in this collection, each of which explores the link between context and career in an interestingly different way.

PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL SECTION

The papers in this special section, while not extending across the whole range of issues outlined above, do examine a wide variety of contextual influences on careers. Although they are highly varied in substantive scope, taken as a whole, they illustrate two key, contrasting but valid principles: historical continuity in factors that shape careers, (e.g., network relationships were as important to 16th century emigrants as they are today, and contemporary knowledge workers still enact the classic struggle between organizations and individuals over control of skills and knowledge), and the importance of specific, unique macro-level influences (e.g. changes in national education policies and gender-roles have affected the dominance of particular contemporary career patterns in Germany, and changing organizational environments affect the viability and nature of alternative career arrangements).

Carnabuci and *Wezel* begin the collection with an intriguing study of the careers of some of the so-called Antwerp Diaspora, in which large numbers of merchants from the Southern Provinces of the Low Countries emigrated to various parts of Europe in response to a brutal Spanish reaction to a Dutch revolt against the then Spanish monarch's policies. Carnabuci and Wezel examine the careers of the emigrants who arrived in Amsterdam, many of whom played an important role in the city's economic expansion, in particular by participating in the Dutch East Indies Company (its Dutch name giving rise to the acronym VOC). This career transition, a difficult one for the emigrants given the substantial differences between the merchant cultures in the two regions, was successfully negotiated by some – where success is defined as becoming a member of the VOC – and not by others, and the authors explore some of the reasons for the difference. They show that at least part of the explanation is demographic, in the sense that the greater the number of peers with whom one made the transition, and the size of the community of emigrants at the time of arrival in Amsterdam, the greater the chance of success. While not, of course, denying the role of individual agency in making the transition, the authors make a nice and surprisingly contemporary case for the importance of circumstances in making successful career transitions.

The paper by *Biemann*, *Fasang* and *Grunow* addresses the popular belief that economic changes accompanying globalization have resulted in major shifts in career patterns in recent decades

(e.g.,Spilerman, 2009), examining changes over time in both the degree of career complexity (changes in job states and job duration) and the representation of distinctive career patterns, by gender, across a number of cohorts in Germany.. The juxtaposition of data on both gender and cohort differences in career patterns vividly illustrates how contextual complexities make any sort of sweeping claims about changes in career patterns highly problematic. This carefully done analysis disputes the notion that globalization has significantly altered career patterns, and suggests that national-level policies and social change - including changes in educational systems and gender roles - are apt to play a more crucial role in shaping such patterns.

The next two papers have a focus on knowledge and learning through change, both seen as a major production factor at the organizational level and as a key success factor in the competition amongst economies. These themes have a significant tradition in management (see, e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1978). However, the important role of knowledge at the level of countries and society (e.g. the initiative of the European Union in terms of 'e-Europe', see http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope), its role for organizational learning (Argote, 1999), knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), or the importance of the transfer of knowledge and practices (e.g., Kostova, 1999; special issue of the Academy of Management Executive May 2005; Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002) for organizational success as well as national comparative advantage only recently have been strongly emphasized (see, e.g. Dierkes, Berthoin Antal, Child, & Nonaka, 2001). Especially in the light of the debate about strategic HRM, the importance of knowledge as a production factor, and the rhetoric of people being the most valuable resource of organisations, many commentators argue that HRM has become more important to organisations in the last two decades. Consequently, we should expect to see the influence of the human resource function on corporate decision increasing over time (e.g. Pfeffer, 1998; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005).

The point of departure of the paper by *Kamoche*, *Pang* and *Wong* is the assumption that in today's globally competitive business environment, organizational efforts to appropriate knowledge from their workers will be increasingly resisted by those employees forced into more fragmented and uncertain careers. In their conceptual paper they see a basic tension between diametrically opposed ways in which knowledge is conceptualized. From an organizational point of view knowledge is an asset which it seeks to appropriate through mechanisms designed to achieve employment flexibility. From the perspective of the individual, knowledge is a form of career capital which helps to reduce the uncertainties of careers by increasing individual employability. Building on Foucault's genealogical approach the authors argue that this contest not only reflects the shifting employment relationship and economic turbulence, but is in fact a social phenomenon rooted in the knowledge-power dialectic and one which sheds light on individuals' efforts to free themselves from the effects of normalization. In this way, organizational efforts to appropriate the knowledge inherent in careers are challenged.

Litrico, *Lee* and *Kossek* take a contextual look at careers and integrate research on careers, flexible work arrangements, and open systems' views of organizational change. Specifically, they investigate how evolution in the broader organizational context interacts with professional career trajectories over time. Focusing on managers and professionals who were working on a reduced-load basis by choice at the first point in time they analyze, they find that career patterns are impacted by the dynamic combination of individual level and contextual factors. Looking at the influencing factors for returning to full time work, they identify four cross-level dynamics –

co-optation, synergy, decoupling, and tug of war – which describe the mechanisms at work between individual work arrangement trajectories and larger trends occurring at the organizational or industry level.

CLOSING SECTION

We think the breadth of the papers in this special issue provide both compelling illustrations of the utility and the need for more research on higher level contextual forces in career research, and provocative templates for the type of research and data that can importantly enrich the field of career studies in the future.

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