

The challenge of career studies

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I am proposing here that career studies is an appropriate subject for study at university level, even for those not intending to enter the 'career' field. 'Career' lies at the intersection of the individual and society, and its study is as challenging as that of any other university subject because it requires understanding of, and a rigorous approach to, a complex area, but unlike them, however, it is of direct relevance to students' own lives. This paper argues that their reflections upon their own 'career' experiences would illuminate and interrogate what they would learn through academic study. This indeed is what I found for myself as I came as a newcomer to this field.

After graduating, I worked in personnel management until the birth of my three children, and thereafter my 'career' was shaped by their needs. In 1976, after a break of 11 years, and a job as a university administrative assistant, I applied for a post which I hoped would give me greater flexibility. This was a research fellowship which was being awarded to facilitate a change of 'career' into the social sciences. For my application I proposed to study 'mid-career change' which had become a topical issue in the USA because of the widespread occurrence of obsolescence and large-scale redundancies in many industries. (At this stage I did not relate this to my own life.) In 1980 after the fellowship ended I became a lecturer in organisational behaviour and organisation theory in De Montfort University's Business School where I was to teach mainly post-experience graduates until I reached compulsory retirement age in 2000. Such experiences demonstrate the challenge of studying 'career', for it is clear that they form three interwoven trajectories. My organisational, institutional 'career' with its hierarchical progression ended nine years ago; my 'career' in 'career' scholarship is continuing, though now passed its mid-point; and my family 'career', now that I have little grandchildren, is still ongoing.

I had a degree in English and a postgraduate diploma in anthropology, so when I began reading the literature and research on 'mid-career change', and the theories of 'career' and of middle age, it was as a newcomer to the field. I needed to know how terms such as 'career' were defined, but I found that many writers did not define them, and others used or defined them differently. The case of my three intertwining trajectories which can be interpreted in different ways by myself or by others again

illustrates the challenge of studying 'career'. It is not just a concept but a construct and a lived experience and hence is inherently and inevitably complex, diverse, multidimensional and dynamic. It is ambiguous and ambivalent; both/and rather than either/or: objective/subjective, past/present/future, emancipation and control, praxis and rhetoric. It is thus open to many definitions according to the perspective from which it was viewed and for what purpose. While one could choose to define it in one way, the word carries many meanings, and the hearer/reader will probably be aware of many of them simultaneously. The resulting ambiguity makes it important that users/writers specify their definition. I acknowledged this ambiguity in my PhD thesis by writing 'career' in quotation marks, and avoided using the word in my interviews. The definition of 'mid-career change' was similarly problematical, so for my respondents I chose men such as those in the resettlement phase of their army career who could be said to be objectively in a situation of occupational change. (To reduce the number of factors to be considered in the research I did not include women in it.)

My own experiences and the very different ones of my respondents all indicated that the environment is significant for our 'careers', both objective and subjective. The interpretations we make of our experiences within our particular context shape our responses to our world: our vocational choices and decisions, our aspirations, values, skills and interests. Yet the literature I was reading did not address these issues raised by the complexity and processual, dynamic nature of 'career'. I came to recognise that it was the fundamental epistemology of the predominant psychological theories of the time that limited their view. They took for granted their Western scientific assumptions and the research methodologies derived from them (and also, of course, their white, male, middle class samples) and did not acknowledge how those led them to focus on the de-contextualised individual and on objective rather than subjective factors. My PhD concluded that new theories that took the environment, process, and subjective meanings into account were needed, and I proposed that systems theory, and particularly the soft systems approach which recognised subjective meaning, could be a way forward. I could arrive at such conclusions because not only I was working with assumptions that were very different from those of others in the 'career' field who were schooled in the values of traditional science, but also those conclusions were in part prompted by, and made sense of, my own experiences.

In the mid-1980s I met Richard Young, a counselling psychologist at the University of British Columbia, who shared many of my concerns but had arrived at them by a different route and from a different perspective, and we have since developed some of these ideas together. Later I

became influenced by social constructionism, and did not pursue my interest in systems thinking, although my enthusiasm for it has not abated, and I hope to return to it before my 'career' in 'career' scholarship closes.

When in 1998 I suggested the title of 'Career Studies' for the personal chair that I was offered at De Montfort University, it represented for me the study of the concepts, epistemology, and methodology of a broad and dynamic field encompassing theory, research, practice, with issues for policy-makers. Now that this label is being used more broadly and frequently than then, many will recognise and value its richness, though some may value only what is relevant to assist individuals in a changing world. Perhaps fewer will appreciate its rigour, or what they may regard as academic hair-splitting. However, without relevance, richness and rigour are of little point; and without rigour, richness is just façade and relevance merely rhetoric. Theorists, researchers, and practitioners all have different roles to play in our field, but each needs to recognise and respect the roles of the others.

The rigour of career studies

I shall now focus on the rigour that is essential to the field, and particularly so if career studies is to be regarded more widely as an appropriate subject at university level.

Because of the complexity of the notion of 'career' there are many 'stakeholders' in it, from the 'career' actors themselves, to 'career' advisers, researchers, theorists, employers, both for strategic human resource development and managing individuals, and increasingly to policy-makers both nationally and internationally. Moreover, there are several disciplines that have a perspective on 'career', including vocational, occupational, and organisational psychology, sociology, and human resource management, although the psychological perspective has generally been predominant. All these various stakeholders need some kind of rigour.

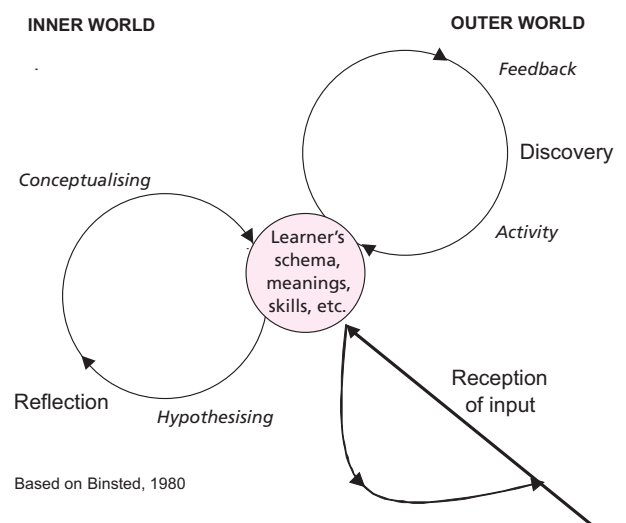
For theorists, rigour, as in any university subject, lies in attending to definition, in recognising and accounting for a range of meanings, in contextualising meanings; in being aware of and acknowledging their own underpinning assumptions and epistemology, and recognising those of others. It means taking account of the multiple perspectives (and of the relationships between them) of the various stakeholders and the many disciplines with an interest in 'career'. Again as in any university subject, rigour in research means using methodologies and methods of research appropriate to the topic, and using them competently, and having appropriate samples from relevant populations. Some of the issues on which a rigorous approach is particularly needed are dealing with the effects of the passage of time, the desirability but difficulty of carrying out longitudinal studies, and the evaluation of the effects of interventions upon the individual issues.

There is a need for rigour of a different kind at all levels of 'career' practice. This is found in the sensitivity and respect with which practitioners address moral, ethical, interpersonal, and multicultural issues, and in their practice and updating of professional knowledge and expertise. Many are working in an environment of regulation and professional licensing, as well as of organisational changes and managerial control, of budgetary constraints, and changing government priorities and policies. Such conditions are severe challenges to their professional and personal values, and make it a struggle to maintain rigour.

I have already suggested that, from my perspective, rigour has sometimes been lacking, but that would not necessarily be the judgement from other perspectives, for there has been considerable attention to testing and applying theories in research, and increasingly to evaluating guidance and counselling interventions. As a result, part of the richness of career studies lies in the existence of and interactions between several schools of thought in the field, debates between epistemologies and perspectives, reappraisal and sometimes redevelopment of traditional theories, and the introduction of new epistemologies such as social constructionism, new concepts such as life design, new approaches such as narrative and the relational approach, and new methodologies such as discourse analysis. An issue of current interest is the failure to exploit the understanding that working in a multi- or interdisciplinary way would give. New issues are continually emerging in this fast-changing world, and career studies will have to continue to respond to them.

The relationship between academic study and personal career learning

I have suggested that my own personal 'career' experience both illuminated and interrogated what I was learning from my academic studies. University students studying 'career studies' would also, I believe, find the same. This can be illustrated in the Lancaster model of learning (Binsted, 1980, p. 22).



This cyclical model identifies three different forms of learning. The receipt of input in this instance is *via* lectures and reading books in which the student will be introduced to some of the analytical concepts mentioned earlier, such as the significance of context, perspective, and underlying assumptions, and to some of the debates in the field. By actively trying out some of what they have learned, for example, by implementing some decision-making models, students would be going through the discovery loop, opening themselves to new experiences, and becoming aware of the consequences of their actions. They go through the reflection loop as they make sense of the knowledge they have received and the actions they have taken and, on the basis of this, begin to re-examine and evaluate the theories they have learned, and hypothesise about past or future situations. Each form of learning is cyclical, and the cycles can be linked in various ways (for example, learning in formal classroom settings links the receipt of input with reflection), but in effective learning the learner will complete the overall cycle. This is essential for the development of critical thinking.

I would further suggest that students who have internalised their understanding of these concepts by virtue of their own experiences will be well placed to apply that understanding to some of the difficult epistemological and other concepts that they encounter in their home discipline with which they might otherwise struggle.

References

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