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# An exploration of young careers in an uncertain labour market

Louise Badelow

This interpretative study sought to explore the story of two young people in relation to their engagement with career. Within what Bauman (2000) describes as 'liquid modernity', how do they respond to uncertainties and agentic expectations in their own careers? Whilst the study did not set out to validate any specified theoretical principle, it became evident that both established career theory and post-modern thinking, had shaped their stories. For one young person, this was especially in relation to the role of adversity in building resilience. Equally, the conclusion appears to validate that effective programmes of career learning and development (CLD) can help to prepare young people for a rapidly changing labour market.

## Introduction

Career. A construct with which most are familiar, albeit that as Yates (2014:11) attests, thus far career practitioners have universally failed to arrive at an agreed definition. Nevertheless, irrespective of an apparent impasse relating to description, it is of note that despite the vast canon of published work within the field, it is only recently that the meaning of career from an individual perspective has been explored. In a post-modern world, where 'change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty' (Bauman, 2000:2), is the concept of increased agency and personal responsibility, as advocated by many academics, including Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994, 1996), genuinely embraced, especially by those at the start of their career? Equally, is the guidance profession, which seemingly remains wedded to practice methods borne out of a bygone era (Savickas, 1997:150), adopting appropriate strategies in order to equip young people for a 21st century, predominantly neoliberalist, society?

It was against such a contextual background that this paper set out to explore the career stories of two siblings. Based on two pieces of research; the dissertation element of the MA Career Management and a project funded by Canterbury Christ Church University Research and Knowledge Exchange, the aim was to better understand their engagement with career and the extent to which they were able to exercise control, whilst responding to the societal uncertainties defined by Bauman's (2000) 'liquid modernity'. Furthermore, with one participant being a Music graduate ('Ruby') and the other forging an acting career ('Huwie'), it might be construed that these uncertainties were potentially greater than for those aligning themselves with a more 'traditional concept of career' (Patton, 2005).

Nevertheless, in this regard they both provide an especially valuable insight as to the attitudes of those who experience precarious work patterns. Huwie in particular provides a better understanding of apparent coping mechanisms, which in turn appears to reinforce the universal value of resilience, including for those who do not necessarily choose an insecure lifestyle, yet still face the consequential challenges (Phillips, 1991). That said, the research also raises questions about how practitioners reconcile the neoliberalist dogma of individualisation, and its emphasis on an internal 'locus of control' (Rotter, 1966). The reality is that for many young people, career success or failure is impacted by more than their ability to exert control and demonstrate resilience. In other words, are we doing our clients a disservice, or worse still

causing harm, by peddling the notion that the fulfilment of ambition rests firmly with the individual? And by extension, are we in danger of apportioning personal blame when success (however defined) does not materialise, inferring they 'have not studied and trained hard enough' (Sultana, 2011:182)?

The study did not set out to validate any specified theoretical principle, nor did it seek to deliver outcomes that might result in any paradigmatic shift as far as careers guidance practice is concerned. Still, it became evident that both established career theory and post-modern thinking, the latter being derived from this new era of uncertainty and 'jobless work' (Savickas, 2011:3), would shape the analysis of both stories. Accordingly, the research findings support the notion that factors seen as beneficial for career management can have their origin in early experiences. These include career resilience; not just the ability to cope with difficult situations, but rather the idea that success is related to the 'staying power of individuals and their perseverance in overcoming obstacles, adapting to change and dealing with adversity' (Bassot, Barnes and Chant, 2014:8). Or as defined by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews and Kelly (2007), the extent to which an individual is able to demonstrate 'Grit'.

Equally, the conclusion appears to validate the assertion that effective programmes of CLD can help to equip young people with the skills they need to negotiate a rapidly changing labour market.

## A review of literature

By using individual career stories as the basis of this study, the precise nature of the literature that would underpin the research only fully revealed itself once the interviews had been transcribed and the data analysed. Notwithstanding this, it was notable at the outset the extent to which theatrical metaphors are used throughout career literature, e.g. Inkson (2004) and Goffman (1959), and these texts, along with others, usefully informed the work. Nevertheless, with Ridley (2012:99) suggesting that an early question in compiling a literature review should be 'What do I know about my research topic?' it was noticeable that there was little material pertaining to those who choose a career within the performing arts. As articulated by Kogan (2002:1) '[why have psychologists] been so negligent in pursuing the study of performing artists when so many other professional occupational groups have been subjected to intensive scientific scrutiny?'

Where specific material existed it fell into two distinct categories. The first focussed on the psychological pre-requisites for maintaining a career within the performing arts sector, e.g. *The Person Behind the Mask: a guide to performing arts psychology* (Hamilton, 1997), and offered advice in order to 'survive'. The second sought to provide an empirical approach to understanding the personality factors and motivations of those pursuing a performance-based career, e.g. *Psychological Profiles of Professional Actors* (Nettle, 2006). However, unlike the narrative approach of this research, it was notable that these studies were quantitative in nature, providing explicit answers as to how people maintain a career within the performing arts. This methodology was in stark contrast to the constructivist principles of interpretation and the location of meaning within an individual's story, with Nettle (2006) concluding that ultimately, it was simply a question of 'fit' between environment and individual characteristics (Holland, 1985). Nevertheless, with this research firmly allied to the concept of social constructionism, its unequivocal aim was to replace scores with stories (Savickas, 1993), utilising hermeneutic methodology to identify the anchoring themes of the here and now, as well as those of the past (Savickas, 2011).

## Methodology

Epistemologically, the research was firmly located within constructivist methodology. Loosely-structured, hour-long interviews were conducted, albeit that occasional guiding questions were employed as appropriate. These interviews were transcribed, analysed, shared and re-visited, adopting the interpretive techniques of biographical narrative inquiry. A qualitative approach, the starting point was not a paradigm, but rather two stories that needed exploration. As Punch (2014:24) points out, 'first we need to establish what we are trying to find out, and then consider how we are going to do it'. It seemed apparent that the ontology of the question lay firmly within the interpretivist domain, where the desire

was to draw meaning and gain understanding from Ruby and Huwie's self-constructed and self-expressed career narratives, whilst at the same time recognising my position in the research. Indeed, as Merrill and West (2009:31) assert, we cannot write stories about others, without considering how our own histories, psychologies, social and cultural locations reflect on those accounts.

In this context, my story was intimately aligned with that of my participants. Two siblings, our familial relationships are especially interwoven. Although this mitigated the requirement to build trust between us (Gray, 1998 in Bell, 2010:21), there was concern on my part that this might result in self-censorship as they told their stories. Furthermore, as a novice researcher, I was anxious about playing the role of expert interviewer with people I knew well. Nevertheless, I was equally mindful of the benefit of what Merrill and West describe as 'opportunist sampling' and the advantage of 'one enthusiast [over] an army of the press-ganged!' (2009:107).

In actuality, these anxieties proved unfounded, albeit that they were later superseded by the ethical dilemmas often presented by narrative research. These, as described by Josselson (2011:33), are created by the gaps between the participant's understanding of their life, and the researcher's interpretive analysis of that life. In other words, despite detailing the purpose of the research and obtaining written consent, I was unsure whether Ruby or Huwie fully understood the extent to which I would scrutinise and interpret their words. Indeed, given that the purpose of the research was not to infer generalities with the wider population, but rather interpret the meaning of their individual stories, the risk of unwelcome, intrusive analysis (from their perspective) seemed all too apparent. As it was, whilst I shared the full transcripts with both participants, neither responded nor expressed any interest in reading my subsequent analysis.

## Findings

Despite my inner discomfort in relation to the research, I took solace from the notion that my findings were an interpretation of the *data* collected, rather than an analysis of the *individuals* themselves. As Josselson asserts, '[w]hat we are analyzing [*sic*] are texts, not lives' (2011:37). Consequently, I set about scrutinising the data, utilising Merrill and West's (2009) proforma method as the analytic tool. This approach enabled themes to be identified and interpretations made as to their possible meaning. Some of these themes, which were distinct for each participant, are as follows:

### 'Right, I'm going to dance'

The control that Huwie has exerted over his career, from an early age, is evident. He describes his progression from watching a particular stage production at eight years old and deciding that 'I have to really seriously consider doing this as a career', to winning the lead role in a UK tour of one of the world's most popular musicals some 16 years later, as a series of meticulously executed steps. Indeed, it is apparent that Huwie has always had a very clear vision for his future, and continues to implement judicious planning, and an uncompromising approach, in relation to the career decisions he makes.

### 'That was hard…being the only boy in a dance school of girls'

Huwie's self-belief which, it could be assumed, is at the heart of his apparent resilience, is palpable throughout the interview. He attributes this to his upbringing, but is firm in his assertion that it was an inherent, rather than taught quality. When talking about the challenges of dancing as a young boy, and the consequential ridicule encountered from classmates, he says 'I think those younger years gave me the mentality of almost going into my world and…focussing purely on myself…and ultimately I think that sort of mentality gives me the basis to…do what I've done.'

### 'If you're clever and turn down things as well as take things, then you can form yourself a good, eclectic career.'

When asked about extended periods of unemployment, which are often self-imposed, Huwie responds 'I'm quite self-assured…because I've done

really good work, it gives me that inner-confidence that when the right thing comes along, I will get it… [I am] comfortable when I'm out of work because I know I will be in work at some point. And in the meantime, I'm going to work on myself so that when the opportunity does arise, I'll be ready.' Equally, when he fails to get a part, he concludes that it was either because he did not produce 'what I know I can deliver' at audition, or because 'they've gone for someone who's got what I haven't actually got. It might be a different type of hair…or particular style of voice.' Either way, he systematically characterises the reasons for failure as purely objective, either totally within his control, or completely beyond it. There was no middle ground.

'In terms of my own career destiny…I have all the control in the world, because I'm young.'

Time is a recurring theme for Ruby. She suggests that whilst career may be important in the future, 'I'll probably live until I'm about 100 anyway…so I've still got about another 70 years to think about it.' Although working to fund her travelling plans, she appears unwilling to contemplate any longer-term options, saying 'I don't think it's time to be thinking about the future yet.' However, despite this apparent *laissez-faire* attitude, revealingly she repeatedly uses the word 'panic', saying 'I don't need to panic yet…I'm sure I'll figure it out in the end' and '…maybe if I get to 50… that's when I'm going to panic a bit. But at the moment, [I'm] not panicky at all'.

'It annoys me that [working five days a week] is just life, that really irritates me…I hate the idea.'

Ruby's feelings of frustration and anger are evident. Whilst seemingly directed at her current employer, there is a sense she is annoyed with herself too, frequently adopting the words 'should' and 'could' in relation to the choices that have impacted her career to date. For example, when talking about her AS results, Ruby says they did not reflect 'what I am [capable of]' and she should have re-taken them. By not doing so, she says her degree options were 'limited' and she had no alternative but to select Music. Had she achieved a better outcome by re-taking the exams she claims 'I could have done something completely different at university.' She also appears to blame her attitude for lack of direction, describing herself as being 'lazy' and suggesting that if she were more 'pro-active' or could only 'insert a little bit of enthusiasm [then] maybe I'll figure out what I want to do'.

'I know what I want…financial security and I quite like the idea of having a job for life.'

Notwithstanding her repeated assertion that 22 'is the time to be selfish', to do 'whatever I want to do, [go] wherever I want to go', it is notable that Ruby ultimately craves the stability associated with the concept of a job for life. Indeed struggling to identify suitable options beyond teaching (which she has vehemently ruled out, together with performance), she randomly selects nursing as a possible career, saying 'there aren't many jobs for life are there? I can only think of nursing...so maybe that's my job for life.' Furthermore, despite acknowledging that remaining single would mean she must 'think in terms of money basically, because I've got to provide for myself', it was nevertheless surprising to hear a woman of her generation refer to 'getting a husband' by the age of 32.

## Conclusion

Despite their shared upbringing, and being only three years apart in age, the interpretation of their stories seemingly indicates that Ruby and Huwie's relationship with career is very different. Huwie, having chosen a notoriously uncertain path from an early age, appears to have wholly embraced the notion of agency and concept of personal responsibility, recognising their critical role in accomplishing his career ambitions. Furthermore, rather than exert a negative influence, the unpredictable nature of the performing arts industry seems to both empower and energise him, as well as build upon the resilience first developed in childhood. Indeed, when describing the ubiquitous audition process, he uses the metaphor of a rollercoaster, saying 'it's like…when you come off and say, I'm so happy I did that…it's an amazing feeling when you get through and it's a really terrible

feeling when you don't, but if you don't try, you will never know. I'd much rather find out than go, no I'm not going on that rollercoaster because it looks really scary.'

Conversely, Ruby's story suggests a very different attitude. Like Huwie, it would seem evident that she had very little in the way of professional guidance, either at school or university. She says 'we did have a big careers service, which was obviously really useful for some people, but …I didn't go to them.' In other words, she appears to have felt no personal responsibility or imperative to seek out possible opportunities. Even now, one year after graduating, her narrative suggests that she continues to delay any meaningful decision-making, explaining '[I'll] come back [from travelling] and then that's when I start thinking seriously about career'. Significantly though, it is both her sense of powerlessness in relation to her degree choice ('I wanted to go to [a good] university, [and so] I [just] chose my best subject'), as well as the notion that she appears to believe the answer may lay 'out there', which strongly indicates Ruby's external 'locus of control' (Rotter, 1966). She says 'maybe travelling will give me some time to think about what I want to do. So it would be quite good if I could come back and think, OK, *this* is what I want to do.'

Whilst it is likely that issues relating to gender difference are also relevant to both career stories, the limitations of this article prevent further exploration. Of note however is the commonality between them, in terms of 'biographicity' (Alheit and Dausien, 2000), and how Ruby and Huwie are able to re-interpret their biographies, and experience their lives, dynamically. For Huwie this dynamism is actively chosen, whereas for Ruby it appears to be an unavoidable by-product of her apparent lack of control and ownership.

In conclusion, the outcome of this small-scale study suggests that despite a societal shift towards neoliberalism, and the consequential emphasis on the power of the individual (Sultana, 2011), for some young people the weight of personal responsibility is paralysing, rather than empowering. As such, whilst effective, contemporary, programmes of career guidance and counselling, learning and development are always welcome, they must perhaps do more than seek to furnish young people with the perceived beneficial qualities of resilience and decision-making. Agentic, resilient young people like Huwie seem well-equipped to enjoy the thrill of a 21st century, metaphorical career-rollercoaster. However, this research suggests that in the first instance at least, the needs of those like Ruby are a more fundamental. Preparation for and an understanding of the world of work, countering gender specific expectations, is a process that takes time and is best started in the early years of secondary school at the very latest (Barnes et al, 2011). Consequently, a social constructivist approach to CLD, and to individual support, may afford young people like Ruby with the navigational skills of biographicity (Savickas, 2011). By so doing, she is helped to recognise the thread in her own narrative, which in turn can enable the construction of a meaningful career identity.

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## For correspondence

Louise Badelow

louisebadelow@icloud.com

Master of Arts, Canterbury Christ Church University 'An Exploration of One Actor's Career Story'