The Hero's Journey: A new model for protean career change

Saira Iqbal

For correspondence:

Saira Iqbal: saira.iqbal@msn.com

Abstract

The protean career is a values-driven and self-directed career where individuals seek greater independence in their work. Despite its increasing prevalence, the ways in which a protean career might develop over time outside of a traditional organisational setting is under-researched. This article draws from a dissertation research project exploring how nine protean career-changers narratively construct and understand their protean career path outside of the organisational setting. A new model of protean career change is proposed; it suggests that protean career change can be understood based on a narrative template known as the Hero's Journey. This model can be utilised by career practitioners and researchers to understand, facilitate, and optimise protean career change.

Keywords: Protean career; career theory; career transition; career change; narrative counselling

Introduction

The protean career path is characterised by self-directed and values-driven career moves (Hall, 2002). It is a non-linear career path, driven by the person rather than the organisation (Hirschi, 2018; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). This contrasts with the traditional, linear career routes which have been characterised by hierarchical advancement,

organisational career management and low career mobility (Gubler et al., 2014). Exploring the protean career today is particularly important as self-directed career change is becoming increasingly common (AbouAssi et al., 2019). In a survey of 4,000 adults in the UK, 87% of under 25s were looking to re-evaluate and change their career paths in 2021 (Aviva, 2021). Gig work, technological advances, as well as the increased expectation and offering of work flexibility post-pandemic (Hite & McDonald, 2020) mean that career paths may be becoming more individualised, with the power shifting to the person from organisation (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). Researchers have indicated a growing need to understand how the protean career path is developed (Gubler et al., 2014). Previous research has mainly studied the protean career quantitatively (Bakhri & Mahfudz 2020; Mahler & Hoare, 2010; Mintz, 2003). Further, studies tend to focus on career change that takes place inside the structure and direction provided by the organisation (Wolf, 2019). Considering those on the protean path may be more likely to change career trajectories and exit the organisation (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), there is a need for more qualitative research on a career path that takes place outside of the organisational setting.

Literature review

The protean career is a widely acknowledged concept in contemporary career literature. Despite its popularity, protean career theory (Hall, 1976) remains largely unchanged and under-examined almost four decades after its conception (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Gubler et al., 2014). The protean career theory suggests two main principles underpin a protean career. Firstly, the individual is values-driven; so that the person's internal values provide the measure of success for their career, and secondly, the individual is self-directed and personally manages and adapts their career when required (Hall, 2004). Researchers have paid the most attention to researching protean careers quantitatively; the protean career orientation has shown a positive, quantitative relationship with outcomes such as career success, job and employee satisfaction, employee commitment and work–life balance (Bakhri & Mahfudz 2020; Mahler & Hoare, 2010; Mintz, 2003), however, less attention has been paid to the qualitative aspects of the protean career path. Exploring the experience of building a protean career path (Gubler et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2018; Hoyer, 2020) can help broaden our understanding of why, despite challenges, some individuals choose this path; and how they keep up motivation during challenging times that occur during career change (Bardon et al., 2017).

Protean career path

Individuals on a protean career path may be more likely to be involved in some form or career change or transition (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). The development of the protean career path has been largely overlooked (Gubler et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2018). The few studies that investigate the protean career path tend to focus on leadership and management within organisational settings with career changes happening as a result of organisational procedures e.g. promotion, transfer, retirement (e.g. Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007; McDonald et al., 2005; Reitman & Schneer, 2003; Wolf, 2019). There is a lack of research on protean participants' career paths when career changes do not take place within the social and formal mandates of the organisation.

Protean career path models

It is important to understand how the transition to a protean career path has been previously constructed by individuals and studied by researchers. Wolf (2019) studied the protean career path of managers from a lifespan perspective and found that managers built a protean career by undertaking a number of steps. First, the discovery of conflicting expectations, second, the exploration of one's own values and capabilities, third, the commitment to one's own path; and finally defending that path. Ibarra (2007) observes that existing models that aim to explain how individuals transition career paths tend to follow a similar milestones based on Van Gennep's (1960) model; such as separation, transition, and incorporation. However, the models have not focused on what drives movement from one stage to the next outside of organisational structure. In response, Ibarra (2007) suggests a model that can be used to explore non-institutionalised career change, where an individual is able to explore future possible selves outside of the traditional work environment. In this model she highlights early transition, where individuals start to act on new possibilities; the liminal stage, where individuals start to explore their identity and enact possible selves; and late transition, where an individual becomes integrated with their new identity. Whilst there is promise in Ibarra's model, it is yet to be empirically evaluated in much depth in relation to protean career change. Overall, in-depth research on the protean career path is lacking, suggesting a need to more effectively understand how it is constructed and developed.

Research Gaps and Research Questions

The literature review has identified research gaps which are important to address due to the shifting nature of careers and an increasing movement toward protean work (Hall, 2002). First, there are very few studies that investigate protean careers from a qualitative perspective. Second, research tends to investigate traditional, organisational career paths focusing on managers where career changes are normally mandated by the organisation. Changing work dynamics signify the importance of understanding the protean career path and identity from a non-institutionalised perspective when an individual chooses to leave an organisation. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore how protean career-changers narratively construct and understand their protean career path outside of the organisational setting.

Methods

Nine individuals who had undertaken a significant career change from a traditional organisational based career to a protean career route were interviewed (table 1). Individuals were recruited by word-of-mouth and using the researchers' professional network. A number of pre-screening questions were asked to indicate if participants fit the criteria of voluntarily moving to a protean career path. Purposeful sampling was used to select potential information-rich cases for analysis, to give a better chance of developing useful insights (Patton, 2002). The British Psychological Society's (2021) *Code of Human Research Ethics* guided this research and ethical approval was granted by Birkbeck, University of London. Nine semi-structured interviews are deemed suitable for studying subjective interpretations (Arksey & Knight, 1999). An interview guide was developed using the life story interview method (Atkinson, 1998); life story interviewing, which is based on biographical narratives, gives a broader understanding of an individual's journey over

the lifespan, emphasising a series of events rather than just one incident (Wolf, 2019) and is effective method to investigate how individuals construe meaning during significant life events such as career changes (McAdams, 1997).

Data analysis

In comparison to other qualitative methods, narrative methods have been found useful to study those navigating complex career challenges such as career transitions over time (Hoyer, 2020; McAdams, 1993). This is because they can provide a lifespan view of the career and can capture ambiguity (Hoyer, 2020). Holistic narrative analysis studies a story structure and finds common denominators, this can give an idea of career and life patterns (e.g. Cochran, 1991; Denzin, 1989; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Savickas, 2001; Tonkin, 1995). By using elements of a chronological story structure from the holistic narrative analysis, a narrative plotline analysis was also conducted, was chosen as the method of analysis as it enabled an understanding of the career journey of individuals i.e. high points, low points, turning points in their career as a whole, and over their lifespan.

Table 1. Participants included in research

Name	Previous Career	Protean Career
Amy	Marketing	Research
Anita	Finance	Health & Beauty
Cait	Teaching	Career Coaching
Ellie	Healthcare	Life Coaching & Training
Lily	Marketing	Coaching & Facilitation
Nat	Government adviser	Health & Beauty
Nimra	HR	Coaching & Training
Nathan	Heathcare / Facilities	Life Coaching
Val	Nursery worker	Life Coaching

Findings

Holistic Narrative Analysis

It became clear during narrative analysis that the structure of most participants stories closely represented The Hero's Journey template. As a result, this template was retrospectively used to analyse three themes that were prominent within the text: these were separation, initiation and return. In The Hero's Journey, the protagonist or 'hero' adventures out of their familiar world where they face various trials, and transitions through these three main phases. During the separation phase, there is a movement away from everyday life, during the initiation, the hero moves to a new career phase, and challenges are met and overcome; and during the return, the final phase the hero returns from his adventure with newfound learning and wisdom (Campbell, 1956; Vogler, 2007; Williams, 2019).

Separation: The critical scenes

For the hero, the separation stage indicates a growing awareness that something is not quite right (Williams, 2019). The idea that something was lacking in their early careers was evident in all accounts of participants interviewed. The majority of individuals recalled a certain triggering event; these memories are often the most vivid, and well explained in the participants stories. It has been argued that these 'trigger-points' in stories are critical components of good stories, helping enhance understanding of both the storyteller and the listener (Ibarra, 2004).

> **Ellie:** 'Literally one day on the way to school, I had a bit of a what I refer to as a nervous breakdown…'

> **Nathan:** 'I remember really clearly, I was stood in the office at work, and I had a couple of report pieces of paper in my hand and I thought, I don't know what I'm doing here anymore, what am I doing?'

These texts illustrate a point in the hero's life where it has been decided that they have had 'enough,' and that they cannot go on. They decide to take action to separate from their previous careers or jobs. There are big realisations here that they are in the wrong place, and something needs to happen. Some of the activities that individuals are involved in include: some disengagement from their current career, becoming aware that alternatives are available, and testing these alternatives. At this stage individuals are sometimes in denial, and often feel a 'push' and 'pull' between current career and job and new career. They may start to transition physically or emotionally to their new career.

Initiation: Learning my way

Every hero faces trials, mistakes, and roadblocks (Campbell, 1956). This was especially apparent as individuals described their lack of knowing as trials. In these new jobs there were many things had to be learnt and weaknesses that had to be overcome. These included both practical and emotional challenges.

> **Nimra:** 'At the beginning it was like; I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how this works. The bit that's tricky are the unknowns.'

> **Nathan:** 'Doubt creeps in, then those dips are quite significant.'

Some of the activities might include increased job search activity and frequent changing of jobs as individuals explore alternative options and live out alternative roles and values.

Return: The transformation

During the return, as mentioned by Campbell (1956) the Hero must retain, integrate, and possibly share with the world the wisdom that he gained on his quest. In relation, Hero's here talk about how their life has changed been transformed for the better. They have learned lessons and reached points where they can look back on their path and understand what has come from their journey (Vogler, 2007). Nimra who talked about her previous career being chosen for status and money suggests that this is no longer important to her.

> **Nimra:** 'Me and my siblings are probably seen as the least successful…a lot of my cousins have these massive mansions, these huge salaries, these big holidays. But

> I'm so content with what I have, and…honestly, I don't want anymore. Mansions...
> they take a lot of cleaning, right?'

In all stories, the transformation or wisdom gained is connected to the overall holistic themes in their life stories. Nimra's life story is about moving away from status to connection, Ellie's story is about being self-sufficient in business because in the past she had not been, and Nathan's story is about being wounded in his life and completing his journey of healing. All individuals have found new wisdom, which shapes which direction their career will take next. During the return stage individuals feel mostly stable in their careers and there is often less action and more reflection than the first two stages. Individuals are reviewing how to shape their career and life in accordance to their values. At this point, new work values and activities start to replace old ones.

Narrative plotline analysis

The plotline analysis created from datapoints during the holistic narrative analysis, is a graphical representation of the journey the individual went on to reach their 'current' state (Figure 1). A plotline analysis was conducted as suggested by Lieblich et al. (1998) and guidance provided by Cooper (2020), which was used as a template to guide the analysis. Narratives and timelines of events were analysed to identify progressive, regressive, or cyclical plotlines. Polkinghorne's (1988) division of narratives was mapped on to The Hero's Journey to create a beginning, middle and ending. The 'beginning' demonstrates the beginning of the career up to when thoughts of a career change became evident; this is the 'separation' stage in The Hero's Journey. The middle phase indicates the in-between, liminal stage (Ibarra, 2007), marked as initiation. The 'return' represents the final and current stage of the journey. Ellie, Anita, and Amy had progressive narratives; they narrated mainly positive learning experiences, with little negative affect and one to three changes over their career lifespan. All others had cyclical narrative with many more ups and downs and job and career changes. Whilst there were not any regressive narratives, there were two cyclical narratives with a downward trend, this is where Cait and Lily were starting to present some disaffection toward their current careers and were looking to make further changes to the nature of their work.

Figure 1: Graphical representation of narrative plotlines
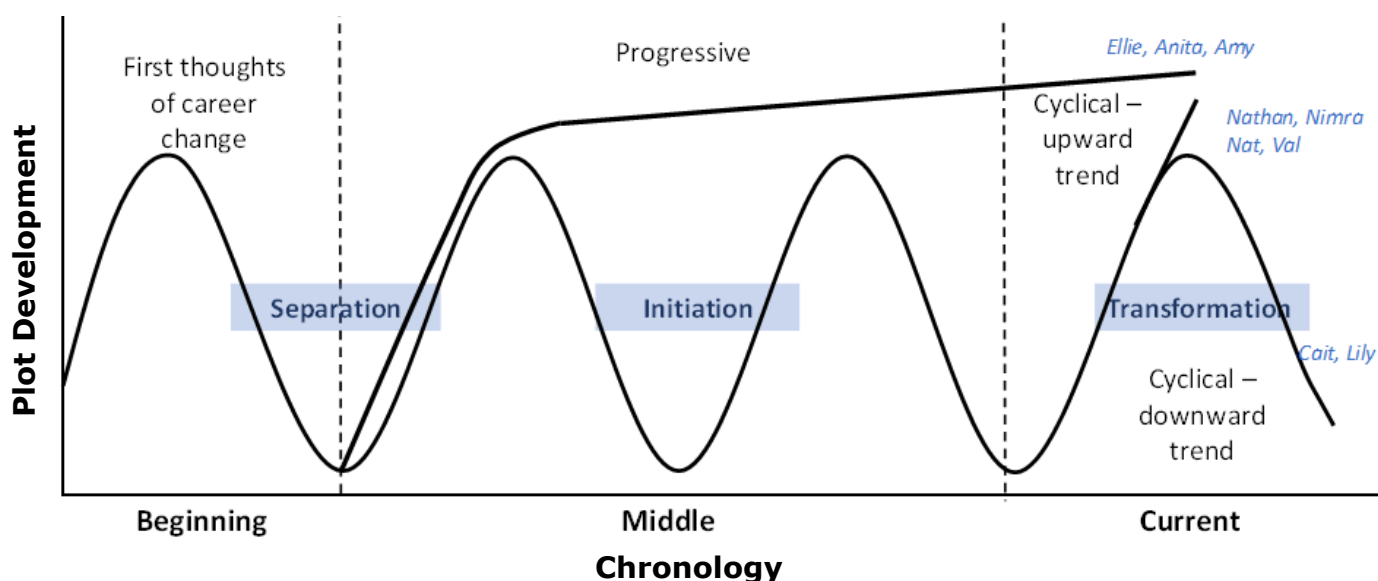
Discussion

This research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how protean career-changers construct and understand their protean career path. The results find that the protean career-changer is very much constructed by participants like The Hero's Journey, as someone who undertakes an important journey and returns transformed and renewed with a better understanding of themselves and their career (Campbell, 1956; Williams, 2019). This study adds to protean career research by suggesting a novel Hero's Journey template that protean career-changers use when narrating their journeys. This model may also be utilised as practical coaching tool to understand and ease transition for the protean career-changer when they exit an organisational setting.

The Hero's Journey showed similarity to other models of change and identity transition e.g. Ibarra's (2007) model of career transition which she suggests as applicable to non-institutionalised career contexts. Like Ibarra (2007) this research recognises that 'push' and 'pull' factors are prominent within both the separation and initiation stages, where individuals weigh the risks and experiment with different jobs. The Hero's Journey, however, differs in one fundamental way; it is a legend that is well-known; often used in media (Vogler, 2007) as well as clinical and therapeutic settings (Duffy, 2010; Hartley, 2010), its strength lies in its ability to be easily used and understood by researcher, and practitioners in both academic and practical work-place settings. For example, it has been identified that 'journey' is a metaphor used by careers advisers to talk about career transitions, movement, and change (McIlveen & Creed, 2018). Researchers have indicated that The Hero's Journey can be used as a comprehensive map for those either seeking change or those that must take forced change (Williams, 2019). There is clearly room to explore this model in more depth when individuals seek to change career paths. How a career coach or adviser might make use of this model and ask questions to help navigate career change is outlined below.

Figure 2: Hero's journey applied as coaching tool for protean career change.
The stages in this figure are adopted by Vogler (2007) from Campbell (1956).
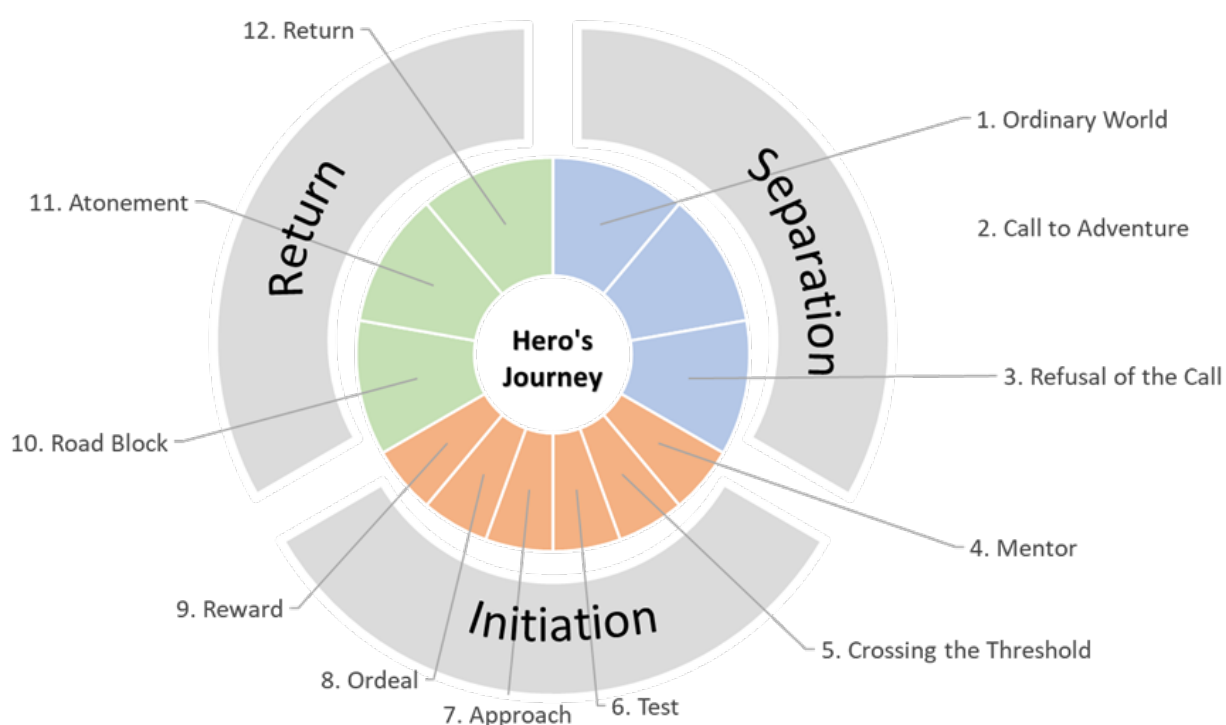
Below are examples of some coaching questions suggested by the researcher that might potentially be asked at each stage to enable movement for the protean career changer. This is not an extensive list.

Separation

1. The coach may ask the client where on the Hero's Journey they are and what that feels like.

2. Have they had the call to the adventure/ career change? What might be the obstacles to this adventure?

3. If they have refused the call – what is going on for them? If they did follow the call – what might happen?

Initiation

4. Who are the mentors that might help them take on this task of crossing over/ changing paths? Who is in their network that might help?

5. What might crossing over to the other side look like? How has/ how might their life change?

6. What setbacks are occurring/ might occur? How can these be handled?

Return

7. What resources are needed to help with these challenges and set-backs?

8. When facing the challenges, what changes have occurred? How will things be different moving forward?

9. What is the reward or payback of having overcome challenges?

10. Are there any additional challenges that need to be overcome?

11. What has been learned?

12. How can these learnings be applied?

The plotline analysis illustrates that individual journeys are either progressive or cyclical over time; suggesting that generally individuals tend to narratively construct their career changes as positive and without regret. The plotline pattern highlights the normality of the cyclical nature of the protean career which is full of high and lows. As well as supporting research that indicates career maturity happens via series of learning cycles (Super, 1990); the novelty of plotline analysis lies in its ability to offer a graphical representation of the protean career journey over the lifespan.

Future research & implications

The Hero's Journey as a model to assist protean career-changers

The Hero's Journey template has been suggested as useful for when individuals experience transition and unfamiliarity (Williams, 2019). This template has been used largely in therapeutic settings and counsellor development training (Duffy, 2010; Duffy & Guiffrida, 2014; Hartley, 2010; Williams, 2016); currently no academic research looks at this tool from a career change perspective. Based on this research gap, this study contributes a novel finding; the utility of the Hero's Journey as a narrative template for protean career change. Practically, there is room for career coaches to use this template to explore individual protean career change journeys inside and outside of the organisational context and have more meaningful career conversations. The scope of the dissertation research allowed exploration of the three main facets of the Hero's Journey (separation, initiation, and return). However, there are many more sub-categories with these stages, suggesting the need for future research to explore this model in much more depth and detail (e.g. Boklage et al., 2018) in relation to change.

Narrative plotline analysis as a tool to understand careers over the lifespan

Cooper (2020) suggests a systematic approach for identifying key plotlines; mapping out narrative chronology (Young et al., 1994), identifying evaluative text (Lieblich et al., 1998) and using researcher reflexivity (Cooper & Mackenzie Davey, 2011). There is greater role for systematically applied plotline analysis in narrative research, as it can help researchers analyse career and life patterns over time (Cochran, 1991; Savickas, 2001). From a practical perspective plotline analysis may be useful for career practitioners in increasing the quality of mid-career or late-career conversations. There is room for complexity and different variations of plotlines, which could be explored in more depth in combination with The Hero's Journey model for career conversations.

The Hero's Journey as a model for broader change

The Hero's Journey is an under-researched tool when it comes to careers. It is a powerful and easy-to-understand model with similarities to other models of change. Therefore, arguably, has the potential to aid general change as well as protean career change.

Limitations

Narrative analysis can be conducted in a multitude of different ways (Elliot, 2005), and some of the methods of analysis are still evolving e.g., plotline analysis (Cooper, 2020; Lieblich et al., 1998), therefore, unlike other methods, there is no recommended way to conduct narrative research. This research was guided by the idea not to 'reify' any qualitative methods at the expense of reflexivity (Watts, 2014). Out of the individuals interviewed, six of nine worked primarily as a coach; so these results may not be generalisable outside of this career category.

Conclusion

By exploring how protean career-changers narrate and construct their career path, a unique model of protean career change drawing on Hero's Journey template was developed (figure 2). This model has implications for career practitioners and researchers who can use it to understand and facilitate individuals navigating protean career change. It also has the potential to be used to investigate change more broadly.

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