

Career development: A geographical perspective

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Abstract

Career theory has typically focused on the ways that careers develop over time rather than thinking about the role of place. Drawing from insights from the geographical literature, this paper argues for a much greater attention to the spatial dimension of career development, understanding that place is a fundamental dimension of human existence, and that our careers are enacted in dynamic relation to the places we live in and move through. Further consideration of spatial dynamics, especially in relation to inequalities, should not therefore be considered a peripheral endeavor, but central to elaborating our theoretical understandings of career development.

Key words: geography, place, mobility, career development, career theory

Introduction

In his work on metaphors of career, Inkson (2004, 2007) describes the 'journey' as 'the most common of all career metaphors' (2004, p.103). Explaining the metaphor, Inkson argues that it is 'attractive because of its ability to incorporate two key underlying facets of career: movement between *places*, and *time*' (ibid). However, as I want to argue in this paper, I would suggest that existing theoretical understandings of career development have typically focused on *time* and neglected consideration of *place*. I start this paper by exploring some of the limitations in existing career development scholarship, before

exploring how it is possible to integrate different understandings of place into career development studies drawing on scholarship from the discipline of geography. I finish the paper by pointing to the potential for spatializing career theory such that it more fully accounts for the geographical dimension.

The role of place in career theory

In existing career development scholarship there is very limited consideration of how an individual's spatial position and spatial mobility might impact on their career pathway (Alexander & Hooley, 2018; Inkson & Thorn, 2010; Patton & McMahon, 2014). Killeen (1996), for example discusses the importance of three elements in career theory: agents, environments and career action; or the who, where and what of career theory. Although we might think of 'environment' in geographical terms, Killeen points out that environment has been 'commonly thought of as labour markets, or as occupational structures or as social structures more broadly conceived' (Killeen, 1996, p. 24). These occupational or social structures are arguably often relatively decontextualised, and where they are imagined with a geographical realisation this relates to differences between *national* contexts – the difference say, between qualification requirements and training routes in certain occupations in different countries. Sometimes work that has focused on social contexts, has considered more localised contexts. Law's Community Interaction Theory, for example, clearly considers the role of (localized) community contexts for shaping career interests: 'the way in which who-does-what in society is decided is the product of a plurality of interpersonal transactions conducted in *local settings* [emphasis added], and on the basis of interaction within and between groups of which the individual is a member – the "community"'. (Law, 1981, p. 145).

The clearest geographical consideration of the 'environment' in career theory however is perhaps not in relation to occupational or social structures, but in relation to the labour market, especially in terms of how the spatial distribution of labour market opportunities might influence career development. Here spatial position is understood typically as a facilitator or barrier to career development. Roberts' (1977, 1997, 2009) Opportunity Structure theory for example is clear about the role of geographical position: 'young people's opportunities are governed primarily by the interrelationships between their home backgrounds, educational attainments, *local* [emphasis added] job opportunities and employers' recruitment practices' (Roberts, 1997, p. 345). Roberts' work here is thinking about young people specifically, and these young people are typically understood to have limited choice about their spatial location, however labour markets may also be considered a barrier to adult career development. For adults, spatial limitations are more often understood to be a result of choosing to be based in an area with limited opportunities, Schein's (1990) work on career anchors for example explores the 'lifestyle' anchor which includes an 'unwillingness' to move location typically 'for reasons of integrating personal, family and career issues' (Schein, 1990, p. 32).

I would argue that even in a great deal of more recent theory these tendencies to think about place either in terms of community context, or in terms of the labour market remain. Often these discourses frame place negatively, as a barrier to career progression, and with mobility being thought of positively as a means to increasing prospects. A focus on

spatial inequalities in health outcomes, life expectancies, skills and employment, often through a focus on deprived areas (HM Government, 2022) can reinforce a framing of place in negative terms, such that to 'get on' is linked to 'getting out'. However, this seems to me to be a very narrow way of understanding geographical space, and in my work I have been interested in exploring the potential for a much deeper understanding of the spatial influences on career development (Alexander, 2022). Here, I have drawn heavily on the wider literature on place and space to explore and interrogate existing career theory, and to identify possible theoretical advancements to develop our understanding of geography in relation to career development. It is to this wider literature that I now turn.

A geographical contribution

In thinking about the value of a geographical perspective on career development, first it is important to consider what a 'geographical perspective' *is*. One of the challenges (and potential opportunities) here is that geography as a discipline is unusual in its high level of diversity or 'internal interdisciplinarity' (Schoenberger, 2001, p. 379). This interdisciplinarity is perhaps most clear in the divide between physical and human geography, but we can also think in terms of economic geography, cultural geography and other sub-disciplines all of which offer different contributions to thinking about the role of place. The challenge here is that the high internal diversity of the field of geography means that despite the 'spatial turn' across the social sciences, sometimes engagement with geography by other disciplines 'reduces and flattens geography' (Schoenberger, 2001, p. 380), such that an understanding of place becomes simply 'coordinates on a map' (Ibid, p. 377).

I would argue that the field of career studies is also seeing something of a 'spatial turn', with a growth of interest in this area. However, it seems to me that much of this literature also runs the risk of thinking about geography in a relatively limited way. So for example, Patton and McMahon (2014) suggest that 'geographic location has been underrated as an influence that may facilitate or be a barrier to career development' (Patton & McMahon, 2014, p. 204), and I would suggest that despite their welcome call for greater consideration of geography, there remains a focus on location as a *barrier* or *facilitator* of career development, rather than asking if the meanings and functions of place in career development might extend beyond this.

Gunz and Mayrhofer's (2020) work also makes a welcome call for a focus on career as both spatial and temporal, however their work also does not offer a fully elaborated conceptualization of place. Specifically, they explore 'position' in geographic space, and how career development can involve crossing geographic as well as social boundaries. The concept of geographic space, then, focuses on 'bounded' spaces and often on national boundaries. The focus on boundary crossing and mobility is also apparent in Inkson and Thorn's (2010) call for a greater focus on geographical mobility (and not just occupational or organisational mobility) in the careers literature. They conclude that generally mobility is positive because of the way it allows greater access to opportunities. Again, there is a risk here of adopting relatively narrow understandings of geographic places, focused on spatial distributions of labour markets, and a continued focus on mobility as a positive means of overcoming spatial limitations. Another growing area of interest is the idea that technological innovation and remote working will overcome barriers of space and although

focusing on place, this literature argues that it is of decreasing importance, suggesting that work in the future will become freed from the constraints of location.

In the next sections of the paper, I want to explore the possibilities for building a more elaborated understanding of the role of geographical place in career development. I do this through reflecting on a number of contributions the geographical literature has made to thinking about place and mobility and which are particularly pertinent for career studies. In so doing I argue for an understanding of geography in career development that moves beyond 'coordinates on a map' and ideas of place in narrow terms as a facilitator of barrier to progression.

Experience is inherently spatial

The first point that is raised in the geographical literature around the importance of place, centres on suggesting that place is a fundamental dimension of human existence (Massey, 2005; Simonsen, 2008). This literature has argued that place has too often been treated simply as a 'backdrop' to life, rather than a meaningful dimension in itself. And that place has often been neglected in favour of the dimension of time, with time aligning to a 'progressive project of "becoming"' whereas place aligning to 'stasis and reaction – a passive "being"' (Simonsen, 2008, p. 17). Arguably career theory, has a strong focus on ideas of 'becoming' (in ideas of career progression for example) and therefore it is somewhat understandable that time may have held a particularly privileged position over place in a great deal of scholarship.

Massey (2005) however argues that time and space may be considered to be equally important dimensions of human life, and, crucially, as intertwined dimensions. Here she argues for the idea of 'time-space' recognising that our experiences both exist within time and space – "it is, irretrievably, here and now. It won't be the same 'here' when it is no longer now" (p.139). Embracing this kind of conceptualisation of place and space in career theory, potentially leads to a much wider understanding of the spatial components of career development. Critically career development can be understood as a process that is navigated across spaces and across times. It is not the case that we can think about place in a static way as influencing (just) our immediate opportunities, but the places we have lived in and moved through will have shaped the kinds of opportunities we have had for learning and work, will have shaped our networks and will have shaped our views of ourselves and our futures. This line of argument is critical to the spatio-relational model of career development that I have been working on in recent years (Alexander, 2022) and suggests a much more profound role for place and space than in existing theoretical perspectives.

Place as space made meaningful

A second contribution from the geographical literature is the way that place is not just relevant in terms of spatial distributions of opportunities, or as a 'container' for our experiences, but has meaning in itself. A key argument here made by spatial scholars is about the distinction between 'space' and 'place': space can be understood in relatively abstract terms as representing the relative positions of objects, whereas place is

understood as space made meaningful through human activity (Cresswell, 2004, p. 1890; Relph, 2008; Tuan, 1977). Of course, how space becomes 'meaningful' can be discussed, but one form of meaning is personal, in how we relate to our places, how we see ourselves in relation to our places, and what meanings we attach to different places. On a simple level for example, it is possible to understand how people might have desires to live in certain places that seem to 'fit' themselves or their lifestyles (see for example Savage et al., 2005). There is a connection here to Schein's idea of the lifestyle anchor introduced earlier. However, the critical point here is that rather than lifestyle being an anchor for some and not others, it might be more accurate to understand place as meaningful to people much more widely.

In understanding the meanings of places, it is also possible to reflect on how the places that we live in can shape our ideas of ourselves and of our futures (Prince, 2014). In my work I have thought about this using the Bourdieusian concept of 'habitus' and the theoretical framework of careership (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) to explore how we might internalize aspects of our context, but this is not the only way we can understand how the places we live in might shape our views of ourselves and the world (Alexander, 2022). A range of other scholars have thought about similar issues in relation to spatial 'belonging', thinking about how we negotiate feelings of belonging in our places (Harris et al., 2021). What is particularly interesting to me in this literature is that I also see ideas of 'belonging' and 'fit' as absolutely central to a great deal of career theory. This stems all the way back to the matching theories and how finding a fit between ourselves and workplace opportunities is key to effective career decisions. However it is striking to me that in the existing careers literature we do not consider other forms of 'fit' including spatial belonging.

Arguably a similar limitation is apparent in the spatial belonging literature where although there has been some focus on work as part of being able to 'belong' to a community or a place, this has typically focused on *access* to work and the rights to work (Antonsich, 2010), rather than the nature of work, or career pathways. Here I would argue there is significant scope to think about belonging much more broadly, bringing together literature on spatial belonging and occupational or career belonging. Again as I have argued elsewhere (Alexander, 2022) it is possible to view career as a process always conducted in certain places, and potentially as a means to generate spatial connections and belongings. Different career routes also provide different spatial potentials, with some careers or qualifications facilitating certain kinds of spatial mobility. Fundamentally perhaps spatial belonging and occupational or career belonging may be two sides of what is essentially the same experience of belonging – an experience of fit in our lives, where we feel that we are doing what we want to do in a place where we want to do it (Alexander, 2022).

Spatial dynamics of labour markets

Drawing on the previous discussion, the third contribution from the geographical literature thinks about how place is not an objective, static or neutral feature of our lives. Instead places are dynamic, contested, and actively shaped through our activities and narratives (Lefebvre, 1991). In very practical terms for example, planning decisions about where to situate a school, a road, or a commercial centre have important impacts on people who live in an area. Understanding space as dynamic is very important for extending our understanding of the spatial dimensions of labour markets – moving away from

treating spatial variation as a neutral 'fact' and understanding how labour markets are shaped through human activities and are created and recreated with different spatial configurations. This is a similar point to that made by Schoenberger who argues that focusing on geography simply in terms of co-ordinates on a map means that:

'Any sense of history in and of place – of how cultures and societies write themselves onto the earth and how both the environmental and the social are transformed in the process – is lost.' (2001, p. 377).

What Schoenberger is pointing to here is the importance of a geographical awareness for understanding how human activity (labour markets for example) do not just exist but are created. They emerge out of human decisions.

A geographical perspective can, therefore, highlight how labour market dynamics are spatialised. In contemporary times for example, it has been pointed out how despite discourses of the decreasing importance of space, global capitalism is shaping our local experiences, including what kinds of work is available and where (Robertson, 1995). Localised labour markets are not natural emergences but are results of political and social dynamics as they occur across space – sometimes termed the 'socio-spatial dialectic' (Soja, 2010). This is particularly important in career theory because as theorists like Massey (2005) and Farrugia (2019) have shown, the spatial dynamics of labour markets intersect with spatialised dynamics of inequality, creating, for example, localised experiences of gender (McDowell & Massey, 1984), or of youth (Farrugia, 2019), or other inequalities. Where career theory and career guidance practice have a longstanding interest in issues of inequality, I would suggest that there is a risk of overlooking an important part of the puzzle if spatialised dynamics of inequality are not more fully taken into account.

Creating our spaces through work

Understanding how places are dynamic and shaped by human activity also points to a fourth contribution from the geographical literature: consideration of how we as individuals engage dynamically with places, shaping our own engagements with place and creating our own sense of meaning from the spaces we live in and move through. That is, we are not simply at the mercy of the places that we find ourselves in. In a very practical sense for example, we might consider the ways that individuals might actually generate opportunities for work in their spatial contexts, rather than simply having to take what is available. This is clear for example in how entrepreneurs can create new businesses and new employment opportunities in the places that they live, and how intrapreneurship might contribute to business development. In much contemporary scholarship on career guidance for social justice, the ways that career choices have impacts on the world has been discussed, including the possibility of supporting individuals to identify how they can go about 'changing the world' (e.g. Hooley, 2015). As a result, it is possible to think of the ways that career choices can have implications in the creation of places and spaces, both on a societal level (impacting on the places and opportunities within them) and on an individual level (in the ways that we engage with our spaces, and how we feel about them). It is also the case that the choices we make in relation to our places – where we move to, or how we engage with our local communities – for example might create different potentials

for future working lives. How we engage with a place for example might help us feel a sense of belonging or not, might bring us into contact with different people, and different opportunities. These points highlight the diverse possibilities for engaging with places, or engaging with different places, and this emphasizes the plurality of spatial experiences.

Mobilities and spaces

Understanding time and space as intertwined dimensions, a fifth contribution from the geographical literature, is an argument to break down the conceptual division between place and mobility. As I have already discussed in much career theory place is understood in a relatively static way in relation to labour market constraints, and mobility is understood as a way of overcoming these spatial constraints. However, drawing on the work of Massey (2005) and others we might understand that mobility is not a way of overcoming place, but is actually in itself a spatial experience – it is a journey through time *and space*. It is not the case that anyone ever ‘escapes’ the constraints of place for example, because all our experience is spatialized. This also helps draw our attention to different forms of mobility practices in relation to work: moving away to live elsewhere is one form of mobility, but equally so is commuting, or working away from home for a period of time, or even a temporary residential move. Our career choices then might be understood not as framed (just) by our residential location, but as framed by different forms of mobility decision and mobility practices, and different mobility practices might potentially be connected to different kinds of spatial and career aspirations.

Again, inequalities are relevant here. Who is able to move and in what ways depends on resources. Sometimes in the literature this is termed ‘mobility capital’ (Corbett, 2007). To live in one community and work in another requires the ability to pay for travel for example, and it might involve being able to drive. However, inequalities are complex, and as well as mobility being a part of being able to access work, work might also require or facilitate mobility in ways that exacerbate inequalities. In a recent news story for example issues of low paid care staff being inadequately remunerated for travel time was highlighted (Jones, 2023); however at the other end of the scale, in jobs that require some global mobility, mobility might be seen as a ‘perk’ of a job. Further, in some jobs or educational courses where global mobility is possible, these mobilities may act in themselves as a form of capital and provide ongoing career benefits. Having a ‘global outlook’, for example, is often something that is valued by employers. Because of the ways that these kinds of global opportunities are often only available to a select few, these kinds of mobilities can effectively support the reproduction of social inequalities (Brooks & Waters, 2010). Here we can again see how geographical understandings might considerably enrich the theoretical consideration of equality and social justice in career theory.

Beyond employment: spatial lives

Thinking about the spatial dimensions of our lives, a sixth contribution of geographical understandings to career studies is about how the wider (non work) parts of our lives have a spatial dimension, and can frame our spatial decisions, and also our career decisions in relation to those spaces. Drawing from the literature on ‘geographies of care’ for example, one key consideration is the ways that caring relationships are conducted in and through space. Of particular importance in relation to mobility is that where our partner is based,

or our children, or our (ageing) parents or grandparents, is important in spatial decisions (Alexander, 2022). But again, thinking about mobilities, it is important to understand spatial decisions as complex, and often involving different kinds of mobility practices. That is, we do not just move to be near a partner and then experience restricted opportunities, but we might perform different kinds of mobility in relation to these relationships – we might, for example, live at some distance from our parents or grandparents, but travel regularly to see them or to support them. We might conduct distance relationships for a period of time, or we might choose to live close to our partner or those who require care, but commute for work. The ways that our careers are embedded in our wider lives, and the kinds of negotiations we make around how we balance our life roles are well recognized in career theories, including Super's (1980) rainbow model. However, drawing from the geographical literature it is clear that the ways these roles are negotiated has a spatial dimension.

Alongside the spaces of relationships, there is a growing interest in housing and how it shapes life opportunities, and here it is important to recognize that the availability and costs of housing vary across different spaces. In relation to career development, this raises awareness of how lower salaries in one region might be counterbalanced by lower housing costs (Ball, 2019). This raises questions about whether prioritizing job progression or salary would always improve economic outcomes, if this means moving to another area with higher housing costs. Questions about how people navigate their housing and career transitions in tandem might also be raised (Hoolachan et al., 2017). And inequalities again become a focus, recognizing that families are often a source of housing especially for young adults, and where family homes are based can provide different access to the labour market (Milburn, 2009). A geographical perspective therefore highlights that other aspects of our lives, not just our working lives, are conducted in and through space, and raises questions about the implications of these dynamics for our career pathways.

Beyond spatial 'containers'

A final contribution from a geographical perspective to understanding place in career development, is in terms of scalar dynamics. In existing career theory, as I discussed earlier in this paper, there is a tendency to think in terms of bounded communities or labour markets, which might seem to suggest that everyone lives in neat geographical boxes. However, this overlooks two very important points. Firstly, that individuals exist in very different relationships to their places. They have different histories, different mobility trajectories and different social connections; they are classed, gendered and have different ethnic backgrounds; they might live in the same sorts of spaces, but they might experience and engage with these places quite differently. Secondly, thinking in terms of spatial 'containers' – regions, cities, districts, even streets – overlooks the scalar dynamics of place, that place exists at lots of different levels. Geographical perspectives for example, have done a great deal to highlight the importance of micro-geographies, and in career theory this might involve thinking not just about national or regional labour markets or communities, but thinking on a much smaller scale of the spatial dimensions of our working lives. This might include the specific buildings, rooms and desks or work stations where we conduct our work, and the kinds of mobilities we enact within these spaces. These perspectives highlight the importance of work in creating and being shaped by spatial dynamics on a highly localized level. To give an example, it is possible to consider

how changes to an office environment such as moving to 'hot-desking' might change the spatial dynamics of how work is practiced in the immediate environment and open up consideration of how power dynamics might play out within a workplace, in relation to the *spaces* of that workplace.

Conclusions: Towards a geographical perspective of career

Having introduced a number of points of reflection from the geographical literature, I want to returning to Inkson's metaphor of the career journey. Through this paper, I hope that I have demonstrated how exploring geographical scholarship can help to really focus on the spatial dimension of our career journeys. Through exploring seven contributions from the literature, I have sought to demonstrate how geographical perspectives address a tendency in existing career scholarship to think about place in static terms as a backdrop or container of different kinds of opportunities or communities. Instead, I have demonstrated how thinking about time and place together – as time-space – helps to highlight *spatial* dynamics of career development. Places are dynamic: they change, they are created and recreated through human action. And equally, the ways people engage with their places is dynamic. We move through spaces, and we engage with and change our places.

Career is one key means by which we engage with, and potentially change our places and our relationship to our places. But equally it is important to recognise how the spaces we live in and have moved through shape our careers, influencing the ways that we think about ourselves and our opportunities. I have also explored the evidence that inequalities have a spatial dimension, and through this have argued that there is a need to advance understanding of how career practices potentially mediate the spatial dynamics of inequality. A final contribution of this paper is that I have identified how spatial dynamics are critical in a number of different dimensions of life, including relationships and housing, and how any understanding of the spatial dynamics of career has to move beyond a narrow focus on simply working opportunities. All of these ideas point to the potential for further theoretical elaboration of the role of place and mobility in career development.

Throughout this paper I have highlighted particular ways in which I have built upon geographical ideas as part of my theoretical work in exploring place and career development (Alexander, 2022). However, I believe that there is also ample room for further scholarship, some indications of which have been given in this article. Alongside an argument that has focused on the value of a geographical perspective on career theory, I hope that I have also shown in this article more broadly how interdisciplinary curiosity is a valuable means of critiquing and enriching the field of career studies.



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