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**Stories of careers, learning and identity across the lifespan:
Considering the future narrative of career theory**

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**Stories of careers, learning and identity across the lifespan:
Considering the future narrative of career theory**

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Introduction from the ICG Research Committee

The Research Committee is privileged to support this publication, which has been developed by 3 internationally regarded figures in the field of career guidance. The pleasure of this paper is that it is targeted at practitioners and those who are interested to understand how we can integrate the various theories with practice within our profession, how we make sense of what may seem to be competing perspectives. The stories shared will resonate with many and this is a welcome contribution to our thinking about new approaches in guidance work with clients.

Abstract

This paper is located within the context of the present debate about modern and post-modern career research, theory and practice. It considers the construction of career stories of individuals across the lifespan. The stories told by the children, adolescents, adult women and men illustrate a range of theoretical constructs related to career development and career construction. Importantly, these constructs are derived from both modern and postmodern career theories. This paper demonstrates that individuals' stories provide for a rich and inclusive narrative that crosses the divide between modern and postmodern career theory. In so doing, it illustrates a possible future direction for the development of career theory.

Career stories are contextually located within the lives of individuals. Beginning in early childhood, career stories represent a recursiveness (ongoing interaction) between life experiences and the individual's attempts to make sense of those experiences. In essence, individuals continually seek to derive meaning from their life experiences, and their construction of stories represents the primary way in which individuals come to understand their experiences. In the telling of stories, individuals locate themselves as the primary narrator and character of their stories and in this way identity is constructed over time. Thus, storytelling represents a recursiveness between life experience, the construction of identity, learning, and meaning making. The agency of individuals is represented in the construction and telling of those stories and, because life is complex and multifaceted, lives are multistoried. Thus, no single story may adequately represent the totality of an individual's life experience.

The following paper considers the construction of career stories of individuals across the lifespan. In so doing, it illustrates a range of theoretical constructs related to career development and career construction and suggests the need for an inclusive and comprehensive future narrative of career theory. In beginning this paper, we would like to introduce the storytellers that you will meet: Annie, Neil and Sally are all children attending middle primary school; Jake, Abbey and Justin are adolescents attending senior secondary school; and Lorraine, Sophia, Marion, Paul, Michael and John are adults who have experienced career transitions.

Children's stories

"I really like money"

Annie, aged 9, was a grade four student attending an urban primary school. She wanted to be an actress or an archaeologist. When asked when she first began thinking about her career and the sort of job she'd like to do, she responded "*Ever since I was two*". When asked what made her start thinking about it when she was two she replied:

"I was always really interested in ... what I really like is money ... I love money ... It's my favourite thing ... I really like knowing about like what I'm going to get when I'm older, and what I was going to be when I'm older".

Annie's comments indicate that from an early age she has begun to construct an identity of herself as an adult. This is reflective of Gottfredson's (2005) claim that even very young children begin to notice and think about themselves in adult roles. Not only has Annie begun to think about herself in adult roles, she has also begun to think about the trappings of adulthood. In early childhood, children begin to construct stories of themselves, through fantasy and play, in what they perceive are adult roles (Super, 1990). For example, children may tell stories about themselves in the role of teacher, doctor, nurse, or cowboy.

At a theoretical level, Super (1990) and Gottfredson (2002, 2005) describe the different life stages through which children pass. Children of Annie's age would fall into Gottfredson's stage of

orientation to social valuation (ages 9 to 13 years). During this stage children become more aware of social class and they recognise the relationships between income, career and education. Similarly, Super believes that children of this age are in the growth *stage* of their career development during which they increasingly think about the future.

Annie's story of developing a love of money at a young age represents a recursive thematic continuity between her past, her present and her future life stories. Thus the stories Annie tells and the themes of those stories provide her with a way of understanding where she has come from, what she is now doing, and who she is becoming (Gibson, 2004).

“A bit about radio stations and stuff”

Neil, aged nine, was a grade four student attending an urban primary school. He was considering several options including guidance counsellor, teacher, and radio announcer. To a lesser extent, he was considering being a builder or electrician:

“But there's one other thing I'd like to be. I want to be a radio announcer ... I ring up (local radio station) and once we went on an excursion at the radio station ... we were learning a bit about radio stations and stuff ...”

Neil provides another example of a child constructing an identity as an adult on the basis of his life experiences. In telling his stories, Neil related how his father was a guidance counsellor who took him to work on days when he was sick and couldn't attend school. Neil effectively learned about his father's occupation from his experiences and observations of his father's work and place of work. Adults, especially parents, are key figures in children's learning about the world of work (Super, 1990). A series of recursively connected learning experiences in Neil's life provide examples of the unintentional nature of much of children's career development learning (Watson & McMahon, 2005a, 2007). Neil's experiences of phoning the local radio station, learning about radio at school and participating in an excursion to the local radio station are illustrative of a recursive set of unintentional and intentional learning experiences that inform the construction of Neil's story about wanting to become a radio announcer.

“An exploding cake”

Neil also had clear ideas about what he didn't want to be and why:

“I wouldn't really want to be a baker ... I just never liked baking, cause the first time I tried to do it, when I baked a cake, it blew up in front of me ... I was doing it in the mix master and then I put it up too high and everything just splattered everywhere”.

Neil's story about the exploding cake illustrates the recursiveness between experience and the way in which such experiences and the resultant stories constructed about those experiences may have implications for later career choices. Reflective of Mitchell and Krumboltz's (1996) social learning theory of careers, Neil's experience of unsuccessfully making a cake resulted in him constructing a story that he was not good at baking and consequently he would not consider that particular career

choice. Mitchell and Krumboltz would account for this in terms of self-observation generalisations, that is, the beliefs individuals construct about themselves on the basis of feedback they receive. By contrast, positive feedback from an activity or experience encourages individuals to maintain their interest in that activity. Similarly, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002) suggests that outcome expectations and self-efficacy regarding activities influence career interests.

“The occasional lizard”

Sally, aged 10, was a grade five student in an urban primary school. Sally wanted to be a vet or to work with animals in some capacity. When asked what she knew about being a vet she explained:

“I might be helping animals if they’re sick, and if they need to be...helped in any way ... and I might need to get them desexed”.

She also knew what animals she might work with:

“Cats and birds...and maybe dogs and sometimes the occasional lizard”.

Sally also had some ideas about what she needed to do to become a vet:

“we were doing this in my class, and we were talking about what we’d need to get and I’d need an (the highest grade possible)...and I’d need to go up to year 12, and finish year 12, and go to university ... I’m not sure how many years I need to be in there for ... but then, I need to get a degree, and I need to find a place I could work and then I can help animals”.

Sally had also thought about another option if she couldn’t be a vet:

“I might like to own a pet shop, cause I really like to work with animals ... I’d do any job that I could work with animals”.

While Neil’s story of the “exploding cake” was located within the context of his home, Sally’s story of becoming a vet reflects the range of experiences that may influence the construction of career stories. Further, it reflects the learning that occurs from life experience. For example, Sally has learned about what vets do and the types of animals she might work with and has begun to tell a story of herself in that role. Sally’s story raises the issue of the intentional and unintentional nature of career development learning (Patton & McMahon, 2006; Watson & McMahon, 2005a, 2007). Further, Sally’s love of animals reflects recursive thematic connectedness between her past and present stories as well as the stories of possibility that she is telling about her future.

While Sally’s career stories may be predicated on a fantasy (Super, 1990) regarding her love of animals, they also emphasise critical developmental tasks described by Super for this career developmental stage of growth. Specifically, Super suggests that children in this stage evidence

increasing concern about their future, personal control over their lives, and convince themselves to achieve both in school and work.

Significantly, all of the children's stories illustrate how their career development occurs within the context of a variety of systemic influences which range from intrapersonal influences (e.g., likes, dislikes and interests), social influences (e.g., family and school), and environmental-societal influences (e.g., the broader community in which they live) (Patton & McMahon, 2006). The stories also illustrate the way in which learning that influences career development occurs intentionally and unintentionally. The contextual nature of career development and the intentional and unintentional learning that influence it are also reflected in the stories of the adolescents that follow.

Adolescent Stories

“You need to be lucky”

Jake, aged 16, was a grade 11 student at a large urban secondary school. Jake was an outstanding sports person who had been “*talent-scouted*” by the elite sports program of a school some distance from his home. Together Jake and his parents discussed his options and decided that he should attend the school, a decision that had proved to be a positive experience for Jake who claimed “*It’s a good school. I love it*”. Parents are a major influence in the lives of adolescents (e.g., Super, 1990) and Jake explained that his parents were very supportive of him:

“They want me to keep going... they know I’m good ... I know it’s a lot of luck too...but like you need to be lucky to make things ... It’s not just how good you are, you need to be lucky. So...they just keep backing me up ... so they just keep doing the things ... and I keep playing hard and that’s the way I do my best”.

Jake explained that his interest in sport and physical fitness was stimulated by watching a television program about the world’s strongest man after which Jake decided to go to a gym, get fit and play sport, none of which he had engaged in seriously before: “*I saw these people on there (TV) and they were strong and big and I thought I wouldn’t mind being them ... they’d given me good influence and that’s when I started really training hard*”.

Jake’s experience of watching a show about the world’s strongest man on television indicates the way in which life experiences, which could be considered inconsequential, become life shaping in the stories constructed around them. Further, Jake’s story illustrates how a chance event such as watching a television show becomes a life changing experience. Importantly, Jake also acknowledges that luck as well as hard work is important for continued success in his sport. Chance, luck and happenstance have been afforded limited attention in the career literature to date but can have profound effects on people’s careers (e.g., Patton & McMahon, 2006; Pryor & Bright, 2003).

Significantly, Jake made a decision to act on what he had seen and became an active agent in the construction of a story related to sport and fitness. Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) would see Jake’s

story as evidencing task approach skills in learning, that is, he formulated specific skills in order to act on the decision he had taken. In relating his experiences to date with his future, Jake explained:

“from early on I’ve always had plans ... if everything goes fine with my school work then I don’t see why there’s no reason I can’t go straight into a job or even further training in a certificate in fitness ... with what I’ve already got ... all my recreation and my capability and my business management side of things ... I even talk about going on cruise liners”.

Jake is in Super’s (1990) exploration stage in which the major developmental tasks are to search for career direction and translate that into action through studying, training or job seeking. Jake is actively constructing a future story and an identity founded on recursive interaction (Patton & McMahon, 2006) between his ability, his interests, and school subjects (e.g., recreation and business management) that he does well in, with future career options such as becoming a fitness trainer on a cruise liner.

“Just find out what happens”

Abbey, aged 16, is a grade 11 student attending a large urban school. In addition, Abbey has a part-time job as an administration assistant that she was offered by a work experience employer who was impressed with her work ethic. She wants to eventually become a registered nurse and is currently studying to become a nursing assistant through a vocational education and training course in her school:

“I went to a nurses’ convention a couple of weeks ago ... there was a place down there, so we had a bit of a talk ... got some brochures and everything ... I’ve looked into it ... it’s probably going to take 18 months to 2 years to do that”.

Abbey explained how she wanted to do voluntary work for a humanitarian organisation in a country like Timor or Zimbabwe and she described how she had found out about what was required:

“I looked into the World Vision website and everything and what they do ... I’m really passionate for it ... to help people ... World Vision pays for people to go over there ... (I’d) rather pay for myself and be a volunteer ... That’s why I saved up a few thousand dollars”.

Abbey’s story demonstrates the role of agency (Chen, 2006) in career development in that she has actively taken steps (such as seeking information and saving money earned from her part-time job) towards the construction of a future story that reflects her passion for nursing and helping people. Indeed, helping becomes a recursive theme that connects her stories of past, present and future (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Abbey’s story also reflects the influence of globalisation and the importance of work in all its forms in people’s lives (Blustein, 2006; Richardson, 2000). Her intention to engage in humanitarian work is built on a life theme that recurs throughout her stories, that of wanting to help people.

“I really wanted to be on stage”

Justin, aged 16, is in grade 11 at a rural secondary school. He explained how he had originally wanted to be an engineer and how through his school work experience he found it “*sort of difficult and boring and just couldn’t get into it at all*”. He then described his increasing interest in becoming a performer:

“I played trumpet in the orchestra for last year’s musical, and I liked that ... I remember watching the people and saying I really wanted to be on stage ... so that’s what I decided to do ... this year I got one of the lead roles so I was pretty happy ... and I just really loved every second ... I think like Mum and Dad are pretty happy about that ... they’re sort of supportive of me whatever I do ... hopefully I won’t like, get over it. Like it’s not just a phase ... next year there’s a big production here in (home town) and I’d really like to be in that, so I’m gonna try and audition for it”.

Justin realised that there would be considerable time constraints if he became involved in amateur dramatics and that he “*might have to give up something like football to compensate for it, but that’ll be fine, because it’s sort of what I want to do*”:

Justin told a story of the construction of an identity based on performance. While he knew he was creative, he had hoped that engineering would be an outlet for his creativity. However, as his work experience unfolded, he learned that he did not like the work. From his experience in the school orchestra playing for the school musical he developed an interest in stage performance. As an active agent in the construction of his career (Chen, 2006), Justin decided to audition for the following musical and was successful in his endeavour. The outcome of his success in the audition and his subsequent love of performance affirmed the decision he had taken and enhanced his self-efficacy, thus leading him to set the further goal of auditioning in amateur theatre which he expected would also be an enjoyable experience (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002).

The stories of Jake, Abbey and Justin are indicative of the multifaceted nature of individuals’ lives. Super (1990) discusses the various life roles that an individual assumes at a particular point in time. For example, in addition to the familial and student roles that Jake, Abbey and Justin fulfil, Jake is involved in significant commitments as a sportsman and Abbey undertakes considerable hours of part-time work. In beginning to consider an additional role in amateur theatre, Justin is considering the management of his various life roles in the context of his available time. The need to ‘juggle’ life roles is also reflected in the story of Lorraine that follows.

Adult Stories

“A big juggling act”

Lorraine, aged 51, is married and has three adult independent children who live away from the rural city in which she and her husband live. She described a career that had included many transitions since she began work in an office when she left school not knowing what she really wanted to do.

From there she moved into specialised office administration until the birth of her first child. From that point she did not re-enter paid employment until her youngest child began school. Since re-entering paid employment, Lorraine worked mostly as a receptionist in casual or part-time roles, observing that:

“There’s a lot of job sharing, a lot of women who have children and job sharing is just a big thing in that industry”.

Later, Lorraine explained:

“There was a particular time when one of my children were having learning difficulties and I just felt that I needed to drop out of the workforce for a little while to get her back on track and feel like I was giving her the time. It’s been a bit of a juggling act ... I was always the one that did the part-time work and tended to look after the children”.

Following a chance comment made by a friend, Lorraine had decided recently to study for a psychology degree which she was enjoying and doing well at. She described a long and varied history of voluntary work and explained that more recently she had become more intentional about the type of volunteer roles she assumed:

“All those things are going to help me though in where I’m heading. I picked those things especially ... I’ve just got myself into volunteer work that’s going to help me once I’m out and practising as a psychologist”.

Lorraine’s many stories had seemed unrelated and disconnected to her until comparatively recently. Although very busy throughout her life, she had felt unfulfilled in all of her roles except parenting. The pattern of Lorraine’s paid employment was one of repeatedly engaging in work that she knew she could do and never engaging in work that she enjoyed or that interested her. Lorraine’s career demonstrated a complex trajectory that included broken employment patterns and part-time employment that reflected the opportunities and constraints available to her across time (Crompton & Harris, 1998).

As illustrated by Lorraine’s story, her career represented a complex recursive interaction of many factors including context, culture, life stage, perceived support and personality (Bimrose, 2008). Bimrose noted that traditional career theories have not accounted adequately for the career patterns of women and that there are promising new approaches that do emphasise the distinctive experiences of women in the labour market compared with men (Bimrose, 2008). An example of a career theory that does focus on women’s multiple life roles and responsibilities is that of Cook, Heppner and O’Brien’s (2002) ecological model of women’s career development.

“I didn’t want to leave the classroom”

By contrast to Lorraine’s varied career path and multiple transitions, Sophia, a retired teacher aged 63, had wanted to be a teacher all her life. As a young child, she sat in front of her older sister who played “teachers” and “taught” Sophia:

“She’d put the things on a little blackboard for us and I just, I think she was inspirational really and that’s what I always wanted to do”.

Sophia’s sister went on to become a teacher and Sophia followed in her footsteps. Being able to work with children as a teacher was Sophia’s passion. Later in her career as a teacher, she was offered a school principalship and received considerable encouragement to accept the offer. However, she declined because it would take her away from what she had always wanted to do – teach. She explained *“I didn’t want to disappoint him (the person offering the job), but at the same time I didn’t want to leave the classroom, because to me teaching is working with the kids and that’s basically it”*. Her only complaint about teaching was that the longer she stayed in it, the more administrative tasks there were to do which she did not enjoy and which she believed took her away from what she did best and loved.

Sophia’s story illustrates a firm sense of vocational identity throughout her life. Moreover, her story illustrates the construction of a career into her retirement in the volunteer work she does with family and friends such as driving them to medical appointments and shopping for and visiting ailing friends. While not wanting to engage with a voluntary agency such as those mentioned in the stories of Abbey or Lorraine, Sophia is acutely aware of the importance of her assistance to family and colleagues. While this stage of life has been termed by Super, Savickas and Super (1996) as disengagement, these terms may not accurately reflect the construction of new career stories related to work experiences that are non-paid. Sophia’s transition to retirement reflected the life stage tasks of decelerating, retirement planning and retirement living as specified by Super (1990).

“Balancing life more fruitfully”

Marion is a 52 year old married woman with adult children and she works in senior management in a university. After working in a helping profession all her life, Marion has only recently transitioned into management. Since turning 50, she has begun to consider her present career development in relation to the future prospect of retirement. Marion explained that early retirement:

“has always been my dream, at some stage I will be able to stop having to work for a salary, take an early retirement and actually be able to balance out more fruitfully what gives me more pleasure and doing a bit of income generation but more voluntary work ... so that is what is in my head.”

Marion’s approach to future retirement reflects her active agency (Chen, 2006) in presently planning her career development. O’Neil and Bilimoria (2005) suggest that worklife balance is important to women’s sense of success in this age group and such balance is important to Marion.

Marion is also open to future learning experiences and other opportunities and she demonstrates an understanding that future contextual factors may impact on her plans: *“What materializes we’ll wait and see”*. In addition, Marion wants to continue to make a contribution by using her helping skills.

This is reflected in her statement: *“when I look at people beyond 65 today not one of them looks really ready for retirement. You know, it just seems like there is still so much to give”*.

Marion’s story is illustrative of O’Neil and Bilimoria’s (2005) three phase theory of women’s career development, phase 3 of which is relevant to women between the ages of 45 to 60. This phase, termed “reinventive contribution” (p. 184), is a time when women view their careers in relation to making a meaningful contribution, not only to their work contexts but to the broader contexts of their lives (e.g., family and community). The stories of the three adult women in this paper reflect O’Neil and Bilimoria’s belief that women in this phase of career development value learning, fairness, justice and making a meaningful contribution.

Indeed, the general relevance for many clients of the core concept of career development evident in traditional theory has been questioned and the failure of theories to take structural and cultural factors into account criticised (Fitzgerald and Betz, p.103). We are reminded that: “as is well known, early work in career counseling and assessment focused on well educated, upwardly mobile men” (Meara, Davis, & Robinson, 1997, p. 116). These limitations need to be considered when reviewing career stories of men, as those of Paul, Michael and John that follow, vividly illustrate.

“I’m not particularly career minded”

Psychological approaches to career theory tend to separate the individual from the context in which they exist (Brooks & Forrest, 1994). However, it is only with an understanding of context that sense can be made of many career stories. Paul, in his early twenties, had been employed for three years in administration with a small finance company immediately after completing his degree, during which time he had become very disillusioned with this job. A process of reflection brought him to the decision that he wanted to change his career, but there were a number of practical issues to overcome. He had a mortgage on his house, wanted to remain in the same geographical area and did not drive, so was dependent on public transport. His wife suffers from a serious medical condition, making her ability to stay in full time salaried employment uncertain. Weighing all his constraints carefully, he eventually identified teaching as a possible career alternative. He was accepted onto a teacher training course, but then after a few months decided that teaching was not right for him after all. He returned, therefore, to the occupational sector in which he had been employed previously and had a rapid promotion to a management position. He became reconciled to being ‘stuck’ in his present job for the foreseeable future because it is:

“the only place that I could earn the wage that I needed, you know, to keep the house and stuff like that.”

Personal finances are a major consideration for Paul in his career development, because his wife’s ill-health means that the family unit is dependent on his earning capacity. Another key issue over the next two to three years will be whether he and his wife decide to start a family. Despite these constraints, he continues to search for a career he would find more satisfying. He attends a training course on writing and writes features for magazines. Another career option would be to move away from a management to a specialist role within the same sector:

"I talk about wanting a change of career, but I've never been particularly career-minded. So all I've really wanted is to do something I enjoy, rather than to further my career or anything like that."

Paul's story illustrates the ways in which social structures have influenced, and continue to influence, his career development. His perceptions of his career options, first when he felt dissatisfied with his initial career choice, then subsequently when he decided an alternative career strategy was unsuitable, were largely influenced by financial considerations. The theory of occupational allocation stresses the importance of structural constraints that context exert on career development (Roberts, 1984, 1993, 1995, 2000). Roberts does not suggest that his theory has universal validity. Rather, he argues that entry to employment in different social contexts requires different explanatory frameworks, acknowledging the impact of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic background and local labour markets. Paul's career progression has been determined by a recursive interaction amongst various factors, including his personal desire to find fulfilment together with financial/family pressures and societal expectations on him to be the breadwinner.

"It's quite scary!"

By his early 30s, Michael had worked for a number of years in sales. He felt he had not been rewarded for the responsibility his job involved and he recognised that market pressures would lead to work intensification. So Michael researched alternative careers and became very focused on becoming a physiotherapist. However, he did not have the necessary qualifications to enter professional training. To switch career, he gave up a well-paid job and started to study a science-based Access to Higher Education course on a full-time basis, together with related evening classes. In addition to studying for the academic qualifications required for physiotherapy training, Michael also undertook relevant work experience to strengthen his application. He knew that his decision to change career in his 30s was a high-risk strategy, but he was prepared to take the risk because of the potential benefits:

"It's quite scary! I sort of always thought of myself as a bit of a jack of all trades and I really wanted to focus that into one area, to have some expertise in one area."

After a year of intensive preparation, Michael's application for a physiotherapy degree was successful. His wife's support – both financial and moral - had been crucial and he was determined to make a success of his learning opportunities:

"Even though I'm a student, I try to roll my sleeves up and get stuck in and be part of the team as much as I can, rather than just follow people around".

In total, it took four years for him to re-skill for his career re-orientation and the process of change required considerable personal sacrifice, as he and his wife had to:

"put other bits of my life on hold – such as starting a family".

As a result of changes in the labour market, Michael recognised the need to expand his capabilities and interests; to prepare for changing work tasks by re-skilling and up-skilling; and to empower himself by taking action (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996, p.250).

“I love my job!”

John suffered a stroke when he was in his early 50s, caused by job-related stress from his job as a carpet fitter. A complete career change was recommended by his doctor. John felt vulnerable because he had a relatively narrow set of work experiences and a low level and outdated qualification. He was both uncertain about the viability of returning to full-time employment and worried about his financial situation. He decided to return to part-time employment, initially, to test out his resilience to work. First, he tried to re-train, via a computer training course, which he found impossible:

“I was really knocking my head against the wall!”

Then he tried applying for retail jobs - unsuccessfully. These experiences started to have a negative effect on him:

“I couldn’t get anything at all. You know, it was just a waste. I was getting so frustrated because I thought I was on the scrapheap, if you know what I mean. Really, after a period of time, you get a bit dejected and you just don’t want to do anything else.”

However, he eventually secured two part-time jobs in the social care sector, across two separate employers. Although the combined financial rewards were poor, he had found something he enjoyed:

“It’s crap money but it’s an enjoyable job. It doesn’t seem like a job of work”.

One of his employers supported him to study for relevant vocational qualifications. Despite working extremely long hours (70 hours per week), he did not experience any further stress-related problems and was delighted when he successfully completed his vocational training:

“I got my certificate, so I’ve got that pinned on the wall! That’s something that they can’t take away from you.”

His line manager then told him he was capable of management duties and was capable of running his own care home – a suggestion he found interesting.

John had fallen victim to the employment structures within which he had operated for most of his working life. Job-related stress precipitated a health crisis which forced him to change career late in his working life. After a period of unemployment and some false labour market starts, he found an occupational niche in which he achieved personal satisfaction and was able to progress rapidly. The

concepts of “pragmatic rationalism” (Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996, p.122) and “turning points” (p.141) help us make sense of John’s story. Here, periods of routine are linked by “turning points” (p.142). Three types of turning points are identified: those forced by unexpected external events (for example, redundancy or ill health); those built into the political structures of society (e.g. school leaving age or retirement age); and those initiated by the behaviour of individuals themselves. “Pragmatic rationalism”, in combination with “turning points”, helps us understand how individuals like John make career decisions. These are neither rational nor irrational. Rather, they are both constrained and enabled by individuals’ “horizons for action” (p,123), which are partly determined by external opportunities, and partly by their own subjective perceptions. These two sides are linked because “what is available affects what we perceive to be possible and what we perceive to be possible and what we perceive as desirable can alter the available options” (p.3). John was forced into an unexpected career change triggered by ill health and after a period of unemployment he made the decision to accept two poorly paid and part-time jobs in social care. This was neither rational nor irrational, but it was possible within the context of immediately available employment options.

Conclusion

The career stories told in this paper are located in recent debate about modern and post-modern career research, theory and practice. Such debate has been described sometimes in dichotomous terms and other times in more complementary ways (e.g., Watson & McMahon, 2005b; Sampson, 2009; Savickas, 2001). The stories told by these children, adolescents and adults illustrate constructs from modern and postmodern career theories. Thus the present paper demonstrates how individuals’ narratives or stories provide an opportunity for an inclusive context within which to understand the future narrative of career theory.

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