**Theme 2: Professional learning and development**

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**Professionals' repertoires of strategic response to the challenge of constructing their work-related identities**

## 1.      Abstract:

This paper reports on the UK findings from a 7 country study that explored continuities and change in identities at work against a background of rapid change in the European labour market, in work practices and skill requirements. The study examined the work-related identity development of professionals working in health care, IT, telecommunications and engineering. One focus was upon **individuals' strategies** to cope with change and how this affected their work identity and the nature of their work commitment over time. Their careers could be mapped through patterns of relationships, orientation and response to work and it is possible to trace the dynamic development of individuals' characteristic repertoires of strategic action - their 'strategic biographies'. The following types of strategic action were identified: **Identification** represents the 'classical' form of adaptive strategy - the individual identifies more or less completely with her or his work - both with the occupation and the employing organisation. For our interviewees this was probably the largest category, but for some this relationship had gone sour. **Long-term adjustment** represents a more conditional form of adaptation - the individual may remain in an occupation and/or with a particular employer, but he or she may feel 'locked into' their current work. **Short-term adjustment** represents a fully conditional form of adaptation - the individual intends to remain in an occupation and/or with a particular employer for a relatively short time. **Strategic careerists** see their current occupational position and/or organisational attachment as one phase of a career that involves relatively frequent changes in the nature of work they do. They are committed to 'moving on'. We did come across some individuals who identified with their work, but who were also active in **role re-definition**. There were also examples **personal re-definition** when an individual sought to change their career direction quite radically.

## 2.      Introduction:

The research, upon which this paper is based, aimed at eliciting employee perspectives on work identities, and in the UK this included 110 interviewees who worked (or had worked) in health care, IT, telecommunications and engineering. The qualitative research methodology involved carrying out semi-structured interviews according to a set of interview guidelines agreed by the project partners. Typically interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed

verbatim. The data analysis was informed by grounded theory as a means of eliciting respondents' own categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These categories were developed within the frame of the broad evaluation categories that the partners commonly identified as being relevant to the development of work identities, following the pilot interviews. The main focus was upon how employees sought to develop their work identities.

The forms of strategic action outlined above helped give meaning and shape to our interviewees' career histories by outlining what we found to be typical and relatively coherent repertoires of strategic response to the challenges of constructing work-related identities. Previously, the data has been examined from a sectoral perspective [Brown (2004a) focuses upon changes in identities of interviewees working in the engineering industry] and according to the extent to which employees are developing flexible work identities (Brown, 2004b). Here, after outlining the different forms of strategic response in a little more detail, the focus will be upon those who redefine their career, in a way that involves a change of occupation.

### 3.      Patterns of strategic action:

Our interviews highlighted that the relationship between individuals and the occupational roles they were required to perform could be represented in terms of their patterns of strategic action across a range of structural, cultural and social contexts (compare Pollard et al, 2000). Their careers could be mapped in terms of their patterns of relationships, orientation and adaptive response to work and it is possible to trace the dynamic development of individuals' characteristic repertoires of strategic action - their 'strategic biographies'.

**Identification** occurs where the individual identifies more or less completely with her or his work - both with the occupation and the employing organisation. Through strategic compliance the individual seeks to satisfy expectations (of employer, colleagues and customers, patients or clients) of how he or she should perform her or his role.  They generally accept the conventions of their peer group, and are usually fully integrated into their occupational and organisational life. They are likely to remain in the same job for a considerable period of time. For our interviewees this was probably the largest category. **But significantly we had a number of (mainly older) people for whom this relationship went sour as a result of their personal responses to changes in the demands of work (particularly in engineering and telecoms/IT).**

**Long-term adjustment** represents a more conditional form of adaptation - the individual may remain in an occupation and/or with a particular employer, but he or she recognises that this represents a compromise rather than an ideal situation. Typically factors from outside
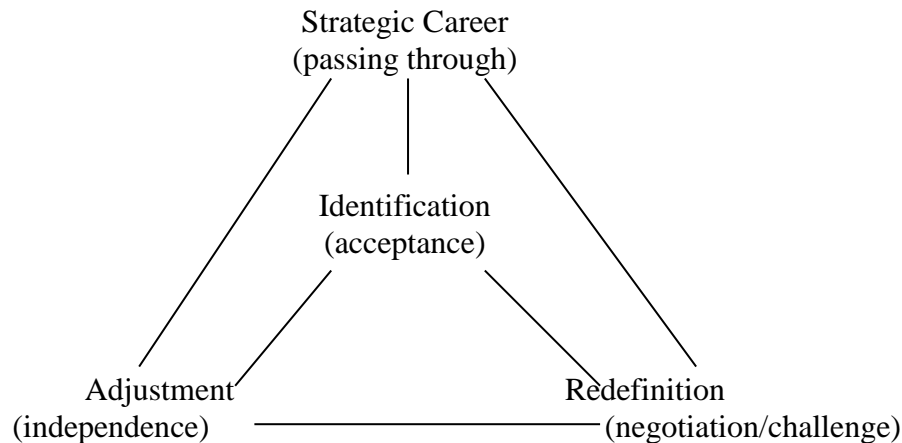
work (family commitments, personal networks, attachment to a particular location) may act to 'hold' an individual in place. The individual may still seek to satisfy expectations (of employer, colleagues and customers, patients or clients) of how he or she should perform her or his role, but he or she typically has some reservations about her or his work or employer. They may remain in the same job may for a considerable period of time, but may willingly move on if the 'holding' circumstances change. Examples of reasons why interviewees felt 'locked into' their current work included accommodation to working patterns of a partner; a desire to be able to reach their children quickly (within two or three minutes) in an emergency; attachment to a particular locality ('we have lived here all our lives'); and attachment to their immediate work group. **This was found particularly in engineering and health. Short-term adjustment** occurs where the individual recognises that he or she only intends to remain in an occupation and/or with a particular employer for a relatively short time. Either because of individual circumstances, choice or long-term career plans, or because of dissatisfaction with the work, the individual is actively seeking or intending to seek alternative employment. **We had examples in all sectors of interviewees who were in the process of changing employers.**

**Strategic careerists** see their current occupational position and/or organisational attachment as one phase of a career that involves relatively frequent changes in the nature of work they do. They are committed to 'moving on' and see their careers as something that they actively construct (although sometimes the employer has a development plan for the individual or he or she is on a 'career track'). Their attachment to their current role is partly influenced by the knowledge that they are only 'passing through'. **We had examples of this from interviewees in all sectors.**

We did come across some individuals who identified with their work, but who were also much more active in **re-defining**, rather than passively accepting, work-related roles. **Re-definition** is associated with the same mainstream patterns of achievement and cultural norms as those exhibiting more passive forms of **identification** (Pollard et al, 2000). However, those using **re-defining** strategies are operating at the cutting edge of norms and expectations, pushing at the boundaries of expectations of employers, colleagues and others, typically negotiating, challenging and leading their peers in some respect. Reshaping could come from 'within' a role and sometimes from 'outside' (or above). **These were rare, but we did find one or two examples in each sector.** The second form of **re-definition** occurred when an individual sought to change their occupation and/or employer, because they wanted (or saw themselves forced) to change direction. **We had examples from all sectors where individuals had changed career direction quite radically.**

It is possible to construct a model of how individuals could respond to the challenge of how they related to their work over time (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: A model of the forms of strategic action of individuals in relation to their work**

Strategic Career
(passing through)

Identification
(acceptance)

Adjustment
(independence)

Redefinition
(negotiation/challenge)

## 4.        Changing career direction:

On the one hand, some individuals build 'strategic careers' where they were just passing through the particular occupation for which they were trained. We had a number of cases of former engineering apprentices who moved into commercial functions (like sales and marketing) very early in their career and then progressed into management. We also had many examples of graduates getting work in sectors very different from those for which they trained as the relatively open UK labour market means that people often feel that they have a relatively wide range of choice (e.g. accountancy firms will take graduates from any discipline and certainly no preference is given to those who studied accountancy!) On the other hand, we also have examples where an individual decides to move out of an occupation because they redefine how they see themselves. In some cases this was because of their own new plans, but sometimes it was conditioned by the intention to fit in with the strategic choice of a partner. Finally, an individual may be unable to find employment in a preferred field following redundancy.

### 4.1     Moving out of nursing

The number of nurses (and people from other professions allied to medicine like radiography) working in sectors other than health in the UK is huge. Major efforts have been made to get some of these to return, e.g. through the introduction of family-friendly policies.

**Former nurse (started a strategic career, but then adjusted priorities because of family formation)**: after leaving school, Marlene started work as an auxiliary nurse away from

home; moved back home for a while she applied to do nurse training. She then trained as a state enrolled nurse, initially working in a hospital, but subsequently working with people with disabilities in a day centre. She then applied to train full-time as a social worker and the year she qualified she also got married. She moved to London because of her partner's job, but easily found employment in the local area as a social worker working with older people. Marlene worked full time until the birth of her first child (when she was 38), when she switched to part-time working. She stopped working altogether for a time upon birth of a second child, but three years later she resumed part-time employment in a local play-group that her daughter also attends.

Nursing was therefore just the first stage of a varied 'caring career', but although she initially built a 'strategic career', by her late twenties she was fitting her employment decisions around those of her partner who was earning considerably more and had a 'company career'. By her late thirties employment decisions were constrained even more by family formation. She also accepted that it was necessary to move for the purposes of her husband's career, particularly as the alternative of long-distance commuting proved very wearing. Now in her mid-forties she does not have a strong occupational identity at this time, rather she is very aware that you go through different stages in your life and is just focused on the current one - principally as a primary care-giver for her young children, with employment fitting into those demands; settling down in a new neighbourhood and maintaining contact with old friends.

**Former nurse (tried to have a strategic career, but in practice career often involved considerable adjustment) - now a health service manager in her forties:**
Pauline did the conventional hospital-based nurse training and then worked as a nurse for a short time before she was amongst the first batch of nurses to take a fast-track university-based nursing degree. So she was one of the first graduate nurses and got a job working at a hospital in the west of England. At this time she also got married and she decided she would look for a job wherever her husband found work. Her husband got a job in the North of England, and she found work in a hospital some distance away that involved her in a lengthy commute to work. So she changed jobs and became a health visitor closer to home. She changed jobs again, this time closer still to home, and then moved into a more specialist area, working as a health visitor dealing with preventive health. She found this job was restrictive and lacked challenge: 'I was not encouraged to think, just follow what was always done.' She was not happy in her job or with the area where they lived, so she encouraged her husband to apply for a new job about forty miles away. He got the job, they moved and then she found a job in the new area, working as a health promotion facilitator in specialist nursing for three years. She was then head-hunted (approached by recruitment consultants to fill a vacancy) by

a large family practice unit (which had been set up following health service reforms) and her job involved carrying out medical audits across a wide geographical area.

Pauline felt her career was taking off and applied for and got a job in the Midlands. This was going to be a 'big career move and would have established my career in management.' [At the time the market-led health service reforms had created considerable numbers of new management posts.] However, her husband refused to countenance a move to the new area, despite the fact that his job took him out of the country for long periods of time. Instead she got a temporary health research job that was based part of the time in London for two and half years. When that was completed she went back to nursing for a time, but she found that frustrating as she felt that she had moved away from that. She applied for a job as a health service manager in another city about seventy miles away. This time they were able to move, as her husband could transfer to another company office in that city.

He then got a job with another company based in London. However, as she liked her job and wanted to stay longer in it, and as neither of them liked the idea of living full-time in London, he lived in a flat there during the week. Partly because she was on her own during the week, and partly for personal interest, she took two part-time health-related Masters degrees that involved study during the evenings. Now though she has decided to move to London too, and is looking for a health service management position there: 'there is a lot of restructuring and there are plenty of opportunities so now may be a good time to go.' The career of her husband has always taken precedence. Even now, when she is employed as a middle manager in the health service, her husband earns four times as much as she does. Indeed she thought that nursing was an example of a secondary career (like teaching): 'it is one career where you can move round with your husband….Nursing in some respects is an insurance policy - you can pick up after an absence or moving from elsewhere - and it is flexible enough to let you balance your career with other commitments and it allows part-time work.'

Pauline has, partly from necessity and partly from choice, built something of a portfolio career in the health field. For most of her career she has been engaged in health-related activities (health promotion, research, health auditing, management) and spent comparatively little time engaged in direct patient care. She has also continued her professional development - completing three degrees in addition to her initial training. For someone with such talents she has not risen as far as she undoubtedly would have if her career had been given a higher priority within their marriage. She was very negative about having to turn down the promotion opportunity (and move) earlier in her career, and subsequently did not apply for such positions. The biggest accommodation of her career has been to fit into with the

relocations of her husband because of his work - they expect total commitment: 'companies have no conception how difficult it is for partners with careers - they don't care and you can't complain.'

**Current ward sister in her late thirties (tried to have a strategic career, but in practice career has often involved considerable adjustment) - now considering moving to accommodate husband's change of job and might take the opportunity for a career change (possibly to teaching):** Celia did a degree in nursing after leaving school at 18 and then worked as a nurse in the South East. She got married and gave up full-time work on the birth of her first child when she was in her mid-twenties. Her husband worked for a multi-national car manufacturer and was relocated to Portugal for an assignment that was to last for two and a half years. As her daughter was then aged six, she had intended to live in Portugal for six to nine months and then come back and start training as a health visitor. However, she and her daughter liked it there so much that she stayed for the full two and a half years, as she was not established in her career. She was 'not too concerned' about giving up her place to train as a health visitor.

When she came back to England she resumed her nursing career, and she worked hard to get her current job as ward sister in a very specialised area of hospital care. Two years ago, however, her husband was switched to a temporary project assignment in the Midlands. This involved him living away from home during the week, and six months ago the move was made permanent. Their daughter was at a crucial stage of her schooling and she was very loathe to give up her job that she loves, as she would be very unlikely to get a similar post elsewhere, so they decided that her husband should continue to live apart from the rest of the family during the week. However, this was putting a strain on their relationship and they now thought that they should all now move to the Midlands. The alternative of her husband coming back was not considered, like refusing the initial relocation he thought coming back would be a 'big black mark' on his career.

If they did move Celia was prepared 'to do something different' and would probably take the opportunity 'to retrain as a teacher.' Because she already had a degree she would only have to do a nine month course, and she was viewing the opportunity for a career change in a positive light. The decision to move now hinged on whether they could get their daughter into a 'good school'. She was philosophical that major decisions about her career were being taken in the interests of accommodating her husband and daughter: 'I have taken myself out of the equation….I have drawn a line under the reasons for me staying.' This is an example of an individual with strong identification with work being willing to adjust her whole career

direction to accommodate the wishes of other family members. It is a case of occupational identity being over-ridden by other identities and commitments that were seen as more important in her life as a whole. Also the decision only makes sense if you view it over the life-course as a whole.

### 4.2 Engineer with strategic career moving between occupations and sectors

Richard is an engineering graduate, in his mid-forties, who worked in engineering, contract electronics, supply chain development and finally moved from the technical side into the commercial area. He worked for a large engineering company for seven years mainly doing project work, and then took a manufacturing management conversion programme for engineers. Richard then returned to another division of the company as a logistics manager, but he decided to follow a developing interest and he switched to working in contract electronics, then he moved to an IT company and eventually became a supply chain manager with a large company of drinks suppliers. Richard has always been highly committed to his work that has often involved being part of a project team. He sought to increase his experience in areas that were business-led rather than technical, when he recognised he had much less international market experience than others in the commercial field. On the technical side he had gone as far as he was likely to go. This is a 'classic' example of a strategic career with little long-term attachment to either a specific occupation or a particular organisation. While this approach is in some ways identified as a 'modern' orientation, in fact this has long been a common route for those seeking to get into senior management positions in the UK.

### 4.3 Involuntary end to a chosen career
**Initial high commitment to work; but following redundancy locked into a work identity in decline and eventually both identity and commitment decay**

Most of the profiles of our interviewees in telecommunications and IT represent 'success stories', but even some of them pointed out that it was possible to find your skills were no longer in demand and that with increasing age it became more difficult to overcome a career setback. The following is an example of someone who experienced a major setback from which his career never recovered. Danny, who is his early 50s, left school at 16 and completed a telecommunications technician apprenticeship with a major telecommunications company. Upon completion of training he worked as a telecommunications engineer but he only worked in the industry until he was 20. He then switched to a major company in the growing IT industry. His case is interesting because despite reasonably high levels of initial skills training and continuing professional development he was considered 'too old' just after 40, and his career spiralled downwards.

Danny's career with the company initially went well and he learned through a mixture of on the job learning and short periods of company-specific training. He became a senior engineer, working from a service centre, making decisions about whether to repair IT equipment or recommend replacement. A couple of years later, however, the company decided to withdraw from offering support services itself directly to one where it encouraged independent contractors to deliver these services. As a consequence for a couple of years he worked for the company as a trainer of these new independent contractors. ['I suppose I was really working myself out of a job. I was at that time earning over £30,000 a year, and for that sum the company could get three independent contractors, driving their vans to company premises to do the work, mainly computer repair and problem-solving.'] At this time he has a strong organisational identity, shown by his willingness to move over to a training role and an expectation that the company would find him new employment.

When the company implemented its policy of closing down its service centres in the early 1990s he was offered either relocation to the head office or a fairly generous redundancy package. He chose to take redundancy for two reasons. Primarily, because moving to the head office would have meant relocating and this he did not want to do for family reasons. The second reason was that he thought he would find alternative employment reasonably quickly, even if not quite at his previous salary level. In fact it proved very difficult for Danny to get another job: 'although I was only just 40, and there quite a lot of jobs advertised, many employers thought I was too old for work in IT.' Eventually he was able to find work with the computing services arm of a large entertainment conglomerate. The work was not so attractive, repairing computerised systems in pubs and clubs, and the salary was half what he had earned previously. 'It was 10.30 p.m. one New Year's Eve and I was working repairing a computerised till in a pub miles from home. It was hot, noisy and crowded, and there were strobe lights flashing while I was trying to solder a connection, and I was supposed to be at a party somewhere else, and I suddenly felt I have had enough of this.'

Danny was disillusioned with this particular job, and believing that most employers felt he was too old to be in the field at all, and aware that those working in computer maintenance were not earning anywhere near as much as he did ten years previously, he quit this line of work altogether. His company pension was at a level that meant he only had to do some work to top this up to a level on which he could live and 'give myself enough time to go fishing.' From this time on, Danny **did not feel he had an active occupational identity**: if he views himself in this way at all it is as a **'former computer maintenance technician.'** For Danny, commitment was initially quite high but learning at work was only directly linked to the

evolving job. When the allocation of work changed and he was no longer linked to the organisation, he had no further engagement with professional updating so his work identity remained 'locked'. He tried to continue in the role when computer repair function had changed – eventually both commitment and identity eroded.

He has had other jobs, but he does not identify with these. In the mid-1990s he worked as a taxi driver, mainly at night, in the suburbs of London: 'it was very high stress - you could have a fight every night if you wanted.' He is currently working part-time as a fork-lift truck driver at a local company. Personal circumstances, age discrimination and being tied to a particular geographical location made it very difficult to recover from a major career set-back. From then on work was always about short-term adaptation rather than identification, and other events in his life reinforced a feeling that you had to 'make do the best you can in the face of events you cannot control.' This is the territory explored by Sennett (!998) **initial high commitment to work with a large company; engagement only with learning at work; expectation that the company will look after you, but finding yourself locked into a work identity in decline. Then both work identity and work commitment start to slip away.**

## 5.    Conclusion

The above forms of strategic action could and did change over time (an individual may become disillusioned leading to a change from identification to adjustment, or an individual may follow a strategic career path for part but not all of their working life) or in response to particular events (most notably redundancy, but also to birth of children, death of a spouse and so on). The forms of strategic action do help us give meaning and shape to our interviewees' career histories by outlining what we found to be typical and relatively coherent repertoires of strategic response to the challenges of constructing work-related identities.

## 6.    References

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