

Icons & Interlocutors: biographical research into learning for career transitions

**Career counselling a human or a citizen's
right?**

**IAEVG
23-27 September 2013**



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Chair:

Professor Mark Watson, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa

Presenters:

- Professors Jenny Bimrose and Alan Brown, Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, England
- Professor Rachel Mulvey, Department of Psychology, University of East London, England
- Dr. Rie Thomsen, DPU, Aarhus Universitet, Denmark

Discussant:

Dr. Mary McMahon, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia



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CEDEFOP RESEARCH

- 5 country study (Italy, France, Denmark, Germany & Spain)
- 125 participants across the 5 countries
- February, 2011 – July, 2013
- Initial interview, recorded, transcribed, analysed + selective follow up
- Final report will be published by CEDEFOP



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Icons and Interlocutors

- Yields rich, thick data: ‘drowning in the data’
- Researchers making sense of it all
- They themselves are making meaning of their experience of their interviewees, using theoretical framework
- Icons illustrate & illuminate the typology and gave us points of reference, landmarks.



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Icons and *Interlocutors*

- Researcher/practitioners did the interviewing
- Interlocutors enable a story to be told (Camus, La Chute is a confession not a monologue)
- Transcripts focus on what icons have said
- The interlocutors work with icons to construct the story, making meaning of their life course, using a consistent typology



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Career decision-making styles

Origins of the typology:

5 year longitudinal case study research in England
(2003 – 2008)

Bimrose, J., S-A. Barnes, and D. Hughes. (2008). Adult Career Progression and Advancement: A five year study of the effectiveness of guidance. Coventry: Warwick Institute for Employment Research and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/2008/eg_report_4_years_on_final.pdf



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Subsequent validation

- China
- Republic of Ireland

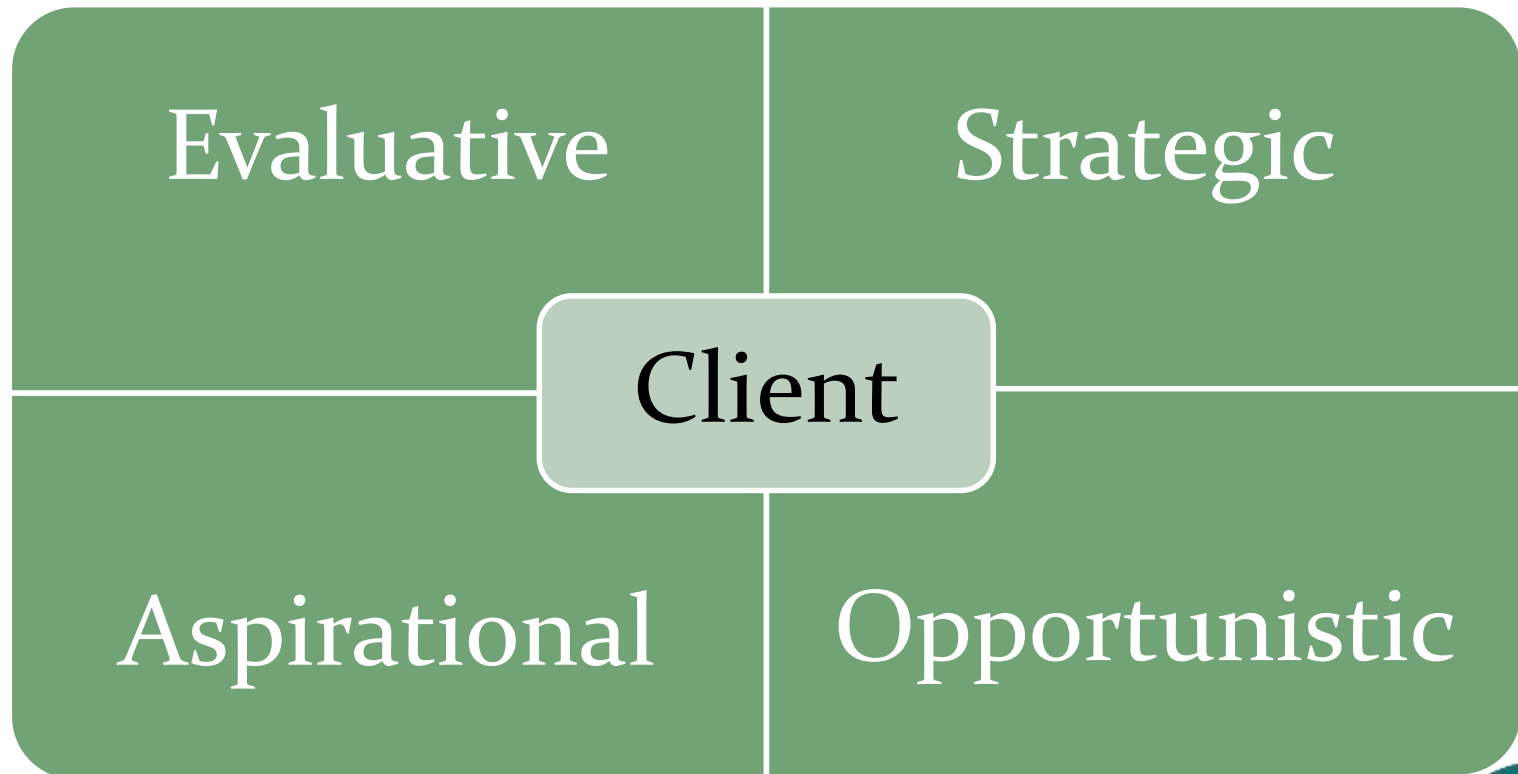


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Transitioning styles



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Evaluative

- a recurrent and on-going process of critical self-reflection, based on emotional & practical considerations;
- an identification & evaluation of their individual needs, values and abilities;
- an increased understanding of the consequences of their decisions; and
- the integration of self-learning in future behaviour.



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Evaluative

I've learned, you know, over the last five years, that there is no point in me really having a grand plan...there's going to be, you know, one step forward, two steps back!



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Strategic

- a rational appraisal of information as the basis for action;
- a steadfast focus on a career goal together with a strong belief in their ability to achieve the desired outcomes;
- a tendency to marginalise emotions and their 'emotional self' in their decision making;
- well developed problem solving skills – the ability to circumvent difficulties that impede progress; and
- predisposition to planning and planfulness.



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Strategic

I took some time off ... weighed things up ...had about a week off. Just to think ... about things logically ...I'm always trying to think kind of 2 or 3 steps ahead ... So if anything bad does happen ... a different way round it.



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Aspirational

- the tendency to identify vaguely focused, but distant goals, with personal and/ or career issues intertwined;
- aspiring towards career goals that are often highly competitive and/ or challenging to achieve;
- a career journey that typically involves (often considerable) material sacrifice;
- the heart typically ruling the head



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Aspirational

I am the kind of person who will jump onto one thing, then another. ... I don't particularly want to get anywhere or get loads of money.



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Opportunistic

- the ability (often preference) to cope with high levels of uncertainty;
- reluctance to close off options;
- the use of intuition, rather than rationality, in making decisions (what feels 'right');
- a predisposition to take advantage of unexpected opportunities;
- resistance (sometimes active) to planning; and
- flexibility of approach



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Opportunistic

I still don't know what it is I want to do. I feel frustrated because I feel there's something out there that would suit me perfectly & everything I've done so far like teaching I just fell into, because it fitted in with my life at the time.



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Mercuzio (Italy): classic opportunist

- opportunistic changes of career direction
- following each change enthusiasm and commitment
- until another exciting opportunity presented itself.
- compare Lucia: only ever wanted to be a fashion designer
- singular focus, developed her career in a variety of ways and through a number of different roles.
- Both cases emphasise the importance of personal agency
- Both seek to develop their skill sets in a wide variety of ways as they develop their general skills and vocational expertise.



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Mercuzio: early career

- high school diploma: gave access to HE, but wanted to work.
- from 16, helped in his brother's snack bar ('Paninoteca')
- military service: barman in the barracks
- then looked for jobs in bars:
- 'Until the year 1990, I worked in bars, changing roles and environments. I experienced the morning bar, where I used to prepare breakfasts, but also the evening bars, the "birrerie", where I served alcoholic beverages. Then, for about three years, until 1993, I worked as a waiter in restaurants.'
- relatively low skilled work but learning to adapt in different contexts



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Mercuzio: passion for manufacturing

- first important transition, his passion for manufacturing, the ‘fil rouge’ of his working life, started revealing itself:

‘I had heard so much about the “mythical” figure of my uncle, who had a coffee shop in Naples and was a self-made man [...] My dream was to work on my own [...] so, in order to prepare myself for the “leap”, I became an employee at a big coffee factory in (my town). After a year in the sales department, I asked to be transferred to the mechanical department, where I could learn how to repair coffee makers (I had never used a wrench in my life!). My request surprised everybody, since the post I was leaving was considered much better than the one I was getting [...] Anyways, they accepted my request and I went to the mechanical department. If you want to make good coffee, you must be able to operate and repair the machines!’



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Mercuzio: work process knowledge

- became passionate and knowledgeable about coffee and coffee makers.
- launched own business, tried to reduce fixed costs to the minimum:
'I used to buy the coffee from factories and then sell it on my own in (my town). Unfortunately, I wasn't making a lot of money with this business, so I kept working as a waiter on Saturdays and Sundays, or at weddings. One day, I met a person who introduced me to a new environment: a wine bar. A few months later, I closed the coffee business and was hired as the wine bar manager in this large structure, where they also had a bakery and a food shop.'
- Opportunistic change of plan!



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Mercuzio: another change of plan

- Mercuzio started working at the wine bar and the sales of wine immediately increased: he liked the job and did it well for two years.
- he attended courses for sommeliers and gave lessons about coffee to the Italian Association of Chefs and the Italian Association of Barmen: he used to spend time on Sundays with a sales representative (who had worked for 30 years in the coffee market) to discuss and exchange ideas about coffee.
- In spite of the frequent changes in his working life, Mercuzio always maintained the passion for manufactured products, for the transformation process and for the manual work that creates them.
- Mercuzio's boss, *'a rather strange lady'* so *'I just decided to change job. At the time, my dream was still the same: create my own business in food service. So I went to work in a restaurant as assistant to the chef. It was not a problem for me to start all over again: I had a long experience, but in a different field, and I needed to learn everything in this new environment.'*



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Mercuzio: two new projects

- At the wine bar, he met an American businessman who was planning to open a restaurant in Seattle and had asked Mercuzio to participate in the project.
- Mercuzio shared all his ideas about an innovative restaurant, where customers could order food and have it cooked in front of them, but the businessman changed his mind, when everything was ready:

'The disappointment was so bitter that I felt the need to detach myself completely from the food industry. I had a grandfather who was a shoemaker. I've never met him, but heard so much about his marvellous shoes [...] I decided to attend a course for shoemakers, after all I've always had a fascination for manual labour.'



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Mercuzio: successful shoe-maker

- attended 900 hour-course and started working with little shoemakers' shops in town, but old artisans interested then jealous
- then assistant to a shoe designer in a large factory: intense and valuable experience - variety of models and samples - two years
- then Mercuzio invested in the creation of a business, in partnership with a couple of shoe makers who owned a small shoe factory:

'I was their designer, and I was also responsible for selling the products [...] The first two seasons went well, but then problems began to arise.

First of all, I had not taken into account the fact that, when you sell, you're also supposed to cash in [...] and I hated to do that! I hated to waste time as a credit collector, while I should have been doing my job instead: designing and selling shoes.'



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Mercuzio: shoe-maker to project researcher

'The other issue was that I used to design innovative models ... at the beginning I thought it was a good thing, but then I realize it wasn't. In fashion, you have to follow trends, you can't move forward too fast.'

- Mercuzio got married to a young brilliant South American architect.
- One day, almost by chance, she was asked to design a cutlery tray. Mercuzio seized the moment: since she didn't have time to complete the project, he helped her. They worked well together and project was a success.
- New idea: work together on restoration and renovation projects, he could do the research and she could do architectural planning. So he enrolled in university to get a degree in Humanities, with a major in Art History.



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Mercuzio: more transitions

'For the whole first year, I used to attend classes during the day and work at the market as a barman at night. My working hours were from 2 am to 9 am, then I would run to class. With this intense rhythm, I took my first six exams, the fundamental ones for my degree.'

- But at the end of his first year his wife decided to leave him!
- he completed his university course, but he had quit the job at the market and found a job as a night janitor in a hotel.
- New plan: he gave himself a piano as a present and started to take lessons, with the idea of becoming a professional player. He invested a lot in this new project, but soon realised that he is not as talented, nor as motivated as he thought.



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Mercuzio: future?

- Mercuzio is '*sailing in the sea of his mind*'. He is searching for a new passion to plunge into, disorienting everybody around him, except for himself. For him, transitions are the natural, cyclical process that scans his life.
- Mercuzio is opportunistic, but he does commit time and energy to being successful: cognitive development, practical development, emotional development, relational development
- Learning through challenging work; through developing a knowledge base; learning through interaction; self-directed learning but less learning through reflexivity – not following a strategic plan like Lucia, but plunges into opportunities with enthusiasm: using his mercurial talents!



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Henri – iconic strategist

- Microtechnical engineer in watches and jewellery – his career goes like clockwork!
- Consistently adapts career decisions to probability opportunities
- His narrative has few emotions
- *‘if I’m not stressed, I’m not efficient’*



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Key transitions

- Ambulance driver (parent's business)
- Works as engineer then
- 5 years training alternating HE & workplace
- Project manager – successful, quickly bored
- Promotion: oversaw outsourcing to India
- Set up business at home, micro parts for client
- Set up optical business for his wife



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Self awareness of this strategist:

- *'I've got a big flaw – I need to understand everything... to get recognition in the company. I imposed myself through knowledge'*
- *'I set up a small business.. Parts are manufactured in Malaysia...this is like a toy for me'*
- *'I said: opticians don't want to hire you? You'll see what's gonna happen. I'll set up a shop for you'*
- *'As soon as I get something I wished for very much, I want something else.'*



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Eugène – iconic aspirationalist

- First job: logging in the rain forest
- Commercial export attaché to export manager
- Head of export zone (automatic taps) Europe
- International sales director (lingerie)
- Multinational sales director – phantom job
- Down to provincial sales director
- Settled with family deep in the country



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Eugene's emotions are keenly felt

- *'(rainforest work) was real Indiana Jones' stuff, it was a childhood dream come true'*
- *'I had an enormous salary, really enormous. For 8 months I did nothing. I was angry, really angry. Disappointed in myself for having taken the money. I didn't listen to my own good sense.'*



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Aspirational doesn't exclude strategy

- Learned most from 1st boss – ‘spiritual father’
- As a Romantic, he won't conform
- Places enormous trust in his instincts
- His greatest anger was directed not at the employers who used him, but at himself for not trusting his instincts
- To follow his heart, he will map strategy



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