

Career identity: An ongoing narrative accomplishment

Patrizia Hoyer

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Abstract

This chapter calls for the endorsement of a ‘career perspective’ when theorizing identity in organizations. It argues that especially the concept of ‘career identity’ can be instructive for settling an ongoing controversy among scholars concerning temporal aspects of ‘continuity’ and ‘change’ in narrative identity construction. Since continuity and change are integral to the career notion, a career perspective helps to explain the under-explored co-existence of dynamic and at the same time stable dimensions of identity. This insight is particularly relevant in light of the changing relationships between organizations and their employees, where career paths are increasingly becoming more discontinuous and therefore unpredictable, protean and boundaryless. Moreover, the chapter argues that a career perspective on identity helps to raise critical questions regarding how widely dispersed career imperatives influence people’s career choices, and how these imperatives can be resisted.

Key words: Career identity, narrative identity, continuity, change, career imperatives, meritocracy, boundaryless career, protean career

Introduction

For a long time, organizational scholars have acknowledged that the meaning of work is tied to people's sense of identity. This implies that 'what we do' for a living has significance for our sense of 'who we are' (Kenny et al., 2011). Rather than just being a collection of tasks, however, work can mean different things to different people. While some consider work as a 'job', others think of it as a 'career' or a 'calling' (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Especially the notions of 'job' and 'career' have often been contrasted (e.g. Arnold, 2011; Arthur et al., 2016). Different to the construct 'job', which is associated with 'earning money' or 'putting bread on the table', the career concept is associated with aspects of time, sequence and status advancement (Arnold, 2011). Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989: 8) have provided a now widely used definition of career as 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time'.

Interestingly, while it can be assumed that this evolving career project is intimately interwoven with people's identity constructions within and beyond organizations (Gedro, 2017), the concept of 'career identity' (Meijers, 1998; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012), which was developed in the context of careers studies, has not been taken up in the organizational literature. And yet, as I will argue in this chapter, adding a career perspective to the study of identity can help to better understand how and why people author their identities in a cohesive way, even in light of shifting (career) boundaries (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). In contrast to the notions of organizational (e.g. Albert et al., 2000; Alvesson & Empson, 2007; Brown & Starkey, 2000) and professional (Pratt et al., 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) identity, which have been studied and theorized extensively in the context of organizations (e.g. Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2015; Ybema et al., 2009), career identity is not bound to a specific organization or professional role. Instead, it derives its meaning from 'the individual's development in learning and work throughout life' (Collin & Watts, 1996: 386).

Therefore, when ‘enacting’ their career identities (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008), people ‘tell how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow’ (Savickas, 2005: 58). The concept of career identity, hence, suggests that people, when narrating themselves in the moment, always speak with larger career trajectories and broader ‘life themes’ (Cochran, 1997) in mind that span different contexts. This framing touches upon two particular aspects of ‘temporality’ (Ricoeur, 1992) in the construction of identity: ‘continuity’ and ‘change’. While the potential co-existence of continuity and change, sometimes referred to as ‘confluence’ (Schmiedeck, 1979), has been explored elsewhere, especially with a focus on specific organizational contexts (Clarke et al., 2009) or situations of organizational change (Chreim, 2005), it can be noted that ‘continuity’ and ‘change’ are always integral to the construction of career identity. This understanding helps to inform the ongoing debate on how notions of continuity and change can be brought into a meaningful balance (Brown, 2015) as people make sense of their changing yet stable career identities over time.

This insight is particularly relevant in light of contemporary workplace developments (Arnold, 2011; Chudzikowski, 2012; Gedro, 2017; Grote & Raeder, 2009; Loacker & Śliwa, 2018), where the flexibilization of labor has led to increasingly precarious work conditions (Standing, 2011) including temporary work assignments and short-term contracts. These developments certainly impact the once ‘mutually beneficial relationship’ (Schein, 1978) between organizations and employees, as the psychological contract that offered life time employment and job security for loyalty and hard work is becoming antiquated. Instead, new career models around protean (Hall, 1996) and boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1989) careers are on the rise. While these new career directions have been discussed comprehensively in the careers literature (e.g. Briscoe et al., 2006; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994), their implications for people’s

(career) identities in organizations are yet to be explored and theorized. In this chapter, I outline some promising avenues for this endeavor.

Lastly, the chapter draws attention to the potential for critical inquiry when adding a career perspective to the study of identity. By framing identity as a culturally embedded, collective endeavor (Somers, 1994), a career perspective helps to explain why career goals and identities are rarely self-contained or constructed in isolation (LaPointe, 2010). It thereby invites critical questions regarding how broadly dispersed and widely accepted career imperatives – grounded in an ideology of meritocracy – influence or limit people’s career choices, and how these imperatives can be resisted. Before I commence this critical discussion, I delineate my understanding of career identity as socially constructed through narrative, discuss temporal aspects of continuity and change in the construction of career identity, and consider how a refined understanding of temporality helps to make sense of identity stability in light of constantly changing career and identity trajectories in the contemporary workplace.

Career identity as socially constructed through narrative

While organizational scholars have sporadically taken an interest in career matters, addressing issues of gender inequality (Herman, 2015) and agency (Fernando & Cohen, 2014), experiences of career transitions (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), involuntary career exits (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014; Maitlis, 2009), as well as an increase in precarious career paths in academia (Bristow et al.; 2017; Clarke & Knights, 2015) and the cultural industries (McRobbie, 2009), a systematic theorization of ‘career identity’ is still absent in the organizational literature. For a definition of this concept, we therefore have to consult the field of careers studies, where various scholars have tried to delineate their understanding of ‘career identity’ (e.g. LaPointe, 2010; Meijers, 1998; Pryor, 1985), mostly, however, with a

(functionalistic) interest in career development and matching people's identities, skills and preferences with the characteristics and needs of organizations (Schein, 1978). Meijers (1998: 200) for instance defined career identity as 'a developing structure of self-concepts in their relation to the (future) career role perceived by the individual himself'. Pryor (1985) additionally proposed that one should not simply equate career identity with the sum of experiences an individual undergoes during the course of his or her (working) life. Instead, he maintained that individuals consciously link their own competencies, interests, goals and personal values with acceptable career roles.

In this chapter, I contend that Pryor's proposition is a good starting point for theorizing 'career identity' in the context of organizations, as it implies a practice of 'performing' and meaningfully 'assembling' different identity positions (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). I frame this 'performing' and 'assembling' of career identities as a narrative accomplishment, especially since narratives are particularly apt for capturing complex identity dynamics (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Maitlis, 2012) along changing career paths. Through 'career narratives' (Christensen & Johnston, 2003; Meijers, 1998; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) in particular, people can construct who they are and how they see themselves in the context of their career. They can express uniqueness and imbue their individual career choices with purpose and meaning. More generally, taking note of an individual's 'career history' (Inkson, 2002) helps to keep the different stages of their career identity connected and ensures a sense of continuity, which allows people to 'stay true' to their overall career trajectory based on individual values (Hall, 2002; Wolf, 2018).

At the same time, career narratives allow people to embark on a transformative journey where they can 'try out' or customize different social and professional identities (Maclean et al., 2012; Pratt et al., 2006), and in this way make space for their changing career experiences over time

(Arthur et al., 1989; Bujold, 2004; Hoyer, 2016; LaPointe, 2010). Along those changing experiences, people may also alter the way in which they narrate their careers, especially concerning the selection and interpretation of significant memories (Wolf, 2018). Additionally, it has been argued that continuous narrative (re-)construction of one's career identity can facilitate transformation and potentially help individuals to achieve their vision of who they want to be (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Wolf, 2018).

Scholars have also suggested, however, that career narratives are not free-standing or self-contained (LaPointe, 2010). Instead, they are embedded in broader cultural narratives referred to as 'master narratives' that are available in a person's wider socio-cultural and historic context (Somers, 1994). More specifically, widely dispersed narratives around 'achievement' and 'personal growth' find numerous ways of entering people's career narratives (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Reedy et al., 2016). Individuals often internalize these narratives at a young age as they are exposed to them throughout their lives through the media, market and workplace (Reedy et al., 2016). By the time a person enters into the labor market, these cultural narratives have turned into career scripts that provide a blueprint for how to make attractive life and career choices (McAdams, 2001; Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011).

While people may tap into their self-knowledge for making informed career decisions, the opinions of co-workers, peers, family members and society more broadly are vital influences in career-related decision-making (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011). Rather than being personally developed choices, these decisions emerge out of social interaction, negotiation and co-construction between individuals and communities (Gedro, 2017; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Even if a person's work context changes along his or her career journey, larger cultural narratives of what an 'ideal career' and related to this an 'ideal career identity' are, will usually prevail over time (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Reedy et al., 2016).

Change and continuity in narrative career identity

In this chapter I contend that taking a ‘career perspective’ is instructive for enriching the narrative approach to identities in organizations. A career perspective helps to better grasp the dynamic, changing and at the same time stable and boundary-spanning dimensions of narrative identity. Thus, by touching upon temporal aspects of ‘continuity’ and ‘change’ – and how they are meaningfully related in people’s career stories – in this chapter I aim to advance theorization of temporality in the narrative construction of (career) identities. While the temporal dimension of identity construction (Williams, 2012) has well been recognized, Brown (2015) notes that few scholars have ventured to build on this. Instead, as Pratt (2012: 28) contends, the explicit ‘theorizing about time in identity research is relatively rare’; and yet, temporality is inherent in theorizing. Paul Ricoeur (1992), for example, who has been most influential in narrative research on identity, strongly emphasized the ‘temporal dimension of human existence’ (Ricoeur, 1992: 114).

While temporality seems to be at the heart of narrative theory (Baumeister, 1986; Brown, 2015), discussions around temporal aspects of ‘continuity’ and ‘change’ in narrative identity construction remain controversial. More specifically, there is an ongoing debate concerning whether identities are unified and coherent or fragmented and contradictory (Brown, 2015). Those who theorize identities as coherent highlight people’s sense of continuity over time. Scholars of personality and developmental psychology (McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006; Singer, 2004) in particular have conceptualized narrative identity as unified and meaningful life stories. In contrast, most narrative work in the field of organization studies – driven by scholars with postmodern inclinations (Brown, 2015) – has treated identity as an ambiguous and ongoing endeavor (e.g. Brown et al., 2005, 2009; Fraher & Gabriel, 2014; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; LaPointe, 2010; Somers, 1994), thereby favoring notions of change

and becoming. From this perspective, identities are provisional (Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986), potentially contested and incessantly reassembled through discourse (Alvesson et al. 2008; Brown, 2015).

Surprisingly, this ongoing debate around change and continuity in narrative identity construction has failed to incorporate a view of people's broader life and career trajectories. I argue that adding a career perspective to the theorization of narrative identity helps us understand how and why the seemingly incompatible aspects of change and continuity co-exist in a meaningful way. As a few organization scholars have concurred, identity change and stability are not necessarily locked in 'dynamic tension' (Ibarra 1999: 783; see also Brown, 2015; Chreim, 2005; Clarke et al., 2009; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). Even though these concepts elicit radically different views, there is also the standpoint that one does not need to choose between a mainly fixed and a predominantly fluid understanding (Gedro, 2017). Instead, some theorists suggest that even fragmented identities can exhibit coherence, while stable identities can still be dynamic (Gedro, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). I argue that this under-explored and under-theorized co-existence between change and continuity becomes self-evident when taking a career perspective, which frames identity construction as an ongoing and constantly evolving project that is held together by meaningful and coherent life stories (Linde, 1993).

Change is already engrained in the very definition of career identity, which derives its meaning from the evolving sequences – in others words, the 'changes' – that people experience along their career progression (Arthur et al., 1989; LaPointe, 2010). Whenever career paths are interrupted and positions shift, new meanings have to be negotiated for people's work and their careers (Van Maanen, 2015). This will have an impact on the way in which people construct their identities in a new work place. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) developed a dynamic process

model that illustrates how career changers revise their narratives in response to career change. The authors analyzed the ‘narrative repertoires’ that people drew on when reporting upon a career change. They suggest that career changers are able to revise or replace their previous identities by drawing on different narrative repertoires, and by adding to or subtracting from them. When internalizing these new repertoires people may experience enduring and profound identity changes.

This brings me to the second aspect of continuity. Expanding upon Ibarra and Barbulescu’s model, I suggest that narrative repertoires do not always get revised and replaced to stabilize a new narrative identity. Instead, certain repertoires in people’s career narratives may in fact stabilize and persist across changing work contexts. In her study of the narrative identity construction of ex-consultants, Hoyer (2014) observed that in the course of career change, former management consultants clung to a discourse of elitism signified by ‘exclusivity’, ‘high performance’ and ‘status’ when narrating their identity in a new work environment. While some ex-consultants did so intentionally, in order to preserve an elite identity in a new work context, others who had consciously turned away from the explicitly elite environment and distanced themselves from elite aspirations, were found to continue, to appropriate, or to (unsuccessfully) denounce the discourse of elitism. This suggests that elite aspirations may be particularly appealing in the construction of career identities. Especially in times of transition, as previous studies have indicated (e.g. Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Ibarra, 2005), people hold on to that which they cherished in the past, while at the same time orienting themselves towards the new workplace (Ibarra, 2005). This allows different identities to co-exist as people draw on multiple, and sometimes incompatible, discourses in authoring their career narratives (Clarke et al., 2009).

Yet, while ‘identity change’ has been well documented (Brown et al., 2005, 2009; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), the notion of ‘continuity’ in narrative identity construction has received relatively little attention, at least in the organizational literature. Again, continuity is fundamental to a career perspective, which integrates an evaluation of the past, the present and the anticipated future into a meaningful life story (McAdams, 2001). In order to explain how continuity is achieved in people’s career narratives, Cochran (1997) suggests that career projects are driven by broader ‘life themes’. These life themes – people’s hopes, fears, ambitions and anxieties (Ybema, 2010), can be considered as recurring patterns in people’s biographies ‘that guide the person through the next phase of their existence’ (McAdams et al., 2001: xvi), and are thus not limited to a specific period in life (Savickas, 2005). Life themes may develop long before a person enters work life. Fraher and Gabriel (2014) for instance explore how stable ‘identity anchors’ such as childhood dreams can influence a person’s career identity throughout adulthood. Influenced by early memories or critical incidents, life themes indicate what people strive for more broadly as they construct their careers (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Wolf, 2018), not only concerning their immediate situation, but also regarding future decisions and actions (Bujold, 2004). Life themes thus explicate the meanings that guide people’s career choices over time. They reflect the core thematic lines (McAdams, 2001) and basic values that a person aspires to. In this way, they become the guiding principles throughout a person’s career narratives (Wolf, 2018).

One way of applying a career perspective to the study of identity in organizations – with the potential for better capturing the co-existence of change and continuity – is through an exploration of identity via people’s work and career biographies (Grote & Raeder, 2009), or more generally, by pursuing a life story approach to the study of identity (Linde, 1993; McAdams, 2001). Even if restricted research budgets or the imperative to ‘publish quickly’ may limit the possibilities of engaging in longitudinal studies or repeated interviewing over

time, asking people to share insights on their broader life and career trajectories can provide whole-life perspectives in which both aspects of continuity and aspects of change will inevitably play a meaningful role. For a better comprehension of this co-existence, I further recommend investigating people's broader life themes, which may especially be prevalent in times of transitions. More generally, I suggest that for a holistic endorsement of the identity concept, scholars should refrain from research designs that render identity as a context-limited construct per se, which ignores stable repertoires in people's changing career narratives and trajectories.

Contemporary career developments and their identity implications

A good grasp of the co-existence of identity stability and identity change is particularly relevant in light of contemporary work and career developments. It has been argued that due to an increase in automation, digitalization and international competition, the world of work has grown considerably more complex, volatile and, therefore, unpredictable (Arnold, 2011; Chudzikowski, 2012; Gedro, 2017; Grote & Raeder, 2009; Loacker & Śliwa, 2018). As a result, employment relationships have become more project-based, contractualized and short-term (Chudzikowski, 2012; Standing, 2011). Technology and flexible work arrangements have, moreover, altered the boundaries of time and space in the workplace, as employees have become 'accessible' during times and in contexts that have heretofore been considered as private, family or non-work time (Gedro, 2017; Grote & Raeder, 2009; Meijers, 1998).

For the past 30 years, the careers literature has been particularly concerned with the two influential concepts of 'boundaryless' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1989) and 'protean' careers (Hall, 1996). Common to these two concepts is the assumption that contemporary careers involve a shift from employer-managed to more self-directed efforts, focusing on aspects of adaptability, employability and competence development according to changing market needs (Grote &

Raeder, 2009; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). The boundaryless career concept (Arthur & Rousseau, 1989) especially highlights increased career mobility through transcending the boundaries of occupations, organizations, industries and the work-life distinction (Arnold, 2011; Arthur & Rousseau, 1989; Chudzikowski, 2012; Mirvis & Hall, 1994; Meijers, 1998). The protean career concept emphasizes that careers have become more self-directed and values-driven (Hall, 1996, 2002), and, therefore, more agentic in terms of how individuals make use of their time, talent and resources (Gedro, 2017). It suggests an alternative understanding of career success as subjectively defined, based on personal definitions of accomplishment (Hall, 2002; Wolf, 2018).

Given the strong link between work biography and identity in Western societies (Law et al., 2002), the rise of new career models has also spurred questions concerning how people construct their identities when conventional career structures are suspended and loyalty-based psychological contracts gradually decline (Chudzikowski, 2012; Grote & Raeder, 2009; Hall, 2002; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Moreover, it raises questions about how identities can most adequately be studied and theorized under these conditions (Grote & Raeder, 2009; Wolf, 2018). These questions, I contend, have yet systematically to be addressed. One can well imagine, though, that in times where identity change and adaptability become imperative, leading to fragmentation and multiplicity, the notion of continuity – grounded in people's values and broader life themes – will become ever more crucial for a simultaneous sense of identity stability.

A fruitful avenue for further exploring emergent career identities under contemporary work conditions is through the concept of 'perpetual liminality' (Ybema et al., 2011), which addresses practices of identity formation wherein actors find themselves in-between two or more identity positions for a prolonged period of time. Indeed, when looking at the career paths

and identities typical of today's 'liquid' organizations (Bauman, 2000) it becomes evident that liminal positions are on the rise. Perpetual liminars are workers who step across hierarchical, professional and organizational boundaries on a day-to-day basis, casting and recasting their identities for different audiences while establishing and maintaining multiple relationships (Ybema et al., 2011).

Budtz-Jørgensen et al. (2017) introduced the notion of the 'liminal career', that is a career in which individuals need to cope with ambiguous work relations, unclear work expectations and uncertain career prospects. One characteristic of the liminal career is that it involves the optimization of future possibilities where employees cultivate a broad repertoire of different competences, skills and identities in order not to become too specialized in one area, which would make them less adaptable to the changing conditions and requirements in a particular field (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2017). Instead, employees try to enact their career identities as 'polyvalent resources' (Weiskopf & Loacker, 2006: 407) rather than turning into specialists who are employable only in strictly defined fields. In that sense, having a liminal career involves navigating one's identity between different imagined career possibilities. As Bauman (2000) notes, the challenge for professionals is then to achieve 'fitness' in terms of adapting one's identity and staying open to its potential expansion in whatever direction (see also Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015).

Turner (1982) points out that (permanent) liminality may infuse people's identity projects with ambiguity, uncertainty and anxiety. It can thus significantly disrupt a person's experience of identity stability, especially when they have to constantly re-position themselves across different organizational contexts and engage in intense 'boundary work' (Hernes & Paulsen 2003). Yet, since a growing proportion of people in the contemporary workplace are engaged in transient assignments (Ybema et al., 2011), there have also been attempts to shift the focus

from the potential negative outcomes such as identity threats (Petriglieri, 2011) to people's ability to deal effectively with liminal conditions. As Hoyer (2017) for instance observed, some people, who endorse a highly mobile career and lifestyle, may in fact thrive under liminal conditions. For them, perpetual liminality can turn into a *source of stability* rather than fragmentation. Borg and Sönderlund (2015) have started to explore the notion of 'liminality competence', a competence which makes people aware first of all of their liminal position, and secondly, helps them acknowledge the potentially positive outcomes associated with it such as greater access to different social networks, and more opportunities for learning and knowledge transfer.

Rather than posing a threat to people's sense of continuity, liminality competence may enable professionals to take advantage of liminality and the provisional identities (Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986) that it offers. A high level of liminality competence could for instance imply that workers experience liminality as a form of freedom which 'liberate[s] them from structural obligations' (Turner, 1982: 27), prevents 'identity closure' (Hoyer, 2017) and allows them to exploit the condition of 'working in-between' for their own identity construction (Borg & Sönderlund, 2015). Liminality may thus provide people with a sense of 'identity flexibility' (Grote & Raeder, 2009), of being ready for the next change, and therefore in a good position not to miss any interesting opportunities for self-exploration, personal development and growth. This framing of liminality can help us better understand people's ongoing quest for identity change and personal growth, without jeopardizing their sense of career and identity stability (Hoyer, 2017).

The critical potential of taking a career perspective on identity

Besides the generation of new insights on the co-existence of continuity and change, I suggest that applying a career perspective to the study of identity opens up new avenues for critically exploring how identities are constructed in the contemporary workplace. Here, I will delineate how a career perspective can illuminate power dynamics in processes of identity construction by touching upon issues of privilege, marginalization and ideology. Concerning the aspect of privilege, the career concept comes with middle-class to upper-class overtones (Gedro, 2017). It implies that people who are concerned with career progression have the ‘luxury’ of being in an environment where pondering about and planning one’s career path is common. It implies guidance toward higher education, while some may have been groomed into comfortable and potentially flourishing (work) lives. This suggests that the career concept is not a neutral proposition, but a result of choice, chance, socialization and conditioning (Gedro, 2017).

Feminist scholars have picked up on the notion of privilege (Gedro, 2017; Hertneky, 2012; LaPointe, 2013; Ng et al., 2005), also problematizing aspects of marginalization and stigmatization (Gedro, 2017). Eye-catching headlines such as ‘gender equality is 57 years away’ (Arnold, 2011: 108) suggest that men are paid higher salaries on average than women and that the gap reduction is a (very) slow process (Ng et al., 2005). Related to this, feminist research has shown that theories and discourses of career have mostly been based on the (limited) experiences of white middle-class men (Gedro, 2017; LaPointe, 2013). Within these framings, as Hertneky (2012) critiqued, career development is exclusively framed as a linear, hierarchical and upward career path, not taking note of women’s career goals which may incorporate other aspects and follow alternative trajectories (Gedro, 2017). Historically, women were forced to choose between having a career or having a family – a zero-sum proposition. Although the idea that women have to live up to the image of the ‘company man’ (Kanter, 1977) was destabilized

during the 1970s, nowadays, new gendered boundaries are constructed through the norms of mobility and entrepreneurialism (Gedro, 2017; LaPointe, 2013). Besides women, also older workers, racial and LGBT+ minorities, and people with disabilities have worked hard to construct a legitimate career position for themselves in the workplace. Yet, in various professions, prevailing gender, ethnic and other discriminations restrict opportunities for career progression for minorities (Ashley & Empson, 2013; Herman, 2015). A career perspective can help to identify these cases of prevailing inequality, and suggests that much more work is needed to reach an equitable situation. Since careers can also be turned into a site of self-direction and agency (Fernando & Cohen, 2014), this will have broader implications for how we theorize empowerment and resistance in the context of organizations.

Earlier in the chapter, I noted how career identity is rarely constructed in isolation, but shaped by widely dispersed cultural narratives, which strongly affect people's career choices (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; LaPointe, 2010; Reedy et al., 2016; Somers, 1994). To better understand this dynamic, it is worth noting that in Western societies, validation of the self is increasingly grounded in a 'success ethic', which is defined in terms of upward mobility as well as in material accumulation (Collinson, 2003). Indeed, the identity ideal promoted in the workplace today is often characterized by career success (Reedy et al., 2016). As McRobbie (2009: 129) suggests, we live in a society where 'nobody can afford to come across as less than exceptional, hardworking and talented'. This claim underlines that in parts of the world where an ideology of 'meritocracy' dominates the quest for career success is deeply engrained (Young, 1958; Brown & Tannock, 2009). The ideology of meritocracy suggests that whatever a person's social position at birth, society ought to offer the opportunity to combine 'talent' with 'effort' in order for anyone to 'rise to the top' of a career ladder (Littler, 2013).

Arguably, in contemporary society, career success has become the only reliable criterion for others to assess and (potentially) grant their goodwill (de Botton, 2014). Moreover, what others think of a person has come to play a determining role in how people view themselves, often because they are afflicted by deep-seated uncertainties concerning their own value (Collinson, 2003; de Botton, 2014). When people lose out in (career) status (Gill, 2015), the social evaluative threat may translate into lower overall happiness as people confront the ‘disreputable’ fate of being deemed ordinary (Delhey & Dragolov, 2014). It has also been argued that ‘in a world where reputations are hard won but easily lost’ (Maclean et al., 2012: 17), career aspirations can inspire relentless competition, compelling people to work harder—even to the point of psychological breakdown (Gill, 2015). This competition is tied to the non-reflexive endorsement of meritocratic principles, which have been disseminated, celebrated and largely normalized as wholly beneficial. From a critical perspective it could be argued, however, that meritocracy damages community by rendering people with important career positions in society ‘somebodies’, while their inverse hold the brutal epithet of being ‘nobodies’. For these people, the system of meritocracy adds the ‘insult of shame’ (de Botton, 2014: 91) to the injury of low status.

This leads to the question of agency and whether or not people can free themselves from an ethic of success and the imperative to excel in their careers. Even if cultural narratives of achievement and career success have strong appeal, career identities are not fixed. Individual agency and the freedom to change reside in the possibility of choosing among other available repertoires within the confines of given social and historic contexts (LaPointe, 2010; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). As Kelly (1955: 15) notes: ‘no one needs to be the victim of his [or her] biography’. Francequin (2002) equally contends that the important thing is not ‘what society has done to us’, but instead, how we respond to that, thereby emphasizing the human capacity for creativity and reflection (Bujold, 2004). The crafting of alternative career narratives can

thus empower people to (re-)assume agency over who they say they are and who they hope to be, thereby opening up new ways for enacting career identities when writing the next chapter in their career stories (Del Corso & Reh fuss, 2011).

A first step towards a possible alternative to competitive career thinking for individuals could be a system that is based on a plural understanding of merit, grounded on a collective and not purely individual basis. Even in the competitive work domain, people could opt to pursue their own projects in collaboration with others (Reedy et al., 2016). In this way, they could move beyond concerns about superiority and an individualized narrative of career progression. Instead, they could de-toxify the individualized identity project, and forge social bonds supported by collective purpose, interdependence, equality, reciprocity and conviviality (Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Reedy et al., 2016).

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have argued for the integration of a career perspective when studying and theorizing identities in organizations. As Blustein and Noumair (1996: 437) proposed, even though there is an abundance of theories, we are still in ‘need of qualifying perspectives that function to enrich our view’. Following this call, I sought to enrich the narrative approach to identity by illustrating how a career perspective is instructive to our understanding of identity as not just limited to a current context or position, but embedded in a long-term identity project that is both stable and flexible, and closely entwined with one’s overall career trajectory. In this way, the chapter advanced the theorization of ‘career identity’ in organizations, namely as an ongoing narrative accomplishment that allows for temporal aspects of continuity and change to co-exist without contradiction.

The chapter also discussed how constructing a career identity remains a challenging endeavor as it involves balancing personal dreams and career aspirations with organizational realities and societal imperatives for career success (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014; Gill, 2015). Likewise, since career experiences can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’, they can serve as sources of shame and disempowerment (de Botton, 2014; Gill, 2015), or likewise, as evidence of strength and wisdom (Gedro, 2017). What complicates the matter is that career identities remain an ongoing endeavor, since societal expectations never come to a rest and organizational boundaries are constantly being refined.

Given the significant and ongoing changes in the work and career landscape (Wolf, 2018), it could be argued that the study of career identity is more relevant today than ever before (Gedro, 2017). There is still little (generalizable) knowledge on how people map their identities under increasingly protean and boundaryless career conditions (Grote & Raeder, 2009; Hall, 2002). Also, since the ‘new careers’ discourse is mainly rooted in the Anglo-Saxon context, there is much room for expanding the study of career identities to European, Asian and other regions, and for making cross-cultural comparisons (Arnold, 2011; Chudzikowski, 2012). This could be particularly valuable, considering that career identities are always embedded in ever-evolving societal, cultural and economic contexts (LaPointe, 2010; Somers, 1994).

A thoughtful engagement with the notion of career identity can also be useful in practical terms. It can be beneficial, for instance, to educational institutions that aim to prepare early career individuals for their professional roles (Arthur et al., 2016). Assuming that most future graduates will not pursue classic, linear career advancement within the confines of a single organization, with a good grasp of evolving career identities they can better be supported in their exploration of provisional (Ibarra, 1999), possible (Rossiter, 2009) or alternative selves (Obodaru, 2012). Organizations too could benefit from better understanding the stable and

flexible nature of career identities. In order to retain their best talent, they might need to develop incentives for those who do not seek a structured and linear career path (Chudzikowski, 2012), while still aspiring to hold on to the life themes and values which they find meaningful. Finally, this chapter can be considered an invitation to think more broadly, deeply and perceptively about how people in organizations make sense of their hopes, dreams, joys and fears as they craft their career identities.

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