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Vocational Pathways: The occupational experiences of older professional practitioners

Ian King

Introduction

With people living and being expected to work longer, this paper focuses on how to encourage older workers to determine future career direction by reflecting on their past vocational pathway. The reported research engaged professional practitioners (aged 50+) by asking them to co-construct their occupational story; the narrative interviews chronicle the reality of their occupational lives and the lifestyle choices they face.

Traditionally, practitioners working in professional services have made career decisions through structured or interactive interventions, e.g. work-based assessment, qualification and reputational profile (the 20th century focus on fact), but are there alternative approaches centring on the meaning that older workers can assimilate from their occupational experiences? This paper positions occupational narrative as a vehicle for making career decisions in later working life (a 21st century focus on vocational meaning) and proposes that it creates a coherent exposition of experience, enabling older professional workers to re/shape vocational meaning as they make a transition toward workplace disengagement.

Exploring career meaning

In this paper I explore the occupational journeys that professional workers have navigated – for most, as Whyte observes, 'a hidden journey, a secret code, deciphered in fits and starts' (2001:8), unknown at the outset. As they approach their occupational destination, this journey is clear in terms of the itinerary taken, but often obscure in terms of its meaning for the person who has undertaken the journey. Embracing vocational coherence offers the person who has driven their career forward, a focus on past experiences and future possibilities. In the contemporary workplace, an individual's decision to retire is not easy, as the concept of

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retirement is contested in an era where economic and political drivers are changing the meaning of retirement from a defined date, traditionally known as the state retirement age (SRA), to one of flexible transition dependent on personal preferences, obligations and organisational vagaries. In 1998, Phillipson suggested that 'older workers increasingly find themselves on the margins of the labour market but with a number of years ahead of them before they reach the comparative safety of retirement… [defined as] entry into a public old-age pension scheme' (1998: 60 and 59). So what do older professional practitioners think about their career options in the concluding stages of their occupational existence?

Traditional approaches to career decision-making have focused on the psychological determinants of occupational choice, but contemporary thinking additionally reflects on the sociological considerations that affect an individual's occupational emergence and stir their narrative imagination. As Mahoney and Patterson contend 'human knowing is a process of 'meaning making' by which personal experiences are ordered and organized' (1992:671); an older worker's occupational memoir represents an artefact of meaning, a co-construction of their narrative testimony built around the influences of temporality, exigency and contextualisation. The experience of a professional is determined within a continuum of time, possibly a period of up to 45 years for some, or longer dependent on their continuing residence within their sphere of occupational working. The organisational environment, through which they travel, has an impact on their career experience, in terms of organisational stability and sustenance, and is likely to be influenced by the intensity of that turbulence. Their purpose in writing an occupational memoir is to express meaning for their occupational self, an act of self proclamation or, as Freeman suggests, a process of 'rewriting the self' (1993:3).

Positioning occupational reflection

So who is the group of older workers whose occupational journeys I chose to explore? Having experienced the turbulence of organisational life in the 21st century (for an account of this see King, 2007), I decided to investigate the occupational experiences of a small group of professionals working within business consulting to see how their occupational choices had been/were being interpreted. My research group was opportunistic – described by Cohen et al (2000:143) as 'convenience sampling' – a group of collaborators defined within the population boundaries of professional qualification and aged between 50 and 64. The final group, selected as a result of familiarity, introduction and participatory willingness, comprised three women, nine men and represented three distinct domains of professional practice – accountants (six), lawyers (two) and management consultants (four). This group reflect what Eraut (1994) recognised as being the central features or characteristics of professionals, namely:

- 'specialist knowledge-base' that legitimised the tenure of specialist knowledge and limited access to that depository of knowledge to competent, that is qualified, practitioners,
- 'autonomy' that, whilst resulting in increased accountability in terms of professional adherence, simultaneously secured operating freedoms, and
- 'service' a concept that infers that action is required to reflect client needs and imposes an obligation on the professional practitioner to deliver to the standard anticipated.

The organisations within which these professionals work are described by Tilly (1984) as an intangible 'big structure' set up to address commercial inadequacies and to concentrate power. These characteristics present an occupational image of the type of people, and their employing organisations, embraced by my research.

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Having located my research population, my principal research aims were to enable older professional workers to give voice to their career story, reflect on their occupational narrative to identify their career aspirations and to model an approach to occupational review that would enable them to seek guidance pending their advancement toward workplace disengagement.

Realising societal influences

In earlier centuries a person worked until they died or ceased due to ill health or forced lay-off, but, from the early years of the 20th century, the concept of the 'pension' emerged and the government introduced their first state pension scheme. Following World War II, the government supported the further development of the state pension and also occupational schemes believing in 'stable employment' and 'traditional careers'. However, in contemporary 21st century, the impact of global forces – economic, political and sociological – have replaced these constructs with the emergence of 'fragmented careers' and continuing uncertainty about employability. This uncertainty is problematic as society faces the challenges of new demographic factors outlined by McNair (2009) as:

- most people can expect to spend 1/3 of their lives in retirement
- there are now more people over 59 than under 16
- 11.3 million people are over state pension age
- life expectancy for a 65 year old today is now 85 for men and 88 for women
- (many) lives are more discontinuous and complex; 'retirement' is problematic
- moving from a from a 3 to 4-phase life course (0-25, 25-50, 50-75 and 75+).

This summary shows that a significant number of the population is spending an increasing part of their life participating in a period traditionally thought of as 'retirement', but is this a realistic concept in contemporary professional life? With more people making a transition to a phase of occupational withdrawal, professional practitioners, along with all older workers, need to address a number of economic and social issues, such as their finances, obligations (including responsibilities for elderly relatives) and aspirations for a continuing occupational usefulness in an extended period of potential working life.

The challenges encountered include the meaning of (flexible) retirement, identity as represented by occupational existence, the self perception of professional status and the opportunity to continue in employment with the option of choosing when to disengage and withdraw from active employment. This latter challenge is more difficult for older workers forced out of work through displacement and redundancy for, as Ford notes, third-age employment 'starts at 45+, because 45 is now the approximate point at which age can begin to present both men and women with significant (and for many, acute) problems in securing suitable employment' (1996:1). My research is, therefore, designed to enable older professional workers to consider the narrative value of their occupational continuum; in other words a reflexive approach to understanding self and occupational experience.

Embracing occupational continuum

A person's career journey is bounded by their existence in time; we are a product of our intrinsic capabilities,

skills and qualifications, located within an occupational continuum – a coherent whole characterised as a collection, sequence, or progression of job roles. When recounting their occupational story a person interprets their past and believes that it has a contribution to their future by utilising the concept of 'temporality', that is the framing of their experiences in terms of the relativity of time. In narrative terms it is the anticipation that we can recall our past in a structured or chronological sequence of events that we have experienced and now hold in memory, but is the structure of time portrayed in narrative equivalent to this chronological time? Frow, in reflecting on the structure of a story by Borges, suggests that 'it is predicated on the non-existence of the past, with the consequence that memory, rather than being the repetition of the physical traces of the past, is a construction of it under conditions and constraints determined by the present' (2007:153). Faced with the prospect that there is no objective way of determining past occupational experience, how can the older worker envisage their past other than by writing it down? In his landmark text, Gergen refers to two narrative forms – the progressive and regressive – noting that they represent a way in which a person can locate their identity 'in terms of whether they move toward or away from the valued goal' (2009:39). These are illustrated in the following figure:

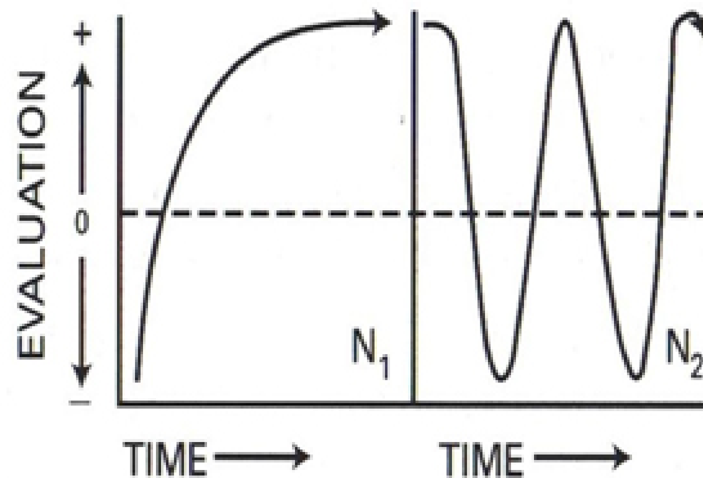

Figure 1. Representations of Working Life

Narrative 'Happily-ever-after' (N1) and 'Heroic saga' (N2) profiles (Gergen, 2009)

To enable my collaborators' early reflection on their occupational experiences, I asked them to create a profile plotting the 'highs and lows' of their occupational experiences over time showing the turning points and, if possible, colour coded to illustrate their degree of satisfaction with their progress, or, as Gergen posits, their progress toward 'some kind of endpoint or goal' (2009: 39). Cochran describes this form of narrative representation as a 'life plot' (1997:60) – this temporal perspective on the extraction of narrative reinforces the view of social constructivism that story is a revisualisation of past memories in the present or, in other words, a contemporary reconstruction of historical images of past events. This approach, to creating an occupational profile, enables an individual to recollect quickly their career travels compared to other forms of occupational interpretation, which require more in depth analysis and do not necessarily add any new dimension to an individual's appreciation of their occupational self.

Vocalising occupational memoirs

Rodgers in his introduction to the republication of 'The Narrative of William Spavens' records that 'he had no didactic purpose beyond telling a good story, and he was blessed with an accurate memory and an interesting

career' (2000:9). This reflection, on the narrative account of an 18th century seafarer, is equally apposite for my research collaborators, whose recollections highlight the differing career pathways they have lived. I encouraged my collaborators to tell me their stories through a semi structured interview which involved them recollecting their occupational trajectory in response to an open question 'please tell me about your occupational experiences to date', what Spradley (1979) describes as a descriptive experience question. With minimal intervention on my part, this resulted in up to 45 minutes of story describing their recollection of the principal incidents within their career journey. I followed this open conversation with a number of closed questions focusing on specific issues such as future aspirations, life obligations and professional allegiance. With their permission, I recorded each interview, transcribed it and asked for their approval of the transcribed text – this edited version became the document that I used as my principal research artefact and analysed to locate the key themes in my collaborators' occupational narratives.

In the two stories highlighted in figure 2, the occupational trajectories of Ann and Charles (not their real names) are illuminated in sketch form showing some of the principal influences and turning points in their long careers.

Figure 2. Sketches of Occupational Life

As an accountant, Ann's story illustrates the vagaries of a career which she has continually had to reinvent and reinvigorate as she strives to sustain a purposeful occupational existence. On the other hand, Charles's story (a lawyer) shows the privileged progression of an individual determined to achieve the ultimate accolade of professional practice, namely partnership in his own firm; albeit on terms that sometimes proved unacceptable and ultimately resulted in self-determined withdrawal. These two stories illuminated the actualities of professional life and show, from two very different perspectives, the reality of professional practice in the 21st century. One other story that recognises the reality of what can happen is that of Jack, a Health and Safety consultant, who, after a long trajectory in government and self employed consulting, found that his working life came to an abrupt end when, due to funding cutbacks, his principal employer, a government agency, was no longer able to offer him a consulting portfolio. Of these three stories, only one, that of Charles', records the ascendant/progressive nature of professional life, whilst the other two show a professional life continually affected by the reality of 21st century working life, namely changes enforced by economic, social and political drivers. These sketches are a small representation of the hundreds of pages of raw transcript that I collected and can only locate some of the principal messages – economic drivers, organisational influences and personal challenges influencing my collaborators' occupational journeys.

To extract meaning from these stories, I had to determine a way of interpreting them to locate and confirm the principal findings that I heard in my collaborators' stories. Here I faced another research challenge – how

to organise and make sense of the stories that I had encouraged my respondents to tell. Boyatzis (1998) suggests that 'a theme is a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (preface, p. vi). This practical observation indicates that a possible solution to my encounter was to identify a pattern of 'occupational themes' that acknowledged the phenomenon that I recorded within my portfolio of occupational texts.

Again, I needed to adapt my thinking in order to accommodate my research progression; my natural inclination, as a logical rational researcher, was to seek a method or instrument that would locate these themes for me, but, after some intense deliberation, I realised that this was impractical. I assimilated the concept that, as Riessman notes, 'theorizing across a number of cases by identifying common thematic elements across research participants, the events they report, and the actions they take is an established tradition with a long history in qualitative inquiry' (2008:74). This approach to occupational interpretation requires an independent enquiry that reflects the principal insights that the raw data are presenting – initially I thought this meant that I had to reconstruct my respondent's occupational story by interpreting their story in a form that created some occupational coherence, but, after representing two stories in this way, I realised that, in addition to being a time-consuming process, this resulted in little new understanding.

It also left me open to the criticism of over-layering my collaborators' stories with unnecessary levels of interpretation or 'interpretive distortion', a risk noted by Clandinin and Connelly, who cautioned that 'because data tend to carry with them the idea of objective representation of research experience, it is important to note how imbued field texts are with interpretation' (2000:93). This caution aptly recognises that the original field text, in my case the occupational transcript derived from the audio recording of my initial interview, already contains interpretations made by the research collaborator in response to my interview questions, without me adding a further layer of interpretation. As a consequence, I adapted my analysis to a simpler form of extracted artefact, which I labelled an 'occupational portrait' – this highlighted the principal occupational issues emerging and generated a platform for determining themes or what Riessman describes as 'theorizing across a number of cases' (2008:74). In terms of research progression, my exploratory journey had taken another detour or, in nautical terms, a tack, that is a change in direction from one position to another.

Co-constructing occupational stories

Co-construction is the process of creating a narrative jointly with another person: in my research the process of recounting an occupational narrative with an older professional practitioner and creating an auto/biographic insight that illuminates the practitioner's occupational history. This approach to occupational investigation is different to those encouraged by career advisers in the 20th century where instrumentation – the design and use of structured questionnaires and inventories – promoted occupational exploration by helping career actors to locate, interpret and understand their career preferences, thereby enabling them to make informed career choices. These traditional approaches included 'trait based' matching e.g. Holland's Vocational Personality Type (Sharf 2006:91) and 'career decisions based on life stage' e.g. Super's Life Stage Model (Sharf, 2006:210), but in these approaches occupational navigation is determined by psychological interpretation and centred around prescriptive approaches to locating career. Whereas these approaches satisfy a preference for a rational scientific approach that can be measured to confirm position/role suitability – post modern career theory, emerging from the latter part of the 20th century, recognises and reflects concepts of opportunity and interaction. These contemporary approaches encourage an emerging disposition for social learning approaches that can be interpreted to extract meaning – Savickas et al argue that career counsellors should:

> …focus on client's ongoing construction and re-construction of subjective and multiple realities.

> Rather than relying on group norms and abstract terms, they should engage in activities and meaning-making that enables them to build some new view of themselves (2009:243).

The auto/biographic narrative genre is an approach that supports Savickas et al's commendation that enable a person '… to build some new view of themselves' (2009:243). However, for most practising professionals the opportunity to recollect a narrative account is restricted due to time availability and the ability to create such an occupational artefact. The process of co-construction enables the career actor to engage in authoring their occupational text by extracting and interrogating their career with the support of a partner, in this instance myself as the career researcher.

Conclusion: adapting to survive

For many older workers, adaptation is an emerging requirement in an occupational world continually battered by the global imperatives of product improvement, technological synergy and financial efficiency, resulting in the ever-increasing fragility of the concept of career in post modernist times. This is no less an issue for professional practitioners who, despite their foundations of professional qualification and credibility, find that their organisations are also likely to face the challenges encountered by all businesses operating globally. As a consequence, the occupational reality is that, like Jack and Ann, most professional practitioners' career journey is or will become predicated by ambiguity and uncertainty over a career life-time. The constant need for all workers, but particularly older ones affected by the ever present, but masked, attitudes towards age discrimination, is to accommodate their changing employment opportunities. The auto/biographic approach is a valuable and innovative way for third-age professional workers in the knowledge economy to explore career options by enabling career comprehension (what has been) and career projection (what might be). It also supports occupational transitions by enabling the older professional practitioner to embrace their career history, however fragmentary, shape meaning from apparently disconnected episodes and accommodate lifestyle choices and obligations as they approach occupational disengagement.

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