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Jürgen Weibler*

Career Expectations – In a Constant State of Flux?

“We have only limited understanding of the interplay between context and career patterns, and of how social backgrounds affect the perception of work and of one’s movements through different social positions” (Gunz, Mayrhofer, & Tolbert 2011, p. 1614).

The significance of this verdict has increased following the study from Kattenbach, Lücke, Schlese and Schramm (2011¹). Until now, many scholars were at least quite confident that career patterns had changed in the last decades with respect to changing environments. This contingency approach suggests a more flexible workforce as a result of enhanced work pressures and requirements of (international) labor markets, especially for managers. “Boundaryless career” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) or “protean career” (Hall, 1996) were two prominent catchwords for their proponents.

Following some empirical evidence, Kattenbach et al. showed instead in their study that nothing has changed dramatically regarding managers’ career expectations in the last decade. Therefore, career patterns have not changed either, because, all things being equal, career expectations transform into career patterns in time. This means that the last assumed certainty has also faded from a central building block of this research field. This gives Wolfgang Mayrhofer and Ronald Hartz later in this discourse cause for concern to reflect on the affectation of a noteworthy group of scholars who proclaim change as the most informative criterion for understanding economic behavior. Moreover, they hold a mirror up to us, and warn us to be cautious about possible personalized effects based on simplifications of environmental observations. Sometimes, they argue, we only produce statements about change through narrations, whereby promising alternatives would be eliminated, to some intents and purposes for ideological reasons (see Klein, 2008; more generally: Nienhüser, 2011). Their questioning of stable career expectations, and, in consequence, unaltered career patterns, is echoed by Frank Schnabel, who doubts that uniform career expectations can be detected at all because of their very individual shaping, which is caused by an as yet intransparent multifaceted framework.

Admittedly, the study referred to has specific limitations, and should only be seen as an initial starting point for more in-depth-studies. These in-depth-studies should acknowledge the working individual as embedded in its economic *and* social environment. Regarding the unsatisfied situation in this specific research, I suggest leading the sometimes pure descriptive discussion about career expectation under the umbrella of

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¹ In this discourse, a single reference list for all contributions is given at the end.

a far more theoretical elaborated construct, namely identity. Identity is one of the most popular constructs in organizational research, and has been well developed theoretically. There can be hardly any doubt that individual and societal considerations about career have a significant impact on one's own expectations and behavior in this matter (see e.g. Kotthoff/Wagner 2008, p. 145-164). Sveningsson/Alvesson already pleaded for this way of thinking in 2003, and addressed the interplay between the organizational context, role expectations, and the narrative (work) self-identity. Among other things, they advocate a process-oriented understanding of emerged identities that requires a concept of multiple, (discursive) constructed identities. With this they "contribute to the detailed investigations of identity constructions in the context of specific forms of organizational preconditions and coherence, as well as contradictions in construction work", and "do not try to explain acts and processes either exclusively through subjection to discourses, identification with social groups and organizational role scripts (...), or solely through a likewise narrow psychological approach based on a distinct, integrated and separate identity". Their approach "differs from a psychoanalytic focus, emphasizing inner psychological processes, based on early development, life history and the unconscious (...) as central to how work life is experienced and acted upon" (p. 1168). Taking this methodological approach seriously leads, hopefully, to new insights "for the contexts, complexities and processes of identity constructions in workplaces" (p. 1190), where positioning oneself with respect to career is an important one. With such a social constructionist methodology we will enhance the chance of acquiring a closer inside view on the self-creation process on career expectations and their (in)dependency on work relevant environmental changes; for example we would learn more "where subjectivities and prescribed identities do not overlap and what happens in these identity spaces of tension and contradiction" (Sinclair 2011, p. 508) provoked by such changes.

Although I concede that there are a variety of methods applicable for going ahead on this path, I suggest qualitative interpretive approaches like grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) at this stage of theory development. Grounded theory is seen to be exceedingly effective in revealing the particular and situated dynamics of social phenomena that can neither be separated from context nor isolated to one level of examination (e.g., Rowland & Parry, 2009). Further, grounded theory is highly recommended when studying processes by which individuals create meaning out of their social experience (Suddaby, 2006, p. 634), and leads us towards more sophisticated theory-building approaches (e.g., Charmaz, 2006). Instead of getting caught in "the trap of reification", where Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1164) see much of existing organizational analysis still remaining, grounded theory comes closer to the dynamics of social phenomena and our participants' lived experience and emerging interpretations. Thus, I would recommend grounded theory for developing models about how individuals construct and possibly change career expectations and attitudes or cognitions, as well as emotional and behavioral responses in relation to their social context. As we can see, such an approach not only highlights the dynamic, interpretive nature of interactions and meanings, but further assumes that research findings are created from dialogue and shared experiences with research participants (Charmaz 2006). In a similar vein, and in answer to one of the most im-

portant and challenging implications for studying change and development in organizations (at least taking change and development as a possibility into account), Pettigrew, Woodman and Cameron (2001) emphasized that scholars should forge a sophisticated context-sensitive engagement with practice.

Taking such methodological implications seriously while incorporating process-oriented models about identity or identity construction, for example in relation to the concept of identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), might hopefully enhance our contextual understanding on how and why individuals construct and/or change their career expectations out of their intersubjective experiences and in response to contextual cues and demands.