

THE SELF-DIRECTED CAREER IN AN ERA OF ECONOMIC INSTABILITY: OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explore and provide critical commentary on the notion of the self-directed career in light of empirical findings on the changing landscape of work and working Germany and Korea. Couched in the broader discourse of employability, self-directed career behavior includes a range of affordances, including increased autonomy in employment settings, job crafting, intra-preneurship, and the boundaryless or protean career. While much research, particularly that situated in organizational behavior and industrial psychology, assigns positive meaning to these new forms of work and working, a more critical reading of the literature suggest that self-directed career may be the exception rather than the rule, may be reserved for an elite set of occupations and roles in organizations, and may run counter to the expectations and needs of a majority of the workforce. The paper concludes with a call for the careful evaluation of the costs and benefits of self-directed career, and the need for HRD research and theory to address the implications of the changing nature of work in scholarship and models for practice.

Keywords: Career Research, Protean career, Employability, Critical HRD, New Work

Introduction

Few concepts have received as much attention in the career and related literatures, such as human resource development and workforce education, as that of self-directed career behavior. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing to today, researchers have observed the far-reaching changes in administrative and organizational structures, including the nature of work processes and the social institution of work and career. New forms of career behavior and career progression were described as one important adaptation at the individual level. The notions of the protean and boundaryless careers (Hall, 1976, 2002; and Arthur & Rousseau, 1996 respectively), here summarily labeled as *self-directed careers*, point to far-reaching changes in the relationship between individuals and institutions and organizations. Whereas the traditional career was said to be largely directed by the employing organization, focused on progression through the ranks, and based on mutuality of commitment, the new career pattern is said to be characterized by high degrees of individual choice, multiple career episodes with different employers and in different fields, and guided by the desire for personal satisfaction (Hall, 2003).

The psychological contract between individuals and employers is said to have shifted from relational to transactional, from mutual obligation and care across many years to project-based and often short-term contracting of work (Rousseau, 1995). Much of the literature portrays the changing pattern of vocational behavior as a result of societal forces, such as a diminished role of organized labor, organizational restructuring, down-sizing, off-shoring, and lessening of the hierarchical levels (for example: Cooper & Burke, 2002). These forces are in themselves responses to an increase in global competition, technological advances, increased rates of change in products and process technologies, and the productive power of emerging economies.

Against this backdrop, this paper proposes a critical evaluation of the self-directed career in cross-cultural comparison, specifically using literatures from the Germany and Korea. This examination appears warranted and important for several reasons: The self-directed career

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literature was developed in an era of economic expansion and optimism about the promise of alternative work arrangements, including entrepreneurial opportunities, intra-preneurship, continuing education and training provisions for new or additional work qualifications, and the feasibility of moving in and out of the labor market without penalty or costs to one's career. The current era appears to be characterized by retrenchment, diminishing opportunities for retraining, uncertainty over the reliable labor market information, and an abundance of unemployed or under-employed individuals vying for a small number of job openings. Thus the question arises to what the degree the current economic situation is supportive of self-directed careers.

A second reason to examine this topic is the prescriptive tenor of much of the literature that portrays the self-directed career as a near universal recipe for alternative career progression and success. Empirical studies, however, show quite consistently, that self-directed careers continue to be the exception rather than the rule, and that self-directed career behavior requires personal, educational, social, and material resources available to only to a minority. Moreover, in an era of high unemployment, self-directed career behavior may be selected as a last resort, a bridge between employments, and thus for many constitute not the highly desirable work pattern portrayed in the literature but a stopgap measure. Finally, there is a dire need to examine self-directed career behavior in cross-cultural settings. With the majority of the literature developed by North American scholars, the question over its cross-cultural validity, relevance, and feasibility in other societies and cultures arises.

Traditional and Self-Directed Careers

Given the wide range, diversity, and complexity of work arrangements, can a single career model or theory capture the plethora of work patterns of any era, let alone the current global moment? The contours of the two dominant models are familiar. The traditional career is said to have been the norm beginning, approximately, with the growth of post-war economies in Australia and New Zealand, North America, Europe and, with two decades' delay, Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa. It links back to earlier industrial and pre-industrial eras and reflects a primary dominance of the employing organization in charge of career socialization, progression, advancement, and separation. At the will (and often the whim) of the employer, there was little room for individual initiative, and career behavior took place within the rules and bounds of the firm. Advancement was a core value, commitment and loyalty were expected, and rewards were provided for in the form of salary increases and promotions (Hall, 2003). Careers were said to proceed in linear fashion over a life span and, for most employees, with a single employer, in a single industry, and in a single occupation (Super, 1980). Youngsters purportedly selected a career at an early age and spent their working lives in their chosen fields (Krau, 1997).

Dissatisfaction with the lack of expression and the dominance of an organizational value set found expression in the arts (examples: Henry Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*) but also in academic writing (examples: Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation* [1977] and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* [1956]). Following the oil embargo and recession of the early 1970s, and the emergence of global competition in advanced manufactured good and services, North American, European, and Asian world economies restructured in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The consequences were increased layoffs, reduction of the role of organized labor, and attempts at finding new ways of gaining employee commitment and high performance given lower commitments and rewards by employers. Charles Handy's 1989 *Age of Unreason*

‘captured this new flexible world of work in his model of the “shamrock organization” with its three clusters of workers (core, part-time, and temporary)’ (Hall, 2003, p. 5). Hall’s protean career shifted the responsibility for careers from the organization to the individual. Applying a free agent image of the worker as setting his and her work path and contracting at will for interesting or rewarding work, the protean career is characterized by a core commitment to personal and professional growth and freedom, high levels of lateral and vertical mobility, psychological satisfaction as the key reward, and commitment to the work, project, or profession (rather than the organization) as the key attitude (Hall, 1976).

The new career model replaces the relational contract between employer and employee—characterized by assumptions of a long term, committed, full-time, and trusting relationship, to a transactional one based on short-term exchanges of benefits and contributions (Rousseau, 1995). Organizations are able to reduce their investment in employee training and development, move to a market-based HR model, and contract with free agents who acquire the requisite skills on their own, selling them to the highest bidder, and take, in return, compensation, increase in experience and skill, and a widening professional network. Individuals prospering in the protean career path are said to score high in adaptability (to new situations, projects, demands) and self-awareness (of their skills, preferences, values, and so on). They further score high on measures of individuation as measured by the Big Five personality inventory (extroversion, openness to new experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness), and make career decisions based on a set of personal values. Finally, they are said to possess a ‘boundaryless mindset’ (Hall, 2003). Hall describes the protean career as a ‘path with a heart’ and views the construct as closely related to the notion of vocational calling. Invoking core ideals of humanistic psychology, he states: ‘The central issue is a life fully worth living....The secret is to find your unique genius, your talents that you love to develop and use’ (Hall, 2003, p. 9).

Self-directed careers should not be viewed as a new genre but rather a continuation of a trend beginning in the 1960s, when job enrichment research suggested that greater levels of autonomy, along with feedback, task significance, task identity, and skill variety, did lead to greater levels of motivation, satisfaction, and performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Related research on job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) provides another perspective on the ‘free agent’ nature of modern work, as does the focus on employability in the critical management and sociological literature (for example, Anderson, 2007).

Both traditional and protean notions of career should be critiqued for being stereotypical and overly general. While there is little doubt, that some individuals, in the current era, have been able to carve out their own niche and succeeded in remaking their careers in line with their talents, values, and desires, there is little evidence to suggest that this model is true for a majority. Rather, as Baldry and colleagues (2007) suggest, many careers continue to follow an organization-driven path. This is particularly so as rising levels of unemployment in many countries curtail the option to change careers and make a steady career with one employer more desirable. In Greek mythology, Proteus, son of the sea god Poseidon, is characterized by the ability to change his shape at will and thus the term *protean* originally connotes flexibility, adaptability, and versatility. Without denying its inspirational value for those who want to better their lot through pluck and hard work, it is hard to envision the protean career as the blueprint for anyone other than an educated elite or a lucky few. According to Hall (2002) the intra-individual challenges to adapt to a turbulent and complex world of work and to develop the meta-competencies required for unbounded careers are substantial. While systematic research is not available, estimates are that less than one half of adults reach the

level of psychological development required for protean career behavior (Kegan, 1994), and this percentage is certain to decrease if social, economic, political, and institutional barriers are considered.

Equally implausible is the whole-sale description of the post-war workforce as solely or even primarily traditional: as access to higher education expanded at a rapid rate, as women entered the workforce in large numbers and gained in educational achievement, so did the opportunities for self-directed careers, entrepreneurship, and career changes in the 1960s and 70s. No systematic evidence was found for a prevalence of either career model in their respective eras. Both traditional and protean career models seem to represent ideal types that have neither descriptive nor normative value but might, in fact, obscure the stratification of the labor market and the difficulties of many to advance, let alone realize their deeply held goals in their working lives. If, as Hall rightly states, careers are characterized by subjectively held attitudes, meanings, and experiences, then individual biography rather than grand theories should be considered. In such an approach, the relationship between identity and career comes to the fore, and thus the next section will examine two country level patterns for the nexus between self and work.

Career Research in Korea

In Korea, the self-directed career attitude is a new concept in career studies. With the influx of western business practice after the financial crisis in the late 1990s, traditional career attitudes based on lifelong employment appeared less valid. Since the mid 2000s, self-directed careers such as protean careers and boundaryless careers have been introduced (Oh, Seo, & Shin, 2004). Empirical studies on the properties of self-directed careers are still rare (Kim & Jyung, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2010; Park & Lee, 2011). Kim and Kim (2010) investigated the relationship between self-directed career attitudes and subjective career success. They found that protean and boundaryless career attitudes were positively associated with career satisfaction and job satisfaction. In a multiple regression model, protean career attitudes influenced job satisfaction and employability more than boundaryless career attitude. However, protean career attitudes played a weaker role than boundaryless career attitudes as predictors of job satisfaction.

In a study of 463 white collar employees at 31 larger companies, Kim and Jyung (2011) found that individual characteristic variables such as gender, educational background, and voluntary department transfers have high predictive value in explaining protean career attitudes, while organizational factors appear to have little influence.

Park and Lee's article (2011) confirmed these findings by showing that dimensions measured by the Protean Career Attitude Scale were influenced by very similar individual characteristics in Korean and US American employees in large companies.

The importance of self-directed career behavior was emphasized by Young-bum Park, President of Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (KRIVET). He stated in the presidential editorial (2012) in the *HRD Review* that the Korean labor market is struggling with poor quality of employment and lack of decent jobs. He pointed out that the number of unemployed people in the age group of 25-29 is triple that of the older unemployed. He identified five major problems that Korea has to solve to increase the quality of employment as follows: 1) a gap in income and job security between permanent and temporary employees, 2) a role of family owned big companies, *chaebols* and public sector,

3) over-expanded higher education, 4) labor shortage of small businesses, and 5) poor self-employed. These five problems might play a role to prevent proliferation of self-directed career attitude. Those who work in larger companies would stay in a privileged position and to hesitate voluntary turnover. Those who work as temporary or small companies' employee suffer from low job and career satisfaction.

Career Research in Germany

The German context for self-directed career behaviour is also set in the structure of the labor market and changing attitudes towards work and employment. In late 2008, the *Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund* ("Federation of German Trade Unions," or DGB) published a report, the *DGB-Index Gute Arbeit* ("DBG Good Work Index"). This report presented the results of a nationwide representative survey of employees with regard to their jobs. The index represents a representative report of working conditions in Germany. On average, the surveyed employees gave their jobs a rating of 59 out of a possible 100 points (the DGB interprets a score of <50 as a "bad job," 50–79 as an "average job" and 80 or more points as a "good job"). Aside from income, the areas of "promotion prospects" (46) and "future professional prospects/job security" (49) fared relatively poorly in the DGB study (DGB, 2008, p. 10). According to the study, job loss worries did not decrease in Germany in 2007 despite rising economic growth. This is underscored by the results of the "European Social Reality" study. In this study, the surveyed German employees were least optimistic about their prospects of finding a new job commensurate with their qualifications and experience (Special Eurobarometer, 2007, p. 30).

Since the 1970s, a clear decline in the traditional values of duty and acceptance has been observed in the life orientation of (Western) Germans, with a concurrent increase in so-called "self-realization" values. This trend is interpreted in various ways with reference to the meaning of working. Some researchers claim that work is perceived as a burden (in contrast, leisure time equals enjoyment) and infer that there has been a general decline in the once so highly praised German work ethic (Seidel, 1992, p. 53). A second strand of research perceives the change in values not as a general decaying, but as an expression of the increasing individualization of the population. According to this argument, a stratified set of social "value types" has been proposed. The five categories (ideal types) identified by Klages are the most commonly used taxonomy, with each group attaching a different meaning to working:

- *Traditionalists*. They uphold old "German virtues" such as orderliness and a sense of duty.
- *Resigned*. They are the losers when it comes to modernization and have sub-average motivation to work.
- *Hedonists*. For them, work is primarily a means to attain personal and material advantages.
- *Idealists*. For them, values like initiative and self-realization are important at work. Nevertheless, the reality of working life often collides with their standards, which makes them prone to frustration.
- *Active realists*. They represent a value synthesis: Classic work values like orderliness and a sense of duty unite with creativity, initiative and interest in meaningful work with a distinctive pursuit of success.

According to Klages, hedonists, idealists and active realists together account for more than 80% of the German population, whereby the realists constitute the largest single societal

group, namely 34 per cent (Klages, 2001, p. 10). The size of the active realists, in particular, suggests that a major opportunity exists with regard to the meaning of work, as employees of this type are personally motivated in their commitment to their work (Bartscher & Huber, 2007, p. 181).

Conclusion

Over the past 20 years, economists, management scholars, and political scientists have identified a clear break from the industrial model and a shift towards a post-industrial or 'new' economy based on the relative decline of the farming/extractive and industrial and the rise of the service and knowledge based sectors. At the same time, there has been disenchantment with the ability of large organizational bureaucracies to provide satisfying work, be they the US style multi-national corporations, the Korean family-owned *chebol*, or the non-governmental organizational of the United Nations, the World Bank, or International Labor Organization. Self-directed career behavior, developed as a solution to the problem of work that is not challenging, satisfying, or meaningful appears to be available only to a small percentage of the workforce, while organizations require increased levels of autonomy, independent decision-making, flexibility, and adaptability without being able to provide long-term assurance of employment stability and continuity.

Career theory and career development, then, operate in an arena characterized by competing factors, paradoxes, and tensions. Where the traditional career model still holds, there is an increase in work intensity, work duration, and work stress and a breakdown or at least a loosening of the psychological contract between employees and employers (Rousseau, 1995). Low levels of job satisfaction were reported in empirical studies in both Germany and Korea. The firms' needs for flexibility, adaptability, and independent decision-making may not be met by the incumbent workforce and suggest the need for project-based, short-term, and part-time employment and contracting. The supply of such contingent workers, however, may be limited, if only a minority of workers have the personal characteristics, motivation, and economic means for self-directed career behavior. The concept of the protean career and the notion of free agency have been used to denote the untethering of the individual from the social. While some are undoubtedly able to benefit from the increased choice and opportunity of the new employment model, it stands to reason that for a majority the model does not lead to increased opportunity but to uncertainty, fear, and material insecurity.

Moreover, a focusing away from work centrality altogether has been found in empirical studies. In many countries, individuals indicate that work and work commitment take second place to commitment to family (Kuchinke *et al.*, 2011). In Germany, a large-scale investigation on work in multiple industries has observed a declining sense of belonging and identification with work (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2007). Germans appear quite content to seek sources of identity and life satisfaction in areas unrelated to work, such as family, community involvement, travel, and other non-work related dimensions of life. Career advancement and higher incomes are not primary motivators for younger Germans, as a recent representative opinion survey suggested. While some 80 percent of respondents in a large scale, randomized, and stratified survey design indicated that they welcomed a fast-growing economy, only nineteen percent of adults were willing to "work hard and contribute a lot to the organization". Fewer than 45 percent indicated they were willing to work longer or harder for a higher salary, and 44 percent answered that they had not done anything over the past three years to improve their job prospects (Miegel & Peterson, 2008).

A similar development has been observed in Korea. Despite the emphasis on non-work as a major life pursuit, however, Korea has longest work hours among OECD countries with the average worker working in excess of 2,300 hours (OECD, 2007). In 2003, the Korea government revised the Labor Standard Law and shortened the maximum number of work hours but the new standard is phased in only gradually over the next five years. For example, the younger, post-war generation cited the goals of achieving recognition in society and self-realization as the most important reasons for working. The older, pre-war generation, in contrast, viewed work as a way of fulfilling their obligation as members of society or their families. Loyalty to employers also differed by generation, with over 20% of the younger generation indicating that they would switch to another organization if the opportunity arose or that they were currently preparing to change jobs. Members of the older generation were far more reluctant to leave their present jobs. In the four-year time span between the two survey publications, there was a decrease in work centrality: younger people placed more value on their family, community, and leisure. These generational differences appear to be indicative of different economic and social experiences and a shift between an 'earn money' and a 'spend money' generation, between a 'prohibited to travel abroad' and a 'free to travel abroad' generation.

These tensions and developments pose important challenges for the theory and practice of workforce and human resource development. For firm-based training and development, long-term and sustained development efforts will fail if employees leave, get assigned to different positions, or are internally disengaged. It is little understood, how HRD practitioners can prepare employees for flexible assignments, autonomous work, and independent decision-making; equally lacking are models for organization development to support such new work patterns. From an individual perspective, research has shows clearly the personal demands of self-directed career behavior that are quite rare in the population, and also the desire for stable employment, clearly defined job roles, and the limited willingness of over-committing to the workplace. HRD research is only beginning to take into account the changing nature of work and career, and there is an urgent need to incorporate into HRD theory and scholarship the insights and developments in career studies. From this, important questions for HRD practice require answers: how to prepare individuals for work when work is rapidly changing, when stable jobs disappear, and when autonomy, flexibility, and adaptability are core requirements of successful careers? How can organizations develop structures, processes, and policies to allow the desire for self-directed career behavior by some and the need for stability and predictability of many others? How can organizations help transition individuals when long-held jobs disappear and when work on multiple projects replaces development of competence in a clearly defined area? How can individuals develop deep expertise when job demands require short-term engagement on multiple projects and frequent revision of job responsibilities and requirements? These and many other questions and challenges are before HRD practitioners on a daily basis, and the need for comprehensive answers based on solid research is urgent. If HRD theory and research is to have a guiding influence on HRD practice, the changing nature of work and working should become central, and to this effect, this paper hopes to make a contribution.⁸

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