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UNDERSTANDING CAREERS

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Career and Metaphor

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The objectives of this chapter are:

- to become aware of the importance of career in your life and some of the key issues relating to your and others' careers
- to become aware of some of the characteristics of careers, the history of career studies and different disciplinary approaches to understanding careers
- to gain an appreciation for the use of metaphor as a tool to understand and develop careers and the set of specific metaphors for career on which this book is based
- to consider a single career as a case study, and see how the use of different metaphors can help us to improve our understanding of that career and other careers.

CASE STUDY

Contrasting Experiences of Career

Maria, Ultrasound technician: I work at a private obstetrics/gynaecology clinic in a big hospital. I do obstetric scans and pelvic exams. I love it! That is just as well,

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as the money is OK but I could probably have done better in the commercial world. I love the doctors, the other technicians, the teamwork, the way everyone trusts my expertise, and of course the patients, and the excitement of a new life coming in to being. It's a great job, and with more experience, new technology and promotion through the ranks, I want to turn it into a great career – though of course if I have children it could change all that.

Jan, Pharmacist: I'm a qualified pharmacist in a retail store, and I'm not sure I can stand it for much longer. The junkies, the abusers, the pleading for drugs – that's bad enough, but where I work there's jealousy, exploitation and backstabbing from my paranoid boss. Of course, I could walk out any time, but the money is good and there aren't many opportunities around in my field. And there's a mortgage to pay off and a family that's counting on me. If I'd known when I was at school what I know now, I'd have made some very different choices. Maybe when the kids are grown up I can take some time out and try something else, but for the time being I'm stuck with a career I hate.

We call Jan and Maria *career actors*: that is, they are individuals experiencing their own careers and taking actions which affect those careers. Everyone who is preparing for, or already in, a career is potentially a career actor, though they also have other, often related roles, such as employee, parent and friend (see Chapter 8). Thus, 'career actor' is not just about people who are pursuing a theatrical career: we are nearly all career actors. The term will be used frequently in this book.

In these stories, Maria is very happy in her work (and life) and looks forward to progressing into an equally productive and happy career, while Jan is very unhappy in his and recognizes that previous bad choices may have long-term consequences. None of this is meant to imply that a career as an ultrasound technician is better than a career as a retail pharmacist. Some pharmacists are probably as happy and fulfilled as Maria, and some ultrasound technicians as miserable as Jan. Rather, the two stories illustrate the extremes of career satisfaction and dissatisfaction, of fulfilment versus being stuck in an intolerable rut. Their stories also indicate that career, although largely defined in this book by experiences of employment and work, is intimately connected with the non-work parts of people's lives.

What caused Jan's misfortune? Was pharmacy really such a bad choice for him? Could he have avoided the fix he finds himself in by taking action at an earlier stage? Is it simply the organization he is in that is the problem? If he could leave this

organization, could he turn the situation around? Or should he make a major career change? How? And to what?

As for Maria, she seems happy and fulfilled for now, but will it last? Will the doctors she works with continue to trust her and give her the autonomy she values? Will her pay and status always be enough for her? Will she secure the promotions she hopes for? Should she be thinking ahead, planning and preparing for even better jobs in the future?

And what about you? If you already have a career, is it more like Maria's or more like Jan's? If it is like Maria's, what can you do to make sure it stays that way? If it is more like Jan's, how can you change it? If your career hasn't started yet, what can you do now to ensure that in 10 years' time you will feel more like Maria than like Jan? Studying careers and developing good career self-management based on what you learn may provide important practical skills.

The Importance of Careers

Over the past few decades, careers – defined here as 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur et al., 1989: 8) – have been the subject of extensive research. Here are just some of the ways that your career may affect your well-being and the kinds of action you can take in response:

- Your career is likely to be one of the most important features of your life. It will probably occupy roughly half your waking hours for 40 years or more. It will substantially determine your financial position, your status in society, your contribution to society, your general happiness, your feelings of self-fulfilment and the judgments others make of you. Your career is therefore to be taken seriously.
- You differ from others in your personal makeup, such as background, abilities and interests. Your career should ideally be congruent with your makeup. To find congruence, you need to know yourself well, have a good idea of what jobs are available, and be sensitive to changes in either yourself or the situations in which you live.
- You will age and mature. As you do so, your energies and priorities will change. At some times in your life, you may be interested in exploring the world; at other times, you'll want to make a major change or chase career success; and at still others, you'll simply want to protect your energy, health and lifestyle. At some stages, there are likely to be significant pressures on your career due to family commitments. Your career needs to be responsive to these changes.
- Careers involve many decisions and choices. You may make a choice with negative consequences you don't anticipate. You may like your job now but hate it later. You may find yourself unable to progress to a higher level. You may be offered an unexpected opportunity. You may have to choose between money and job satisfaction. You may be laid off. But if you look ahead intelligently before committing

yourself, perhaps you can anticipate and change such circumstances or adapt to them. Career planning can help you safeguard your future.

- Your home, family and leisure lives intimately affect, and are affected by, your career. Many commentators suggest that there needs to be a balance between the demands of your work career and your commitment to family and non-work pursuits. Imbalance may be damaging to both parts of your life. You need to monitor your priorities and your actions and communicate with your family and others about these matters.

Stop and Consider

Think about your career so far. If you don't think you have a career yet, think ahead to the kind of career you expect or hope for. Re-read the five paragraphs above, which are about, respectively, the *importance, congruence, development, planning* and *balance* of your career, and think about how they might relate to you. Write down any thoughts that come into your mind in relation to each one. Keep your notes for future consideration. Get into the habit of thinking about the ideas in this book in relation to *you.*

These are the kinds of practical issues that career studies deals with. By understanding how careers work, you can empower yourself to improve your career. Academic researchers have expounded relevant knowledge. Educators, counselors and managers have developed good practices for assisting career actors. This knowledge and practice is reported in this book.

Defining *Career*

What does the word *career* mean? As Moore et al. (2007) point out, 'career' in the sense of a sequence of events relating to an individual's ongoing working life did not reach the dictionaries until well into the 20th century. In earlier times, career was a mark of privilege. In 19th-century England, for example, the notion of career, involving a long-term vocation, or progression through a series of work-related roles, was applied only to men entering the military, law, medicine or the Church. The democratic concept of career as a long-term chronological sequence of paid work experiences of the majority of the population was unconsidered. Some might have a *trade*

or an *occupation*, such as carpenter, maid, cook or accounts clerk. Most people thought in terms of *having a job, making a living* or *being employed*: they sold their labor and their skills for the best price they could get.

Some definitions of career have suggested that a career is more than just a sequence of jobs. For example:

> (Careers are) occupations that are characterised by inter-related training and work experiences, in which a person moves upward through a series of positions that require greater mastery and responsibility, and that provide increasing financial return. (Perlmutter and Hall, 1992: 384)

This definition appears to confuse 'career' with 'occupation', and to make vertical advancement (promotion) a precondition for having a career. Likewise, Leach and Chakiris (1988: 52) say:

> Careers flow from jobs… a job need not lead anywhere; it is just something a person gets paid for. Careers, on the other hand, are continuous behavioural episodes, leading to a path or ladder that ends, optimally, in some sort of career capstone experience.

In this view, if you have a series of odd jobs all your working life, that is hardly a career: These authors are suggesting that the idea of 'pattern' is essential to a career.

We take a wider view. First, we recognize that many, if not most, careers tend to move across different occupations (as well as different organizations). We also believe that even in the 'odd job' example, there may be patterns below the surface of 'a series of odd jobs' which are not necessarily immediately apparent, and that, in any case, 'pattern', while often desirable, is not essential to a career, and that anyone who works in employment or self-employment at some stage in their life has a career. Consider this:

'Tell Me about Your Career', by Kerr Inkson

Due to my interest in careers, as part of both my research and my social life I often say to people, 'Tell me about your career' (see, for example, Arthur et al., 1999). As well as being a surprisingly productive research method, this question is a great conversation starter – more demanding than 'What do you do for a living?', but less intrusive than 'Tell me about your religion/politics/finances/personal relationships/sex life'. Career is a personal topic, but not an intimate one. People *like* talking about their careers. It enables them to choose an interesting framing of

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their history and to tell stories, rather than, as with 'what do you do?', sticking to the often mundane realities of the present. The notion of career creates that sense of *chronology* and *sequence* and *story* that differentiates career studies from other aspects of occupational psychology and organizational behavior. It also enables the researcher or questioner to understand what the word 'career' means to the answerer of the question.

But first, I find, one has to push past the superficial denials: 'I don't have a career, I'm just a housewife'; 'I don't have a career, I have an orchard'; or, most common of all, 'Oh, you don't want to talk to me – my career is kind of strange'. It turns out that in the way many people think, and talk, about career, the term denotes something rather orderly and linear: an occupational career or an organizational career. Many people consider as prototypical those existent but surprisingly uncommon forms of career: the perfectly progressive professional career and the one-company organizational career. They compare those 'ideal' forms with the sheer *messiness* of their own life histories and decide that the term 'career' is not the right one to describe these experiences. They conclude that somehow, even though their working lives may have worked out all right, they have failed to go about it in the right way and have therefore not had real careers.

The truth is that there *is* no right way. Most people at some stage, and often for long stretches of time, go through processes of what Super (1957) called 'floundering'. Many careers are knocked periodically off-track, and sometimes on-track, by error, unexpected obstacle or opportunity, contextual change, chance and whim. Such careers flow blithely across the boundaries of occupation, organization, geographical location, industry and status within which they are supposed to be conducted. Most careers, in other words, are *non*-linear (and therefore fascinating!).

Source: Inkson (2014), quoted with permission of the American Psychological Association.

This wider view did, in the later 20th century, achieve some kind of currency, and nowadays the term is much more common. Websites listing employment vacancies often advertise not *jobs* but *career opportunities*, apparently promising the chance of changing the rest of one's life for the better. In short, the notion of 'career' has become very popular.

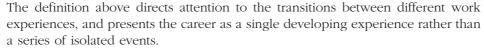Here is one definition of *career*: 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur et al., 1989: 8). This definition has important implications:

- Based on this definition, each person has only one career. If someone says, 'I've had three different careers', they probably mean they have worked in three different occupations or industries, but their experiences are all part of the same career.

The definition above directs attention to the transitions between different work experiences, and presents the career as a single developing experience rather than a series of isolated events.

- The phrase *evolving sequence* denotes that a career is not a momentary thing. It involves continuity and change. To understand a career, we need to look at what came before each experience and how the past relates to the present. We may even want to try to project our understanding into the future, for example in career planning. Careers are cumulative.

- The phrase *work experiences* focuses on employment but does not confine careers to paid work. Activities outside employment involve experiences that are relevant to one's career. For example, parenting at home may provide important career skills. A hobby such as wood-carving or mountaineering may become the basis of a full-time career. There is constant interplay between our career and other parts of our life.

- The term *experiences* also brings up the question 'what kind of experiences?' Objective experiences that are external and verifiable, such as job title and salary? Or subjective experiences, internal to the person in the career, such as career ambitions, job satisfaction or dissatisfaction, emotions about career progress and decision-making processes guiding career moves? The answer is both. The notion of 'experience' can be used to cover both the formal roles that a career actor occupies (the objective career) and the internal experiences of the career actor in terms of motivation, satisfaction, etc. (the subjective career).

- The term *over time* implies longevity. A career potentially lasts a lifetime.

The above points summarize what a career is, but don't necessarily tell us what a career is *for*, particularly for the individual experiencing it. Here, the concept of *career success* is important. Career actors are generally encouraged to pursue career success, but what career success consists of – for example, 'getting to the top' versus feeling an ongoing sense of satisfaction in one's career – depends both on the way society and its institutions define success, and on career actors' career goals. We explore career success further in Chapter 5.

A Brief History of Career Studies

This book has its basis in 150 or so years of academic thought, theory and empirical study. By theorising about careers and gathering data, we can better understand how they work. Sociology, psychology, educational studies, anthropology, economics, political studies and other disciplines can all assist us to build a new, more specialized discipline – career studies – to integrate this diverse information. It is instructive to understand how the study of careers has developed over time. For those interested, Moore et al. (2007) provide an excellent history of career theory and research, and Savickas (2008) that of career guidance and counseling.

Sociological approaches to careers

Early consideration of careers was affected by 19th and early 20th-century sociologists who believed that efficiency in work organizations was best served by specialization, requiring individuals to develop and utilize precise skills (Durkheim, 1893/1964), with obvious consequent effects on their ongoing working lives, such as the development of specialized trades and professions with codified forms of training and membership. Weber's (1920/1947) conception of rational organization, or bureaucracy, as the dominant form of 20th-century institution, also promised the creation, within organizations, of career systems that would direct employees through organizational pathways and, potentially, organizational careers.

Studies of careers were pioneered in the USA between the 1930s and the 1960s by the Chicago School of Sociology (Barley, 1989), which adopted the term 'career' as an individual's entire life history and focused on formal roles and 'career scripts' that were based on the expectations of society and enacted by individuals in their careers. In this view, careers were conduits between institutions and individual action, and could be used to study the constitution of society. The Chicago theorists also acknowledged or reinforced some of the central propositions on which today's career studies are based: everyone has a career; careers are not necessarily confined to work roles; careers are not necessarily vertical in direction; and careers involve subjective as well as objective elements. The Chicago School's studies of occupational groups such as managers, teachers and hospital physicians showed the potential of ethnographic study to provide knowledge and understanding of career dynamics.

Sociology continues to contribute to career studies. Careers are constrained by wider factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity and education, and may represent social structure rather than individual action (e.g. Blau and Duncan, 1967; Mayrhofer et al., 2004; McLeod et al., 2009). If this is true, individuals may make a limited difference to their own careers, which are rather thrust upon them by context and circumstance (see Chapters 2 and 3).

Psychological approaches to careers

In parallel with the developing interest of sociologists in careers, psychologists interested in the adaptation of individuals to their jobs have developed a 'vocational' psychology focused on individuals and their career decisions.

The term 'vocation' has a special place in career studies. What is a 'vocation'? Literally, based on the Latin root of the word, it is a 'calling', and in the Christian religion it often has connotations of a calling from God, for example, to be a minister or priest or teacher. But in the careers context, both 'vocation' and 'calling' can be wider, meaning that the person feels an external or internal compulsion that guides career decisions (Dik & Duffy, 2009). More broadly, a vocation, whether or not experienced as a 'calling', can be an occupation that a person trains for, takes up and stays in.

The term 'vocation' also has connotations of long-term adherence. The premier academic journal in career studies is the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*.

This tradition of career studies has a clear practical focus, with an objective of assisting career actors to make good career decisions, particularly in choice of job and occupation, so as to provide maximum benefit for both themselves and for society.

Savickas and Baker (2005) trace the antecedents of vocational psychology back to 19th-century events such as the founding of the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) in Boston in 1851. In 1909, Frank Parsons published the first systematic book in the area, *Choosing a Vocation*. Parsons advocated that people should understand themselves, understand the requirements and conditions of different lines of work, and use 'true reasoning' (logic) to find a match between the two. This philosophy is the basis of the fit-the-person-to-the-job, or trait-and-factor, approach to careers, which remains critical to the careers guidance field (see Chapter 6). Over the years, psychologists have made great strides in the measurement of career-relevant human characteristics, such as abilities, aptitudes, personality, values and interests.

After the Second World War, research and practice based on the 'fit' idea blossomed, focusing particularly on initial choice of occupation. For example, Roe (1956) theorized that motivational and personality factors developed in childhood predisposed the choice of particular occupations. In Dawis and Lofquist's (1984) work adjustment theory, career actors' abilities and values were compared with patterns of work in different occupations to predict their 'satisfaction and satisfactoriness' and enable a cost/benefit analysis, resulting in optimal choice of occupation. Holland's (1959, 1997) theoretical and psychometric analysis of career actors' vocational interests and the corresponding profiles of different occupations provided the basis of career practice for many practitioners. Such efforts were premised on the view that each career actor has a relatively stable set of personal traits, and should therefore find – if necessary with professional assistance – the kind of work that best utilizes those traits, and should stick to it long-term. Careers guidance based on such assessments continues to thrive today, and we consider its efficacy further in Chapters 6 and 13.

Some psychologists, however, took a wider perspective, developing theories based on the view that there is more to careers than initial choices, because careers are lifelong developmental processes (Ginzberg et al., 1951). In *The Psychology of Careers*, Super (1957) sought to go beyond static 'fit' theories, and consider in addition how individuals develop and change throughout their lives and what implications such changes might have for their careers. Levinson's *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (Levinson et al., 1978) portrayed careers as chronologies that, as individuals changed over time and entered into new phases of their lives, could be predicted with the inevitability of the seasons. We focus on the relationship of careers to adult development in Chapter 4.

Another tack was taken by theorists who emphasized that careers result from career actors' own actions, particularly the processes of decision making and adjustment through which they plan and implement their careers. Key theories were those

of Krumboltz (1979) on career as a form of social learning; Peterson et al. (1991) on cognitive information-processing theory; and Lent et al. (2002) on the social cognitive theory of career decision making. These theories, together with 'fit' and developmental theories, form the basis of individually oriented career development theory and – along with theories of counseling – of modern career counseling practice (Athanasou & Van Esbroeck, 2008; Hartung et al., 2014). We discuss theories of action in Chapter 5, and career counseling in Chapter 13.

Organizational approaches to careers

In the 1970s, business school academics began to study careers, perceiving them as being a concern for both the career aspirant and their employing organization (e.g. Hall, 1976). The notion of using careers to 'match individual and organizational needs' (Schein, 1978) in practices such as personnel selection (based on the same 'fit' model as vocational psychology), staff development, performance appraisal and promotion policies, promised benefits for both parties. Authors such as Hall (1976) and Schein (1978) recognized the symbiotic long-term interdependence of career actors and organizations. In a kind of human resource management of careers (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000), organizations began to develop more sophisticated systems to manage their members' career development for mutual benefit (see Chapters 10 and 14).

More recently, the restructuring and layoffs prevalent in many organizations have removed some of the mutual loyalty and common interest between career actors and their organizations. Interest has grown in 'boundaryless' careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), where individuals move between organizations, creating major skills displacement and labor turnover problems for these organizations to solve. This approach also focuses on career journeys – the directions, routes and pathways that careers typically follow. The ways in which professional workers with sought-after skills, such as those in science and IT, develop their careers, has become a major topic in research (e.g. Duberley et al., 2006a; Joseph et al., 2012).

All of these theories, both sociological and psychological, are based, however, on the philosophical position of logical positivism – that is, on notions of empirical evidence, testability and logical proof. An alternative, which since about 1990 has gained a strong following in career studies, is the notion of *constructivism* or *social constructionism*, which holds that people construct their own realities, including their own realities about their careers. If that is correct, then career studies is about individuals' understanding of their own careers (Young & Collin, 2004). For example, Savickas (2012a) outlines a 'life design' counseling program whereby career actor and counselor examine the various 'narratives', or stories, that the career actor has used to construct their career so far. They then collaborate to create a new narrative that will enable the actor to confront current career challenges and build a better future.

Career Studies: Separate Realities

Some of these different perspectives of career have proceeded relatively independently. In particular, the career development and 'fit' views of the career guidance movement, the social structure view of the sociologists, and the career management view of employers and business schools have to some extent ignored each other.

- The career development movement tends to view the career as a set of personal, psychologically based issues. Indeed, vocational psychology has developed as a speciality within applied psychology (Savickas, 2004; Savickas & Baker, 2005). The movement tends to understand well the processes of career decision making, such as how initial career choices by high school and college graduates are made. But it does not consider so extensively the context of careers – for example, institutional discrimination, the labor market, and formal organizations – or the long-term patterns that careers typically follow. In terms of practice, it recommends interventions by skilled counselors in career actors' decision-making processes, feedback and guidance, and the empowerment of clients (career actors) to make good choices. Its client base is the career counseling and guidance profession, and, indirectly, career actors.
- The sociological view is strongly influenced by evidence of the influence that context and social structure, such as economic cycles, political domination, social class, education, and gender, have over careers. It pays less attention to individual differences and individual action. In terms of practice, it often recommends policy and legislative interventions designed to alter the contextual conditions in which careers are enacted, and thereby changes the career opportunities available. For example, changed legislation concerning education, remuneration or taxation may reduce inequalities and improve the career opportunities and outcomes of minorities or underprivileged groups. Lobbying or radical action may also be recommended. The client base of this view is opinion leaders, advocates and policy makers in areas such as employment law, labor market policy, economic development and minority rights.
- The career management view emphasizes the role of organizations and their management of human resources. In terms of practice, it favors interventions by management to offer employees career pathways and development opportunities for mutual benefit. But it tends to underestimate both the limiting effects of the wider context and the extent of individuals' responsibility for, and control over, their own careers. Latterly, however, recognising the inherent inter-organizational mobility of many careers, it too has favored the empowerment of career actors, particularly the highly skilled, to be proactive and mobile in seeking career satisfaction and success, and new forms of human resource management that recognize and seek to capitalize on this mobility (e.g. Inkson & King, 2011).

The result of these differences of emphasis is that there are seemingly three separate research literatures on the topic. This book takes a more eclectic view. For a full understanding of careers, these different 'worldviews' of the topic have much to offer each other, and they all have much to offer the student of careers. In the belief that students, whether of sociology, psychology, education, counseling, or business, deserve a broader view of the topic, we include all of the viewpoints in this book. Recently, there have been new conceptualizations of careers as part of much wider social systems, in a systems theory approach (Patton & McMahon, 2006).

The Use of Metaphor

Each of the worldviews discussed previously generates its own images of the career actor. The sociological view elicits pictures of a tiny person, perhaps a 'pawn', controlled and overwhelmed by massive forces beyond their control. The psychological view, in contrast, invites us to see an autonomous fighter, a 'hero' or 'heroine' in a difficult environment, struggling to find satisfaction and success in their decisions and actions. The business view is of a 'busy bee' working with others in a mutual endeavour and progressing happily along career pathways thoughtfully provided by a supportive employer.

Such notions, very common in career thinking, are metaphors. They represent a natural human tendency to render complex abstract phenomena understandable by making them concrete, and as far as possible human, in our minds. Metaphorical thinking is common in all human thinking and all discourse (Ortony, 1993). And, because metaphorical thinking is particularly common in relation to careers and potentially expands our understanding, a series of career metaphors frames this book.

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a point is made about one thing by substituting something else that demonstrates a particular quality of the first in a dramatic way. Thus, instead of saying, 'the soldier was strong and ferocious', we might say, 'the soldier was a lion'. The term *lion* embodies an extreme form of strength and ferocity and has a dramatic impact that the terms *strong* and *ferocious* lack. The metaphor also enables us to summarize complex qualities using a single word. But it ignores the fact that lions typically spend most of their time resting or sleeping: metaphors are usually selective in the ideas they draw attention to.

Using metaphors has benefits and disadvantages. Metaphors often provide compelling images that sum up phenomena wonderfully, much as 'a single picture is worth a thousand words'. Metaphors also encourage creativity and help us see things in new ways.

On the other hand, metaphors may be used to induce us to see things that aren't there and to force other views into the background. Philosopher John Locke railed against metaphor as 'the artificial and figurative application of words ... for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move passions, and thereby mislead the judgment'

(cited in Chia, 1996: 134). For example, watch for metaphors in TV commercials: the house as a lifestyle, the bed as a magic carpet, the consumer as a superhero, and so on. Advertisers use metaphors to persuade. In considering metaphors, retain some skepticism, seek evidence to support the metaphor, and recognize that every metaphor has its limitations.

In 1986, Gareth Morgan made a landmark contribution to organization studies when he published *Images of Organization*, a wonderful book that used the method of multiple metaphor to analyze organizations in terms of key metaphors, such as 'machine', 'organism', 'culture', 'brain' and 'political system'. We all know organizations that have those characteristics. For example, when an organization is described as a machine, we picture mechanical moving parts, and see it as efficient, rational, and inflexible.

Morgan argued that different metaphors can be applied to any organization. Each metaphor reveals a special truth about the organization and about organizations in general. Because organizations are complex, no metaphor on its own tells the whole truth. But between them, a range of metaphors can provide a reasonably complete picture. Of course, with a wide range of metaphors available, users of metaphors – including the authors of this book – make their own choices of metaphor, to emphasize the features they consider important.

Career Metaphors

If Morgan is right, then presumably we can use metaphor to illuminate our understanding of careers. What career metaphors can we generate?

The use of metaphor to describe careers is common (Inkson & Amundson, 2002). We have heard people describe their careers, for example, as 'a roller coaster ride', 'a car stuck in the sand', 'the family's fuel tank', 'a house of cards', 'a hall of crazy mirrors', 'a straight line' and 'an LSD trip'. These images often go far beyond the most detailed résumé in conveying the overall career and the person's feelings about it.

Metaphors can also be used to advance thinking about careers. Mignot (2004) shows how the process of 'metaphorization' – the conscious creation and development by individual career actors of their own metaphors – can be used, for example, in career counseling, to assist creative career development (McMahon, 2007).

Career metaphors generated by ordinary people, employing organizations and the mass media also work their way into our consciousness. Consider the commonplace 'career path', 'career ladder', 'career plateau', 'fast track', 'glass ceiling', 'milestone' and 'turning point'. All represent the commonest career metaphor of all – the career as a journey.

Other frequent metaphors are 'playing the game', 'office politics', 'left on the bench', 'open door', 'square peg in a round hole' and 'story of my life'. Academics have added metaphors such as 'career anchors' (Schein, 1993), 'career tournament'

(Rosenbaum & Miller, 1996), 'career climbing frame' (Gunz, 1989) and 'career craft' (Poehnell & Amundson, 2002). The terms 'portfolio career' (Handy, 1989) and 'bound-aryless career' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) are also metaphors. In a study of graduate employees in a large British company, El-Sawad (2005) categorized the metaphors they used to describe their career experience under eight headings: journeys (e.g. 'career ladder'), competition (e.g. 'rat race'), horticulture (e.g. 'corporate mushroom'), imprisonment (e.g. 'life sentence'), military (e.g. 'fighting battles'), school-like surveil-lance (e.g. 'someone looking over my shoulder'), Wild West (e.g. 'watch your back') and nautical (e.g. 'treading water'). Hall and Chandler (2005) drew attention to the special dynamics that exist when a career is perceived as a *calling* – work one is called to do by some higher force. And Bright and Pryor (2005) focused on the sheer unpredictability of careers by invoking the metaphor of careers as 'chaos'. The same authors also encourage career actors and counselors to be aware of the career as a 'game' – and to develop game-playing approaches to career decision making (Pryor & Bright, 2009).

All of these metaphors express their own point of view about careers. All have something to say to us. All have the potential to make us think about things in ways we may not have thought previously.

Stop and Consider

Write down the names of a few people you know who have careers. For each one, try to think of at least one metaphor which seems to summarize what that career is like. If you like, use the lists in the last couple of pages to help you.

This book looks at careers through successive metaphorical lenses by using a number of key, archetypal metaphors. Most established research and theory about careers can also be grouped and discussed under these metaphorical headings (Inkson, 2004):

- *inheritances* – predetermined outcomes passed on from our background and our parents
- *cycles* – identifiable stages through which each of us must inevitably progress
- *actions* of our own, through which we impose our will on the world
- *fit*, as in 'square pegs fitting in square holes' – career slots into which each of us must fit
- *journeys*, as indicated earlier
- *roles* acted out in a theater of life

- *relationships* arising from interactions with others, and from social networks
- *resources* that organizations use as inputs to their own purposes
- *stories* about our lives, which we tell ourselves and other people.

Each of these metaphors represents a truth about careers, but none provides the whole truth. Each represents a particular way of thinking about careers. Taken together, they may provide a wide understanding of careers. In the main section of this book (Chapters 3–11), each of the nine metaphors is explained and examined in detail. After reading these chapters, you should have a more complete, balanced and integrated understanding of careers.

As a starting point, read the following detailed account of a real career. It is a long and complex case, so take your time, read it carefully and, if necessary, re-read it. We subsequently analyze this career in terms of the nine metaphors.

Applying Metaphors to Careers: A Case Study

C A S E   S T U D Y

From Drop-out to Entrepreneur

Max came from a family with strong church connections. He lived in a major European city, in which he was destined to spend most of his career. While at school he worked part time for a local supermarket. Disliking school, he left at age 16 without qualifications and secured a full-time job as a stock assistant in a super-market. Soon afterwards, however, he suffered serious injuries in a car accident and had to give up this job. After his recovery, he was undecided about what career direction to take, but a friend had turned down the offer of a job as a shop sales-man in an auto parts company, and Max was able to obtain the unwanted job. The business owner, who became Max's mentor, was, in Max's words, a 'fantastic sales-man' from whom Max 'learned how to sell things, and loved it'.

He stayed in the auto parts job for about two years, picking up good sales skills and industry knowledge. Then a customer who knew him through church circles and admired the quality of his service offered him a job in SalesCo, the auction company that he worked in, assisting the auctioning of insurance company

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write-off cars. Max loved the job. He quickly learned how to be an auctioneer – an unusual accomplishment for a 19-year-old. He went to a drama therapist to assist with his breathing and speaking.

Over the next few years, Max moved through different departments at SalesCo, not through any company development plan for him, but fortuitously as he was chosen due to his hard work and reliability to fill positions left vacant when other staff moved on. He acquired a range of new skills, particularly interpersonal skills, and a better appreciation of the whole business. When his department was merged with another, he gained more responsibility. Eventually, still in his early 20s, he was offered his first management position as a team leader, and stayed in it for five years. He also became an accomplished basketball player.
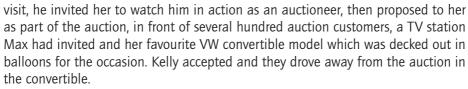
At this point, Max developed a yearning to travel overseas. He quit his job and went abroad with a SalesCo colleague who shared his passion for basketball, which he wanted to play in other countries. His travels took him to the USA, where a girlfriend's father was involved with a motor racing team, and he started 'helping as a race mechanic … Well, more like the tyre guy, and the cleaner, and the truck driver and everything else'. To Max, traveling – driving the team truck around the USA and Canada – was a great experience, especially the parties, the celebrities and the girls, but when the race season ended, he was out of work and went home.

Back home, Max was hoping to be able to go back to the USA for the next race car season, and did not want to commit to anything long term. So to tide him over he got a job as a ski-field ticket checker: 'a great way of learning how to ski, for free!' Then, interested in Japan as a possible destination, he enrolled for a three-month course in Japanese – his first period of study since leaving school. But as soon as he had finished the course, the race car team in the USA called on him to work for them again, and he headed offshore. But he had not appreciated the legal requirements for immigration to the USA, and ended up falling foul of the US immigration authorities, having his visa revoked and being declared persona non grata in the USA. 'I was young and dumb … but I knew I could always go back to my home city and there'd be a job for me, because of my skills'. Moreover, on this trip Max had met his future wife, Kelly, in Canada, and stayed on there to test his new relationship.

By now, Max was thinking about marriage and the need to give it a secure base. So he returned to his home city, called SalesCo and was immediately offered a job: 'a step backwards in terms of my career, but I just wanted a job; I knew the people, liked the environment'. Six months later, Kelly flew over to visit him. During her

visit, he invited her to watch him in action as an auctioneer, then proposed to her as part of the auction, in front of several hundred auction customers, a TV station Max had invited and her favourite VW convertible model which was decked out in balloons for the occasion. Kelly accepted and they drove away from the auction in the convertible.

Kelly had completed an education degree with a view to becoming a primary teacher. Which country to live in? His or hers? At that time there were few jobs in Canada for new teachers, whereas Max had a secure job, so they decided on Max's country.

Back at SalesCo, Max was quickly promoted to a position as a team leader, then, due to SalesCo's growth, a branch manager, a position which he stayed in for another seven years. It was very successful, and Max became highly regarded within the company: 'a sort of corporate superstar.' Meantime, Kelly had had her foreign qualifications accredited and (with assistance from a friend in the church network) obtained a good teaching job, which she kept for six years until she and Max had their first child and she withdrew from the workforce.

At this point, SalesCo, now very successful, became a publicly listed company with its own capital, was cash-rich and looking for new ventures to invest in. Due to the CEO having an old friend in Montreal who was willing to be a business partner, it was decided to launch a business there: SalesCo North America. With his continuing business success and his Canadian wife and experience, Max was an obvious choice to lead the new business and headed to his new city with his 3-year-old daughter and Kelly, now pregnant with their second child. But the business was an absolute failure and within a year it was merged with a Canadian auction company, which saw no need to retain its SalesCo managers, including Max, and laid them off. In his mid-30s, for the first time in his life, Max found himself 'nobody in Nowhereville'.

Back in his home country, Max retained goodwill at SalesCo and was able to fly home and continue on full salary. But he soon found himself stuck in a lower-level job, too low to justify his salary; and his relationship with the CEO, who blamed him for the Montreal debacle, was fatally flawed. Perceiving that notwith-standing his 17 years' service to SalesCo it was time for him to move on, Max put together a résumé and started to look for other positions. He had a lot of experience in car 're-marketing' (after use, for example, in a rental fleet), and good networks. A job came up as purchasing manager at AutoLease, a car-leasing company he had dealt with in the past. He was appointed, and within a year promoted to area manager in his home city. The new job made Max again a

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manager, responsible for leading a team and accountable for profit. At about this time, his third child was born.

By now, the global financial crisis of 2008 had reared its ugly head. His new company's owners decided to sell AutoLease because it did not fit the overall corporate structure and focus. Max and his CEO decided to try to buy the company in a management buy-out, but their bid was unsuccessful. They were able instead to get agreement to 'run out the lease book' of 4,000 motor vehicles – waiting for the cars' contracts to expire and then selling them. The process was to take place over a three-year term. Max's three-year fixed contract was, he says, 'the best thing that ever happened to me, in terms of, for the first time in my life, being able to stop and smell the coffee, not having the pressures to grow a business, all I was doing was running it down'. The 'running down' process eventually took four years.

The process was financially very successful, and being vital to it Max was able to make a lot of money in bonuses. Due to the reduction in his workload, he was also able, despite having no undergraduate degree, to gain acceptance into an Executive MBA (Master of Business Administration) degree program at a local university – a 'huge blessing', he says – for which he was able to study during working hours.

By now, Max was 'fed up of the corporate environment', and he began to wonder if it was the right time to start his own business: something he had not previously countenanced because of his mortgage and other debts, because he had always felt comfortable in corporate jobs with assured salaries and cars, and because, he says, 'I am risk-averse'.
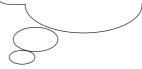
But, at the end of the wind-down, Max started to look at business plan options. Capitalizing on a research project which he had completed in his MBA, he decided to start an auto-broking business, and did so. Eighteen months later, when we interviewed Max for this book, the business had been successful far beyond his expectations, doing a 1.5 million euro turnover – 'about six times as much as I expected' – in the first year. A long-standing former business relationship with a rental car company accounts for over 50 percent of his business as he 're-markets' their cars. He also got Kelly involved, on the office side of the business. But he still has internal arguments about 'corporate career' versus 'own business', and feels under stress, overworking, denying himself holidays, and managing growth without assistance. He knows he could still do a good job in the corporate world, and wonders if he should sell his now-successful business or continue to try to build it.

Stop and Consider

Re-read Max's case and, as you go, write down a series of *themes* for his career, e.g. industries, occupations, changes, patterns, plus any you yourself perceive. Then read our analysis below and compare it with what you have written.

Understanding Max's Career

The Context of Max's Career

First, note that Max's career does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in a *context*: a specific European country, mostly in one city; a specific industry relating to automobiles, automobile dealing, leasing, selling and auctioneering. These provide a stable context for Max's career but other factors constantly change, affecting it. A legislative control on migration to the USA destroys his dream of a career in the motor racing industry. His own industry has its own cycles of growth and retrenchment. His employing organizations change and develop, and this provides both opportunities and threats to his career: for example, the opportunity of the Canadian experiment followed by the threat posed by its failure. Later, the global financial crisis and AutoLease's changing strategy likewise impose changes on his career. In our careers, we cannot divorce ourselves from what is going on *out there*. The political, economic, social and organizational settings in which we live our careers constantly provide new opportunities and impose new constraints. Career actors therefore need to pay attention not only to what they want, but also to what is going on around them and therefore what is possible in their careers. In Chapter 2, we will look specifically at career contexts.

Max's Career as an Inheritance

Inheritances are career resources (and sometimes handicaps) that come into our careers from the past – for example, our innate abilities and personality, gender, social background and education. We 'inherit' these characteristics from our parents and elsewhere. Max's career used an inheritance of above-average intelligence and some special aptitudes, such as verbal and persuasive skills, which were partly built into his genetic makeup and which may also have been developed through his upbringing and education. On the other hand, he brought no special qualifications into his career. Notwithstanding his current self-employed status, he recognizes his inbuilt risk aversion and need for security, and only went 'out on his own' when he had plenty of

savings. From his church background, Max probably gained strong ethics of service and hard work, while his male gender and white ethnicity probably played a part in the types of jobs he pursued and obtained, including his brief spell in motor racing. All careers are affected, for good or ill, by such legacies. The inheritance metaphor, dealt with in detail in Chapter 3, involves the things people bring to their careers that cannot easily be changed.

Max's Career as a Cycle

A cycle is a succession of events or phenomena completed in a period of time. The cycle most frequently used as a metaphor for human lives is the seasons, and in Max's career we can discern classic career seasons, such as growth, exploration, establishment and maintenance (Super, 1957). There was growth in Max's childhood and education, and exploration – though largely limited to a single industry – in his early movements through the supermarket and the various different functions of SalesCo. At one point, referring to his escapades in trying to pursue motor racing in the USA, Max refers to himself as 'young and dumb'; nowadays, in the possible summertime of his career, he moves more cautiously and invokes business plans and study to inform and guide his progress. We can also see shorter cycles in Max's career – for example, cycles within specific jobs, of novelty, action, progress and disillusion. Lastly, his family cycle, from dependent son, to independent adult, through courtship and dual-career marriage, to responsibility for child rearing, create additional rhythms and constraints. What will the 'autumn' and 'winter' of Max's career look like? Are these rhythms inevitable? By looking at the cycles typically affecting careers (in Chapter 4), we can find out.

Max's Career as Action

Whereas inheritance and cycle emphasize patterns imposed on Max's career, action emphasizes his personal efforts, so that Max creates his career through his own actions based on his own planning and decision making. Max made short-term plans. He worked hard constantly through his career and made a point of learning what he could from each job. As his career proceeded, he did not decide exactly what job he would have in five years' time, but he focused on a single industry, gathered information, determined what he enjoyed and was talented at, developed new skills, chose general directions and seized unexpected opportunities (the initial auto parts sales job, the Canadian venture). He built on his strengths and extended into new areas. He remained rational in his career decisions. In large measure, and notwithstanding the force of his inheritance and the cycles on his career, he constructed that career. Chapter 5 presents more information about action, self-expression and the way career choices are made.

Max's Career as Fit

In the common 'square peg in a round hole' metaphor, career actors are pegs who should have a good fit with their holes, or careers. Max was constantly aware of the extent of his fit and tried to improve it. He described 'trading' as what he enjoyed and was best at. His recognition that he had a 'risk averse' personality' – thrown off track temporarily in his auto racing and skiing period – kept him, until recently, in secure, corporate, salaried jobs. Then he made himself self-employed (to fit growing needs for autonomy) and worked from home. Neither the peg nor the hole stayed the same shape for long. Max developed new ambitions and skills, and grew himself, for example, though postgraduate study. His industry and the structure of the companies he worked in changed, and his jobs were redefined, restructured and, on one occasion, eliminated. How can career actors assess their changing values, interests and capabilities, and those of the context, and always find a good fit? We look at these issues in Chapter 6.

Max's Career as a Journey

'Journey' is the most common career metaphor of all. Journeys imply mobility, getting to a new place. Compared with many career actors, Max has not been especially mobile in his career. He has stuck largely to one industry, one city and (for a long time) one organization. But he has been mobile between roles within his organization and industry, and has taken his career twice to other countries. Moreover, he has climbed in status throughout his career, crossed a number of boundaries (particularly when moving from non-managerial to managerial positions), and moved latterly from being an employee to being self-employed. Max's journey is unique, but by thinking about it we can develop insights into the mobility aspects of career. Did Max's journey have a destination, and, if so, what was it? How clear was it? Was getting to where he was headed more or less important than enjoying the experience as he went? What are the implications of the trend towards careers becoming, more and more, *boundary-crossing* and *international* journeys? All these are significant issues and will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Max's Career as Roles

As Max's interests, skills and self-image changed over time, so did his work roles – shelf-stocker, salesman, auctioneer, race mechanic, vehicle buyer, area manager, and so on. To a large extent, these roles were defined not by Max but by his employing organizations and bosses. But as he went, he tried to put his own interpretation and imprint on them. People seldom do exactly and only what is in their job description. Also, the roles changed – for example, at one stage AutoLease's actions changed his job from area manager to downsizing contractor. Max also occupied different roles in his changing home life. His wife's career moves into, out of, and then back into

different employment roles, some of them connected to his own, also affected his career. Even his role as a basketball player affected his career. Each of his roles was defined by sets of expectations that others – his parents, his employers, his family – had of him. In this sense, his career was like a theatrical performance, with others co-authoring the script with him. But Max's performance also included his own expression of himself. Careers involve multiple roles and changing expectations. In Chapter 8, we discuss these and related issues.

Max's Career as Relationships

Max's career was constantly mediated not just by what he knew, but also by *who* he knew. He got his first sales job through a friend. He got his first job in SalesCo, the key employer in his career, through a church contact, and it was his church network that later helped Kelly to get her first job in her new country. By the time he went to the USA, he had built a formidable set of contacts both in SalesCo and throughout his industry. Even those who didn't know him well knew his reputation, so that Max could always be confident that in his home city he would be able to get a job. Later, he was even able to refer to himself as a 'corporate superstar'. He pursued the business opportunity in Canada because of his boss's friendship in Montreal, but later had to leave his job back in Europe because his relationship with the same boss had deteriorated. Lastly, when he finally started his own business, half its revenue came through an important contact he had made earlier in his career. Max had wonderful networks and knew how to work them. The network element of careers is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

Max's Career as a Resource

Both Max and his employers used his career to achieve their objectives. His qualifications, experience and expertise created a resource that his employers combined with their other resources to create products and services. For example, early on in his career SalesCo capitalized on his abilities by rotating him through different roles, enabling him to learn new facets of the business. His career was a resource for the organization, but his experience at the organization also became a resource for his career. Each was investing in the other and looking for a payoff in terms of added resources. The resource metaphor focuses on the developing capability that every career has to contribute to a wider cause and the way that employers, as well as employees, facilitate such development. This metaphor is further explored in Chapter 10.

Max's Career as a Story

Max's career history, outlined earlier, is a faithful reproduction of what Max told us. But it is not the only story one could tell about Max's career. Would Max tell the same

story in a job application? For example, what would he say about his experience of being denied entry to the USA, or of leading a disastrous business failure in Canada? Did he tell the same early-career story 20 years ago, and will he tell the same story again in 20 years' time? Would his family members, friends, colleagues and employers tell the same story about him? What story would the CEO who first championed him but then fell out with him tell? There is no single true story of any career, particularly if the stories include subjective as well as objective elements. There is nothing necessarily dishonest about multiple stories: they simply indicate subjective biases, memory lapses and the different purposes of the stories. Careers may be no more or less than the stories we tell about them – often compelling stories in which the career actor is a hero. Such stories help us to understand who we are and what our lives are about. They provide us with the logic to explain the past and give us direction for the future. They help us to maintain our self-esteem. If we know how career stories work, we can tell our own and interpret those of others. The world of career stories is explored in Chapter 11.

Conclusion

We have shown nine different views of Max's career. It is as if each metaphor provides a different lens to view the same phenomenon. Through each lens, we see different things. Each view appears to be valid and there is some overlap between them, but each metaphor generates its own unique insights. The discipline of thinking about careers in terms of each of the nine metaphors is a rigorous one but one that we believe will pay off over time in terms of your general understanding of careers and your specific understanding of your own career. In the ten chapters that follow, we explain what we can learn about careers by considering career contexts, then using each of the metaphors.

Key Points in this Chapter

- Careers are important sources of human satisfaction and fulfilment, or the reverse. Key issues are congruence with one's makeup, personal change, family matters and decision making.
- A definition of *career* is 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time'.
- The field of career studies has evolved over time from its original, psychological trait-and-factor and human development theories to include a range of approaches from sociology, social psychology and management studies.

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- Careers are often described by metaphors, such as the 'pathway' metaphor or the 'square peg in a round hole' metaphor. Multiple metaphor is a way of expressing a range of viewpoints about careers to increase understanding.
- The career metaphors considered in this book are 'inheritance', 'cycle', 'action', 'fit', 'journey', 'roles', 'relationships', 'resource' and 'stories'.

Questions from this Chapter

General Questions

1. Outline three career decisions or problems that you or people you know currently face.
2. How would you advise Jan (see start of chapter) to solve the career problem he currently faces?
3. Which of the various theories in career studies seems to you to have the most relevance to your career and today's careers in general? Why?
4. Use metaphor to describe one or more authority figures you know (e.g. managers, tutors, instructors). What is the meaning you are trying to convey with the metaphors? How well do the metaphors fit?
5. Read the story of Max's career. Outline some principles you think Max used in managing it. Which of the metaphors do you think best describes his career, and why?

'Live Career Case' Study Questions

1. Ask your career actor to provide, and explain, metaphors for their career.
2. Think about the nine key metaphors outlined in the chapter in relation to your case career. Which seem to offer the most in terms of understanding the career? Why? If necessary, discuss them with the case career actor.

Additional Resources

Recommended Further Reading

Duberley, J., Cohen, L. and Mallon, M. (2006) 'Constructing scientific careers: Change, continuity and context', *Organization Studies*, 27(8): 1131–1151.

El-Sawad, A. (2005) 'Becoming a lifer? Unlocking career through metaphor', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 78(1), 23–41.

Inkson, K. and Amundson, N. E. (2002) 'Career metaphors and their application in theory and counseling practice', *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 39(3): 98–108.

Mignot, P. (2004) 'Metaphor and "career", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(3): 455–469.

Moore, C., Gunz, H. and Hall, D. T. (2007) 'Tracing the historical roots of career theory in management and organization studies' in H. Gunz and M. Peiperl (eds.), *Handbook of Career Studies* (pp. 39–54). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Online Resources

Find out about the use of metaphor and learn how to generate your own – see: www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCT_93.htm and www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Metaphor