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The Hughes Award

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Examining contemporary careers: A call for interdisciplinary inquiry

Michael B. Arthur

ABSTRACT

This article describes an urgent need for interdisciplinary careers research in the emerging global knowledge economy. It begins by identifying a range of traditions in careers research, including both occupational and organizational research traditions from professional schools of education and management. It proceeds by offering a view on contemporary careers, and examining three directions for contemporary careers research – reflecting what organizational careers scholars see, what other organizational scholars see, and what is suggested by evidence on the knowledge economy – while leaving the door open for others to join the conversation by suggesting further research directions. The article then turns to propose three topics for future interdisciplinary research collaboration: a more accessible definition of career, application of contrasting methodologies and adoption of wider research agendas. The overall message is for careers scholars to become both more collaborative and more 'imaginative' in their further research endeavors.

KEYWORDS career ▪ global ▪ interdisciplinary ▪ methodology ▪ occupation ▪ research knowledge

A Calvin and Hobbes cartoon (Watterson, 1988) goes as follows:

Setting: A clear winter night. Calvin and Hobbes contemplate the sky.

Calvin: Do you believe our destinies are controlled by the stars?

Hobbes: No, I think we can do whatever we want with our lives.

(Pause)

Calvin: Not to hear Mom and Dad tell it.

We can all laugh at the cartoon, and its contrast between future possibilities and present realities. However, if we were to examine our reasons for laughter we might find different underlying perspectives. Some of us might focus on Hobbes's psychological message that we can 'do whatever we want with our lives'. Others might enjoy Calvin's reference to family background, and the implied sociological constraints on his future. Others again might laugh at the social-psychological interdependence between the two heroes, and at Hobbes in particular providing a reference point for Calvin's learning. In the end, we might laugh louder when we share our perspectives with one another.

Calvin and Hobbes gently remind us that the career is an interdisciplinary concept. They also suggest that sharing the laughter, in the sense of seeing interdisciplinary connections, is healthy. The laughter can help us to see fresh possibilities, and to talk with what Andrew Abbott (2004: 4) calls our imaginative social science voices, concerned with 'whimsy, surprise and novelty'. Our imaginative voices are distinct from our more customary 'monologue' voices, frequently organized within separate academic disciplines, concerned with the 'how to design a study, how to acquire and analyze data, [and] how to draw inferences'. As we will discuss later, our imaginative voices may also be more critical in an era of rapid change, where old recipes appear not to work, and where fresh conversations and new insights appear urgent.

With the above distinction in mind, let us see where we stand in our examination of careers. We will proceed by first identifying the academic traditions underlying careers research: a series of traditions stemming from the individual social sciences, and two further traditions focused on occupations and organizations respectively. Next, we will consider definitions of the terms *career* and *boundaryless career*, and related characteristics of contemporary careers. We will then describe three sets of directions for contemporary careers research. The first set comes from my own tradition,

that focused on the world of organizations. A second set comes from organizational scholars outside the careers research community. A third set stems from evidence on the global knowledge economy. (This leaves room for further sets of directions, to come from other research traditions that lie beyond the scope of this article.)

Turning from where we stand to what we can do, we will examine how we can seek more effective interdisciplinary conversations in the future. These can be served by separate communities of careers scholars, as long as they share a clear understanding of key terms and stay in regular contact with one another. The main opportunity lies in widening our agendas to hear other voices with something to say about contemporary career phenomena; that is, to be more imaginative.

Traditions in careers research

If we are to aspire to greater interdisciplinary conversation in the future, what is the present state of careers research? The contemporary study of careers stems from several traditions. One set of traditions reflects the separate social science disciplines that can contribute to careers research. Thus, if scholars are interested in interdisciplinary research, those schooled in any one discipline (e.g. psychology) can seek out evidence from another discipline (e.g. sociology) to inform their separate perspectives. Or, scholars can collaborate over interdisciplinary work and contribute to an interdisciplinary journal – a prominent example is *Human Relations* – to promote wider interdisciplinary conversation. However, the term discipline often means what it suggests, as scholars are encouraged to stay within rather than stray beyond the theories of their schooling. Moreover, the separate disciplines are not the only sources for careers research.

A further two traditions stem from the professional schools, specifically schools of education and management (or business). In these schools disciplinary boundaries are less of a constraint, and scholars can feel encouraged to look across disciplinary divisions to better serve their professional populations. A tradition popular in schools of education has been mainly concerned with 'vocational guidance', that is with helping a person find entry to an occupation that complements his or her interests and abilities. The tradition has been principally focused on people first leaving full-time education, but it has also been widely applied to people seeking fresh employment in later life. Its theories are usually concerned with 'the *psychology* of careers' – the title of Donald Super's (1957) landmark book – although it sees other social sciences contributing to those theories. It applies its theories to the world of occupations. Researchers in this tradition enjoy their own round

of annual conferences, such as the annual International Career Development Conference, separate from the individual social sciences.

During the 1970s a further tradition evolved concerned with developing 'a richer understanding of the relationship between the individual and the organization' (Van Maanen, 1997: vii). This tradition is popular in schools of management. It has focused not on initial job choice but on how individuals and organizations interact with one another over time. From the outset, this tradition sought an interdisciplinary perspective (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977), however its theories so far have been an eclectic mixture of largely separate psychological, social-psychological and sociological approaches. It applies its theories to the world of organizations. Researchers in this tradition enjoy a different round of annual conferences, such as the Careers Division sessions at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management. These conferences are separate from those of both the individual social sciences and the education schools, and usually address wider management or organizational phenomena.

Until the late 1980s, it was possible to see the separate traditions in careers research enjoying a relatively comfortable coexistence with one another. However, since that time there has been greater economic turbulence, so that each tradition has struggled to adapt to a changing world. One might have expected scholars from the professional schools, in particular, to revisit the opportunity for interdisciplinary conversation. However, the two communities of scholars have continued to emphasize the links between occupations and the host economy on the one hand, and between organizations and the host economy on the other hand. As shown in Figure 1, the first community – let us call them occupational careers scholars – has been addressing links A, B and C, while the second community – let us call them organizational careers scholars – has been addressing links E, F and G. Meanwhile, there have been only limited attempts to bring the two traditions into the same conversation (link D) and thereby to offer a meeting-ground for wider interdisciplinary activities.

As already noted, my own research tradition focuses on the world of organizations. Let me therefore take the opportunity to offer a view from this tradition to a wider audience. Let me also invite other researchers representing other traditions to respond to the issues raised.

Definitions

Let us define the term *career* as 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur et al., 1989: 8; Gunz & Peiperl, 2007: 4). This

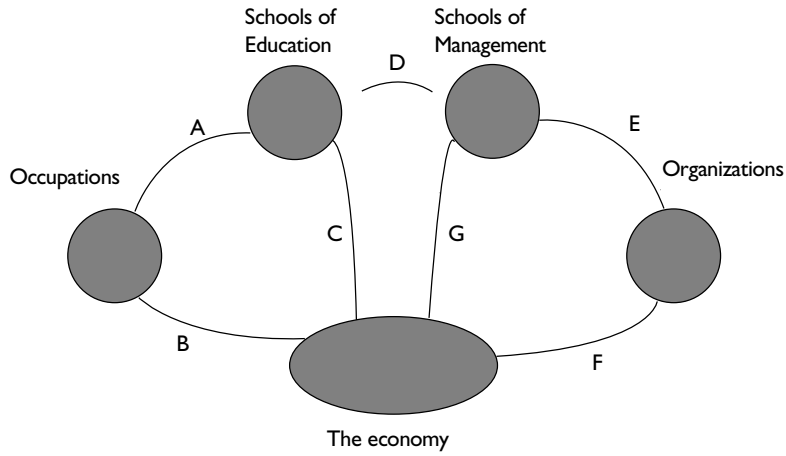

Figure 1 Professional school traditions in careers research

definition stands in contrast to alternative definitions that reflect a more particular point of view – such as psychological views that see the career in terms of individual interests or attitudes, or sociological views that see the career in terms of available social roles and relative status (Khapova et al., 2007). The definition may offer less than any singular perspective may assume, but it does provide an opportunity to share the laughter, so to speak, and for separate disciplines to communicate what they see to one another. It applies to anyone who works, allows us to consider unpaid work, and makes no assumption about the nature of career success. It restricts us to the work arena, but leaves us free to appreciate the interdependence between work and the wider life course.

The definition insists, in contrast to the terms 'job' or 'work', that we take the passage of time into account. It also insists that parallel work experiences, and successive sets of experiences in apparently disconnected fields of employment, be considered part of the same career. This is controversial, but if we allow the idea of 'multiple careers' we can lose sight of the person who undertakes the variety of jobs in question. To suggest that parallel or successive jobs are unconnected is to interfere with the holistic view of the career that the definition otherwise allows. Let us focus on one person, one career, and one lifetime in which that person can work, learn, make friends, start a family, pursue hobbies, have fun or whatever.

A body of recent work has qualified the above definition by focusing on *boundaryless careers*. A boundaryless career may be defined as 'a sequence of job opportunities that goes beyond the boundaries of any single employment setting' (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994: 307, 1996: 116). This

allows a sustained focus on organizations, while emphasizing that careers (or the ways we make sense of careers) frequently go beyond the boundaries of any single organization. For the record, the term was first introduced as a response to the adopted theme of the 1993 Academy of Management meeting, namely 'the boundaryless organization'. As various commentators have pointed out, in different circumstances it might have been better to talk about boundary-crossing careers (Inkson, 2006; King et al., 2005). However, an advantage of 'the boundaryless career' is that it invites us to adopt a fresh perspective, and to question prevailing assumptions about boundaries – in employment arrangements, reputation-building, patterns of communication, interpretations of career circumstances, and so on (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Let us also note that the definition focuses on job opportunities, so that it leaves open whether or under what circumstances a person leaves his or her employer (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

Let us widen our lens further and consider not only boundaryless careers but also what have been variously called kaleidoscope careers (Mainero & Sullivan, 2006), new careers (Arthur et al., 1999), post-corporate careers (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997) or protean careers (Hall, 2002) under a single label as *contemporary* careers. Such careers, reflecting the times in which we live, can be broadly described as being responsive to: a) shifting boundaries in occupational, organizational, national and global work arrangements; b) higher uncertainty given the rapid generation of knowledge and the unpredictability of its effects; and c) greater individual agency, not only as a response to shifting boundaries and uncertainty, but also because of the wider combinations of job experiences that can be incorporated into one career (Bailyn, personal communication, 2007).

Directions for contemporary careers research

What research directions do we see or hear in this changing world? Let us consider three sets of directions here: one set from the community of organizational careers scholars (a community in the sense that its members identify with and interact around a shared research agenda); a second set comes from other organizational scholars, also frequently situated in management schools: a third set comes from observations on the emerging knowledge economy. What does each set of directions offer?

What do organizational careers scholars see?

The organizational careers research community has made substantial inroads in the study of contemporary career phenomena. Six particular inroads – into

the examination of identity development, career-relevant networks, lifestyle and family issues, individual career investments, social contexts and international comparisons – seem particularly important. (A convenient reference point for further exploration is the *Handbook of career studies*, Gunz & Peiperl, 2007.)

Identity development

If contemporary employment arrangements are calling for individuals to be more adaptive, most established career theories are ill-equipped to help us consider changing professional identities or work role transitions (Ibarra & Deshpande, 2007). However, we do have ideas about how identities provide continuity at the same time as they can develop as a result of successive learning cycles (Hall et al., 2002). We also have case study evidence about how identity transition can respond to people's career initiatives (Ibarra, 2003). In a globalizing world, we can see identities as 'based less on prescribed social roles and more on individual choices, on decisions that each person makes about what values to embrace and what paths to pursue in love and work' (Arnett, 2002). In the process, identities are subject to 'relational influence' that can occur from interactions both within and beyond the individual's present workplace (Hall et al., 2002: 175).

Wider networks

A related shift in contemporary career theory is toward the recognition of wider personal networks. For example, we have shifted from a traditional mentoring approach (concerned with a single, long-term hierarchical relationship in a particular organization) toward a networking approach (concerned with multiple, perhaps shorter term relationships) (Chandler & Kram, 2007). These multiple relationships make up a 'developmental network' (Higgins & Kram, 2001) which ideally provides sources of learning, social support and other resources and extends beyond any single organizational setting. At this stage we know much about protégés, less about mentors, and even less about how gender and racial diversity influence network arrangements (Chandler & Kram, 2007). Along other paths, researchers have made a start in examining how careers influence occupational and organizational institutions (Jones & Dunn, 2007), and how extra-organizational 'career communities' can provide both social support and learning opportunities (Parker et al., 2004). There is also considerable work being done on social network analysis that enhances our appreciation of career-relevant networks (e.g. Casper & Murray, 2005).

Lifestyle and family

The 'overarching issue', suggest Greenhaus and Foley (2007: 131), is 'How can individuals derive substantial satisfaction and fulfillment from those roles in life that matter?' There are now relatively few differences in the reported levels of work–family conflict among men and women, but strong reasons to study within-gender variations to explain those reports (Greenhaus & Foley, 2007). There are also strong reasons to take employees' personal lives into account in the design of work, both to avoid negative consequences and to provide for superior solutions. Moreover, integration of work and family needs 'must be done for all employees, not only women, not only parents, but all'. Only this can prevent '[i]nsecurity and fear, stress and anxiety' detracting from people's potential contributions to the host economy (Bailyn, 2006: xi). Changes in employment systems that provide for different options as careers unfold can generate both greater productivity *and* greater career satisfaction for the workers involved (Valcour et al., 2007).

Social contexts

The mobility of contemporary careers and the limitations in assuming singular occupational or organizational assumptions invite a search for wider contexts. This has led certain careers scholars toward the so-called 'grand theories' of sociology that seek widespread and enduring explanations of social phenomena. Examples include Barley (1989) and Weick (1996) drawing on Giddens's (1984) ideas on structuration (concerning the way interacting careers help shape the host social structure); Iellatchitch et al. (2003) incorporating Bourdieu's (1986) idea of *career capital* (with its attention to the immediate social context with which the person is familiar); and Becker and Haunschild's (2003) use of Luhmann's (1995) idea to study relationships first (so that individuals and institutions become defined through the relationships in which they participate). A useful synthesis, showing careers at the center of a series of 'onion rings' of global, national, social and employment contexts is provided by Mayrhofer et al. (2007).

International comparisons

Further inroads in contemporary careers research have come from international comparisons. One point of comparison is the apparently distinctive networking behavior common within expatriate Chinese careers (Granrose & Chua, 1996). Further comparison comes from replication of New Zealand research in France, suggesting that individual career interests

are comparable across the two countries, even if the means and support systems for expressing those interests are different (Cadin et al., 2000, 2003). Additional studies have further broadened the range of international and cross-cultural research, and sharpened our awareness of the differences across the economic and political circumstances in which careers unfold (Thomas & Inkson, 2007). There are now evolving comparative literatures along three lines of inquiry: careers across international boundaries, careers across cultural boundaries, and the interdependence between careers and economic globalization (Tams & Arthur, 2007). In each of these literatures, and in contrast to much earlier research, there is an emphasis on comparative studies across populations of organizations and nations.

Unfolding career investments

A final issue concerns the consequences of a changing world of employment. As time goes by, the value of people's past career investments is likely to change, especially in an era of rapid technological progress. There will always be a population of older workers who began their careers in a different era, and with different expectations. These workers may have much to offer, but may need special support if facing job loss or perceived age discrimination (Feldman & Ng, 2007). Regarding the shift toward contemporary careers, there is a greater ethical obligation for organizations to help their employees to learn new skills and remain employable (Van Buren, 2003). However, this obligation is harder to meet for employees who have already developed organization-specific skills, and where the boundaries of occupations those employees might wish to enter are heavily 'policed' by established occupational associations (Currie et al., 2006). The obligation is even harder to meet for the socially marginalized – people who for some combination of race, gender, immigration status and sexual preference get distinguished as outside society's mainstream (Prasad et al., 2007).

The above summaries say much about the extent to which organizational careers researchers have already contributed to our understanding of contemporary careers. The summaries suggest a greater respect for individual agency in determining one's own life and career direction, and in building a support system to pursue that direction. They also suggest new combinations for careers research, for example on the links between identity development and changing personal networks, or on how patterns of career development influence larger social structures. Let us turn next, though, to consider another set of research directions stemming from other organizational scholars.

What do other organizational scholars see?

A second set of research directions can be determined from listening to other organizational scholars who have something different in mind than the career interests of the organizations' individual employees. Five particular topics keep cropping up, and find expression in those scholars' reservations about the wider implications of contemporary career phenomena. Those reservations cover the interests of individuals, organizations, communities, welfare capitalism and institutions respectively.

A question of individual security

The old ideals of job ownership and job security, in pure form providing workers complete financial security for the rest of their lives, seem anachronistic in contemporary times. Yet, Pfeffer (1998: 100) has claimed that employment security is a 'basic dimension' of effective managerial practice, and a prerequisite for the implementation of high-performance practices, such as 'selective hiring, extensive training, information sharing and delegation'. Various research reports indicate that employment security is still an important concern, especially for experienced and older workers (Granrose & Baccili, 2006). A bias toward employment security is built into many national, especially European, legal systems (for example, in Spain, where a worker is entitled to 45 days' pay for each year employed by the same organization). One adaptation to changing times has been to emphasize 'employability' (Kanter, 1989) or 'career resilience' (Waterman et al., 1994) to maintain the opportunity for alternative employment. A more recent idea is that of 'flexicurity', a hybrid of employment regulation and state support intended to deliver the advantages of job security through a more adaptive approach (e.g. Madsen, 2006).

A lack of alignment

A separate set of arguments claims that mutual individual–organizational loyalty can benefit the organization. For example, O'Reilly and Pfeffer (2000: 234–5), question how much appeal there is to employees in messages about 'career resilience' and argue that organizations which 'don't believe that loyalty is dead' can promote a shared set of values. In nurturing a 'sense of community, security and mutual trust and respect' those organizations can benefit from a shared platform for collective employee adaptation and learning (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000). An overlapping argument (although not necessarily an equally people-sensitive one) is that organizations need to take

a strategic interest in both the attraction and retention of human talent, 'the resource that includes the potential and realized capacities of individuals and groups and how they are organized, including those within the organization and those who might join the organization' (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007: 2).

A loss of community

Communitarian thinkers seek a social order to be achieved through 'the development of a core of globally shared values' (Etzioni, 2005: 1657), that would subordinate individual agency to an overarching sense of community participation. The communitarian perspective may also be extended to contemporary debate about corporate governance (e.g. Johnson, 2006). Related ideas encourage a focus on 'social capital', described by Putnam and his colleagues as 'the collective value of all "social networks" and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other' (Saguaro Seminar, 2007). Some (but not all) of the disciples of these ideas have sought to apply them inside single organizations (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Leana & Van Buren, 1999), anticipating aggregate long-term benefits for the surrounding world.

A problem for welfare capitalism

The argument that it is a 'human tendency to believe that one lives in an exceptional era' has been used to question predictions about the demise of organizational careers (Jacoby, 1999: 125). On the one hand, 'it is easy to over-react to short-term employment patterns, rather than to anticipate long-term corrections' (Jacoby, 1999: 126–7). On the other hand, to give up on the centrality of the organization to workers' lives would jeopardize the gains of 'welfare capitalism', – that is of the delivery of welfare benefits through the established employment system. Beyond making relatively short-term corrections, organizations may be eager to reaffirm 'career-type jobs' and the advantages of job stability and team effectiveness many associate with those jobs (Jacoby, 1999). A similar sentiment is voiced by Van Maanen on the Japanese ideal of lifetime employment. He observes that 'the Japanese invention of the employee sovereign firm seems a good one' (Van Maanen, 2006: 289), which he hopes will prevail.

A denial of institutions

The central concern here is that the emphasis on 'free agency' can discredit a legitimate role for institutions. Moreover, even as free agent contractors,

people may be seen as 'catering to the same employers against whom [they are] rebelling' (Barley & Kunda, 2004: 22). Thus, the shift to free agency can be characterized as one from previous 'iron cages' in bureaucratic settings to alternative 'webs of dependency' in an open market (Barley & Kunda, 2004: 291). Moreover, globalization of market competition without parallel globalization of institutions can mean that people feel left out, and resist – sometimes violently – the forces that they see working against them. A 'guiding hand of the state' is seen to be needed, along with reform rather than abandonment of institutions promoting 'education, emancipation of women, banking reforms and the investment climate' (Giddens, 2003: xxix) all of which affect the lives and careers of everyday citizens.

The above reservations are not to be rejected lightly. They reflect a genuine concern about the common good, and about the risks of giving up what some would see as a century or more of hard-won benefits. Yet we do need to acknowledge that the old psychological contract – the promise of lifetime employment in return for doing jobs of the organization's choosing – has changed. How many organizations can realistically commit to such a contract today? What proportion of the workforce can be realistically covered by such a commitment? How useful would such commitments be for the future economy? As Schein (2007a: ix) notes, it is 'a normal evolution to be talking more about individuals being responsible for their own career' inasmuch as organizations 'cannot predict or control career paths in the way that they used to be able to do'. Let us look further at that unpredictability.

What's up with the knowledge economy?

The knowledge economy creates unpredictability in both work roles and careers. It does so through 'knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technological and scientific advance as well as equally rapid obsolescence' (Powell & Snellman, 2004: 201). The knowledge economy makes a habit of introducing new ways of working, condemning old ways of working, and thereby triggering changing career arrangements around the globe. Sources of inspiration about the knowledge economy are diverse, from a former director of London School of Economics's depiction of a 'runaway world' (Giddens, 2003), to a *New York Times* reporter's portrayal of a 'flat world' (Friedman, 2005). The common invitation to careers scholars is to better understand the ways in which careers and knowledge flows are connected to one another. Let us examine six particular themes, focusing on careers as repositories of knowledge, career imprinting, virtual communities, open innovation, regional and inter-regional advantage and global social initiatives.

Careers as repositories of knowledge

As academic attention in the 1990s turned to the 'knowledge driven company' (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) careers scholars introduced the idea of 'careers as repositories of knowledge'. These repositories reflected 'accumulations of information and knowledge embodied in the skills, expertise, and relationship networks' that are acquired as careers unfold (Bird, 1996: 150). Through their career behavior people can collaborate to combine, articulate and internalize new knowledge that in turn becomes available to current or future employers. An interesting aspect of listening to individual career narratives is to hear the individuals' own accounts of how they gathered and subsequently 'cross-pollinated' knowledge to other employment situations (Arthur et al., 1999). A more systemic approach to examining knowledge flows is to study project-based learning, and the way the groups and institutions that project members represent both provide knowledge to and derive knowledge from project activities (DeFillippi et al., 2006).

Career imprinting

Former employees from the Baxter Pharmaceuticals company in Chicago turned up in disproportionate numbers 1500 miles away in either California or Massachusetts. Their new jobs were as members of the top management team in biotechnology start-up firms. It turns out that the entrepreneurial skills the managers developed at Baxter were widely valued by the venture capitalists responsible for financing the new firms. The example is one of 'career imprinting' where a body of knowledge developed from career experiences in one situation can be broadly transferred to a different situation (Higgins, 2005). Other examples of the same phenomenon are the widespread migration of senior GE managers, and in earlier times of IBM managers, to rival firms. The opportunity in studying career imprinting is to gain a much clearer picture of how valued knowledge and skills are developed and recognized in the marketplace, and in turn incorporated into organizational and institutional arrangements.

Virtual communities

The Linux computer operating system began when one college student's summer hobby turned into a virtual community of database developers. This virtual community (of IT specialists making volitional and unpaid career investments in the Linux product) has had a remarkable impact on the information technology industry. So too have other 'open source' programmer communities, who make their source code freely available to users, and who

find jobs and earn reputation because of the work their virtual communities perform (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Lakhani & von Hippel, 2003). Institutions such as the Free Software Foundation of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and more recently a global network of similar establishments, lend support to the open source software model (Free Software Foundation). Change the meaning of open source from program code to knowledge provider and you get Wikipedia, the popular online encyclopedia. You also get a range of wider initiatives concerned with open source searches for more effective solutions, for example in treating relatively neglected Third World diseases (Moran, 2005). There seems much to be gained from further examining how virtual communities respond to and influence the host knowledge economy.

Open innovation

Organizations have now caught on to the opportunities of tapping into open knowledge sources, so that an increasing number now practice 'open innovation' seeking contributions from outside the organization, and around the globe (Chesbrough, 2003). Firms, such as Proctor and Gamble, post their innovation agendas on their company websites and await responses. The limited reports so far point to early successes of the open source approach. An example is the 'Goldcorp challenge' issued by a Toronto-based mining company that posted geological data for a problem mine on the Web, and in response to which outsiders identified over 40 new sources of gold, and shaved over two years off its anticipated exploration time (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). It is becoming an increasingly attractive career option for people to respond – either individually or as members of specialist teams – to these open source innovation efforts. The attractions from doing so, apart from any direct remuneration involved, are several: to do what the individual likes to do, to experience challenge, to join a pioneering team, to apply relevant knowledge, to gain new knowledge, or to build reputation in the employment marketplace.

Regional and inter-regional advantage

Another theme reflects evidence that established regional clusters of firms, such as California's Silicon Valley, provide the regional labor markets that support workers' careers (Saxenian, 1996). These clusters also host interpersonal and community-centered knowledge exchanges through which career behavior can further support a regional industry (DeFillippi et al., 2006). In the era of the World Wide Web, career investments often involve inter-cluster links with distant collaborators (for example, between Bangalore, India and Silicon Valley, USA). Or, career investments can involve mixed

physical and virtual communications, as when 'new Argonauts' fly between continents to develop new business opportunities (Saxenian, 2006). Governments are getting in on the act, with the Government of Singapore particularly active in seeking to connect indigenous industry clusters with leading innovators around the world (Parayil, 2005) – with consequences for both Singaporean careers (greater involvement in knowledge generation and transfer) and careers around the rest of the globe (more networking and information exchange with Singapore-based specialists).

Global social initiatives

Finally, there is a challenge to incorporate social rather than economic initiatives into our thinking about careers. Castells (2001: 278) warns that the emergence of the global, Web-driven 'network society' calls for redefinition of the mechanisms of social protection through which social peace, working partnership and personal security – all fundamental themes in people's careers – are provided. Wellman (2002: 96) sees a shift away from social connectivity 'based on the household and the workplace' toward new sets of connections (which careers scholars can investigate) based on individualized social networks. Voluntary, Web-facilitated networks and communities are developing not only for individuals to find traditional paid work but also to collectively address the principal challenges of our time – such as world peace, global warming and the eradication of poverty – and thereby to exercise 'career impact' through individual career initiatives (Heslin, 2007). These emerging, voluntary forms of connectivity are rich in opportunities for new careers research.

Organizational careers scholars are already beginning to examine the above themes. Common to these scholars' work is an appreciation of what Weick (1996) has called the *enactment* of careers, that is of the way that people's careers, singly or in combination, have an influence over the surrounding knowledge economy. This point of departure is distinct from alternative approaches that see careers as principally responding to the host economy.

In summary, the above suggests three sets of future research directions: one set involving career-relevant phenomena that organizational careers scholars see for themselves; one set involving the common good that other organizational scholars see; and a third set about relationships between careers and the global knowledge economy. This leaves room for further sets of directions that might be best identified by representatives of individual social science disciplines or by occupational careers scholars. Setting those further directions aside for now, let us make a start in examining how to find common interdisciplinary ground.

Opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration

Where do we go from here? The story so far suggests that careers researchers, perhaps like many others in the global economy, need to become more effective at both knowledge generation and transfer. The story also suggests that much of the problem lies in knowledge transfer – that is, in further conversation both within and beyond our own research communities. In the space remaining, let us look at three topics – concerned with a more accessible definition of career, contrasting research methodologies and wider research agendas – and for each of them make some modest suggestions about how to proceed.

A more accessible definition of career

A simple point of departure would be for separate research communities to begin with the same definition of the term career. There is broad agreement that careers involve both work and time, and that there is a distinction between the subjective career – as seen through the eyes of the individual – and the objective career – as it is publicly observed in society (Khapova et al., 2007). We might therefore anticipate broad agreement that the career provides what Hughes (1958: 67) once called a 'moving perspective' on the relationship between the worker and the host environment as time unfolds. However, this has not been the case.

As Collin (2006: 60) observes, not only is the term career 'often not clearly defined' but 'when it is used to modify other terms, such as development or guidance' that meaning 'is generally taken for granted'. To take an example from the occupational careers research community, Brown and Brooks's (1996) introductory essay to the book *Career choice and development* does not define career. However, their preface describes career *development* as 'a lifelong process of getting ready to choose, choosing, and, typically, continuing to make choices from among the many occupations available in our society' (Brown & Brooks, 1996: xv). Similarly, Herr (2005: 385) concludes a volume on *Adult career development* noting that 'the importance of career exploration and choice' has moved from the front end of a person's career toward being distributed over the life span. The common emphasis remains on occupational choice, even if more than one choice may be taken over time. Dig a little deeper, and you will find that this community's interest in the objective career is usually limited to a person's *perceptions* of how society sees his or her career (Khapova et al., 2007). These psychological views stay within the logic of their own tradition, and appear resistant to interdisciplinary debate.

However, Collin (2006: 62) adds that 'several types of stakeholders in [the term] career' all view it 'from their own perspectives and use it for their own purposes'. That is, Collin would see the tradition-bound logic suggested above as illustrative of a wider problem; one where established disciplines and research communities all fashion their own definitions, and contribute to a breakdown of interdisciplinary debate. To return to Abbott's (2004) language, we prefer to adopt *methodological* definitions associated with one research tradition, rather than more *imaginative* definitions – in the sense of freeing our definitions from the constraints of separate traditions – and thereby inviting other traditions to relate to our work. There may be understandable reasons for separate definitions, but their existence does present a barrier to interdisciplinary conversations. Shifting toward a definition accessible to alternative research traditions – such as, for example, the definition introduced earlier – can help us to better promote those conversations in the future.

Contrasting methodologies

The question of how we define careers may be extended to how we research them. One issue here is whether the term boundaryless career, or any other term intended to help us focus on contemporary careers, is expected to simply encourage a range of fresh perspectives or to serve as a specific construct for further research (Feldman & Ng, 2007). My own view is that it is sufficient to see the term as one that encourages fresh perspectives. Each perspective can then be developed through the adoption of particular constructs and methodologies to underlie separate research initiatives about shifting identities, work and family issues, careers as repositories of knowledge, or whatever. This was, of course, the approach adopted by contributors to the original collection of articles on the boundaryless career edited by Arthur and Rousseau (1996).

However, fresh perspectives can come at a price. Writing in 1986, Edgar Schein (the organizational scholars' equivalent in stature to Donald Super) worried about the fractionation of alternative reports about careers, where researchers did 'not really understand and take seriously' those 'points of view different than their own' (Schein, 1986: 312). In failing to do so, the researchers failed to accurately represent organizational reality, and offered misleading generalizations. A similar worry can be found in Savickas's (1993) views about the work of occupational scholars and career counselors. He saw this work using 'theories and interventions that emphasize verifiable action' (p. 336) while neglecting 'the importance of understanding the meaning that clients invest in their careers' (pp. 338–9).

Fast forward to 2007, and Schein worries more about the methodologies behind our theories. He sees much of existing careers research involving 'locating relevant constructs, [and] measuring some abstract surrogate for those constructs'. He adds that research elegance is 'often displayed by ever more refined statistical operations' rather than checking whether operational definitions reflect the phenomena under study, and he seeks more longitudinal research and more research about the careers of particular career occupants (Schein, 2007b: 574). Writing at the same time, Savickas (2007: 93) emphasizes a need for 'building new models for comprehending occupational choice in the postmodern society and the global economy'. These new models also invite a greater diversity of research approaches.

These overlapping views once more connect us to Abbott's (2004) distinction. Both Schein and Savickas call for us to sharpen our imaginative voices (and to become better at hearing other people's voices), in seeing how different perspectives on careers can complement one another, and in pursuing greater variation in the methodologies we use to highlight career phenomena. Career scholars can better communicate about all three of the definitions, concepts and methodologies they pursue in the search for greater understanding.

Wider research agendas

If we can temporarily remove our career-focused lenses, there may be further opportunities to be explored. One issue here concerns what many scholars see as distinct 'levels of analysis' – for example across global, national, institutional (occupational or organizational), group (or community or team) and individual levels. Some writers use the distinction to write about 'cross-level' or 'inter-level' observations that enrich our understanding of the connections. However, others see levels of analysis in a more restrictive, hierarchical way. Organizational careers scholars are often seen as taking a 'micro' view with little to offer colleagues taking 'macro' views on, for example, organization theory, strategic management, even human resource management, that focus primarily on the organization. Moreover, the field of organizational behavior (with which organizational careers scholars are often associated) often emphasizes an *intra*-organizational rather than *inter*-organizational focus. At the time of writing, the domain statement of the Organizational Behavior Division of the Academy of Management (2007) still refers to 'the study of individuals and groups within an organizational context' thereby excluding much that is interesting about contemporary careers.

We can also pick up what may be seen as new invitations from other thinkers. One example, as noted earlier, is that contemporary careers scholars can quickly touch the sensitivities of institutional theorists. Yet, there is some

shifting of positions among those theorists. Giddens (2003: 5) hopes for the reform and further democratization of existing institutions 'in ways that respond to the demands of the global age'. Barley and Kunda (2004) suggest a stronger role for occupational institutions that provide worker credentials, skills training and links to employment opportunities in support of 'itinerant professionalism'. Sennett (2006: 104) calls for a sharper focus on 'craftsmanship' – in the broadest sense meaning doing something well for its own sake – in future employment arrangements. Our interest in the enactment of careers (Weick, 1996) provides a useful basis for examining how new institutional forms can emerge.

A related opportunity for fresh research lies in the suggestion that the underlying model of social and economic organization has shifted. That is, social mobilization may occur more around identities linked to race, ethnicity, social stigma, gender, age, physical disability or sexual orientation than around traditional workplace allegiances (Piore & Safford, 2006). These identities give rise to 'communities of interest' that may better support the ongoing process of identity formation and change, and in turn more adaptive careers. A further concern about the traditional model of social and economic organization comes from legal writers who suggest that present employment law neglects the interests of the mobile employee (Lobel, 2006; Stone, 2004). A range of fruitful opportunities exists for imaginative careers scholars to engage with these and other constructive ideas about the contemporary world of work and its further evolution.

Conclusion

To recap, careers research has so far been performed under separate traditions, with each tradition largely independent of the others. However, the nature of contemporary careers invites us to take a fresh look at the possibilities for interdisciplinary inquiry. That means looking at what organizational careers scholars, other careers scholars, and scholars outside the careers research arena can contribute to new research initiatives. More accessible definitions, alternative methodologies and wider research agendas can all nurture more imaginative voices in careers research.

Let us celebrate contrasting research perspectives at the same time as we seek more communication among them. Let us also celebrate the interdisciplinary opportunity behind a concept with both work and time at its core. Let us make careers research central, rather than peripheral, to future conversations about the global knowledge economy – with heartfelt thanks to Bill Watterson, Calvin and Hobbes creator and an instinctive interdisciplinary thinker.

Figure 2 An interdisciplinary conversation between Calvin and Hobbes. CALVIN AND HOBBES © 1988 Watterson. Dist. By UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved

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Michael B. Arthur is Professor of Management at Suffolk University, Boston, USA. His principal research interests focus on contemporary career arrangements within the global knowledge economy. His books include the *Handbook of career theory* (1989), *The boundaryless career* (1996), *The new careers* (1999), *Career frontiers* (2000), *Career creativity* (2002) and most recently *Knowledge at work* (2006). He has written and spoken widely on the subject of contemporary, knowledge-driven careers in the global economy. He was the 2006 recipient of the Academy of Management's Everett Hughes Award for lifetime achievement in career studies.
[E-mail: m-arthur@comcast.net]