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Social constructionism in the study of career: Accessing the parts that other approaches cannot reach

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Abstract

In this article we consider the contribution of a social constructionist perspective to our understandings of career. We examine this approach in relation to two studies: a study of women's career transition from organizational employment to portfolio work, and a study of the careers of research scientists. Within the career literature a dichotomy has emerged between what are seen as "traditional" and "new" careers. On the face of it these studies seem to neatly illustrate this dichotomy. However, when examined from a social constructionist perspective, questions are raised about the viability of this binarism. In this article we argue this approach enables us to transcend dualisms which have prevailed in career theory, facilitates analyses of the relationship between careers and the social contexts in which they are embedded, and illuminates issues of power and ideology which are often eclipsed by more positivistic research approaches.

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1. Introduction

There is some consensus that careers are changing or have been transfigured (Collin & Watts, 1996) and much agreement about the direction of that change. The old,

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stultifying world of traditional, hierarchical careers is said to have given way to a more liberating and all-embracing career world based on the accumulation of skills and knowledge and the integration of personal and professional life.

However, while there has been considerable enthusiasm for the project of redefining career and examining alternative careers (Sullivan, 1999) questions about how to study these new careers have generated much less energy. Indeed, it is curious that although contemporary definitions of career might seem to lend themselves to diverse approaches, some authors have argued that traditional methods still prevail (Collin & Young, 2000). Even though many writers have extolled the virtues of more phenomenological perspectives (Cochran, 1990; Ornstein & Isabella, 1993), there is still a tendency towards positivistic approaches in career theory. This article offers an alternative, social constructionist approach, based on the generation of in-depth career accounts. We consider this approach in relation to two research projects: a study of women's transition from organizationally based to portfolio careers (here portfolio work is understood as packages of work arrangements for the plying and selling of an individual's skills in a variety of contexts), and a study of mainly male research scientists working in university departments and public sector laboratories.

Within the career literature a dichotomy has emerged between what are seen as "old," "traditional" or "bureaucratic" careers, and "new," "boundaryless" careers. On the face of it, these two studies would appear to neatly illustrate these opposing career forms, with the scientists representing the old way, and the women the new. However, when examined from a social constructionist perspective, things look rather different. In this article we argue that social constructionism illuminates aspects of career that are obscured by more positivistic approaches, casting doubt on the viability of the old/new dichotomy.

Recently there has been a spate of predictions about the demise of the traditional career (e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002). Such careers are increasingly being discredited as stultifying individuals' initiative and promoting an unhealthy dependence on organizations for the conduct of one's working life (Handy, 1994; Herriot & Pemberton, 1995). In their place more embracing notions of career, based on the accumulation of skills and knowledge and the integration of professional and personal life are being promoted.

Most empirical research into boundaryless careers thus far has been applied to a limited sample of people and within a narrow range of occupational environments, for example, the film industry (Jones, 1996), the Silicon Valley IT industry (Littleton, Arthur, & Rousseau, 2000) and the biotechnology industry (Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000). Notwithstanding these highly specified contexts, it has become incorporated into ways of thinking and talking about career more generally (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Peiperl, Arthur, & Anand, 2002). In our view, though, this emerging literature must be treated with caution. In particular, we have three main concerns. First, whilst some voices have been raised about the potentially negative side of these "new" careers, they have largely been drowned by a chorus of approval (Hirsch & Shanley, 1996; Hutton, 1995). Second, despite much rhetoric about career change, it is difficult to trace the extent and nature of such change empirically (Guest & MacKenzie Davey, 1996; Worrall & Cooper, 1997). Third, and most significant for our

purposes in this article, is the issue of methodology. Although contemporary definitions of career might seem to lend themselves to alternative approaches, traditional, positivistic methods still dominate the career field (for critique see Collin & Young, 1986, 2000). This has resulted in the persistence of unhelpful divisions: the individual *or* the organization; career as subjective experience *or* objective phenomenon; and now, we argue, the old *or* the new (Cohen & Mallon, 1999). The conceptual power of the career concept is precisely that it recursively links the individual to the wider, changing social world. Unfortunately, though, much of this power is lost through the prevalence of positivistic approaches and their tendency towards fragmentation and reductionism at the expense of more dynamic, more holistic explanations. In this article we argue that social constructionism has the potential to transcend such fractured understandings—to move beyond “the old” and “the new,” and to more adequately capture the analytical richness of the career concept.

The article is structured in three sections. In the first section we outline our approach to social constructionism. Next we turn to research methodology and briefly introduce the two studies on which this article is based. In the section that follows we compare and contrast the two studies, identifying the contribution of social constructionist perspectives to our understandings of career.

2. Social constructionism: An alternative approach to researching careers

As discussed in the introduction to this Special Issue (Collin & Young, 2003), the terms constructivism and constructionism have been defined and applied in a variety of ways. Whilst the intricacy of this debate is a fascinating topic in its own right, in this article it is not our purpose to engage in this conversation. Rather, our aim is to outline our particular take on social constructionism, and to examine its application in two very different empirical settings.

Our starting point is the notion of the social world, not as a fixed or objective entity, external to individuals and impacting on them in a deterministic way, but as constructed by individuals through their social practices. As regards careers, from a social constructionist perspective a career is not conceptualised as a form or structure that an individual temporarily inhabits, constraining or enabling her in her journey. Rather, it is constituted by the actor herself, in interaction with others, as she moves through time and space. However, this is not to suggest that individuals have a free rein as to how they enact their careers. Rather, we agree with Weick when he suggests that people are part of their own environments, that through their actions they contribute to the creation of “the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face” Weick (1995, p. 31). It is an iterative and on-going process, involving at times the reproduction of existing structures and at times their transformation.

Burr (1995) outlines four key assumptions underpinning the broad label “social constructionism” (see also Collin & Young, 2003). First, *a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge*. Here Burr refers to the constructionist challenge to notions of reality as objective, fixed and, with the right instruments, knowable. Social constructionism invites us to challenge conventional understandings and to understand the processes by which such understandings come to be seen as “natural”

or “true.” Of course, this challenge requires reflexivity in the research relationship. Burr’s second point concerns *historical and cultural specificity*. That is, our understandings of the world must not be seen as static or inevitable, but as historically and culturally situated, changing and developing across time and space. Third, *knowledge is sustained by social processes*. As its label suggests, social constructionism views the construction of knowledge as an interactive process. In their daily lives, people create and recreate versions of reality through social practice. What we think of as “true,” therefore, is not some external reality, but what is currently accepted as such. The construction of knowledge, in this sense, is a negotiated process in which certain interpretations are privileged, whilst others are eclipsed. This leads to Burr’s fourth point, that *knowledge and social action go together*. That is, particular versions of reality lead to particular forms of action, and away from others. As Gergen suggests, “it is the individual as socially constructed that finally informs people’s patterns of action” Gergen (1996, p. 146). Given the dominance of certain understandings and the subordination of others, it follows that social action will work in the interests of more powerful groups and against those in weaker positions.

These four tenets of social constructionism have important implications for the study of career, in terms of both what we study and how we study it. As regards *what* we study, they encourage us to question conventional (bureaucratic) definitions of career (Gowler & Legge, 1989), our assumptions about what constitutes viable career paths and notions of acceptable career behaviour. At the same time, they highlight the importance of historical and cultural context in framing our career thinking and action, elucidating links between individuals and their social worlds—links often obscured by more positivistic approaches. These points also lead researchers to questions about power and ideology in career sensemaking and action—for example, why certain kinds of career are seen as legitimate and valued, while others are cast aside as deviant, or are simply ignored. And they encourage us to take note of those moments where dominant prescriptions are challenged, where meaning is up for grabs.

A social constructionist epistemology likewise has consequences for *how* we approach our career research. First, we need approaches that elucidate the socially and culturally embedded nature of career, and that facilitate greater understanding of the relationship between individual agency and social context. Second, given the notion of constructed/contested versions of reality discussed, we need methods that bring contradictions and struggles over meaning to the surface. It is only in doing so that we can get beyond the reductionist thinking so prevalent in career theorising. Third, cognisant of Burr’s first point about maintaining a critical stance, we must be aware of the frames of meaning that we, as researchers, bring to the research process, recognizing that these assumptions and values are themselves only versions of reality, echoing, competing, and colliding with the versions presented by our participants.

3. Social constructionism and the creation of career accounts

Fundamental to this process of constructing the social world is endowing it with meaning. As Billington and her colleagues maintain, human beings know the world

as a result of assigning meanings to its different parts. “Things, objects, and persons do not have any intrinsic meaning: they are brought into human society through the frameworks of knowledge in current use” (Billington, Hockey, & Strawbridge, 1998, p. 223). These frameworks of meaning are metaphorically described by anthropologist Clifford Geertz as “webs of significance” (Geertz, 1973). This vivid metaphor illustrates the construction of meaning as an active, creative process, the intricate ways in which meaning systems intersect, and the idea that once spun, these webs are incredibly strong, trapping and suspending people in their overlapping strands. Here the social aspect of social constructionism is underlined, as we consider meaning-making to be a collective rather than an individual, idiosyncratic process.

In essence we see social constructionism as concerned with how the world comes to be endowed with meaning, and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated and transformed through social practice. Language lies at the core of such processes. By this, we do not mean that language is simply a mirror, a ‘mere messenger from the kingdom of reality’ (Gergen, 1999, p. 11). Instead, it both creates and reflects social realities—and thus is essential to what makes us human. As Berger and Luckmann put it, “Language marks the coordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 36). In our quest to understand how individuals understand career and account for their careers, a consideration of how people talk about their careers is important.

In spite of the prevalence of logical positivism within the career canon, there have recently been calls for the adoption of a narrative approach to allow for a more holistic view of career, one that can take account of time and space, and that can enable the finding of pattern in retrospective study (Collin, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988). We share the view that the generation of narrative accounts is a powerful—and appealing—method in career research (Cohen & Mallon, 2001). Within career accounts, we are not concerned to access specific facts, rather we are concerned with interpretation and meaning making. In their stories individuals do not present their careers as series of disconnected events. Rather, they talk about stages and episodes which, observed through the lens of their present reality, are interpreted as a seamless whole. Significantly, in our research some participants were reflexively aware of the process of creating a career story—and consciously recognized that in doing so they were choosing one version of events over another. Indeed, a number of participants asked whether we wanted “the CV version of their career or the truth.” We see the generation of career narratives as a social process, framed by cultural norms and understandings. As Czarniawska suggests, we are not “the sole authors of our own narratives, in every conversation a positioning takes place which is accepted, rejected or improved on by the parties in the conversation” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997, p. 14).

The idea of careers as continuous narratives, merging past and present, is central to new definitions of career. For example, Arthur and Rousseau describe it as “The unfolding sequence of a person’s work experience over time” (1996, p. 6). Collin and Watts view it as the “individual’s development in learning and work throughout life” (1996, p. 393). Paradoxically, though, positivistic methods rarely provide insights into this evolving process as they tend to be more static, capturing

a moment, or a set of measures at one particular time (Sullivan, 1999). The implications of this are that either individuals are examined in isolation from their social circumstances, with facets of their social world as a mere ghostly presence or career structures are studied as if individuals were shadowy beings that inhabit them. In contrast, the generation of career accounts illuminates the relationship between individuals and their social contexts, and how individuals understand and act with respect to this relationship. Our view of stories as encapsulating the mutuality of individual action and social structure is consistent with Hughes' (1937, p. 413) notion of the career as

Janus-faced: at once looking outward to a series of statuses and clearly defined offices, and inward, to the way in which a person sees his [sic] life as a whole and interprets the meanings of his various attributes, actions and the things that happen to him.

In our research, the generation of career narratives has enabled us to attend to aspects of the social realm that individuals identify as enabling or constraining them. We were also interested in the extent to which our respondents saw their personal circumstances as mirroring broader social trends. In their accounts participants described how they manoeuvred between what are seen as socially legitimate and illegitimate career scripts, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes subverting, traditional “rules” for action.

4. The research contexts

This is not an empirical article, as it does not systematically report on research findings. However, our discussion draws on a comparison of two studies. The first is concerned with women moving into portfolio careers, the second focuses on scientists within universities and public sector research laboratories.

The career transition study is based on the accounts of 41 women professionals and managers who left organizational positions and embarked on portfolio careers. Having achieved middle and senior posts within their organizations, these women arguably had had most access to the supposed fruits of the traditional career and by its precepts potentially had much to lose by opting for portfolio work. As employees, the participants had worked in a variety of sectors. They subsequently set up businesses as independent trainers and management consultants, alternative health therapists, marketing and public relations consultants and independent psychologists.

The study into the careers of research scientists is based on qualitative interviews conducted with 68 public sector research scientists, 37 from the UK and 31 from New Zealand. The scientists worked either within public laboratories or universities. These are far more traditional arenas where, from the outside at least, organizations appear fairly bureaucratic and there are well-trodden career paths. However, there is an emerging consensus that the world of science is radically changing (Ziman, 1994), with an increasing emphasis on application, collaboration, and social accountability. Both the New Zealand and the UK scientists were experiencing increased pressure

and there was a sense from our interviews that the very nature of these organizations was being transformed (for further detail see Cohen, Duberley, & McAuley, 1999; Duberley, Mallon, & Cohen, 2002).

In both studies, an explicitly interpretative and qualitative stance was taken, rooted in a life history methodology (Jones, 1983). Interviews explored how respondents made sense of their career to date, their relationship with organizations, future plans and their view of career and career success. Participants spoke in their own voices, controlling their responses and introducing their own relevant issues (Mishler, 1986). Such interviews also facilitated the development of a personal narrative (Cochran, 1990) that gives context to particular career events. We used flexible interview prompt guides that we augmented and amended as interviews progressed. All interviews were taped and transcribed and data analysis was on-going throughout the projects. This iterative process led to the emergence of a coding template for analysis of the data into inductively generated categories (King, 1998).

Our approach fits neatly within Burr's social constructionist framework noted above. First, consistent with the constructionist's "critical stance toward existing knowledge," in both studies our pre-understanding (Packer, 1985) was that there was no particular truth that would give a universal picture of the issues under investigation. Instead, we aimed to interrogate existing understandings through our exploration of the accounts of situated individuals. This leads to Burr's second point that knowledge must be seen as historically and culturally specific. Not only did we seek to examine participants' career decisions and actions in the contexts of their lives more generally, but we also did so from a particular vantage point. Career accounts, in this sense, are fundamentally about looking at one's life in retrospect, spinning it in relation to current circumstances, and attempting to tidy up loose ends. Our approach enabled us to examine how participants in both studies saw career success as constituted within their particular contexts, and how they accounted for their own career patterns in light of these dominant prescriptions. This echoes Burr's third point that social constructionists see knowledge as sustained by social processes, mindful of the way in which certain understandings come to be privileged, while others are obscured. Finally, in line with social constructionism's linking of knowledge and action, we were keen to explore how respondents' interpretations of career appeared to spur them to certain career actions.

5. The contribution of social constructionism to our understanding of career

In this section we use data generated in both studies to illustrate how social constructionism can further our understanding of careers. We see this contribution as falling into three broad areas: first, it enables us to transcend the theoretical reductionism which in many cases has limited the depth and breadth of career research; second, it facilitates more contextually embedded analyses and third, it leads to an emphasis on issues of power and legitimacy in career thinking and action—a dimension which in our view has received insufficient research attention.

5.1. *Moving beyond reductionist understandings*

Explanations of the move from organizational employment to self-employment are frequently based on a push/pull dichotomy (Hakim, 1989; Granger, Stanworth, & Stanworth, 1995). “Push” is generally interpreted as factors such as unemployment, redundancy, and increasing insecurity at work, while “pull” is about the supposed lure of independence, flexibility, and choice. Examining our data two broad categories emerged which on the face of it resembled the “push/pull” framework. However, a more critical and deeper analysis revealed that these categories were themselves differentiated and complex. Furthermore, although women could be broadly placed in one category or another, these categories were rarely mutually exclusive. In the spirit of social constructionism, then, we were concerned to splice rather than split the data (Dey, 1993), to capture the web of factors seen as salient to the transitions, and to hold on to the sense of continuity which in most accounts underpinned the career change (see also Young & Richards, 1992).

Women described a diversity of triggers that impacted on their decisions. Their stories were characterised by an urgent desire to leave an organizational situation that was causing them personal and professional pain. For many, the reasons for leaving centred on responses to organizational change. The majority of our participants had worked in the public sector. The significant market-oriented changes in that sector were implicated in a sense that the organization had lost its value base. The lure of self-employment lay in its perceived opportunities for greater freedom, autonomy, balance, and the ability to live by a personal value system threatened within the organization.

Several women saw portfolio work as their only career option. Significantly, some theorists have seen women’s move into some form of self-employment as a “subordination response” (Stanworth, Stanworth, Granger, & Blyth, 1989) to being “pushed out” of organizations. However, far from looking at portfolio work with a kind of fatalistic resignation, most of our respondents described the move as a way of fulfilling deep-seated hopes and career aspirations.

Our data thus revealed a duality of push and pull factors, making sense in relation to one another rather than as discrete variables. For example, stories of constraining organizations were typically illustrated through vivid descriptions of freedom and opportunity available within portfolio work. This notion of meaning making as relational (de Saussure, 1979) was demonstrated time again in our dataset, and presented a challenge to apparently distinct analytical categorisations.

On a broader canvas, we would argue that the debates on emerging careers are themselves grounded in dichotomies which social constructionism serve to undermine. A new binarism is being set up which suggests that old careers are stultifying and must be overturned, and that the new hold out great possibilities for liberation (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Inkson, 1995). In stark contrast, far from moving swiftly from an old to a new work order, our respondents felt the pull of both change and continuity. The transcripts were peppered by phrases such as “I have always been like that,” “I was always freewheeling” “I have always been a rogue” and “I have always wanted to manage my own career.” While typically described as dichotomous,

in this study, change and continuity seemed to exist in parallel, as related aspects of the same process. Although the specific patterns varied, the relationship between change and continuity, and the sense that they are mutually dependent, permeated the stories we heard.

Turning to the scientists, similar reductionist models are common in debates on scientific careers where distinctions have been drawn between those of a local *or* a cosmopolitan orientation (Bailyn, 1991; Gouldner, 1955) and those on a managerial *or* a professional career ladder (Payne, 1987; Raelin, 1986). As in the career transition study, at first glance it is easy to see these divisions in the data and a positivistic analysis of individuals' roles would certainly support this. However, a social constructionist perspective revealed a more diverse picture. From our discussions with scientists we identified at least four different categorisations of scientific career imperatives. First, the impassioned scientist, in which the career is seen as inseparable from and largely determined by the science. Second, the strategic opportunist, a category which reflects much more individual career planning. Scientists who describe themselves in this way see their science and their career as separate and manageable so as to achieve satisfaction, status and fulfilment. Third, the organizational careerist where talk about careers is predominantly in relation to the career path offered by the organization. Finally the balance seekers who planned their careers so as to achieve a degree of balance in their lives, between work and home life, or in order to pursue outside interests.

It is important to point out that, as with the female entrepreneurs, there was not a neat one-for-one match between an individual and a category. Rather, respondents described how, at different points in their careers they oriented to particular categories. In certain instances scientists' accounts indicated a shift between categories as careers progressed; in other cases respondents appeared to mobilise aspects of different categories simultaneously. Together, then, these categories paint a vivid picture of how public sector research scientists think about and enact their careers. Our social constructionist approach elucidated those features of the research scientist's world which are constructed as "objective": the structure of scientific knowledge itself, organizational hierarchies and career paths, scientific networks, lifestyle factors such as family commitments. At the same time it provided insights into how individuals experience these, how they make sense of and enact their careers in and around these features.

5.2. Contextualising career

As noted previously, an examination of social phenomena within their historical and cultural contexts is a central tenet of social constructionism. An often cited limitation within much of the career literature is the way in which career is depicted as distinct dimension of life, a variable which can be studied in apparent isolation from its social context (Collin, 1997).

Some participants in our career transition research explained how, alongside organizational factors, their decisions to leave their jobs resulted in part from personal circumstances. Popular myths suggest that women experience an incompatibility

between personal and professional roles and responsibilities (Rosin & Korabik, 1992). Of the women who cited parental duties as their principal reason for leaving, though, it became apparent in the course of their interviews that their motivation was far more complex, that motherhood was one in a web of factors that resulted in their decision:

At the time I said it was for the children. The children were my excuse, and that was an acceptable excuse. Now though, I see that it wasn't the children at all. It was about me and my growth and development. I can say that now, but I couldn't then.

Whereas the desire for more autonomy and greater control at work may not have been seen (by herself or others) as a legitimate reason to leave, the desire to do the best for her children was. Considering her decision at the time of interview, she said that her child had probably been used as an excuse, that her decision to leave had been an attempt to resolve more fundamental issues about competence and identity.

Deeply embedded in social practice, we see career stories as “forms of social accounting or public discourse” (Gergen, 1994, p. 188). Reflecting on their careers, respondents described how in various circumstances they went along with, utilised, resisted or sought to transform existing social practices. As regards transformation, several women felt that they had an important role to play in changing the structures of career opportunity available to women. They described themselves as “pioneers,” “trend setters,” and “role models” and were determined that young women setting out on careers today would not meet the same barriers that they had faced.

For the scientists, the importance of context was also apparent. Broadly speaking, in addition to the organizational context which has traditionally been the focus for study our research highlights at least another four contexts that scientists see as both constraining and/or enabling them: scientific, professional, personal, and societal. The first refers to scientific disciplines themselves and how they serve to structure the production of scientific knowledge. Professional context is clearly associated with scientific disciplines, but relates more specifically to the social relations, the communities operating within (and across) disciplines—the networks, research teams, collaborators, peer groups, both within and outside their organizations, which research scientists participate in as they seek to establish their reputations. By personal context we are referring to lifestyle and family contexts that individuals orient to, and which influence the ways in which scientists manage their careers and conceptualize career success. Finally, the societal context could potentially include aspects as diverse as government policy as well as cultural belief and meaning systems. In our dataset the most salient societal features are the changing funding regimes, and concomitant changes in our understandings of what science is essentially for and about. What was fascinating in our data was the way in which different individuals privileged some contexts, while appearing blind to others.

As noted earlier, the career concept has the potential to illuminate the relationship between individuals, organizations, and wider social contexts. However, within

much career theory these fundamental social relationships remain unacknowledged (Collin & Young, 2000). Indeed, in what is considered the mainstream “career canon” it is the organization/individual dyad that is at centre stage, eclipsing other important relationships and affiliations. Utilising a social constructionist perspective it is possible to access not only those aspects of context which individuals see as impacting upon them but also to gain a richer picture of the ways in which individuals variably understand the nature of their relationship with their contexts. In this sense, career could be a valuable analytical concept for examining some of the big sociological questions of our day—questions about social structures and human activity, about determinism, free will, and power. The issues of power and social legitimacy will be considered in the next section.

5.3. Power and ideology in career meaning making and action

The narratives collected in both studies enabled us to examine the play of power and ideology in how individuals made sense of their careers. Power can relate to meaning making in the sense of illuminating the dominance of certain definitions and the subordination or marginalisation of others. This leads into further questions about how such dominant patterns are reinforced, reproduced or transformed. We can consider how and why certain individuals may feel that they can control their career situations but others take a more deterministic view, feeling constrained by their circumstances.

As mentioned earlier, we were particularly interested in the extent to which our respondents saw their personal change as mirroring broader social change. This awareness was aptly illustrated in the stories of several mothers in the sample who explained how they managed the conflicting demands of home and work. We have already referred to the woman who explained how she had used her children as an “acceptable justification” for leaving her job. Throughout the stories we collected women described how they manoeuvre between what is seen as socially legitimate and illegitimate career behaviour, sometimes reinforcing—and sometimes subverting—traditional prescriptions. It is interesting to note how these social rules (what it is to be a good mother, or a good worker, etc.) can appear to clash, and also how they change through time.

Embedded within such negotiations are issues of power and subordination: which views take hold and which are seen as “incorrect” (or are rendered invisible). Our data are replete with examples. Other studies have argued (Davies, 1995; Hopfl & Hornby Atkinson, 2000; Marshall, 1995) that women who want to achieve within organizations often feel that they have to conform to prevailing, male career norms. Likewise, a number of our participants explained how they felt that within their organizations they were somehow seen as “unacceptable.” Their decision to leave resulted from an unwillingness to tolerate the lack of recognition and value afforded to them because of their difference. Exit, in such cases, was described as a means of regaining a sense of oneself and creating a situation in which they could operate with integrity. Here we see our respondents navigating the intersection of (competing) discourses of career and gender.

A further intersection was that of traditional career discourse and emerging career possibilities. In our research we were keen to understand the extent to which women incorporated new career discourses into their career stories. The majority of women in the sample continued to describe a fundamental attachment to work and to vertical progression in their career. However, this was not the only picture presented by our respondents. Reflexively aware of the emerging discourse of new careers and portfolio work, they did not frame the move to self-employment as a last ditch effort, but rather as a desire for independence, autonomy, personal growth, learning, and balance. Within the new career literature, these are all seen as worthy motivations for exit from organizations. On one hand, then, many respondents felt themselves to be driven in certain directions by social forces. Conversely, they knew themselves to be pioneers, actively engaged in changing dominant career scripts for those who followed.

Similarly, in the scientist study a social constructionist approach led to questions about what was seen as “correct” scientific behaviour. Our data highlight the point that even careers which are embedded in bureaucratic organizations must themselves be seen as diverse and politicized, reflecting and constituting a range of alternative paths or modes which fall into particular patterns of prestige and legitimacy. In other words some routes were seen as the “right” way to do science; others were very wrong. But, as these “rules” seem to reflect diverse life experiences, individuals saw the distinction differently. For example, individuals with industrial experience saw science as happening in a range of organizational settings and were more open minded about what constitutes a legitimate science career. Those who had no such background and who had only seen science in an academic or institute setting had more rigid ideas about success (and maybe more importantly) failure. From such a perspective it is easy to fail: not getting the lecturing job or the permanent contract, not securing research funding, being “forced” into industry or a more applied science (which in this view is not real science at all). All this is constructed as failure and much of it is seen as beyond the control of the individual.

A significant issue to emerge in scientists’ accounts was the link between these evolving “rules” and changes in government funding regimes. Again this points to the importance of societal context. Drawing on the work of Leflaive (1996), we would argue that a framework for understanding the concept of power within organizations requires more than an investigation of the interrelated processes of domination and subordination within a particular organization. At the same time such a framework must also look outwards at the relationship between the organization and its wider institutional context. Thus, an analysis of scientific careers must take into account, not only the relationship between the individual scientist and their laboratories, but also the relationship between these institutes and the social systems in which they are situated—at one level research councils and on a more general level government departments and society.

Our data revealed that changes in government science policy challenged conventional views about legitimate career behaviour, disturbing existing power relations, and meaning systems. Scientists working in the public sector could not ignore the new rules. Whilst some respondents felt able to use them to further their career aspirations, others were overwhelmed by the changes and saw the new rules as

unworkable, insurmountable obstacles. The scientists' study thus elucidated the dynamic and highly politicised contexts in which the public sector operates, and the diverse ways in which scientists interpret and enact their careers with respect to these contexts. By adopting a social constructionist perspective it was possible to see the ways in which some scientists were 'selectively identify(ing) with, appeal(ing) to and skillfully mobilis(ing) a diverse set of cultural values' (Willmott, 1997, p. 1333) in rethinking the actual purpose and process of science and indeed their identities as scientists as a result of this change in emphasis.

6. Conclusion

In the career literature there has been a number of calls for alternative approaches to empirical work (Collin & Young, 2000; Dany, Mallon, & Arthur, 2003; Savickas, 2000). This interest has been invigorated by current debates on new career forms and patterns. In this article we examined the contribution of one such alternative, social constructionism, to our understanding of women's transitions from employment to self-employment and the careers of research scientists. These studies show that it is not only emerging, portfolio, boundaryless or protean career actors, organizational misfits or deviant women whose careers are usefully examined from constructionist perspectives. Rather, such approaches are also valuable in providing insights into the seemingly most embedded and enduring career forms, and the most "traditional" of career actors. Indeed, our data casts doubt on the viability of this old/new distinction.

As we have demonstrated, a social constructionist perspective "accesses the parts that other approaches can not reach," providing insights into dimensions of career that are often eclipsed through more positivistic approaches. First, they enable us to transcend dualistic frameworks for understanding, illuminating instead the mutuality of binarisms such as the push/pull of self-employment, managerial/professional career paths, processes of change/continuity, and old/new careers. Second, this perspective encourages a consideration of careers as situated in and inextricable from their social contexts. Here social constructionism elucidates the power of the career concept in linking individual and social worlds. Our findings echoed Dex's (1991) suggestion that "individuals' lives are the stage on which societal changes are played out." This emphasis on social context leads to our final point that social constructionism facilitates an analysis of power and ideology, and can provide insights into how individuals negotiate with these prescriptions in their career sense making and action.

Proponents of the "new career" idea link the emergence of different career forms with the late modern period in which we live. Hall (1996), writing about this period generally, suggests that:

identities are never unified and, in late modern times, are increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiple; constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation (p. 4).

However, our research findings lead us to question the view that such fracturing is uniquely a product of late modernity. Rather, it could be argued that in making sense of the present, in any era, our experiences cause us to question the certainty of unitary prescriptions—career, success, failure—resulting in understandings which are full of uncertainty and doubt. However, as this present fades into the past, we weave it into our evolving narrative, so that it becomes the latest episode in an on-going saga. And significantly, the apparent seamlessness of this narrative of the past poses a stark contrast to, and serves to highlight, the apparent lack of orderliness that we see as a defining characteristic of our age. Hence whilst interest in a constructionist perspective on studying careers may have developed as a response to perceived instabilities and uncertainty in current career environments, it can also give valuable insight in those careers that are often depicted as more enduring. Indeed, from a social constructionist's gaze, the “old” and “new” might not look quite so different after all.

In our closing comments we return to Burr's (1995) very first point about social constructionism taking a “critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge.” As we suggest earlier, we believe that a key strength of social constructionism is that it encourages researchers to be reflexive (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). We see it as imperative that researchers from this perspective recognize that as epistemic subjects we are all complicit in the processes through which we socially construct versions of reality. Thus it is incumbent upon us to reflect critically on our own intellectual assumptions in our social construction of any version of reality. Furthermore it is important that we are aware of our (albeit fallible) roles as partisan participants in interest-laden knowledge claims (see Carchedi, 1983; Chubin & Restivo, 1983; Tinker, 1991), thereby divesting ourselves of allusions to the role of detached observer.

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