

Researching careers, learning and identities: Career attachments as anchors or chains?

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Abstract

This article discusses the career biographies of four individuals in transition. They were responding to the challenges of engaging in work-related learning, re-shaping their careers and their career identities. The four cases were selected from a larger sample of fifty participants in a five-year longitudinal, qualitative case study, which has evaluated the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling in supporting the career transition and development of adults in England. They have been chosen because they illuminate different patterns of responses associated with career change. In particular, they demonstrate the value of education-based or work-based learning in helping individuals not only update their skills, knowledge and competences but also to keep a positive disposition towards learning. Whilst access to opportunities for learning and development is important, it is also clear that some individuals are much more pro-active than others in taking advantage of opportunities. In contrast, others perceive themselves to be more constrained by circumstances, which can lead to disengagement from learning and development. Reshaping careers, learning and identities is a daunting challenge for individuals and career guidance and counselling can play a role in facilitating attempts to construct a new coherent career narrative that help drive these processes.

Keywords: Career change; work-related learning; identity formation; career guidance and counselling

Introduction

To understand changing work identities, different approaches to work-related learning and how individuals respond to challenges associated with career development, it is important to acknowledge how the intensity of learning and development varies across different time periods for individuals. When workers engage in substantive learning and development, their work-related learning could either be represented as primarily concerned with upskilling (within a current occupation and/or organisation or between different occupations) or reskilling (linked to an actual or proposed career change). A further distinction can be made when there is a significant change in the development of work-related skills, knowledge and understanding, between learning that is either intensive or incremental.

This article examines evidence from a five-year longitudinal, qualitative case study of the career biographies of fifty adults who received career guidance and counselling in England. The focus of the research study was to evaluate the role of career guidance and counselling in supporting the development and progression of adults into and through the workplace. At the start of the five-year study, research participants were either in employment, unemployed or trying to re-enter the labour market. The focus here is four particular participants who were seeking to change their career, either from within or outside formal employment structures. To achieve their goal of career change, they primarily used education-based or work-based approaches to re-skill. Each case is illustrative of different types of response to the challenge of developing work-related learning, careers and identities.

Researching learning for work, careers and identities

Identities are both individual and social, as they locate individuals within society and mediate interactions with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Important identities are built through work and exist at the junction between the structural conditions of the work context and individual dispositions, influencing an individual's concept of work and relationship to job, work environment and employing organisation. Collective identities at work are built on a 'sense of

belonging' (Tajfel, 1981), with most employees belonging to various units, like departments, divisions, work teams or projects. These organisational structures influence the structure and allocation of work that, in turn, influence the work processes with which the individual engages, and affect their sense of 'belonging to' or 'being members of' particular groups (Garrick, 1998; Jones, 1995). Developing work identities are situated within particular communities where socialisation, interaction and learning are key processes that take place in a dynamic context where the nature of employment, work roles and patterns of skill development change, but where nevertheless the individual is also an active agent in the processes whereby work identities are reshaped (Brown, 1997).

Identities developed through work have particular significance as their influence also extends to wider communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As well as mediating the ways in which individuals relate to the work organisation and work process, identities frame the ways individuals cope with the pressures and stresses of work and how skills and knowledge are developed over time (Brown, 1997; 2004). Work-related socialisation plays a key role in identity formation, helping individuals develop an occupational orientation, work attachment and commitment (Heinz, 1995; 2003). As work-related identities are becoming increasingly unstable and disrupted (Carruthers & Uzzi, 2000), unfolding experiences at work can be mapped in terms of patterns of relationships, orientations and adaptive responses to work through individuals' 'strategic biographies' (Brown, 2004). Brown (1997) identified how three key sets of relationships operate between the individual and the context in shaping identities in work settings. The first set revolves around the nature of the work activities themselves and the extent to which the individual finds them challenging, changing, rewarding, etc. The second set concerns the nature of interactions with other people related to work and the extent to which the individual receives recognition, support, establishes friendships, etc. The third set focuses upon identity issues, not only how the individual sees herself or himself, but also how far this influences motivation and commitment. Particularly noteworthy is the way work activities, interactions and identities can operate either independently or in concert in influencing the approaches to learning and development of workers.

Evidence for this article has been drawn from longitudinal, qualitative case study research that was carried out in England from 2003-2008, funded by the Department for Education and Skills. The methodology was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling (Bimrose *et al.*, 2004) and also captured the developing career biographies of participants over five years. The study used qualitative methodologies that problematised practice and raised issues relevant to theory development, with a primary focus on 'user voice' (that is, the clients of services). Selected features of the methodology are presented below, with the full details of the research phases, the career guidance contexts from which data were collected, the process of negotiating access to organisations and individuals, questionnaire construction and sampling methods detailed elsewhere (Bimrose *et al.*, 2004).

Grounded theory method represented a suitable research paradigm for the research because it provided a way of producing theory from data suited to prospective uses. The method stressed the importance of phasing data collection so that findings and insights from one stage could inform subsequent stages (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). General exploratory questions were formulated and the coding of data occurred alongside data collection, allowing the focus to change and leads to be pursued. This approach enabled detailed comparisons to be made across varied career guidance contexts. Fifty in-depth case studies were undertaken in 2003-2004. Data sources for each case study included digital recordings of career guidance and counselling interviews, semi-structured questionnaires collecting background data on the client and perceptions of the interview and data on the context in which data were collected. For the follow-up studies, the initial 50 clients were contacted by telephone for four consecutive years (2004-2008), approximately one year after the case study interview.

Telephone interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Overall, 45 of the 50 clients were successfully contacted for the first follow-up (2004-2005); 36 for the second (2005-2006); 30 the third (2006-2007); and 29 for the final follow-up (2007-2008) (Bimrose *et al.*, 2005; Bimrose, *et al.*, 2006; Bimrose & Barnes, 2007a). These follow-ups tracked clients' career trajectories, their retrospective views of the value of the career guidance and counselling received and its role in their career progression. Key findings relate to the barriers to progression and career decision-making styles (Bimrose & Barnes, 2006; 2007b).

The complex interaction of a number of variables became evident as the research progressed. These included the way in which clients varied in respect of their personal circumstances (such as gender, age, ethnic origin, disability and attainments); the contexts in which they operated (their domestic situations, geographical locations, mobility and labour market status); and the nature of the career counselling and guidance services available (this varied extensively in terms of the intensity and duration of the intervention(s); the nature of client needs; the experience and training of the practitioner; and whether services were delivered as a specific activity or part of an integrated, on-going learning programme). The case studies discussed below exemplify different constellations of these variables, as well as varied patterns in the development of work-related learning, careers and identities. Participants' responses to challenge and change at work were influenced by their attachment to work (the extent to which they identify with, and make a commitment to their work) and the nature of the opportunities available, together with their approach to learning and development. Brown (2004) identified that a strong attachment to a work role could act as a career 'anchor' from which individuals continued their career development (e.g. through willingness to engage in 'upskilling') or else as a 'chain' that restricted their perceived opportunities and freedom of action (e.g. making them unwilling to engage in 'reskilling'). Evidence from the longitudinal case studies supports the claim that career guidance can support individuals in managing labour market transitions by helping them view their current skill sets as 'anchors' that can be taken with them on a journey and utilised in a new setting, rather than as 'chains' that can hold them back.

From the original fifty cases in the longitudinal study, four individuals (all followed up over a five-year period) are discussed, each exemplifying different responses to the challenges faced and differing degrees of success in accomplishing a successful career change, including one case where an individual becomes progressively disengaged from any work-related learning and development.

Reskilling within the workplace

At the time of the first research interview, Robert had been out of work for about ten months after suffering a stroke caused by job-related stress. As a consequence his medical consultant recommended a career change. The client was very unsure about his abilities to return to full-time employment and his future employment options. He needed a similar level of earnings as in his previous employment in floor laying to pay his mortgage and household bills. His wife was due to go to hospital because of a serious medical problem, which was imposing further financial strains. Consequently, Robert felt an urgent need to get back to work. He enrolled for a training course in computing, because he was advised this would increase his employability, and decided to apply for a part-time job in a supermarket in parallel.

When Robert was followed up one year later, he had applied for the part-time supermarket job and had also enrolled for a computer course. His application for part-time work had been unsuccessful and he left the computer training course, because he just 'couldn't get on with it'. Because of financial worries, he had then secured two part-time jobs in social care working, in total, over seventy hours per week for two employers. One was helping care for people suffering from dementia and the other providing support to people with learning difficulties. One of his

employers had immediately supported him in studying towards a work-based vocational qualification. Two years later, Robert was still working long hours across his two jobs (on average fifty-five hours a week), but was unconcerned about the long hours as this brought his pay up to an acceptable level. He had successfully completed his initial work-based learning course in care work and was very keen to progress to the next level of accreditation. Three years later, Robert was in full-time employment supporting people with learning difficulties, but also continued to work twenty hours a week in his other job. He had started to work towards a higher level work-based qualification and his employer had asked him to consider a future role in management in social care. Four years on, he had successfully completed the next level of his work-based learning. He had settled into his new occupational identity – having made the switch from floor laying to social care, through learning while working, and the completion of work-based qualifications.

Robert's career change was serendipitous in the sense that he had not anticipated suffering from ill-health and had certainly not planned to move into social care. Rather, his career change was a result of opportunism – he was unemployed, needed money and the jobs were available on a part-time basis. However, having found himself in a situation where opportunities for work-based learning were available, he embraced every chance. The process of learning helped him to develop a completely new occupational identity, to which he now feels committed.

Reskilling within an educational setting

At the time of the first research interview, Leo was twenty-seven and working as the Acting Sales Manager for a newspaper. He felt he was not being rewarded for the extra responsibility and seemed generally discontented with work. He had researched alternative careers thoroughly and was focused on becoming a physiotherapist, but problems associated with full-time study and finance were dominant concerns in Leo's career decision-making. However, his wife was supportive and encouraged him to make the change. One year later, he had given up his full-time job and was studying a science-based 'Access to higher education' course, together with other relevant evening courses (in science and mathematics), to ensure he was properly qualified to start physiotherapy training. He had also organised some work experience in a local hospital physiotherapy department, which had confirmed his decision to change career. Two years later, having passed all his preparatory courses, Leo had successfully applied for, and begun a three-year physiotherapy degree course. He was enjoying the experience of learning and making new friends. Passing his exams had boosted his self-confidence and helped him believe that his ambition to become a physiotherapist was achievable. Three years later Leo was still coping well with study and had enjoyed the practical work placement, from which he had received very good feedback. He felt that he had made some really good friends – even though he was eight or nine years older than they were. In the fourth and final follow-up interview, Leo had progressed to the final year of his course. He was convinced that he had made the right decision to change career, despite the financial sacrifices. Feedback from his work placements had helped him develop an occupational identity as a physiotherapist and had boosted his confidence considerably. He was looking forward to qualifying, though was somewhat nervous about the final exams, since he saw his future employment prospects as hinging on the results. By this time, he was less enamoured with the academic life of a university student and was ready, even impatient, to start work.

This case study exemplifies a proactive approach to work, learning and career. Dissatisfaction with current employment resulted in reappraisal of career direction, which involved a high-risk strategy. Leo developed a strategic plan of action and followed this without deviation. The strategy was successful, with the professional learning and associated work-based placements playing an important role in developing a new occupational identity. This individual

benefited from being in a relationship where his partner was supportive of his plans for change. What are the consequences when circumstances are not quite as conducive?

Reskilling: Navigating barriers to progression

Norma was taking the first steps in returning to work following personal upheaval at the time of the first interview. A single parent, she was living temporarily with her sister and in receipt of benefits. She wanted to take up learning opportunities to support her return to work, but was constrained by the timing of courses (to fit school hours) and finances. Her initial occupational interests were hairdressing, retail, and reception work, all jobs in stereotyped female areas that fitted her perceptions of what was appropriate and achievable for a woman with few qualifications, child care commitments and severe financial constraints. She however decided to focus on hairdressing. One year later, she was still enmeshed in resolving the practical details of a messy divorce, which was time-consuming and financially restrictive. Still aiming at hairdressing, she had begun to pursue free college courses, including computing and Italian, out of personal interest. She was still living with her sister because the legal proceedings surrounding her separation from her partner had 'ground to a halt'. Her childcare responsibilities continued to be a major issue – she felt she could only engage with learning which was free or heavily subsidised. Two years later, Norma had enrolled as a full-time mature student at the local college. Her ambition to become a hairdresser had been thwarted because the college offering the course was too far away. The public transport costs combined with the hours of the training course not being compatible with child-care arrangements had ruled this out. Instead, she had enrolled for an access course in social science, as well as courses in maths and English. She had found that she enjoyed learning and had begun to develop an identity as a learner after feeling that she had been a complete failure at school. Three years later, Norma was near successful completion of all her courses and she was focused on training to become a teacher. She had secured a place at a local university to study for a full-time degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (ESOL) with Italian as a subsidiary subject. Her university application marked a dramatic shift in her perception of what was possible for her to achieve. From an initial ambition to become a hairdresser, her engagement with learning had encouraged her to aim higher to become a teacher. However, four years later, she had been unable to start her university course because she had found it impossible to secure the necessary finance. Her financial constraints as a one-parent family are so great that she feels resigned that there no longer is any point 'in having a grand plan' about career progression. Despite these constraints, however, as an alternative, she would consider doing evening or weekend courses that would help her progress towards her occupational goal of teaching.

Here, gender has played an important role in constraining first Norma's view of what was possible to achieve and second her ability to achieve her ambition. However, over a five-year period, remarkable progress had been made in making the transition from an educational underachiever to a successful learner with ambitions to train for a professional role.

Disengagement from learning and development

Mike had become redundant after twenty six-years with a telecommunications company at the time of his first interview. He had specialised in electronics, also with experience in quality management, but recognised that opportunities in the telecommunications industry were now very limited. Losing his job had had a profoundly negative impact and he was still struggling to cope with being redundant. Despite various attempts at applying for similar jobs, he had been unsuccessful. He had researched the requirements for different occupational areas in which he was interested (occupational therapy and accountancy), but had found that they would require too great an investment in time and training. He lived near his ageing parents, who were requiring

an increasing level of support. Mike was uncertain about his career direction but realised that this was an opportunity to make changes in his life. However, rather than attempting to reskill, he decided to seek employment based upon his existing skill set. Within a month or two of the first interview, he had secured a job in retail, but did not find it rewarding and resigned after six months. So at the time of his first follow-up interview, he was unemployed again. Two years later, Mike was still unemployed and increasingly involved in providing care for his elderly parents. His whole life had become focused on applying for jobs and going for interviews, though the applications were constrained geographically, because of care commitments. Three years later, Mike had found a job. He had become a self-employed decorator for a short period. Then he secured a part-time job with the local authority in the printing and photocopying department (twenty-five hours a week). Although it was not ideal and the pay was not good, he actually enjoyed being employed again. The job was close to home so he could continue to care for his parents, his colleagues were pleasant and he had no responsibilities. He was, however, conscious that he was more highly qualified than those for whom he was working and this caused him some concern. At the start of his employment, he received some very basic job-related training and had made no connection with his occupational role in terms of identity formation. It simply represented a means of surviving – paying the bills and caring for his parents. Four years later, Mike suffered health problems, which required an operation. So he had been off work for a few months, but had returned to the same job with the local authority. He no longer saw himself as having any sort of options for career change.

This is the territory explored by Sennett (1998): there is an initial high commitment to work with a large company, where there is major engagement with learning through work, with the expectation that the company will look after you. However, when circumstances change, individuals can find themselves locked into work identities in decline. Then both work identity and work commitment start to slip away. Personal circumstances, age discrimination and being tied to a particular geographical location made it very difficult for Mike to recover from a major career set-back. From then on, work was always about short-term adaptation rather than identification. Other events in his life reinforced a feeling that he was a victim of events he could not control. This case illustrates how, where demand for existing skill sets changes, then individuals who have become, for whatever reason, disengaged from work-related learning and development for a significant period of time, find themselves in a vulnerable labour market position.

Career attachments as anchors or chains?

The complexities related to attachment to work emerge from the cases. Robert and Leo were successfully reskilling and exhibiting stronger attachments to their new occupations than they had to their former work. Norma was still in a process of transition, while Mike had drifted downwards and was now feeling trapped in undemanding work that was much less skilled than his work in the telecommunications company. In most circumstances strong attachment to work brings considerable benefits, including a sense of career stability and having a career 'anchor'. Dewey (1916) saw an occupation as giving direction to life activities and as a concrete representation of continuity: a 'home' with clear psychological, social and ideological 'anchors'. 'Home' in this context refers to a 'familiar environment, a place where we know our way around, and above all, where we feel secure' (Abhaya, 1997, 2). Viewed in this way, it is easy to understand the sense of loss and dislocation that people may feel when they become redundant, with little prospect of regaining their former occupational identity (Sennett, 1998).

However, there is the question as to whether a strong commitment to current work can also act as a 'chain'. In such cases, a careers guidance intervention in mid-career may be helpful to alert the individual to the possible dangers, as well as the potential benefits, of staying in

their current job role. Yet religion, literature and film abound with stories of people 'breaking free' and "loosening attachments to 'homes' of many kinds, be they psychological, social or ideological" (Abhaya, 1997, 2). In this sense, after a period of stability, an occupational identity may come to be viewed as a confinement from which the individual longs to escape. That is, what is initially experienced as interesting and exciting may, with the passage of time, lead to 'a sense of profound dissatisfaction with the comfortable limits' (Abhaya, 1997, 8) of the existing way of life. In such circumstances, an external stimulus, like a career guidance and counselling intervention, again may be useful in helping individuals manage possible career transitions.

What should be of concern, therefore, is the process for some individuals where the 'anchors' become progressively perceived as 'chains' that hold individuals close to their current roles, even where these are in decline. Interestingly, a strong attachment to a current work role could act as a career 'anchor' from which it was possible for individuals to continue their career development (e.g. through their willingness to engage in 'upskilling' activities). However, where attachment was acting more as a 'chain', an external stimulus, such as a careers guidance and counselling intervention, could help individuals to manage their career transitions more effectively – in some cases by viewing aspects of their current skill sets as 'anchors' that could be taken with them on a journey and utilised in a new setting, even if other aspects of their occupational or organisational identities were left behind. Indeed, this may well involve viewing aspects of current skill sets as 'anchors' that are transferable to a new setting, even where other aspects of occupational or organisational identities are left behind.

Discussion

Many individuals need, or desire, a change at some stage of their career and this invariably involves responding to the challenges of developing their work-related learning, careers and identities. The two successful cases examined in this article demonstrate how education-based or work-based learning could help individuals not only update their skills, knowledge and competences, but also maintain a positive disposition towards learning. However, as the other two cases demonstrate, geographical or financial constraints, as well as caring responsibilities, can restrict access to opportunities for learning and development – particularly when reskilling has to take place without learning while engaging in challenging work (Brown, 2004). It is also clear from these cases that some individuals are very pro-active in their engagement with the reskilling process (especially in relation to creating and taking advantage of opportunities for learning and development), whereas others perceive themselves to be constrained by circumstances, which can lead to disengagement from learning and development.

It is important not to pathologise the problems faced in learning new skills: many individuals do this routinely as a normal part of their job or through their developing career. However, circumstances are most likely to be particularly challenging in two specific contexts. First, learning new skills may seem challenging when individuals are out of work, are about to become redundant, and/ or where they have not engaged in substantive learning and development for some time. Secondly, returning to the labour market after a prolonged absence can be problematic, since reskilling in such cases is essentially an individual responsibility. In either case, the development paths of individuals' learning, careers and identities can be varied. Reskilling can be achieved through self-directed learning, formal retraining or a return to education, but individuals' careers can, however, drift downwards as they struggle to overcome a career setback caused by redundancy or health problems.

The exemplary cases show that where individuals develop and maintain a positive disposition towards learning, this can either be instrumental in them achieving their career change or at least feeling that they have opportunities for change even if they are currently constrained by circumstances. However, in the absence of affordable and accessible

opportunities for learning and development (and support for those with caring responsibilities) then some individuals become discouraged about the value of learning and development and the unlikelihood of being able to achieve a career change. Individuals like Mike can feel trapped in unchallenging work for which they have no enthusiasm. The contrast with Norma is interesting. Norma also felt trapped by circumstances and could not implement her plans, but because she engaged in substantive learning, this had acted as a spur to a transformation in how she perceived herself and what she believed she might be able to do if constraints lessened. Hence she remained optimistic about her future. This illustrates how individuals are actors who shape important aspects of their own occupational trajectories and careers, with some taking an active role as coordinators of their personal work biographies. Career biographies of adults often involve elements of growth, learning, recovery or development as individuals move between images of what they were, had been in the past or thought they might become – thereby emphasising biographical continuity. Even in cases of major, traumatic dislocations in career patterns, individuals can construct coherent career narratives and 'move on'. This can prove to be psychologically valuable and career guidance and counselling often plays an important role in that process.

Conclusion

There is a prevalent policy view that adults either do not need this type of support, or that they require it only in a crisis situation (e.g. redundancy). Ten years before Mike was made redundant he was in skilled employment, but his skill set was in decline and he did not engage in any substantive learning and development. An intervention at that time may have stimulated him to position himself to engage in a new career. This might have seen him productive through to retirement, instead of the subsequent 'downward drift' into unchallenging work. Career guidance and counselling aims at getting people in mid-life to consider career changes and this approach might actually extend people's productive working lives, bringing considerable benefits to the individual and society, by avoiding later underemployment and a drift into semiretirement or detachment. Career guidance and counselling was seen as useful by participants in three of the cases reviewed above (and in 49 out of the initial 50 case study interviews undertaken for the longitudinal research). Even in these three cases, it could be argued that the biggest problem was that the intervention was too late. Reshaping careers, learning and identities is a daunting challenge for individuals and research evidence indicates, strongly, how career guidance and counselling can play a major role in facilitating attempts to construct a new coherent career narrative that can help drive these processes.

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