

Constructing Adaptability and Identity Scripts for  
Protean and Boundaryless Career Orientations

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## Constructing Adaptability and Identity Scripts for Protean and Boundaryless Career Orientations

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought a new social organization of work, one that flattens hierarchical bureaucracies. Organizations have become smaller, smarter, and swifter in response to market conditions. In contrast to a bounded holding environment, the new boundaryless organization responds to change by being open, collaborative, proactive, and creative. Breaking the bureaucratic chains of an organization dissipates the form a modern career. The employee in a postmodern organization becomes unbound and ungrounded. Consequently, entering the work world and moving through occupational positions requires more effort and confidence today than it did during the modern industrial era. Working in the postmodern global economy entails more risks because in a substantial way jobs are being replaced by assignments and organizations are being replaced by networks. The dejobbing of organizations has produced the “insecure worker” as companies now look for work not workers. Insecure workers include those who are temporary, contingent, casual, contract, free-lance, part-time, external, atypical, and self-employed.

Individuals can no longer plan to work 30 years developing a career within the boundaries of one organization. Instead, they can expect during their lifetimes to occupy at least ten jobs, more properly called assignments. Healthcare, which was once the province of the employer, is now the concern of the employee. Pensions that once consisted of defined benefits promised by an employer are now reconstituted as defined

contributions to a retirement plan managed by the employee. Retirement has become “rehirement” characterized by “encore careers.”

Postmodern careers are no longer contained and constrained by bounded organizations. Super’s meta-narrative of five career stages no longer describes the work life on the majority of Americans because boundaryless organizations do not function as holding environments that stabilize and normalize the lives of their employees. This leads to concept of a boundaryless and Protean career in which occupational paths are not bounded within a single organization for life. Instead, they are routes ploughed, not by jobs, but by a series of assignments and projects in which one develops competencies to add to their portfolio, thus the emergence of the portfolio career.

#### Protean and Boundaryless Careers

Protean and boundaryless are two metaphors that symbolize the new career orientations, augmenting the career patterns first described in 1949 by Miller and Form. These two metaphors are used by I/O psychologists to understand and explain social phenomenon and by individuals to assist in their construction of reality (Inkson, 2006) .

Protean career. Given that the individual rather than the organization shapes a 21<sup>st</sup> century career leads to Hall’s (1996) concept of a Protean career. Proteus was flexible shape shifter who could adapt to circumstances. Hall describes a Protean career as driven by values and directed by self. Protean career is shaped by the individual not an organization. The shaping is based on internal values and goals, for the whole life space, in pursuit of psychological success rather than power, prestige, and possessions (Hall, 2002). Hall views a Protean career as a calling, whether secular or religious, as enhanced by two meta-competencies that help chart a course through the work terrain (Hall, 2002).

The first is self or identity-awareness that enables seek feedback and form realistic self-perceptions that keep revising the self-concept as necessary. The second is adaptability, which he defines as the capacity to change based on competence to change and motivation to change. Together, these metacompetencies empower individuals with a sense of when it is time to change and the capacity to change

Briscoe and Hall (2006) use the dimensions of value-driven and self-directed to chart a 2 by 2 model of career orientations. Individuals who are high on both dimensions endorse a Protean orientation. Individuals who are low on both dimensions show a dependent orientation because they are directed by others and do not follow their own calling. Those individuals who are high on self-management yet not inclined to follow their own values show a reactive orientation because they manage their careers using external values. Finally, individuals who are value-driven yet not self directed show a rigid orientation because they cannot shape their own careers. Hall's construction of the Protean career, which concentrates on orientations characterized by inner psychological variables, finds a complement in Arthur's construction of the "boundaryless career."

Boundaryless career. (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). For Arthur, a boundaryless career is the opposite of an organizational career bound or tied to one firm. Rather than organizational stability, a boundaryless career show physical and psychological mobility. Sullivan and Arthur (2006) use the dimensions of physical mobility and psychological mobility to chart a 2 by 2 model of boundaryless careers. Physical mobility means actual movement across jobs, firms, occupations, and countries. Psychological mobility is a mindset. Individuals who are high on both physical and psychological mobility exemplify the boundaryless career. In contrast, individuals low

on both dimensions may be expected to be enacting a traditional career in a bounded organization that offers job security and interesting work. Individuals low on physical mobility but high on psychological mobility may be expected to remain stable in an organization yet open-minded in absorbing ideas and actions from sources across the globe. For example, a tenured professor who remains in one university for life would be characterized as physically immobile. Nevertheless, by attending conventions around the globe and studying the world's literature that same professor could be psychologically open-minded, what we used to call a cosmopolitan professor as opposed to a local professor. Individuals who are physically mobile but more close-minded may be expected to cross boundaries yet may not particularly enjoy the work itself. Sullivan and Arthur use examples of a bartender who travels the world picking up temporary jobs as she goes and the teacher who changes schools systems frequently as he follows a geographically mobile wife. The bartender and teacher may not see any psychological benefits in these moves, and could eventually become in jeopardy of having dysfunctional careers. A solution for them is to increase their career competencies if we agree with the presupposition by Sullivan and Arthur (2006) that individuals with greater career competencies are likely to have more opportunities for physical and psychological mobility

#### Combinations of Protean and Boundaryless Orientations

The four quadrants for the Protean career and for the boundaryless career produce 16 possible career orientations from which Biscoe and Hall (2006) identified eight probable career profiles. In discussing the challenges and interventions for the eight profiles, they explained that individuals low on all four dimensions would be trapped or

lost because they lack the inner values to direct themselves and the boundaryless perspectives that could envision new opportunities. Briscoe and Hall (2006) suggested that individuals trapped or lost in their career could benefit from basic career development intervention, in particular values clarification and increased self-efficacy. In contrast to the trapped, at the other extreme, individuals high on all dimensions might be protean career architects because of their convictions, self-regulation, open-mindedness, and world travels. The challenge for career architects is to prioritize their goals, manage boundaries, and obtain career resources. Briscoe and Hall end their article by stating that major research energy should be given to helping career actors in each of the eight scripts become aware of their orientation, opportunities, and contexts.

#### Counseling Interventions

I was more than pleasantly surprised to see the synergy between counseling psychology's conception of career choice and Briscoe and Hall's eight career profiles. They even use the narrative concept of "scripts" to describe the career orientations. The career construction model and life design counseling methods provide the interventions called for by Briscoe and Hall (2006). At the end of their article, Briscoe and Hall explicitly stated that major attention should concentrate on research that helps career actors become aware of their orientation, their opportunities, and content. Career construction theory does exactly that in its focus on personality, identity, and adaptability.

The synergy is more than superficial. Hall explains that the defining characteristics of Protean career are dimensions of value-driven and self-directed. Self-chosen, purposeful actions pursue psychological success in the whole life-space. Career

construction theory asserts that story is the fundamental means of charting personal experience and of pursuing purpose. It defines psychological success as actions with meaning and mattering. Hall writes that the two main meta-competencies for pursuing protean careers are identity and adaptability. He also wrote that personal attitudes are important. In parallel, career construction theory has three segments: personality, adaptability, and identity. In reading Hall carefully, I find no instance of difference in meaning or nuisance. They essentially are same constructs yet viewed from two different perspectives, that of Hall on career management and of Savickas on career choice. The adaptation mini-cycle of career construction theory maps clearly onto Hall's view of career as a series of learning cycles. Life design counseling fits nicely with Arthur's views on the accumulation of career resources and the integration of personal and work life.

Career construction theory asserts that career is a psychosocial construct, not a psychological one. Arthur (2005) highlights the idea that career should be broadly conceptualized to include the interdependent nexus between individual roles and identities aligned with institutional positions and expectations. He emphasized that we should pay particular attention to the social processes that bind individuals to the institutions. Arthur argued that to attend to either one alone misses the fact that individuals do not just respond to the stimuli of occupation with response of vocational behavior. The individual interprets these stimuli to make sense and give them meaning. The resulting behavior enacts some purpose.

Hall and Chandler (2005) address meaning and mattering by developing a postmodern concept of secular calling in contrast to the modern view of calling as a

religious experience. The postmodern call comes from within the individual not from an external higher being. The individual discerns the meaning of the call for self and purpose, not through prayer and listening but through introspection and reflection. This meaning is enacting individual purpose rather than enacting God's plan.

### Career as Story

In the postmodern world, employees can no longer depend on an organization to provide them with a familiar and predictable environment to hold their lives. Nor can they expect to progress along the linear stages in Super's meta-narrative of career. Instead, individuals must rely on themselves to construct a story—a story about self and about career-- to hold themselves and their lives together when they encounter discontinuity. As they move from one assignment to the next assignment, they must let go of what they did but not who they are. If they let go of everything, then the loss may overwhelm them. By holding onto the self in the form of a life story that provides meaning and continuity, they are able to move on in a way that advances life purpose and actualizes overarching goals. Stories hold in place the life lessons that have been learned and these lessons can lead the way through ambiguity by creating scenarios that link future initiatives to past achievements.

Career as story provides a holding environment. Stories make our lives coherent and continuous. They explain values, goals, and motivation. Story serves as a container for meaning and a continuity of being. To the extent that the life story holds us, we can master developmental tasks, vocational transitions, and occupational traumas. During these changes, career as story functions to give stability and condition the emotional experience. The life story allows the individual to meet uncertainties of transition with

comforts recalled from the past so as to envision a future and entertain possibilities. It enables one to experience chaos and disorder and appreciate them as necessary precursor to change, the next chapter. The story orients an individual to the new events and digests these numerous experiences into short story that can be understood and manipulated. This allows individuals to express and examine their experiences and then make choices about how to proceed.

Counselors who apply the career construction model to life design counseling use narrative techniques to help individuals move into their own story and learn to hold it, so that in the end the story can hold them and quell their uncertainty. Their narrative construction of self and career becomes the structure that provides meaning and direction as they encounter transitions that involve a loss of place, position, and project. A clear and coherent story does more than just hold tension. Constructing the story turns tension into attention, and telling that story expresses intention. A good story about the self encourages a client to make career changes while holding onto a self that is even more vital and intentional.

The postmodern career as a story is linked to the individual's life project, not the organization. What Handy calls a portfolio life involves more than the work role. It involves what Super called a rainbow of roles including, student, worker, community member, friend, family member, leisurite and more. That is why the theory of career construction expands the focus from career counseling or career management to that of life design. The idea is to assist people select, enter, manage, and exit a changing constellation of roles throughout the life course. It no longer assumes that work is the central life interest, it inquires about the salient life roles from each individual and helps

them conceive how they enact their purpose and do things that matter to them, their families, and communities.

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