Sociological Conceptualisations of ‘Career’: A Review and Reorientation

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Abstract
In the last decades, the use and meaning of the concept of career has profoundly changed, shaped by a ‘new career’ literature rhetoric and a move away from mainstream sociological debate. Our aim in this article is to provide a critical assessment of the concept, and to make a productive contribution to the current debate on careers, and work more generally. Specifically, we seek to: (i) critique the lack of elaboration of the concept within the discipline of sociology in recent years; (ii) reposition the concept of careers as a key sociological category; and (iii) assess and reorient the current meanings of career. After tracing the history of career from linear to boundaryless, we situate the concept in a broader sociological understanding of gender and habitus and structure and agency, and through a methodological discussion of narrative approaches for studying careers. These concepts and approaches are especially effective for understanding careers. Having showed the added value of the concept of career for sociology, we conclude with a research agenda which attempts to overcome the voluntaristic pitfall of its use in recent years and opens up a more thoughtful and articulated understanding of careers for both teaching and research.

Introduction
This article offers a critical assessment and a reorientation of the concept of career. We critique the lack of elaboration of the concept within the discipline of sociology in recent years, and we argue for its relevance and usefulness for making sociological sense of the working lives of people, especially in the context of current economic and social changes. Following our review of the use and understanding of ‘careers’ into the 21st century, we critically discuss the so-called ‘new career literature’ and its overemphasis on agency. To explore the sociological strength and potential of career, we have selected the concepts of gender and habitus and structure and agency from current mainstream sociological literature to shape our discussion. We demonstrate how they speak through the notion of career, permitting us to assess it within a broader sociological perspective. The selection of these concepts is partial and deliberate. They are central sociological ideas and especially powerful for making sense of careers and highlighting the value of the concept. Finally, we discuss researching careers with a focus on methodology, notably narrative approaches. Again, this best allows us to demonstrate the merit of working with a sociological understanding of careers. We conclude with a discussion of the value of the concept of careers for sociology today and with a research agenda for the field.

Positioning career studies
A key objective of this article is to reposition the concept of ‘career’ within the discipline of sociology, a need which has arisen both as a result of the ways in which careers have
been conceived in recent years, and the directions taken by the sociology of work (Strangleman 2005). In this section we offer a map for the current disciplinary location of the concept. In the special issue of Sociology, ‘In search of the sociology of work’, Halford and Strangleman (2009) lament the decline of this sub-discipline in teaching and research in sociology departments across the UK. The study of careers is a case in point here as the most influential literature today is published outside of sociology journals. Strong arguments have recently been made for a more interdisciplinary approach to careers research, drawing on different approaches whilst avoiding conceptual confusion (Arthur 2008; see also Human Relations 2011, 64(1)). Notwithstanding this, we contend that the location of careers research within business schools and management journals may lead to a loss of a specifically sociological understanding of the careers, a point Halford and Strangleman (2009, 820) make with regard to work more generally.

Most current research on careers is published in management and organisation studies journals. The Journal of Organizational Behaviour has featured a special issue on Enacting global careers: Organizational career scripts and the global economy as co-existing career referents in 2010 (vol. 35, issue 5). More generally, many key articles on careers have appeared in: Journal of Career Development, Journal of Career Assessment, Journal of Management, Human Relations, Gender, Work and Organization, Educational Administration Quarterly, Journal of Management, Group & Organization Management, International Review of Administrative Sciences (significant articles where the word ‘career’ appears in the title are found in all these journals). If a similar search is performed in mainstream sociology journals, the results are quite different. We have searched for all articles appearing between 2000 and 2010 in The American Journal of Sociology (AJS), Sociology, European Societies – respectively the official publications of the American Sociological Association, the British Sociological Association and the European Sociological Association – as well as the British Journal of Sociology (BJS), Sociological Review and the American Sociological Review (ASR), and we have found the following. European Societies has not published anything featuring career in the title, despite a special issue on professional work (2008) and several articles whose contents included work and employment; BJS has published seven articles, although three of them pertain to Hakim’s preference theory, and the other two appeared in a special issue on ‘Education, Class and Gender’. AJS has published only two pieces (in 2001 and 2005), as has the ASR (in 2004 and 2007) in recent years. Sociology has published only two articles in this period, in 2003 and 2006 although a stronger interest in career was apparent during the 1980s and 1990s. Despite a special issue on elites (2008), Sociological Review has published only four articles in the last 10 years. Very recently, however, there appears to be some renewed sociological interest in careers. A section in a recent issue of 2010 of Work, Employment and Society (also an official BSA journal) is devoted to careers, as well as one in the first 2011 issue of Human Relations, with articles discussing typical sociological themes (narratives, Slay and Smith 2011) and authors (e.g. Bourdieu in Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer 2011). Also Work and Occupations features one article in early 2011 (vol. 38, 1), whilst only six in the previous decade.

We thus argue that the concept of career and our understandings of how careers happen remain under-elaborated within sociology. If the study of work has become significantly disembedded from wider social theory (Wolkowitz 2009), a specifically sociological understanding of how careers happen, and the more general relevance of the concept of career in grasping the interplay of opportunity structures and the ways in which people navigate them, or as a site through which institutional processes might be viewed (Barley 1989, 49), has been neglected.
Tracing the history of the concept: from linear to boundaryless careers

Having discussed the position that ‘careers’ currently assume in research, it is useful to step back to the origin and history of the concept. The term career is derived from the Latin *carraria*, meaning a road or carriageway. However, from the sixteenth century, it signified a racecourse and a gallop, then any rapid or unrestrained activity (Williams 1983). This is quite different from what later became the dominant understanding of career in the twentieth century: a linear trajectory of interconnected jobs in a single organisation, with upward vertical mobility, and a sense of inevitability and closure. Progress is ordered and (more-or-less) predictable where jobs represent change ‘in responsibility, status, and authority’ (Wilensky 1961, 523). Advancement within a hierarchy of power or prestige is central and considered to be positive. Accounts of careers make reference to stages, phases, steps, and turning points (Barley 1989, 44–6). Metaphorically, such careers have been depicted as ‘ladders’ or ‘tracks’.

This conceptualisation of careers has implications for how they can be studied, and allies itself with a structural approach. If careers take place largely through organisations and the positions within them that individuals can occupy, it makes sense to study career structures such as salary scales and the contracts which define them, or career routes in which employees are the central unit of analysis (Evetts 1992). However, these approaches reify structures which overdetermine career outcomes, and establish norms of career patterns; and since they have an exclusive focus on the workplace, personal circumstances are seen to ‘affect’ careers but not to ‘constitute part of career development and career success’, so sustain an idealised version of a male career free from any domestic demands (Evetts 1992, 8; Halford and Leonard 2006), also neglecting Hochschild’s (1989) insights on the significance of the burden of domestic work on women’s careers.

A different elaboration of the concept of careers was put forward by Chicago sociologists, especially Hughes (1937, 1958), who treated career as ‘a heuristic applicable to a much wider range of situations than is typical of current usage’ (Barley 1989, 45): to the life histories of juvenile delinquents, marijuana users, doctors and executives; to the logic of illness and recovery, the process through which labelling takes hold, consumption patterns, and family life. For instance, Becker et al.’s seminal text about the culture of trainee medics, *Boys in White* (1961), explored a whole universe of work rather than a narrowly conceived occupation or profession. Furthermore, it has been very influential as a sociological study, understood for its relevance beyond the study of work (Barley 1989).

Arguably, the original notion of career is once again more salient in the 21st century. Indeed, a third set of conceptualisations of careers is now dominant, arising out of the recent socio-economic context of deindustrialisation or post-Fordism in the west. The extensive restructuring of firms and organisations means that markets are no longer confined to national and regional boundaries (Silbey 2006). In these globalised times, capital and culture circulate, assisted by the widespread introduction of new technologies. The world order is increasingly competitive and based on interconnections of flows of information (Castells 1996). Sociologists have made sense of these changes notably through the concepts of liquidity (Bauman 2000), risk and uncertainty (Beck 2000), and mobility (Urry 2000), leading to disorientation in working lives (Sennett 1998).

However, this picture of the contemporary labour market in constant flux and chaos is not accepted by all scholars. Strangemman argues that the supposed decline in stable, permanent employment has to be critically assessed. For him, there is nostalgia in ‘attempt[s] to make sense of the fragmentary present by its juxtaposition with a seemingly stable, intelligent past’ (2007, 94). Fevre (2007) suggests the difficulty in measuring insecurity
contributes to its overstatement. Drawing on Green (2006), OECD studies (2002), and the UK Labour Force Survey, he points out a difference between ‘objective’ and ‘perceived’ stability. Also according to Doogan, based on data from the Eurobarometer, MORI, and ESRC skill surveys, actual insecurity is ‘a misnomer to a large extent’ (2001, 438). Notwithstanding these critiques, one significant change is the increase in women’s labour market participation in the late twentieth century as the service sector has grown (despite ongoing and horizontal and vertical segregation). And at the lower end of the labour market, job polarisation and wage differentials have been widely documented (Goos and Manning 2007), as well as collapses in internal labour markets and career ladders (Bernhardt et al. 2001; Cappelli 1995, 1999; Osterman 1996; Vidal 2011).

Broadly described as the ‘new career literature’ (Arthur et al. 1999), new conceptualisations of career no longer rest on the assumption of upward vertical mobility, and refer to different constructions of careers across all levels in the occupational hierarchy, especially in the creative and cultural industries (Gottschall and Henninger 2007). For instance, the expression ‘protean career’ (Hall 1976, 1996, 2002) (from the Greek god Proteus who ‘could change shape at will’) consists of all the ‘person’s varied experiences in education, training, work in several organisations, changes in occupational fields’ (Hall 1976, 201). A subsequent job may, or may not, be internal to the same organisation or agency, and is not necessarily more difficult, complex or rewarding, in terms of pay or recognition. Workers are supposed to develop a portfolio of skills, which implies the ability to quickly convert existing skills according to the environment and tasks. Such skills define the condition of ‘employability’. In this sense, the term ‘portfolio career’ has also been used (Handy 1994). With a focus on the organisational dimension, careers have been conceived as ‘boundaryless’ (Arthur and Rousseau 1996), ‘post-corporate’ (Peiperl et al. 2000) and ‘kaleidoscope’ (Mainero and Sullivan 2006), taking shape across separate employers, based on networking, learning and enterprise.

This literature clearly presents a conceptualisation of actors operating within networks and systems of jobs with greater self-reliance than their predecessors and looser ties to the organisation, which is no longer the primary provider of career structures (e.g. Gunz et al. 2000). The boundaryless career is a ‘disorderly’ career, to use Wilensky’s (1961) term, in contrast to traditional ‘orderly’ organisational careers. Entrepreneurship is seen to be fundamental for ‘people pursuing modern-day, network sensitive careers’ (Kanter 1989) in a world in which ‘discourses of excellence’ (Du Gay 1996, 59) abound, supporting the idea that excellent companies seek to cultivate ‘enterprising subjects’ (1996, 60). Whilst the new career literature offers a more flexible and inclusive conceptualisation of trajectories recognising that careers occur both within and beyond organisational boundaries, and that people may move in and out of paid work (Dany et al. 2003, 706), it presents individuals as free to invent their careers, regardless of structural constraints (Dany 2003), gendered or otherwise, something which is noted in a celebratory tone (Pringle and Mallon 2003, 848). So, whereas in the traditional conceptualisation of career, individuals are thought to be the bearers of supposedly intrinsic motivation, in the new approaches, they carry autonomous intentions in their elaboration of their strategies. The assertion that individuals are shaping their own destinies overstates their power, falling into voluntarism and neglects the context that limits and shapes them. A deeper understanding of agency, especially in the context of careers which are to some extent, boundaryless, is needed (Tams and Arthur 2010).

Furthermore, this literature does not take into account well-established empirically grounded sociological research which evidences the ongoing significance of class or forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) in the making of careers, and understates the
impact of racism and discrimination (Pager 2003). How resources continue to shape individual social trajectories in the 21st century is especially pertinent in the case of people at high levels. Indeed, it may be that social inequalities widen over the course of a career, as Goux and Maurin (1997) have shown with respect to France, and Useem and Karabel (1986) previously demonstrated in the United States. In the new career literature, the necessity of persistent and informal networking, building contacts across multiple dimensions is presented as a feature of contemporary working life (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). There is debate about the extent to which in some settings networks take precedence over social origins as determinants of future positions. In any case, it is already well established that relationships count in careers, both in the conduct of work, and in the allocation of opportunity and reward, whether through formal associations or ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1974), or through mentors, sponsors, or friendships (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Burt 1992; Kadushin 1995; Lamont 1992), and that the operation of these mechanisms is gendered (Benschop 2009). The deployment of social capital in working life has become a significant area of research in recent years, shifting from a focus on the tight interconnections of people in power to studies which analyse how people manage wider networks (Savage and Williams 2008).

Finally, associated with the loosening of organisational careers, there has been a proliferation of popular, self-help literature (books and magazines) on making careers, especially in the field of management (Flecker and Hofbauer 1998). In these accounts, individuals must take responsibility for their own career futures, and are rewarded for new configurations of the self which emphasise enterprise and the capacity to cultivate relationships and networks to gain access to other people’s knowledge and resources. Indeed, the role of networks, and the individual who can manage and mobilise networks effectively is especially prominent. In Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) analysis of self-help management literature in France from the 1960s to the 1990s, they found motifs of individual freedom and creativity whilst stressing adaptation, change and flexibility. These normative models of being are both a prescription for and add up to a ‘new spirit of capitalism’. In Cuzzocrea’s (2009) study of young professionals, career booklets in the UK reproduce norms of comportment and skill, emphasising confidence, self-presentation, communication and the ability to accomplish tasks to deadline. These amount to a ‘career propaganda’ related to the individualist expression of one’s ambition in the public domain. Again with special attention to professionals getting established in a new boundaryless area, MBAs have also been looked at and interpreted as new rites of passage (Kelan and Dunkley Jones 2009).

Reviving a sociological understanding of careers

We now propose to draw attention to the value of thinking about careers through some central sociological categories. We have selected the concepts of gender and habitus, and structure and agency for this discussion. The opposition between structure and agency is a central sociological debate. Discussing careers through this debate allows us to explore the dynamics and tensions in the theoretical understanding as well as the lived experience of careers. Gender is widely recognised as a ‘constitutive element of social structure’ (Britton 2000, 418) and exploring it in relation to habitus allows us to situate it at several levels: as a social structural feature, as an aspect of identity, and as a social practice. As discussed earlier, these are deliberate but partial choices of focus, ones which we consider are especially powerful for highlighting the significance of the concept of careers and for a grounded understanding of the lived experience of careers.
Gender and habitus

As feminist scholars have long argued, employment and domestic life, the household and the formal economy are intertwined (Glucksmann 2005). The intersection of paid and unpaid work marks households as well as individuals, where the domestic labour of one partner (mostly women’s) contributes to the labour market success of the other (Finch 1983; Walby 1997). Pursuing a career has a differential impact on the domestic life of men and women, as does domestic life on the pursuit of a career (Hochschild 1989). Women in demanding jobs have lower marriage and fertility rates (or delayed motherhood), especially in certain occupations and professions, such as law and banking. Conversely, for men in certain fields, for instance, law, family formation can contribute to career success (Crompton 2006).

Gender also operates powerfully within work; arguably gender is a ‘foundational element of organizational structure and work life’ (Britton 2000, 419). Work organisations through which careers take place are based on gendered discourses, assumptions and practices (Acker 1990; Halford and Leonard 2006; Poggio 2006). Gender is understood as something which is accomplished in interaction (West and Zimmerman 1987), crafted and performed (Kondo 1990), including at work (Gherardi 1995; Poggio 2006). This means that organisations are more than contexts for the operation of gender, and that gendered subjectivity is part of organisational belonging. This recognition is a departure from previous research which argued that bureaucracies are ‘gender neutral’, and that power differences linked to organisational structure underlie sex segregation (notably, Kanter 1977), not only in traditional organizational contexts but also in new media work, for example (Gill 2002).

Although there is widespread acceptance in the literature of the ways in which gender (as well as ethnicity, sexuality, age, etc.) structures working life, this is not always apparent in research which focuses on barriers to women’s advancement. At times there is an implication that the functioning of organisations can be ‘corrected’ by measures which better support women’s responsibilities outside of employment (e.g. child care facilities and flexible working patterns), and other measures to improve so-called ‘work-life balance’ but which fail to fully appreciate the unequal impact of domestic work on women’s careers; (Hochschild 1989), or through measures intended to address the ‘glass ceiling’ within work (e.g. recruitment and promotion practices, networking, etc.). (For a discussion of the glass ceiling, see Wilton and Purcell 2010).

Within research on gender and careers, some scholars have argued that the concept of career is based on an idealised male-centred construct of working life and does not therefore apply to women as it does not reflect the reality of women’s working lives which are often marked by less linearity and greater complexity (e.g. Gherardi and Poggio 2007); and (more controversially) that women do not necessarily seek the same goal-centred careers as men (Hakim 2000). The gain of feminist critiques of narrow conceptualisations of career has been to widen the scope of what is seen as relevant in the construction of career. This includes a better understanding of how gender operates in the working lives of both men and women. For instance, Kanter (1977) and Roper (1994) both evidence male careers based on strong emotional bonds, rather than pursued exclusively on rational and instrumental bases, and highlight the diversity of career practices of both men and women.

A gender analysis examines the production of sexual difference, i.e. in what ways the opposition between men and women is inscribed in social relations and sustained through social practices at work. This lends itself to a focus on practice (Bruni and Gherardi 2007;
Connell 1995; Martin 2003, 2006) which has implications for methodology. For instance, Lyon and Woodward’s (2004) interview-based research points to the ways in which men and women in high-level careers in business and politics in Belgium are differently positioned in everyday working life and the ‘tests of availability’ used to challenge women’s legitimacy in these roles. McDowell’s (1997) study of merchant bankers in London highlights the narrow and dominant form of hegemonic masculinity in this world which excludes many men as well as women. Recent approaches have also made explicit use of the concept of intersectionality to explore the ways in which class, gender, ethnicity, age and sexuality operate together in the shaping of working lives (Britton and Logan 2008).

With respect to networking – often seen as central to career success, as discussed earlier – Benschop’s micro-analysis of the politics of networking highlights the gain of understanding networks as ‘socially accomplished and dynamic’ (2009, 218). Her emphasis on processes of networking, rather than structural outcomes, makes it possible to explore ‘relational and interactional’ (2009, 222) practices and the production of gendered identities within and through networks.

The effect of the gendering of jobs on women means that ‘they [women] never seem quite right for the job, or not quite ready’ (Wajcman 1998, 274 with respect to management in the UK). This apparent unsuitability has been productively explored through Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which refers to ‘a pre-reflexive level of practical mastery’ (McNay 1999, 100), learnt by the body and not able to be explicitly articulated: the resultant dispositions, tastes, habits of bearing and behaviour, feeling and thought then become naturalised (Lovell 2000, 12). Indeed, Bourdieu argues that it is not direct institutional discrimination which creates large-scale inequalities but that these are established ‘through the subtle inculcation of power relations upon the bodies and dispositions of individuals’ (McNay 1999, 99).

If habitus produces events which are ‘relatively unpredictable … but also limited in their diversity’, it is also generative (Bourdieu 1995, 35). Further, as habitus is realised only in relation to specific situations, predisposition to one thing does not mean foreclosure of another (McNay 1999, 103). For women in high-level careers for instance, it may be that the habitus of their class origin equips them with the sense of entitlement to the places they attain; alternatively, the transposability of practices of key experiences may be what gives them ‘practical mastery’ of these high-level positions. In Lyon’s (2003) research on men and women in high-level careers, the case of a woman who grew up in a boys’ boarding school where her parents worked was particularly instructive. She never felt the exclusion that some other women report in men-only social and professional spaces and was able to bring this ease and expectation to her working life. Habitus is also useful for thinking about the intersections of class and gender. For example, people in high-level career positions may act on the assumption of or entitlement to a professional future, based on a sense of the openness of such worlds to them, an expectation of belonging.

The structure-agency debate

The structure-agency debate might be said to constitute the backbone of a sociological divide between traditions of research. We have therefore chosen to employ this central debate as a second theme through which we argue that the concept of career not only is fundamentally sociological, but also can be used to enhance sociological analysis. Arthur et al. suggest that ‘careers reflect the relationships between people and the providers of official positions, namely, institutions or organisations’ (1989, 9): the concept
of career contains the potential to overcome the separation between the job seeker/worker and the ‘objective’ labour market and/or employment situation. Whilst most literature tries to identify how jobs – seen as simply out there – fit with the person who obtains them, or focuses on their suitability for climbing the ladder, a career is actually the result of continuous negotiation between the agent and what he/she identifies as resources to be used, as in Cuzzocrea’s study of early career professionals (2011). A dynamic interplay embeds agents in their own material and cultural contexts and renders visible the meanings they attribute to work through their choices to activate particular resources. What Barley calls ‘career scripts’ – a concept recently used to understand globally oriented careers (Cappellen and Janssens 2010) – provide ‘resources, interpretative schemes, and norms that shape people’s actions [...which] in turn, modify career scripts’ (Barley 1989, 54).

However, there remains a need for the greater articulation of structure and agency in the pursuit of careers, especially because most recent literature does not recognise the dynamism of this relationship, clearly overstating agency as discussed earlier. Focusing on careers should be seen as an encouragement to study both individuals and structure in their interconnections and in the ways in which they are intertwined. This is even more significant once recognised that an holistic view of the person was present in the work of early career theorists such as Argyris (1957) and McGregor (1960) – as Arthur et al. (1989) suggest – but then was lost in later works.

The fact that agents are able to ‘act otherwise’ means that they can intervene in the world, or else they can refrain from such intervention. They are ‘always rooted in a structural context’, but also ‘always and inevitably drawing upon their knowledge of that structural context’ (Stones 2005, 17). For instance, a middle class woman who embraces non-traditional studies might perceive new prospects in the chosen path. Actions depend upon the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events (Giddens 1984, 14). An author who has explicitly linked careers to the debate on structure and agency is Julia Evetts (1996). She discusses how women who pursue either occupational or organisational careers in science and engineering redefine, with their work, the respective organisational cultures of these traditionally male fields. In this view, what it means ‘to have no choice’ is to be questioned (Giddens 1984, 15). Yet, agents may lack the competences or the cultural, or economic, or social resources to direct their career construction actions. Therefore, being aware of this duality in careers is a powerful way to recognise the pitfalls of voluntaristic views, such as those contained in the new career literature.

However, discursive consciousness – the rationally articulated justifications for action (Giddens 1984) – implies that agents are competent, and have developed their own meanings and strategies: they identify what and who is changing in their worlds, and the direction of that change, and locate themselves in this scenario in a more or less active voice. For example, young educated people tend to overstate their power to change the structure of opportunity whereas older, even successful people in career terms speak of a greater recognition of structural constraints. The capacity of the individual to plan his/her future is central to the exercise of agency (Archer 2007; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). External conditions such as the flexibility of labour markets ‘enter’ the agents, in the sense that they affect their general attitudes, but actions are ‘reflexively monitored’. Not to forget, though, that at the same time there is a recursion by which ‘institutions jointly ‘constitute’ and are ‘constituted by’ the actions of individuals living their daily lives’ (Barley 1989, 52), and that ‘when social practices are reproduced they perpetuate the structure, making it a social reality’ (Cohen 2006, 16). Thus, we suggest to move the
discussion into a methodological level, i.e. how careers can be studied, and we do so by choosing a perspective which we find particularly insightful.

**Researching careers through narrative and framing**

To fully understand how a career takes shape, we need to attend to how people are accounting for their trajectories, backwards and forwards in time. How we think of and account for ourselves to real or imagined others is not only a retrospective construction; it is also **prospective**, i.e. it matters for how we act into the future (Archer 2007). The narrative methodological approach is based on an understanding of the significance of narrative in the constitution of meaning in everyday life (Poggio 2004) and across the life course, and has fuelled the so-called ‘biographical turn’ (Chamberlyne et al. 2000). In this section, we highlight some key points about this approach, then discuss Goffman’s (1974) notion of ‘framing’ for making sense of careers.

We choose to emphasise narrative in the study of careers as we contend that a focus on narrative goes some way to overcome the difficulties identified (in the discussion earlier) in existing modes of research. An attention to narrative is more than an attention to agency and identity. If we accept that careers are sites of broader institutional processes – as Barley (1989) has put it – this means that they are the expression of the interplay between structure and agency, and that accounts of them can give us access to the ways in which this tension – and others, such as around gender – is lived and negotiated, as for instance in Benschop’s (2009) analysis of processes of networking. Narrative analysis can trace the cultural or interpretive repertoires available for sense-making as these are echoed in interviewees’ accounts and underlie the ways in which people frame the meanings of their working lives. In Kelan and Dunkley Jones (2009) analysis of people’s accounts of studying for an MBA, they make effective use of this kind of approach. Furthermore, whilst *habitus* cannot be directly spoken, its significance (to the sociologist’s ear) emerges in open-ended accounts of how careers happen, such as in the example given above of the woman who grew up in a boys’ boarding school and who recounted in a taken-for-granted way the ease she could assume in a male-dominated and masculine working environment.

Narrative allows for an explicitly sociological approach to careers. It is central to our experience of social life (Bruner 1990; Kearney 2002; Somers and Gibson 1994), the construction of identity (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010), even a privileged medium for self-interpretation (Ricoeur 1991a, 188) as our actions in the world in the passage of time ‘call for’ a narrative account. We construct narratives through and in relation to the cultural repertoires available to us. With respect to careers, these repertoires may be specific to a sector of work, they may be national, or global, or a configuration of these different levels. The extent to which employing organisations or institutions are relevant is an empirical question and depends on the nature of the career itself (Cappellen and Janssens 2010).

Narrative accounts are marked by thematic plots that link events, turning them into episodes, in which meaning is relational, derived in connection to other events or experiences. Plot is central an ‘integrating process’, complete only in the act of reception of the story, where it ‘serves to make one story’ out of multiple happenings (Ricoeur 1991b, 21). It is through being a character in our own and other people’s narratives we achieve a sense of identity (Kerby 1991, 40). Narrative requires closure, a beginning and an ending (White 1981), where the structure is retrospectively seen to have been immanent in the events all along, the past being both determinate and consequential (Mink 1981,
Stories ‘move forward in time’ (Steadman 1998, 251), the end somehow fixing the tale, the point (in time and as meaning) from which the rest unfolds. There is then always ‘another story ‘waiting to be told’ just beyond the confines of ‘the end’ [of the present one]’ (White 1981, 22 in Mink 1981, 238). However, narrative can never fully achieve closure as it must be ready to accommodate new possibilities (McNay 2001, 87). And so the past is not fixed.

In the case of careers, which may seem to have an implicit coherence, it is only in and through the act of narrating (to oneself, or to an imagined or real audience) that they become apprehended as a ‘set’ of events (Herrnstein Smith 1981, 225). Narrative analysis has to see through this ‘edge of inevitability’ (Freeman 1993) that recounting a career can produce (Bourdieu 1986), to challenge and unpack the ways in which stories are told (Riessman 1993, 2008). Indeed, career paths ‘lend themselves to analysis through narratives collected in organisations’ (Cohen 2006; Gherardi and Poggio 2007, 23).

Goffman’s (1974) concept of the frame is a particularly useful way to analyse narrative accounts of careers. Framing is ‘a coherent, meaningful way to organise feelings and events’ (Flax 1996, 590). Frames both organise the past and ‘structure and determine how ‘new’ experience is felt and interpreted’ thus confirming and perpetuating themselves (Flax 1996, 590). They reveal felt possibilities and operate as ‘logics of action’ (Wright Mills 1940). How we frame what we are doing make certain possibilities more or less likely (Archer 2007; McNay 2001). Indeed, individuals act in certain ways because it would violate their sense of being to do otherwise’ (McNay 2001, 80), an important dimension which underlies the interplay of structure and agency.

Frames are a useful concept for the study of careers as they offer a level of analysis which opens up understanding of apparent contradictions and changes over time in a career trajectory. Whilst some kinds of frames do tend to get embedded, they remain malleable in principle, some more or less vulnerable or robust than others. Change can happen through the intersection of different frames, and there may well be multiple frames in a single account. Overall, frames are neither arbitrary nor infinite but configured through the available (and differentially valued) cultural repertoires for sense-making, and are therefore context dependent, in both time and place. For example, in Lyon’s (2003) research, the account of French politician Catherine Gagnon (a pseudonym) is permeated by a primary frame of public service, across both her employment as a civil servant and her roles in politics (minister, MP). For Gagnon, her commitment to public service extends into an imagined future shaping what she considers and excludes. In short, her career has come about and continues to take shape in part through the meanings with which she has imbued it. This dimension of understanding careers is usually understated in research on careers (and on work more generally).

Conclusions

In this article, we have retraced the meaning of the concept of careers, and critically assessed the dominant ideas and discourses it carries. After demonstrating that the concept is largely researched under a management perspective at the present time, and in a way which overstates agency, we have proposed a reorientation and repositioning of the concept at the core of the sociological domain. More specifically, we have argued that the so-called ‘new career literature’ overstates the power of the individual, possibly as a result of the permeation of neoliberal ideologies in career discourses (Roper et al. 2010). Connections between structure and agency are insufficiently articulated in much current research and it is necessary to bring back a more thoughtful understanding of this
dynamic, as we have sought to do in this article. Reflecting on how salient some tradi-
tionally sociological themes are in studying careers, from both the substantive and meth-
odological standpoint, allows us to reclaim the sociological value of the concept which
has been neglected in recent years. It is in this vein that we have proposed further study
of careers that focuses attention on gender, habitus, structure/agency dynamics, and narra-
tive methods, discussions which allow us to highlight the potential of careers. These ways
of thinking open fruitful avenues for using the concept of careers in a way which resem-
bles the influential, broad meanings that scholars from the Chicago School first attached
to it, thus reclaiming the ongoing sociological relevance of careers.

Recent empirical research shows that there is considerable potential in the investiga-
tion of ‘the practical reasoning and reflective ‘accounts’ that people use on a daily basis
and that make social life an ongoing, practical accomplishment’ (Silber 2003, 429) for
the understanding of how careers happen. However, the range of arguments and prin-
ciples of evaluation which individuals deploy in grappling with a career in progress is
embedded in a broader cultural and socio-economic context. Indeed, career narratives,
along with career structures and systems of promotion and advancements, vary depend-
ing on the occupation or profession, as well as on the broader national or cultural con-
text. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) have identified what they call ‘regimes of
justification’ to disentangle how people mobilise principles of evaluation, an approach
which has been applied in various fields (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). This makes
careers not only an inherently sociological object of study, but also an especially suitable
one for comparative design.

Research which focuses at the level of labour market, jobs or single professions, could
be usefully complemented by a renewed understanding of the concept of careers, which
is especially valuable in understanding how lived trajectories cut across professions, life
spheres, and organisations. Researching careers means continually shifting perspectives –
at one moment, focussing on a particular experience of work, at another seeing the way
analysing careers sheds light on the bigger picture, e.g. gender relations, and the kaleido-
scope-like interconnections of different spheres of life including beyond work. This
would be particularly powerful in comparative research a multi-tiered design, such as in
Brannen and Nilsen (2011), or more generally in context-sensitive research (Nilsen
2011).

Moreover, the value of the concept should be emphasised, not only because of its
potential in research, but also due to its usefulness in teaching sociology. Focusing on
careers allows us to see how different sociological traditions ‘work’ if used to understand
the same phenomenon. Careers have a strong significance for mainstream sociology, as
well as for highlighting interdisciplinary connections (Arthur 2008), and recognising this
is pivotal to avoid compartmentalisations within the sociological domain.

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sections on Positioning career studies, Tracing the History of the concept, and the sub-
section on the Structure-agency debate; Dawn Lyon the remaining part of the article.

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**Short Biographies**

Valentina Cuzzocrea is a Research Fellow at the University of Cagliari, Italy, where she graduated in Political Science and has more recently taught Sociology. She holds a MA and PhD in Sociology from the University of Essex, where she has developed a broad research interest on the difficulties that qualified young people encounter in first entering the labour market. She has written on careers, youth, transitions to adulthood and her work appears in international journals and several edited volumes. She is also author of *Flexi-jobs or Flexi-lives?* (Bologna: Odoya, 2011), and co-editor of *Value of Work* (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, forthcoming).

Dawn Lyon is Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent, UK. She completed her PhD at the European University Institute, Italy. She has published in the field of gender and work, and is co-editor of *Women Migrants from East to West: Gender, Mobility and Belonging in Contemporary Europe* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007). She has a strong interest in visual sociology and together with Lynne Pettinger (University of Essex), runs the website, nowaytomakealiving.net. Her current research is on the work of fishmongers in the socio-economic process that brings fish from sea to table.

**Note**

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