

1 Establishing the Need for the Social Chronology Framework

Most people who study careers have had an experience such as the following when explaining to an acquaintance what they do. The conversation is usually brief:

“What do you study?”
“Careers.”
“Oh.”

But some time later it might be that the person in question finds themselves needing career advice, and it is now that an interesting ambiguity in the word “career” may become apparent. Of the great many people who study careers, only a small proportion do so in a way that qualifies them any more than a layperson to provide advice of this kind. Little does one’s credibility more damage than to be forced to reply: “Sorry, I don’t do *that* kind of career research.”

Mirroring that variety of interest is the widely encountered observation in the opening remarks of scholarly books about career, remarks that typically comment on, even lament, the many meanings that the term has attracted, how many disciplines show an interest in it, and how little conversation there is between these many discourses (e.g. Gunz and Peiperl, 2007a; Hall, 2002; Collin and Young, 2000, 1986). We have no intention of departing from this venerable tradition; indeed, we address it in the next paragraphs. But this book is an attempt to do something about it. Rather than merely celebrate the extraordinary richness of career as these other books do, we accept that as given and ask the question: Can we find a way of viewing career that subsumes much, if not all, of this richness into a new and overarching framework? If so, can this framework be used to help us and our colleagues in what we call here the field of organizational and managerial career (OMC) studies – which is very much the focus of this book and which we define with greater care later in this chapter – to find new ways of doing their research? Can it help OMC researchers see hitherto missed connections between their work and that of colleagues who do not see themselves as OMC scholars but whose insights have high relevance for the study of OMC careers? And, perhaps most ambitiously of all,

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might such a perspective help these other colleagues – those working in a career field outside OMC studies or with the construct of career but not necessarily seeing themselves as scholars of career – to find new and productive ways of framing their work?

Our starting point is to address two questions: What do we mean by the term “career,” and what do career researchers (i.e., researchers who study careers, as opposed to those who make a career out of doing research) do? This needs some explanation. “Career” is, after all, a word in common if not daily use, so where is the ambiguity?

As we discuss in Chapter 2, the term “career,” in Hall’s (2002: 8) memorable phrase, “suffers from surplus meaning”:

If “career” were used in a free-association test, it would undoubtedly elicit an impressive range of meanings and feelings. Career conjures visions of political gamesmanship, the “organization man,” the Wall Street jungle, and government civil servants, slowly but steadily working their way upward, grade by grade. (ibid.: 8)

For many people careers are things that only successful people or people in specific, usually highly regarded professions have; for others, everyone has them. They can be the list of positions that appear in one’s CV or résumé, the subjective experience of moving through those positions, a particular kind of occupation, or just getting ahead in life. Depending on how a career is defined it can be one’s working life, one’s life in a particular occupation, or life from birth to death. Careers can be studied from as many angles as there are academic disciplines and subdisciplines with an interest in them, and there are a lot of disciplines and subdisciplines that do have this interest. In addition to people describing themselves as career researchers the list can include (but is not limited to) sociologists, demographers, labor economists, organizational theorists, developmental psychologists, educational and vocational psychologists, economists, historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and geographers. Even the current (2017) Chair of the US Federal Reserve, Janet Yellen, can get drawn into talking about careers, albeit without using the term, when assuming that “a tight labour market might draw in potential workers who would otherwise sit on the sidelines and encourage job-to-job transitions that could also lead to more efficient – and, hence, more productive – job matches” (Schneider and Herbst-Bayliss, 2016).

Each perspective brings with it its own unique view of career, ranging from a focus on the individual and their path through life to what this tells us about the nature of the society in which the individual lives:

... a study of careers – of the moving perspective in which persons orient themselves with reference to the social order, and of the typical sequences and concatenations of office – may be expected to reveal the nature and ‘working constitution’ of a society.

Institutions are but the forms in which the collective behaviour and collective action of people go on. In the course of a career the person finds his place within these forms, carries on his active life with reference to other people, and interprets the meaning of the one life he has to live. (Hughes, 1937: 413)

We explore these distinctions and differences in greater depth later in this book. For now, let us simply accept that “career” is a term used in many different senses and that it is of interest to an extraordinarily broad range of scholarly disciplines.

Therein lies both the great strength and the great weakness of career as a concept. On the one hand it matters a great deal in a practical sense to lay-people, i.e. people who have careers, namely everyone, and people who find themselves worrying about other people’s careers, for example parents worrying about their offspring, as well as to a very broad range of researchers. On the other, not only is it used in many different senses – it is almost as if it is a term that everyone understands but that everyone understands differently – but different disciplines have different interests in it. And precisely because they come from such different directions there is, typically, surprisingly little interaction between them: scholars studying career in field A very rarely read the work of scholars studying career in field B, and vice versa. If there is little or no conversation between different discourses, it is hard for each to learn from the other (Arthur, 2008).

Hence the starting point for this book: exploring the meanings of career and of career research. Flowing from this proximal aim is our distal one: to find a way of facilitating conversation about career between different disciplinary discourses. Our approach is to propose a framework for viewing career and career research that transcends narrow disciplinary boundaries and that provides a way of viewing career that can be recognized by anyone interested in career. Our assumption is that if you and I find that what we are studying can be described in the same terms and thus enables us to share a language, it will help us to establish a meaningful conversation. Language-sharing is not the whole story, of course: there is a lot more to developing understanding than just sharing words and concepts. But unless you and I both speak the same language we cannot even begin to develop any kind of mutual understanding. Such a conversation would allow the field of career studies, if there is such a thing, to profit from insights generated elsewhere and, hopefully, vice versa. This is what we hope will be the outcome of this book, the product of both proximal and distal aims.

We call this shared language the Social Chronology Framework (SCF), for reasons that we explain later in this chapter. Before doing so we address a number of fundamental questions about what career is and what we might mean when we refer to the “field” of career studies.

What Is Career? Is There a Field of Career Studies?

We address the first question – what is career? – in greater depth in Chapter 2, including many of the distinctions that have been made between different senses in which the term “career” is used, but we need at this stage at least to establish the broad outlines of how we use the term in order to orient the reader to the material that follows.

As has been pointed out elsewhere (e.g. Gunz and Peiperl, 2007b), the English word “career” derives from the late Latin *carraria*, meaning a carriage-road or road, which was reflected in its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century usage in English. Over time its English meaning has evolved to: “A person’s course or progress through life (or a distinct portion of life)” (OED, 2017), although it often has overtones that give it a richer set of meanings. The German *Duden*, the most authoritative reference for German language issues, refers in its online version to career as the successful advancement in one’s occupation. In addition, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), in the entry on career, goes on to add “*esp.* when publicly conspicuous, or abounding in remarkable incidents: similarly with reference to a nation, a political party, etc.” (emphasis in the original). This supplementary observation makes two interesting points. First, it seems to be saying that careers are things that interesting people have and, by implication, that ordinary people do not. Second, that it is not just people who have careers; one of the citations from the entry in question refers to “the career of France, Prussia, etc.” We shall return to the second point later in this chapter and in Chapter 2; for now, let us reflect on the idea that career might be about status.

There is no question that, for many, a career is more than just what happens to everyone as they proceed through life. We refer to someone as being “career-minded” if they show signs of being driven by more than just the need to work at something they find rewarding, either financially or in other ways. The expression is typically intended to indicate that the person in question has ambitions to become something that they are not at present; that they are showing signs of wanting to get ahead. It can be used disparagingly, as Mark Anthony speaks of Caesar in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*:

The noble Brutus
 Hath told you Caesar was ambitious.
 If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
 And grievously hath Caesar answer’d it. (Act 3, Scene 2)

or admiringly, as one might of a young person with ambitions to rise above their humble origins. It all depends on the observer’s opinion of the person’s ambition.

However, career does not have to imply only a sense of getting ahead or of ambition. It can be used in conjunction with a profession or an occupation so that someone may talk of their career for instance as an accountant, an executive, a painter, a writer, an architect, or a politician. Each of these examples refers to an occupation in which it is possible to conceive of the individual as progressing over time to become a more senior and successful accountant, a more renowned painter, and so on. So when a profession or an organization produces publicity material describing careers in their profession or organization, the clear implication, accurate or otherwise, is that more is being talked about than simply a job: the profession or organization is offering some kind of future. This implication derives from the way that the word “career” is less likely to be used in everyday usage in connection with lower-status occupations. Indeed if someone were to refer to “their career as a dishwasher” it is likely that they would be heard to be doing so somewhat wryly or sarcastically (e.g. Anonymous, 2016; Isom, 2006).

There is a branch of the literature, which we shall call in this book the study of organizational and managerial careers (OMC) and with which the book is most closely concerned, that extends the use of the term “career” to any working life. It has its origins in the work of scholars interested in organizational careers, most commonly traced to the MIT school led by Edgar Schein, Donald Super’s work at Harvard, and the group organized by George Milkovich at Cornell (Gunz and Peiperl, 2007b). Many of these scholars, particularly the MIT group, in turn owe an intellectual debt to the Chicago school of sociology led by Everett Hughes (although not all members of the “school” regarded it as such; see Becker, 1999). We shall return in Chapter 6 to the question of just how the focus of this succession of groups and schools, and of OMC research generally, has changed over time, for example, in terms of the role that organizations play in these careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996a). Suffice it for now to say that some scholars, particularly the Chicago school (Barley, 1989), see a career as lasting the career actor’s lifetime, while most, especially more recently, think of it as covering the actor’s *working* life. We return to this debate in Chapter 3, but in brief the position we take in this book matches that of the Chicago school: we see a career as that which happens to a career actor over their life to date and a working career as a subset of that broader span.

Such an account with its North American focus seriously oversimplifies the origins of the study of careers. Moore *et al.* (2007) identify three contributory streams in the literature. The first they call the sociological tributary, which is the one to which we refer in the previous paragraph, although they go back further in history to Durkheim and Weber. The second they label vocational, which can be traced back at least to Plato’s *Republic* and is to do with finding a fit between the career actor and the range of occupations on offer. The third they call the developmental, tracing its origins to the writings of Freud and Jung and

encompassing work on the development of the individual over the course of their life. It comes as no surprise, then, that career can have such a breadth of meaning, and not just the breadth that we have outlined thus far. Career can be approached from so many angles the effect can be dizzying and, more seriously, divisive. A sociologist may be interested in the way that advantage is passed on between generations or the patterns of intergenerational mobility within countries; an OMC researcher may want to understand more about the pattern of careers within and between organizations or occupations, what the precursors might be for career success, or how different career actors define success in their terms; and a vocational researcher may be interested in new ways of providing counseling to young people struggling to make their way in a world dominated by global economic forces. At first sight there does not seem to be a lot in common between these directions of inquiry.

Many discourses, then, converge on the topic of career; we have only touched on the list of possibilities here. This raises the question, in turn, of whether career studies generally can be thought of as a field and, if so, what might belong in that field. We shall address this question at three levels of analysis: (1) research in the field of OMC studies; (2) career research carried out across a range of other fields outside OMC studies, such as vocational or life-course research; and (3) research that involves the construct of career, even when carried out by scholars who do not see themselves as career researchers since they contribute to other fields such as human resource management (HRM), strategic management, or demography.

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First, what do we mean by a field? One definition is offered by Whitley:

Scientific fields can, I suggest, be best understood as particular kinds of work organization which produce intellectual novelty by working on intellectual artifacts to solve intellectual problems. They are institutionally committed to constructing intellectual innovations – only “new” knowledge is considered publishable – and yet restrict the extent of such innovations by making reputations, and hence rewards, dependent upon the use made of them for others’ research . . . Research in reputational work organizations is conducted with a view to convincing fellow specialists of the importance and correctness of the results and thus enhancing one’s reputation in the field. (Whitley, 1984: 776–777)

A number of candidates offer themselves for consideration as fields of career research. We shall focus most closely here on OMC studies because that is the field that we inhabit and that forms the major focus of this book. But there are others, for example, vocational psychology and life-course studies, both of which we return to in the next section.

OMC studies has at least some aspects of Whitley’s description of a field. There is no doubt that there is a loosely coordinated community of scholars who see themselves as being involved in the same project as their colleagues. OMC researchers are certainly united in their fascination with career and see fellow OMC researchers as allies, people to be joined with, for example, in groupings like the Careers Division of the Academy of Management or the long-standing succession of working groups on careers at the European Group for Organizational Studies. Indeed, in a landmark publication, the 1989 *Handbook of Career Theory*, the editors made a strong claim for career studies as a field:

In a word (or two), career theory has ‘gone legitimate.’ We (people who study careers) have become established. We have become a *field*. (Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence, 1989c: xv; emphasis in the original)

Whether there really is a body of career theory, “the body of all generalizable attempts to explain career phenomena” (Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence, 1989a: 9), that could be described as legitimate does not matter for present purposes. What does matter is that there is an identifiable group of scholars who see themselves as sharing an interest in career and who undoubtedly think of themselves as belonging to a common field. But it is a very loosely defined, partitioned field. One has only to attend a meeting of any such group to discover the breadth of topics in which the researchers are interested and the lack of overlap between them, reflecting all that we have described previously. One view (Gunz and Peiperl, 2007b) is that OMC studies is an example of what Whitley (1984) calls a fragmented adhocracy:

The fragmented adhocracy is characterized by a low degree of interdependency between researchers, which implies a rather “loose” or flat research organization. Since the researchers are facing very few restrictions in this type of organizational configuration regarding the choice of theoretical framework and the choice of research method, the degree of technical and strategic task uncertainty is very high. This implies a relatively fragmented knowledge structure and the existence of much disagreement about the relative importance of different problems to be solved by the field. As a result, the problem solving activity within the field takes place in a rather arbitrary and ad hoc manner, with limited attempts to integrate new solutions with the existing structure of knowledge. Management studies and contemporary American sociology are mentioned by Whitley (1984a) as examples of this type of reputational organizational form. (Knudsen, 2003: 278)

There is no question that OMC studies fits this description. OMC researchers feel few restrictions on the theoretical frameworks or research methods they can choose to make use of. As we have seen, the knowledge structure is extremely fragmented, and arguably it is fair to say that there is no real agreement on the relative importance of problems to be solved. It is not clear

whether there have been attempts to integrate new solutions with the existing structure of knowledge; the main attempts at integration have been to produce books or articles that have provided an overview of the field (e.g. Gunz and Peiperl, 2007a; Sullivan, 1999; Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence, 1989b; Collin and Young, 1986; Van Maanen, 1977b; Hall, 1976; Glaser, 1968), but they have not tried to provide a theoretical integration of the field. So we shall refer in this book to OMC studies as a field, with the proviso that it has the characteristics of a fragmented adhocracy, with all that that implies for the coordination and collaboration, or lack thereof, that happen within it.

*Career Research Carried Out across a Range of Fields outside
OMC Studies*

OMC scholars are interested in careers within and between organizations, but there are others for whom career, or an obvious synonym of it, is the central object of their research yet who do not, by and large, either publish in the same journals as or cite OMC literature. Nor do OMC researchers pay much attention to the work of these other scholars. Perhaps the gulf that has been most commented on is the one between OMC and vocational career research (Collin and Patton, 2009). On the face of it each field has a lot in common. We previously introduced OMC; the vocational is “the study of vocational behaviour and development (Crites, 1969). It is particularly concerned with career choice and work adjustment, career decision making, the influence of context upon choice, and effective interventions to facilitate the above (Fouad, 2007)” (Collin, 2009: 11).

So, in brief, the vocational field focuses on the way that individuals make choices about the careers studied in the field of OMC and how they can be helped to make those choices. As Collin (2009) points out, many scholars, for many years, have deplored the lack of contact between the two fields and called for a more multidisciplinary approach. But it is evident from the length of time these calls have been coming – Collin traces them back at least to 1977 – that this contact is not easy to establish or, if established, to maintain.

The OMC–vocational career research divide is just one example of the way that career studies generally consists of many relatively independent areas of scholarship. Peiperl and Gunz (2007) suggest that at least part of the explanation comes from the great many researchers working in a great many subdivisions of career studies, publishing in a great many different journals, so that it is not easy to keep track of what is going on. But there is more to it than that. Conducting conversations across disciplinary boundaries is not easy. At the most straightforward level, languages or sociolects (varieties of language associated with particular social groups) differ so that people may find themselves using different words for the same phenomenon and the same word for

different ones. The term “career” is perhaps the best example of this: as we have seen, almost everyone has their own view of what precisely it means. And, of course, each discipline comes with its own education and training, intellectual foundation and epistemologies, preferred methodologies, founders, iconic figures, and publications.

If this is a fair description of the careers “field,” and many writers have suggested that it is (e.g. Collin, 2009; Gunz and Peiperl, 2007b; Schein, 2007), then can it be called a field at all? Is there really an overarching field of career studies that unites, for example, vocational psychology and OMC studies?

To return to Whitley’s view of what constitutes a field, the term “work organization” implies some sense of consciousness of a collectivity, however loosely defined. But it is far from clear that everyone who sees themselves as having career as a central research interest also sees themselves as part of the same intellectual community. To take two examples: We have just seen how the vocational and OMC communities barely talk to each other; we shall refer in Chapter 6 to the extensive life-course literature, which also appears to have a relationship of mutual oblivion with OMC studies. So while career research generally has some aspects of Whitley’s view of a field, it is hard to argue that it really meets all of the criteria. There are clearly communities within the general category of researchers interested in career, such as OMC studies, vocational psychology, and life-course scholarship, that are closer to his definition, and we shall refer to them here as fields, albeit fields with varying degrees of integration. But it is hard to see the term “field” applying to the broader area of research that includes all of these fields.

If we cannot regard career researchers generally as forming a field, at least for now, is there another term that might do? Whitley (2016) suggests that it could be called a proto- or embryonic field *if* common elements between the constituent parts could be identified and the circumstances imagined that might cause them to come together to “constitute a distinct intellectual enterprise” (ibid.). Is it possible to find commonality beyond the not very helpful statement that they all study careers even if they do not necessarily use that term? That, as we shall shortly show, is one of the tasks we set ourselves in formulating the SCF.

*Research Involving Career Carried Out by Noncareer
Researchers*

There are a great many researchers who certainly would not describe themselves as career specialists but who nevertheless have an interest in career. In the not-too-distant field of strategic management, for example, many scholars have introduced the career construct to their work without explicitly referencing the OMC literature (e.g. Sorensen, 1999; Boeker, 1997; Haveman and

Cohen, 1994). The same is true for many other fields, for example, HRM (e.g. Mayrhofer, Meyer, Iellatchitch, and Schiffinger, 2004; Ferris and Rowland, 1990) or health sciences (Boadi-Kusi *et al.*, 2015; Gigliotti and Makhoul, 2015).

At times it can seem that there is practically no area of the social sciences and humanities that does not, at one point or another, introduce the concept of career. Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989a), for example, list psychology, economics, sociology, demography, and organization studies but also anthropology, political science, history, and geography, and others have extended the list (Chapter 2). A great many scholars are interested in what happens to people, how their backgrounds might affect the way they do things, and what all this might mean for the social forms of which they are part. Yet, as with the strategic management examples just cited, it is not at all common for writers outside the field but nevertheless working with career concepts to refer to work within the career literature in general or, for organization researchers in particular, the OMC field. Nor is it common for those within the OMC field to reference the work of those outside it, even when the field is closely related, as it is, for example, in the case of strategic management.

We are describing here something that, at best, could be described as a nascent commonality of interest without it even approaching being a proto-field. There is certainly a commonality of interest to the extent that the concept of career appears in this work. The commonality is nascent in the sense that any recognition of the commonality has yet to emerge beyond the suggestions of perceptive writers such as Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989a).

To sum up where we have got to (Figure 1.1): We start with the observation that career is a multifaceted concept that is used in many different senses in a broad range of literatures that overlap to varying degrees. From there we go on to examine the question of whether, in view of this complexity, career studies can be thought of as forming a field. We show that there do seem to be a number of fields of study that meet this description, including the one with which this book is most closely involved, namely OMC studies. However, OMC studies in particular is an amalgam of many different approaches and can be described as a fragmented adhococracy. Despite that, there certainly exists a community of scholars who see themselves to be involved in a common task that is the study of careers within and between organizations. In the same way, other communities of scholars examine, for example, vocational psychology or the life course.

Although linked by a common interest in career, these fields of study do not together form a meta-field: there is no real indication that those working in the fields are particularly aware of or influenced by those working in the others. We call the collection of fields with a focus on career a proto-field, indicating that if it is possible to detect commonality between them – other