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Edited by Michael B. Arthur, Douglas T. Hall and Barbara S. Lawrence

Excerpt

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**PART I**

*Current approaches to the study of careers*

## Introduction to Part I

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Our Preface offers some general comments about the way career theory has evolved. Now it is time to get down to specifics and consider the various theoretical approaches to careers extant in the literature today. In Part I we review the current “state of the art” of career theory, based upon the major lines of inquiry that have thus far emerged. Underlying all Part I chapters is a belief that before we can add to the theoretical landscape about careers, we must first have a good sense for its present contours.

To set the scene for the review that follows, a preliminary chapter by Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence explores how the diversity of theoretical perspectives that share the career concept can be brought together to promote cross-fertilization and new career theory development. First, the authors discuss definitions of career and career theory, the range of social science perspectives relevant to career studies, and the characteristics that guide career theory to highlight how career theory can serve as a nexus for transdisciplinary study. They then move on to consider how new career theory develops, by describing a cycle of new theory generation and mapping out the mix of philosophies of knowledge that career theory reflects. The authors conclude, and extend the thesis of the handbook, by claiming that debate at both these levels of analysis can promote “transformational” career theory that gains new relevance in a changing world.

Each subsequent chapter takes responsibility for an established perspective in career theory and covers both the historical emergence and the current relevance of that particular stream of thought. However, these chapters represent more than mere reviews of the literature; they also propose fresh ways for viewing the issues they cover. The charge to each author was to produce “a literature review with a point of view,” that is, to reflect the writer’s own judgment about what was noteworthy. Moreover, authors were encouraged to project what could still be done with the adopted perspective and thus to help prepare the ground for future inquiries.

The flow of Part I is an *evolutionary* one. The chapters are arranged in the order in which each stream of theory and research has emerged. Thus, we begin with the two most established lines of career inquiry stemming from psychology, on personality–occupation matching, and sociology, on careers as social roles. Then we turn to the more recent literature on adult development and its implications for individual careers and for the organizational processes to which careers connect. The adult development theme is also a component of what can be seen as three sets of responses to the early research emphasis on white males; responses that have women’s careers, minorities’ careers, and dual careers as their respec-

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tive foci. The final two chapters in Part I cover the most recently emerging, but now clearly visible, topics in the field: the first focusing on career transitions and the second on organizational career systems. These ten chapters that make up Part I, then, are offered as a set that reflects the best of what career theory has come to be and serve as reference points for further activity within each line of inquiry.

Our survey of established lines of career inquiry begins with the traditional cornerstone of career theory, namely, the vocational psychology perspective on personality–occupation matching. The second chapter, by Betz, Fitzgerald, and Hill, examines the theory and research on individual differences as they affect career outcomes. However, the chapter points out that traditional vocational psychology has often overlooked the effects of organizational variables as well as the interactions between the individual and the environment. The chapter provides first a brief historical overview, after which it summarizes the basic trait-factor theories of vocational behavior, discussing their current status, strengths, and limitations. It concludes with recommendations for future work in theory and research.

Next, Barley presents a historical overview of the Chicago School of Sociology and its contribution to current ideas about careers. The author argues that the Chicago School did not tie the meaning of career to currently popular notions in career theory: for instance, the succession of jobs, vertical mobility, or formally organized contexts. Instead, careers were viewed as social constructions woven together by four themes: (1) status passages, (2) the objective and subjective, (3) properties of collectives, and (4) social structures. Barley suggests that, again in contrast to more recent sociological thought, the Chicago School advocated theory development rather than theory testing. While this approach led to an important body of empirical work that expanded our view of how individuals both construct and are socialized into society, it focused on the particulars of each situation and never provided generalizable theory. The author argues that Giddens's work on structuration might provide such a theory and presents examples of how this theory might be applied.

Chapter 4, by Cytrynbaum and Crites, examines the different historical approaches to adult development (remember that before the work of Erik Erikson, “development” in psychology was assumed to mean “child development”) and shows how this work can help explain previously uninterpretable findings in research on occupational behavior. Several chapters in this volume employ adult development theory as a point of departure (e.g., Gallos, Chapter 6; Sekaran and Hall, Chapter 8; Marshall, Chapter 13; and Arthur and Kram, Chapter 14) as does much of contemporary work on careers, and a clear presentation of what we know in this area is critical foundation work for this handbook. Similarly, contemporary careers are impacted primarily by the experience of individuals in organizational settings, and it is these processes that form the basis for the chapter by Dalton (Chapter 5). Thus, Chapter 4 provides a crucial conceptual foundation on adult development for later work in the handbook.

Dalton raises the specter of modern society's ambivalence toward organizations. On the one hand, people feel angered by the control that organizations exert over their lives; on the other hand, they seek the stability and companionship provided within organizations. The author discusses this ambivalence from the perspective of career development theories, examining how organiza-

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tions influence, enhance, and constrain individual growth. Individually and organizationally based models of career development are summarized. The author then utilizes Dalton and Thompson's four stage model – identity, competence, interdependence, and leadership – to explicate both the positive possibilities and negative consequences that exist for an individual's development within organizational contexts. Dalton concludes by raising questions concerning who bears the responsibility for these consequences and what individuals and organizations can do about them.

Next, we move to a critical career issue in contemporary work settings, namely, that of gender. To what extent do our theories and practices encompass the experiences of women as opposed to being primarily oriented toward the male experience? Gallos (Chapter 6) examines this issue with an in-depth analysis of adult development in women. The purpose of this chapter is, in her words, "to explore the different vision of reality that women can bring to work, love, and career." She starts by reviewing the literature on women's development, to provide more context about women's lives, contrasting women's development with that of men. She raises and examines the models of career and career success implicit in male and female views of development and concludes with the need for new career directions for both men and women. Thus, her chapter speaks not just to a theory of women's development but to the wider body of career theory.

A similar question regarding diversity versus the traditional views of career could be asked in relation to the influence of race on career dynamics, a minority topic in career research (pun intended). Thomas and Alderfer (Chapter 7) reflect on the very limited set of descriptive and research studies into the dynamics of race in organizations. Drawing principally on available studies of the black American experience, they identify and explore a number of themes – biculturalism, racial identity, cross-race developmental relationships, and gender–race interaction – that affect the career development of minorities. The authors then move to offer an intergroup perspective on race and career dynamics, concerned with the embeddedness of intergroup phenomena in organizational life and the extra barriers minorities face in the progress of their own careers. A series of recommendations for organizational research ends with the poignant observation that researchers need to take an introspective look at their own (professional) organizations to learn why greater progress on racial issues has yet to be made.

The problem of combining career and family, a critical and still-growing one in our society, is reviewed and examined by Sekaran and Hall (Chapter 8). Their review of work done on spouse attitudes and behavior, boundary differences between spouses, and organizational accommodation to family points to a missing element in past research, synchronism, or its counterpart asynchronism, between the partner's careers. Themes of asynchronism, male development, and female development are explored as background to a stage-based model of the dual-career *couple* that combines separate strands of previous inquiry. The model informs an implications section encouraging organizations to pay attention to late career development for men and women, to reconsider the "bailing-out" tag applied to women who quit established careers for motherhood, to confront organizational definitions of success, and to consider cultural barriers for what they are. The authors predict that through such efforts greater synchronization can be achieved, not only between partners but also between the work force and organizations generally.

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The final two chapters present recent views that show much potential for our understanding of the interconnectedness of individual career processes and organizational career dynamics. At the individual level, an important stream of research has been concerned with transitions, which provide a way of treating the all important time dimension in a bounded, practical way. Nicholson and West (Chapter 9) present an overview as well as new approaches on transitions. After reviewing work on stages of transitions, they turn to the body of the chapter, an examination of four interconnected themes they have identified in relation to the outcomes of transitions: (1) experiential content of antecedents and consequences of the change event; (2) how different adjustment strategies originate; (3) linkages between transitions cycles to explain their life-long patterning; and (4) how influences within the person and the organization interact to affect job mobility. The authors conclude with a call for researchers from different disciplinary perspectives to utilize transitions concepts to help integrate their related fields in relation to the study of careers.

Finally, at the organization level, concepts of large-scale human resource management systems have provided employers with ways of linking the development of individuals to the achievement of organizational objectives. Chapter 10, by Sonnenfeld, focuses on this process of strategic staffing and its implications. Noting the wide variations in human resource management approaches to people's careers, he highlights a "missing link" in the research that fails to relate this variation to strategic differences among firms. For Sonnenfeld, organizational career systems reflect strategic staffing choices that can be categorized according to two critical dimensions of career movement: "supply flow" into the organization and "assignment flow" across jobs. The resultant typology of implicit career systems can be used to reinterpret previous labor market research and to describe and predict an organization's work force composition. Sonnenfeld concludes by relating his typology to Miles and Snow's alternative strategic orientations and presenting coherent sets of staffing policies to match selected strategic postures.

In sum, the chapters in Part I represent the central concepts and issues stemming from career theory as we know it. With this work as a foundation, we shall later consider possible new theoretical directions in Part II.

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# 1 *Generating new directions in career theory: the case for a transdisciplinary approach*

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The limitation of social organization is found in the inability of individuals to place themselves in the perspectives of others, to take their points of view.

*George Herbert Mead, 1927*

When we pause in our studies to reflect on theory and method, the greatest yield is a restatement of our problems.

*C. Wright Mills, 1959*

The concept of the career has never been more popular. Once viewed mainly as a synonym for initial job choice, it is now widely accepted as a central feature in employment arrangements. Career development and human resource management programs are not only widely accepted but also seen as critical to both individuals and organizations. Such programs cover a wide range of issues, from individual careers and work–family accommodation, to policy and strategic concerns such as the aging of the work force, adaptation to new technology, and organizational productivity (Gutteridge, 1986; Mills, 1985). However, these trends mean that much of the practice of managing careers has come close to catching up with the body of theory that inspired it (Hall and Associates, 1986). Either career theory has served its purpose and should be laid to rest or it needs a good shot in the arm.

We believe this state of affairs exists not because we are done explaining careers, but because work on the topic has moved away from its conceptually rich heritage. As a result, career studies are at risk of addressing increasingly narrow and decreasingly innovative questions. Our view is that a good shot in the arm will help rejuvenate career theory and also help us adapt to the dynamic character of modern industrial society. But where do we go from here and how do we get there?

Our point of departure is that, unlike many social science concepts, the concept of the career is not the property of any one theoretical or disciplinary view. From psychological notions of how dispositional differences affect job adaptation (Holland, 1973), to sociological interpretations of role behavior in organizational settings (Glaser, 1968), to economic views on how human capital accrues through education and experience (Becker, 1975), the career concept is shared among a diversity of perspectives. We believe that exploring this diversity will help us uncover new theoretical questions as well as new answers. Thus, our purpose is to re-establish the importance of this shared view of the career concept and to examine the process by which disciplinary cross-fertilization may help move ca-

reer theory in new directions. In sum, while this chapter represents a pause in our studies to reflect on the heritage of career theory, we hope that the yield is not just a restatement of problems but a statement of possibilities that will prod us to pursue new theoretical developments.

These notes are divided into two main sections. In the first section, we examine what makes career theory a nexus for transdisciplinary study. How do we define the term “career,” what do we mean by career theory, and more particularly, what characteristics make career theory useful to study from multiple disciplinary perspectives? We then discuss the kinds of contributions that can aid further development of the field. In the second section, we explore how the substance of career theory evolves. By what process do new ideas about careers emerge and stand or fall through comparison with previous explanations? At a broader level, how do the different philosophies behind career theory support or challenge one another and with what implications for our debate at both theoretical and practical levels? We conclude by suggesting that scholars should join in the continuing pursuit of transformational career theory, which can serve to improve both theory and practice as they are applied to careers.

#### CAREER THEORY AS A NEXUS FOR TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDY

To consider theory building across social science disciplines, we need to establish a joint frame of reference. A fundamental, although not necessarily straightforward, task is to establish shared definitions of *career* and *career theory* and the meanings they convey. Related to this is a need to appreciate why the career concept stemming from the definition should be viewed from a range of disciplinary perspectives. And, beyond these basics lies a vital but neglected question: What makes the body of career theory so valuable, and why do we need such theory in addition to – and therefore separately cultivated from – other studies of work within the organizational and social sciences?

#### *The definitions of career and career theory*

Our adopted definition of career is *the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time*. A central theme in this definition is that of work and all that work can mean for the ways in which we see and experience other people, organizations, and society. However, equally central to this definition is the theme of time, along which the career provides a “moving perspective” (Hughes, 1958, p. 67) on the unfolding interaction between a person and society. This moving perspective offers a link, in Erikson's terms, between an individual's initial identity and final integrity over the course of his or her adult life (Arthur, 1984, p. 5). Yet, the notion of a career also links matters internal to the individual with matters external, such as those concerning official position (Goffman, 1961, p. 127). Thus, careers reflect the relationships between people and the providers of official position, namely, institutions or organizations, and how these relationships fluctuate over time. Seen in this way, the study of careers is the study of both individual and organizational change (Van Maanen, 1977) as well as of societal change (Kanter, Chapter 25).

While the preceding or a similar definition of career is well established in previous

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literature (e.g., Arthur and Lawrence, 1984; Hall, 1976; Schein, 1978; Super, 1957), it differs from certain popular conceptions of the term. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary (1961, Vol. II, p. 117) defines career as “a person’s course or progress through life (or distinct portion of life)” and adds the qualifier “esp. when publicly conspicuous, or abounding in remarkable incidents.” This selectivity about what qualifies as a career recurs in a later definition implying that careers include only those aspects of work in which “a course of professional life or employment . . . affords opportunity for progress or advancement in the world.”

Unfortunately, this restrictive definition and others like it (Arthur and Lawrence, 1984) have led some scholars to avoid the term and adopt alternatives such as “working lives” (e.g., Shamir and Salomon, 1985; Thomas, Chapter 17) or “work histories” (Nicholson and West, 1985, Chapter 9). Yet, we believe the term “career” better captures the focal relationship between work and time that we seek to study. Moreover, to abandon the term would be to abandon a rich vein of theoretical endeavors that use the term as we do, and which we support. But let us be clear about the view adopted here: Everyone who works has a career.

This leads us to a definition of career theory. Career theory, for us, is the body of all generalizable attempts to explain career phenomena. We use the qualifier “generalizable” to distinguish what we mean by career theory from the more situation-specific explanations of career outcomes derived from personal experience or local practice (cf. Kaplan, 1964). However, we proclaim a vital interest in the link between theory and practice. Our interest is both to learn from and contribute to practice, so that the multiple individual, institutional, and societal parties affected by careers can be better served by the career theory we hold.

*Career theory and the social sciences*

Over the past fifteen years, reviews of career theory consistently suggest that the field is composed predominantly of psychological and secondarily of sociological views. For instance, Sonnenfeld and Kotter (1982) identify four types of career theory. The first type is sociological and concerned with social class determinants of career outcomes (e.g., Blau and Duncan, 1967; Chinoy, 1955). The second type is psychological and concerned with static dispositional differences and their occupational implications (e.g., Holland, 1973; Strong, 1943). The third, newer type is of mixed psychological–sociological origins, focusing on the career stages that surround occupational choice and development (Crites, 1981; Dalton and Thompson, 1986; Super, 1957).<sup>1</sup> The final and most recent type is principally psychological and focuses on the broader notion of the adult life course and the relationship of the career to other major life activities (e.g., Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977).

This emphasis on psychology and sociology does little justice to the range of social science perspectives that can contribute to our understanding of careers. What, for example, of a political science perspective, which might approach the career as a vehicle for accumulating power or influence regardless of an individual’s personality disposition? Or what of an economics perspective, which might examine the career as an outcome of the overall distribution of jobs and wealth? As Table 1.1 attests, the career concept can appeal to just about every social science discipline.

The diversity of social science perspectives that can engage in the study of



Table 1.1. *Examples of social science viewpoints on the career concept*

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*Psychology*

*Career as vocation:* a viewpoint accepting the traditional psychological position on stability of personality in adulthood; associated theory is intended to help guide individuals and organizations fill job openings in a mutually satisfactory way (e.g., Holland, 1985).

*Career as a vehicle for self-realization:* a humanistic viewpoint focusing on the opportunities a career can provide for further individual growth and how that growth can in turn benefit organizations and society (e.g., Shepard, 1984).

*Career as a component of the individual life structure:* from this viewpoint eras and transitions throughout the career are predictable and are to be accommodated in the work arrangements made (e.g., Levinson, 1984).

*Social psychology*

*Career as an individually mediated response to outside role messages:* a viewpoint that studies particular occupational circumstances, such as those of priests (Schneider and Hall, 1972) or scientists and engineers (Bailyn, 1980), for their psychological effects.

*Sociology*

*Career as the unfolding of social roles:* this viewpoint overlaps with social psychology but places greater emphasis on the individual's reciprocal contribution to the social order (e.g., Hughes, 1958; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984).

*Career as social mobility:* seeing a person's title as an indicator of social position (e.g., Blau and Duncan, 1967; Featherman and Hauser, 1978; Warner and Abegglen, 1955).

*Anthropology*

*Career as status passages:* a viewpoint overlapping with functional sociology about how rites and ceremonies serve to maintain a society or culture over time (e.g., Glaser and Strauss, 1971).

*Economics*

*Career as a response to market forces:* a viewpoint emphasizing the near-term distribution of employment opportunities and the long-term accumulation of human capital (e.g., Becker, 1975; Doeringer and Piore, 1971).

*Political science*

*Career as the enactment of self-interest:* this views individual needs such as power, wealth, prestige, or autonomy as prominent objects of self-interested behavior in the context of institutional political realities (e.g., Kaufman, 1960).

*History*

*Career as a correlate of historical outcomes:* looking at the reciprocal influence of prominent people and period events on each other (e.g., Schlesinger, 1965).

*Geography*

*Career as a response to geographic circumstances:* focusing on variables such as availability of raw materials, a natural harbor, or a population ready for work or trade as they affect the way working lives unfold (e.g., Van Maanen, 1982).

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careers suggests that the career concept provides an excellent nexus for trans-disciplinary debate. In other words, career theory provides a forum for "taking us beyond the limitations and confines of disciplines as we currently conceive them" (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1978, p. viii). However, scholars have only recently recognized the value of this debate. Van Maanen's (1977) plea for a shared focus on the career laments the lack of previous multi-disciplinary activity. Sonnenfeld and Kotter (1982) observe that the habit of people working within traditional

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disciplinary boundaries still “retards the maturation of career theory.” And, Collin and Young (1986) struggle to identify an “accepted corpus of theory” about careers and claim the theory that does exist lacks organizing principles. Yet, despite such calls for integrating different disciplinary views, much of the work has yet to be done.

Why have diverse perspectives not been brought together earlier, or more substantially, in studies of careers? One answer is that studies spanning disciplinary boundaries are difficult to perform and do not easily gain acceptance. The ideas and language in such studies are borrowed from several disciplines; further, building theoretical bridges across these disciplines frequently requires a middle-range or grand theory. Consequently, the reviewers who serve as disciplinary gatekeepers often find these studies wanting. The ideas and language fit neither here nor there, and the work itself lacks the same depth and specificity of within-discipline studies that mine existing ideas. These difficulties make it easy to see why contributions to career theory tend to revert to their disciplinary backgrounds. For these reasons, we believe it is critical to maintain career theory as a forum separate from, but integrated with, the organizational and social sciences.

*Characteristics that guide career theory*

In this section, we discuss two guiding characteristics that make career theory an appropriate nexus for transdisciplinary debate. As suggested by our definition of the career, career theory provides a view of work situations that (I) encourages study of both *individuals and institutions* and (II) incorporates properties of both *emergence and relativity*, as we define them in what follows.

*The individual and the institution.* The first characteristic of career theory is that it encourages study of both individuals and institutions. This characteristic flows from the definition of career, which speaks directly to the individuals who work and indirectly – through the notion of work – to the institutions in which work gets performed. This characteristic brackets theoretical approaches that explicitly address the career concept as well as other approaches in which the concept is implicit (e.g., Giddens, 1984).

For the individual, work can provide a potent influence on both personal adjustment (Evans and Bartolome, 1981; Hall and Hall, 1979) and development in life (Levinson, 1984; Mortimer and Borman, 1987). Thus, an “added value” of career theory – in contrast to many theories of organizational behavior – is this focus on the whole person as he or she relates to the work situation. Whereas early theories of organizational behavior (Argyris, 1957; McGregor, 1960) did have this wholistic view of the person, the field later became fragmented into theories of variables and processes, not people (cf. Schneider, 1985). The notion of the career, on the other hand, promotes consideration of both the whole person and the organization, or institution, for which work is being performed.

The term “institution” refers to a social phenomenon in which the form of collective behavior is relatively established and permanent (Hughes, 1971, p. 6). Most prominently, in our case, institutions are public and private organizations in which the required collective behaviors include the work roles out of which careers are made. In our view a career theory – in contrast to basic psychological theories of individual differences – needs to attend to the institutional dimension.