

Career Discourses: Exploratory Studies

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Abstract

There is growing social science interest in “discourse analysis”, which enables researchers to uncover value orientations and power dynamics that underlie everyday discourse and thereby both express and frame the thinking of various parties. In this paper we outline what we believe is the world’s first research program analysing career discourses, which are found in books, academic journals, practitioner magazines, self-help paperbacks, promotional pamphlets, and in the day-to-day conversation and dialogue of counsellors, employers, and rank-and-file people. Where do such discourses come from, what philosophies and interests underlie them, how do they affect and otherwise influence the career choices of individuals, how should they be approached by practitioners, and what effects they have on society? Examples of discourse analysis applied to contemporary New Zealand will be provided. An initial study that has been completed on discourses of “boundaryless career” raises interesting questions concerning political influences on career thinking, and the use of rhetoric rather than empirical evidence to reinforce particular positions. A second project will look at paperback self-help discourses, and a third at practitioner discourse.

Introduction

The words we use matter. When the words are combined into ongoing discourses, they matter even more.

The recent Auditor-General’s report on the probation service in New Zealand, showing that the Corrections Department failed in most cases to follow its own processes for the supervision of people on probation, has generated much controversy, including pertinent commentaries on the terminology used to describe the probationers involved, who are referred to in the Corrections Department’s documents as “clients”, compared with an earlier era where they were referred to as “offenders”. One critique is that the word “client” – adopted apparently as part of a dominant social worker discourse which terms all Government beneficiaries as “clients” – involves a discourse of service, meeting client needs etc that is quite inappropriate to deal with the relationship between probationer and probation officer.

Few movements in social science have been as massive and as all-embracing as the recent upsurge of interest in the phenomenon of “discourse” and the concomitant methodology of “discourse analysis.” Discourse is often seen to constitute our realities and our social order - our own and others’ discourse, which both causes and reflects our beliefs. As a practice, the analysis of discourse enables researchers to

uncover underlying power dynamics, knowledge interests and value orientations that produce particular discourse (Fairclough, 2003).

What about careers discourse? Instances of careers discourse are found in a range of publications, from academic books and articles, self-help paperbacks on career development, through practitioner media and magazine articles, the documents published by institutions such as businesses, professional associations, educational organizations, and government, and finally the day-to-day conversations of all parties involved in careers. Even something as innocuous as the moves in recent years by some New Zealand newspapers to deal with “Situations Vacant” in the context of a special newspaper section labelled “Career” indicates a subtle change in the social order that is assumed – an assumption that a job is more than employment, that a new situation should be considered in the context of what comes before it and after it, that work is woven into our ongoing lives. Discourses commonly have their own built-in underlying assumptions – “career”, for example, denoting a different set of assumptions than “job” or “work” or “employment” - and relate to wider societal discourses on, for example, the purposes of education, the need for social cohesion, national productivity, flexible work, or entrepreneurship. Discourses may represent or encourage particular kinds of careers. Where do such discourses come from, what philosophies and interests underlie them, how do they influence the career actions of individuals, and what effects do they have on society?

Surprisingly, despite the frequency and importance of discourses concerning careers, there has so far been little research on discourse in career studies. In the vast literature on careers, we have found only a few papers that employ the idea of discourse, and no systematic analysis of careers discourses. So at the University of Waikato we have decided to attempt to begin to fill this gap, by developing a program of research on career discourses, based on the rigorous analysis of discourses in various forms. This will be a New Zealand based program for search, albeit with international implications, and in due course we may seek the involvement of members of CDANZ, hopefully for mutual benefit. We are therefore grateful for the opportunity to share with CDANZ at this conference, the thinking underlying our programme, some of our preliminary results, and our plans for future projects.

Research Programme

Our programme as currently constitutes has three projects in mind, to be completed by the end of 2010 and published or in press before the end of 2011. The projects will start from the academic end of career studies and work through to more practical and practitioner-oriented studies. They are as follows.

- *First project (2008):* An analysis of academic discourses concerning the concept of “boundaryless career”, which has growing popularity in academic journal articles published since 1996 and is increasingly influential in academic conceptualizations of career.
- *Second project (2009):* An analysis of career discourses in a sample of 20 popular self-help books on managing one’s career, accessed through the internet.
- *Third project (2010):* An analysis of spoken discourse relating to careers in the conversation of a sample of New Zealand career practitioners, employers, and human resource managers.

First project: Boundaryless Careers

In recent years the term “boundaryless career” has been increasingly popular in academic circles. The boundaryless career has been characterized as “the opposite of the organizational career” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, page 5), and as involving proactive career self-development by means of crossing boundaries into new territory, particularly the boundaries around and between employers. The original book on the topic, *The Boundaryless Career* (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) was in many respects was a breakthrough in career studies, due to the way in which boundaryless careers were explained in relation to wider economic trends such as regionalized industries, IT development and globalization. In the years since, there has been a steady stream of literature on boundaryless careers, that has provided provide a powerful new lens through which to consider careers and career-related phenomena in modern, fast-changing economic life.

To study the representation of boundaryless careers in discourse we located a sample of 48 papers on boundaryless careers and subjected them to a technique called Critical Discourse Analysis. To find more details of our method and findings, write to us at kinkson@mngt.waikato.ac.nz to view the academic paper we presented on our findings at EGOS (the European Group for Organisation Studies) in July 2008 (Inkson, Roper & Ganesh, 2008). Theory, research and practice relating to boundaryless careers creates, and is supported by, its own *discourse* – its own linguistic constellations, patterns, arrangements, themes and terms that are used when it is talked about. We found that the boundaryless careers theory has indeed generated a powerful discourse concerning the changing nature of careers. Essentially this discourse notes that forces such as globalization, hypercompetition and organizational restructuring have made the notion of organizational and even occupations careers increasingly untenable, that as a result careers cross many boundaries previously considered sacrosanct, and that individuals are increasingly taking over from organizations and other institutions (including Government) as the authors and guarantors of their own careers

This discourse represents a powerful, challenging position. The implication that careers have changed, in apparently major, permanent, and irreversible ways. In our analysis we show how phrases such as *radical shift*, *profoundly affected*, *challenge to traditional views* draw attention to the importance and novelty of the issue being addressed, and the notion of *assuming personal responsibility* for careers shifts the causal mechanisms underlying them from structural institutions to personal agency. Thus, an imagery of heroic, boundary-challenging, constraint-defeating career trajectories is created that may be attractive to individual career actors. On the other hand, there have been sporadic critiques of the notion of boundaryless career (see Inkson, Roper and Ganesh, 2008, for a list of references) for example the fact that such careers may not be representative of many of today’s workers, and the phenomenon of *involuntary* boundaryless careers in which lower skilled workers, women and minorities are treated as casual labour, laid off when convenient for employers, and marginalised. So *boundaryless careers discourse* deserves analysis. Is it a shrewd reflection of the realities of its time, or a piece of propaganda serving the changing interests of business, political and academic elites?

The boundaryless career needs to be considered in its socio-political context and the influence of that context over discourse. The introduction of the concept and terminology followed the adoption in Western nations of neo-liberal economic systems begun in the early 1980s, particularly in Britain under Thatcher, and in New Zealand under its 1984 Labour Government. The ideology of neo-liberal economics advocates a reduced role for governments and stresses personal rather than government or organizational responsibility for employment behavior. Key terms in the discourse are “free markets”; “liberalization” and “enterprise”. Appropriate careers are characterized not by bonds of employer-employee loyalty but by flexibility and opportunism on both sides.

Research Questions

1. *Authorship and location.* Who is talking about boundaryless careers, and who are they talking to? Is the boundaryless career a concept that is re-shaping the thinking of policy-makers, managers, counsellors and members of the public?
2. *Empirical accuracy.* Are careers changing as stated? How far are the assumptions underlying boundaryless careers discourse supported by empirical evidence?
3. *Socio-political context.* Is boundaryless careers discourse a product of neo-liberal thinking?

Authorship and location: According to many academic sources, the world is buzzing about boundaryless careers. For example Pringle and Mallon (2003, p. 839) state that the boundaryless career “has proved to be a remarkably popular concept. It has resonated with theorists and practitioners alike.” We could find no evidence for such statements. Based on Google references for boundaryless careers discourse is only a tiny part of overall careers discussion – perhaps a hundredth of one percent. Furthermore, the discourse is, so far, entirely academic; “boundaryless career” is mentioned *only* in scholarly sources, but never in newspapers, magazines, trade publications or practitioner journals. This all forces us to the conclusion that boundaryless careers discourse may be little more than a series of self-referential or self-inflating conversations among a group of scholars whose enthusiasm may be considerable, but whose influence and numbers are small. It may be that the boundaryless career *idea* is covered in such publications but if so a different terminology is being used. The examination of similar discourses in the media and conversation of practitioners, to discover their own “discourses of career” is an urgent priority.

Empirical Accuracy. Our analysis suggests that the proposition that careers have moved rapidly from an organizational to a boundaryless norm is supported in discourse mainly by bald statements that this is a fact, rhetoric, case studies of particular industries predisposed to boundaryless careers, and citations of other papers. There is little independent empirical support. For example, labor turnover rates have changed little over the years. According to Stevens (2005), the average tenure in the longest job for US males aged 58-62 declined only from 21.9 years in 1969 to 21.4 years in 2002. This scarcely supports the view that there has been a sudden move since the 1980s from traditional to boundaryless careers, or that boundaryless careers are “predominant.” What is true instead is that labor turnover and job tenure are highly correlated with age (OECD, 2006). Perhaps organizational boundary-crossing

in career behavior characterizes only the young. With apparently limited evidence to suggest change in average job tenure through recent years, and massive evidence of gross decreases in inter-organizational mobility as people age, why do nearly all commentaries treat boundaryless careers as if they were a new, universal, and homogeneous phenomenon? We therefore consider that these commentaries are part of a *process of normalization* that purports to describe and to some extent explain boundaryless careers as background setting to the main discourse.

Socio-political context. In discussing boundaryless careers, researchers do not necessarily support neoliberal ideology. Indeed, the discourses notably do not have a socio-political dimension, preferring to look only at the narrower dynamics of career behaviour. But the key proposition in the discourse – that individuals not organizations or societies are responsible for their careers – is consistent with neoliberal thinking. Our results suggest that boundaryless careers discourse is a manifestation of wider neoliberal discourse that emphasizes the effects of market forces and individual rather than societal or organizational responsibility for economic and career outcomes. Because of a normalization process, writers on boundaryless careers tend not to question their prevalence and importance but to accept them as “common sense”. As we have shown, however, this discourse has however gained little traction outside academic circles, and has limited empirical support.

This does not necessarily mean that the boundaryless career is a concept without value. It has stimulated considerable academic interest, presents an appropriate model of thinking and conduct for *some* individuals, *some* organizations, and *some* industries. However, thinking and research about boundaryless careers, and all careers, needs to be contextualized, and the context of ideas, for example the neoliberal discourse that we have shown is unconsciously taken for granted by some commentators. The possibility that acceptance of the inevitability of boundaryless careers disadvantages as many as it advantages must be recognized.

First Study: Publication.

So far, our only publication has been our paper at EGOS (Inkson et al., 2008). Following feedback from that conference we are rewriting our results for journal publication in two papers – one on the neoliberal critique of boundaryless careers discourse and the other on the empirical critique.

Second Study

Self-help books on careers are framed, we think, in terms of metaphor and rhetoric. Titles are exotic and gimmicky: for example: *Career Match: Connecting who you are with What you'll Love to do*; *Career Distinction: Stand out by Building your Brand*; and *Life's a Bitch: Nine Steps to get out of your Funk and on to your Future*. As far as we can tell they are mainly written by people who have no particular expertise in career development. By subjecting such discourses to critical and empirical discourse analysis we hope to reveal their validity and potential value, their agreement or otherwise with commonly accepted theories of career development, and the broader discourses that they are part of. This study, which has been partially funded by the University of Waikato Management School, will commence in 2009.

Third Study

As indicated above, we consider career practitioner discourse extremely important, and hope in due course to frame a later study of such discourse as utilized in the communications and conversation of career practitioners. However, this project is little more than a “gleam in our eye” at present, and will not commence before 2010.

Conclusion

The great thing about discourse analysis is that discourse is all around us, all the time. It's easy to collect as data, and developments are taking place all the time in methods of analysis. There is therefore a huge opportunity for career theorists and practitioners to examine their own discourse and thereby their own images and frames of reference relating to careers. Our own first study has raised important questions about a way of looking at careers that is increasingly taken for granted, at least in academic circles. Hopefully further research will raise further questions.

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