Research as Transformational Practice – how it can all work together.

Presentation by Dr Heather Carpenter, CDANZ Conference, July 2 2010.

Engaged by powerful theory

In 1996 my Masters level career management class began with the arrival of Kerr Inkson and Michael Arthur as co teachers. Michael was carrying the biggest bundle of handouts I had ever seen- readings from the Academy of Management Careers Division – a group who had in 1996 had produced landmark papers on the 'new careers' paradigm. Thus I was introduced to new and powerful ideas of career theory: Michael Arthur's Boundaryless Careers, Tim Hall's Protean Career, and work by Edgar Schein, Lotte Bailyn, Denise Rousseau, Anabel Saxenian, Karl Weick. Articles which addressed the changes and implications in the new environment for organisations and those employed within them. My classmates included Polly Parker, who went on to do her own PhD in career theory, and a number of others fascinated by the introduction to this field. It was brand new theory, taught by the leading thinkers from (mostly) business schools of USA, UK and of course Kerr Inkson, at this time at Auckland University. I went on the next year to Judith Pringle's Women in Management class, meeting in theory and in person stellar names such as Judi Marshall, and Mary Mallon. Mary was finishing her own PhD on Portfolio Careers, and she was to become a friend, mentor and PhD Supervisor.

Key ideas and phrases intrigued me – the idea of boundaryless careers, the concept of psychological success, Judi Marshall's image of 'holding dreams lightly', Weick's concepts of 'preserving discretion' in attachment to the organisation, and self designing careers, Herb Shepard's 'Path with a Heart.' The fascination demanded more knowledge and a way to immerse myself in it. My Masters thesis (New Maps of the Career Terrain) looked at young peoples views of the future- their understanding of the new career environment, and their expectations about the future; but that wasn't enough. I wanted more and after a move to Hawke's Bay, and time to think, a PhD proposal was accepted by Massey University in 2001, and Kerr Inkson my valued supervisor.

Theory and Investigation - Five Areas.

PhD Research gave me a chance to look at the whole picture- how much did this fascinating theory intersect with people's experiences in the current environment. I examined five aspects of theory, all of which have transformed my practice.

i. **The changing concepts of career:** the debates surrounding old and new careers, and new career theory. This brought into focus the new careers paradigm, boundaryless careers, career competencies, protean careers, concepts of internal and external careers, and psychological success. I developed a key interest in *self management* strategies – what were the ones that worked? How did one maintain employability in such a changing environment? These questions were at the heart of my research. The literature in this area includes the debate around boundaryless careers and a chance to clarify my views.

'As a concept the boundaryless career represents its time, and the discussion below focusses on the 'opportunities view' of boundaryless careers, a view which celebrates the discarding of restrictive structures and the embracing of individual freedoms, initiative and self-management, along with a new organisational relationship of mutual benefit (Arthur, 1994.) The concept enlarges the idea of career defined as the unfolding sequence of a person's work over time (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989). Not only does the new paradigm suggest a new way of organising our careers, it also suggests an unambiguous ownership of the career, and new responsibilities for the 'owner'.

Versus

A related problem is the effect of the shift of career risk as well as responsibility to the individual (Dany et al., 2002), encouraging the new career rhetoric to serve as a basis for the reconstruction of employment relationships (Fournier & Grey, 1999, cited in Dany et al.2002). Richardson (2000) is sharply critical of what she calls the new 'ideology' suggesting that its belief in personal self-sufficiency and resiliency is 'American individualism at its most extreme' (p.203).

My argument

' self-management in my view need not equate to self-sufficiency, and that increasing the ability of people to navigate and manage the difficulties of their time in no way disregards or denies the benefits of stable employment, or the constraints of organisational structures.

ii.   **Career development theory. Here I c**oncentrated mainly on the age/stage progress of 45-60 year olds. The ideas of maintenance and predictability in adult development processes are examined in the light of current changes and new concepts and expectations related to older workers are discussed.

Career renewal – a new stage?

A case has been made that a sixth stage of career development - career renewal-occurs between the end of the establishment stage and the beginning of the maintenance stage (Murphy & Burck, 1976; Riverin-Simard 1988; Williams & Savickas, 1990; Beijan & Salomone, 1995). Midlife renewal is seen as a transitional stage requiring career actors to make new decisions, and plot action to implement these decisions, and the stage occurs when a person experiences a trigger to change in mid-career (Hall, 1990). The tasks performed during this stage are to reappraise career commitment and choice, to integrate the polarities in one's personality, and to modify the life structure (Levinson, 1980; Williams & Savickas, 1990).

And new thinking on women's careers was a highlight……..

Feminist writers have consistently challenged male models of success defined by the external career, with their inherent assumption of the centrality of work to identity (Gallos, 1989; Marshall, 1989). They deny ideas of upward mobility and success at all cost as central to women's perspective on career, and point to other indicators of

success which may be more appropriate, such as forging a career which meets personal, professional and interpersonal goals (Gallos, 1989), charting a successful course to manage life's critical challenge, finding the balance between love and work (Gallos, 1989), and achieving congruence between one's values and activities (Pringle & Dixon, 2001). Their models emphasise the achievement of personal subjective definitions of success and individual goals, reinforcing the focus articulated by new career theorists (Mirvis & Hall 1996; Arthur 1994; Hall, 1996).

iii. **Labour market realities.** My research called for the examination of the experiences of older workers in the current employment environment and highlighted the key areas of concern and debate. Issues of participation, discrimination, responses to restructuring experiences, changes in the employment landscape, changes in work patterns and the effects, portfolio careers, and multiple careers were examined and found in plentiful supply in Hawke's Bay.

It seems that new definitions are required for many aspects of the employment world - retirement is not what it used to be (Greller & Simpson 1999; Stein 2000), the concept of job may vary considerably in the population at large (Taylor, Baines & Newell, 2004) and many older workers do not work in predictable ways, or for that matter, consider themselves older workers…….

The older worker may be viewed as an "active agent negotiating various roles within the workplace" (Stein, 2000, p. 3). In this study this seemed to apply to both men and women. Is there a blurring of gender themes alongside the blurring of traditional employment and retirement boundaries at this time? One might expect this to be so, and research that addresses these questions would be valuable.

iv. **Strategies for behaviour and employability in the new careers environment.**

Key models, attributes and behaviours for sustaining employability and skills are prescribed in the literature as necessary and effective for career actors engaged in new careers. These were reviewed and summarised to identify the significant actions relating to these behaviours. I examined attributes such as resilience, proactivity, adaptability and continuous learning in depth, and added my own concept of identity awareness after grappling with the identity literature. I looked at models such as the protean career and career competencies.

Proactivity suggests future directed behaviours, as well as effective improvisation and opportunism. The idea involves reading the environment, expecting change, gathering the information required to position oneself for those changes, and also being able to influence that change in some way. It suggests anticipation of inevitable change by utilising all the capital or resources of the wider environment, identifying opportunities and actioning them through initiative and perseverance (Siebert, Crant & Kramer, 1999).

v. **Life History methodology,** the process of the research, and the factors that impacted on methodological choice.

Drawing on life history methodology recognises a fundamental aspect of the telling of careers - it is essentially a story. "To describe a person's career is to tell a story" (Cochran, 1990, p.71). Stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. Career stories cannot start anywhere but at the beginning. This has been my experience in research interviews, but I have also found it to be invariably true in any career interview context, for example in career counselling. The participant will ask, even if not invited, to "let me start at the beginning." The story needs to be told in a way that makes sense for the teller, and with my experience of careers as stories, I considered this methodology the most appropriate for this subject.

Although in my research I am primarily interested in the participant's experiences and behaviours as an older worker, it is still relevant and necessary to allow the participant to tell the story from the beginning. The beginning informs the middle which leads to the end (Cochran, 1990); the ways in which people have dealt with experiences and changes over the 25 years of employment will impact on and inform their choices and behaviours now. Listening to the stories that people tell allows the researcher to learn about their lives in their own terms, listening to people's stories and their accounts in their own words also made it easier for me to be connected to them. In Marshall's (1981) words "it's important to me to have been there; I can't imagine doing an adequate analysis of data if I haven't participated in collecting it " (p. 394).

Interviews allow the researcher the opportunity to interact with the research participants at a personal level as they tell their personal story. Interviewing is a flexible way of gaining data that is both detailed and personal (McLeod, 1994). Face to face interviews can promote the building of a 'research alliance' between the researcher and the participants (Grafanaki, 1996), and I found this to be true for me - participants took an interest in the project and felt part of something worthwhile, and in conveying this to me they increased my commitment to the research and my efforts to produce work that had some value.

The skills required for counselling apply equally in my thinking to the research interview – to be fully present, actively listening, displaying accurate understanding, warmth, acceptance and genuineness. These qualities are of major importance in encouraging and promoting a good rapport between researcher and participants (Mearns & McLeod 1984, McLeod, 1994). The degree of sensitivity and respect towards the research participants affects the quality and depth of the interview and the material shared by the participants (Grafanaki, 1996). For my part, the personal intensity of the research interviews encouraged reflexivity, and increased my awareness of my own biases and assumptions.

And remembering my role -

'I needed to be attentive also to role boundaries - I am a careers counsellor and my role was that of an interviewer. I usually tried to acknowledge any difficulty or issues that the participants had with their careers, while making clear my boundaries as a researcher. According to Patton (1990) the researcher needs to adopt a stance of 'empathic neutrality' - empathic engagement with the story being told, and neutrality regarding the content of the data generated.'

Career counsellor as researcher

Listening to peoples stories is what we do. Qualitative processes give us the why, the thinking behind the actions, the belief systems-all the interesting frameworks on which people make career decisions. It was crystal clear that those making career decisions that moved them in the directions they wanted and gave them the satisfaction they needed were those whose thinking had useful and up to date rationales. Those slipping behind were often out of date with their thinking and this restricted and limited their actions and progress.

What did I find from listening to their stories?

Theory in action. The *career connected,* the most satisfied group were high on resilience, proactivity, adaptability and identity awareness, and they were continuous learners. Many were *career resilient* – holding their own by being adaptable, but compromising, and lacking the strategies (mostly proactivity or identity awareness) to get themselves to a more satisfying place. The *career slowed* group lacked all of these, most significantly they were not adaptable, and had fixed views of themselves. My identified 4 key attributes within the PAIL Model:

- *'**Proactivity** enhances career competencies – the more proactive a person the more they proactively increase their career competencies and build capital. A proactive approach to building career competencies is a valuable asset in the new environment, particularly for the older worker.*
- ***Adaptability** - the more adaptable a person is the more they will respond positively to experiences that enhance career competencies. Broad experiences (not necessarily mobility) enhance adaptability.*
- ***Identity awareness** - the more aware a person is as to their 'knowing why' at any stage of their lives, the more directed the competencies are to career prospects that suit the person. Identity awareness and identity growth is important to allow the changes required in a changing era.*
- *Involvement in **continuous learning** underpins all these behaviours.'*

Research into Practice

After the research came the impetus to make this useful. Ideas and concepts on identity were used in workshops (Identity and Career Choices, and Self Directed Search workshops.). The ideas also became self assessment exercises, used first in my Level 7 Career Management classes, and with clients. A much more engaging way to teach theory, these were universally liked, and found valuable, so they have eventually become a book.

Examples from Your 21st Century Career- New Paths to Personal Success.

- Inkson and Arthur's model of Career Capital, and the competencies of Knowing Why, Knowing How, Knowing When - became a self assessment exercise:

  Know Your essential Career Capital, (Chapter 2)

- Schein's Career Anchors - became a self assessment exercise:

  Knowledge of your guiding values – a prerequisite for satisfaction- Exercise p. 68

- Derr's internal career success map – became a self assessment exercise:

Chart Your Success Map, Exercise (Chapter 4 , Getting the Success You Want)

- PAIL model, from my thesis (Proactivity, Adaptability, Identity Awareness, Learning) –became

Assessing your attributes, p 181, Chapter 10, Transforming Careers.

Why so much self assessment? It contributes to identity awareness, an essential element for identity growth and understanding of best prospects.

> *'critical to managing one's career and integrating work with the other parts of one's life is a clear self awareness, or a sense of identity - knowing who we truly are. There are may different ways, both unstructured and structured to come to know oneself....For the purpose of our career development work, lets just assume that the best, or at least the most teachable, means for achieving this self awareness is through a rigorous self assessment process....the goal in this process is to give you some insight, and using that information ...to develop self understanding.'*
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> *p. 16, Harrington & Hall, (2007)*

My final conclusions on 'boundarylessness'

> *'This research shows that people may be differently bounded – voluntarily bounded by their geography and its economic possibilities and within those structures able to adopt a boundaryless perspective of career making that fits their circumstances. If we apply the concept to the actions of the career-maker we may find a more viable concept that encompasses broad experience, wider thinking, and creative approaches to career. Perhaps it may be more acceptable to talk about boundarylessness in terms of the career-maker rather than the career.'*

It is by finding evidence of that wider thinking and creative approaches to career in my research subjects, and seeing how that has helped them live the life they want, that motivates my teaching and writing.

Finally, what happens in practice is the ability to make use of an effective cycle:

Your research provides you with **powerful theory** which provides **useful frameworks (and wider understandings)** which provide **powerful thinking and insights for clients** – this is what leads to transformation. As a counsellor, your confidence in these frameworks and theory is enhanced, because you have heard the theory in action, through the stories of your research subjects.

References

Unreferenced sections in italics are extracts from my thesis:

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