

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE ANALYSIS OF TRADE AND CRAFT CAREERS

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Despite the study of careers being one of the most active areas of social enquiry, there has been a lack of focus in the field of construction, particularly in terms of trade and craft occupations. This paper presents the results of research that explored trade and craft careers from the perspective of trainees/apprentices. Focus groups were used to reveal 15 indexed themes that defined trainees' perceptions of the term career. The results provide fresh insights into the career expectations of those embarking on construction careers and demonstrate that new entrants are highly motivated by the career development potential that the industry offers. It is argued that imposing professional/managerial career themes on the craft population could limit understanding of how individuals select, participate and orient their working lives. The results will be used to develop strategies for improving career development initiatives that redress future skill shortages and improve employee retention difficulties.

Keywords: careers, career development, craft operatives, focus groups, human resource management.

INTRODUCTION

A distinction is often made between a job and a career, with the former considered as employment positions of 'low status, few promotion prospects', and the latter being regarded as professional and managerial positions of 'high status, with many promotion prospects' (Arnold, 1997 p.16 - 17). However, recent academic thinking views careers in a wider context (Adamson, 1997; Arnold, 1997; and Arnold et al., 1998). Wider definitions of careers expand the concept to encompass all forms of work, placing emphasis on individuals' perceptions of their own working life. Despite this, it is still questioned whether or not organisations view manual workers as having or even wanting careers (Thomas, 1988; and McDonald, 2002). This is often the view held within the construction industry, as it is frequently suggested that trade and craft employees are motivated purely by short-term financial gain. This view is incongruent with the wider careers' literature that asserts in theory and empirical data that career development and career progression are prime motivational factors and vital for the retention of employees (Hall, 1986; Young, 1990; Adamson 1997). However, most of this research refers to the working lives of managerial and professional employees.

The purpose of the research reported in this paper is to explore the career concept from a trade and craft perspective. Using a focus group methodology, trade and craft

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trainees were asked to define, describe and interpret the term “Career”. Further discourse assessed: whether or not trainees regarded themselves as having careers; the extent to which they valued their career; and the extent to which they sought to develop their career. The aim was to assess how the context of the working environment, career development initiatives and practices within the industry influence career progress to the point of employees meeting their expectations. This knowledge could be used to inform retention strategies in the future.

DECONSTRUCTING THE CONCEPT OF “CAREER”

The term “career” has a number of connotations, thus resulting in a profusion of definitions and subsequent ambiguity (Young, 1990; Adamson, 1997; and Arnold, 1997). The ambiguity is both compounded and confounded when: the terms “Career”, “Vocation” and “Occupation” are used synonymously (Hall, 1976); and when the term “Career” is combined with other words such as “Development”, “Management” and “Planning” (Routledge, 1983; Collin, 1984; and Young, 1990). Thus, in order to perform an analysis of construction craft careers, a deconstruction of the term is necessary in order that a cogent definition can be developed for the target population. One common and simple meaning attributed to the term is of patterns, sequences and consequences of work related activities that people engage in at various points in their lives (Hall, 1986; Arthur et al., 1989; Adamson, 1997; Arnold, 1997). Variations of this definition focus on “internal and external”/ “subjective and objective” elements, which in turn relate to differing perspectives of the employer and employee (Schein, 1978 p.10 - 11). Other definitions consider careers as a sequence of attitudes and behaviours associated with work activities (Hall, 1976). These definitions can also be taken in a more abstract form to mean the movement and transition of individuals through an occupational “Time” and “Space” (Hearn, 1977; Johnson, 1977 cited 1983; and Collin, 1984), representing the element of an individual’s work history, within a particular social context. These definitions usually refer to a normative, achievement-oriented model (Hall, 1976; Arthur, 1989), which assumes progressive escalation indicators in terms of financial rewards, power or status.

In this regard, social, professional and academic rhetoric can be used to disguise socio-ideological underpinnings that refer to some groups of people and their related occupations and not others (Thomas, 1989). The basis of this being that the majority of previous career-based research has been conducted on typically white middle-class males aspiring to upper managerial positions. Hence extant definitions reflect the interpretations of this group. As such, “having a career” can be used as an elitist statement that excludes: minority groups; those in occupations that are perceived to have few promotion prospects; and those who work in particular: industry’s; organisations; or environments (Thomas, 1989; Loscocco, 1990; Leibowitz et al., 1992; Milman, 2003; and McDonald et al., 2002). In the occupational context, most organisations are expected to provide career development programs that address the varied needs of executives, managers, technical and administrative professionals (McDonald et al., 2002). However, the same cannot be said for manual workers (Ibid). Consequently, within the construction industry, due in part to stereotypical views of manual employees, the concept of a career is often only applied to specific (professional and managerial) occupations. There is clearly a need to redress this imbalance by firstly defining the term career from the perspective of craft workers. Thomas (1988) poses the question “Should we bother with blue-collar careers?” (p.354). In an extensive bi-polar argument, Thomas suggested that the answer was clearly “yes”. However, Thomas argued that this is only achievable by dispensing

with the normative, achievement-oriented model of careers and developing an inclusive perspective that “transcends the colour of the collar” (ibid) and focuses on the individual’s interpretation.

Careers as individual projects

The dimension of interpersonal interpretation warrants particular interest and further analysis in the context of the individual. This is particularly relevant amongst previously unconsidered populations, such as trade and craft operatives. According to Rose (1989), careers have the potential to shape and direct lives. Rose further suggested that: “the citizen, in work as much as outside it, is engaged in a project to shape his or her life as an autonomous individual driven by motives of self-fulfilment” (p.115). Grey (1994) supported this view and commented on the career as ‘a project of the self’. Adamson (1997) similarly suggested that the career is a ‘vehicle for the realisation of self’. This view of careers sees the concept as a possession and a continuous developmental process or multiphase project, involving serial decisions, subsequent adjustment and modifications (Rose, 1989; Grey, 1994; and Adamson, 1987). Roberts (1975) suggested that this process has the potential to continue indefinitely or until a career that matches the individual’s unique characteristics or aspirations are found. As such, employees are likely to leave work that does not meet their criteria for self-fulfilment, particularly if a blatant disregard for their development is encountered. This is the current case for the construction industry as it continues to experience a haemorrhage of key trade and craft employees.

Two noteworthy themes have emerged in the field of vocational psychology in recent years and researchers are now beginning to recognise the need to include previously underrepresented populations in career theory and the need for integrative models of careers and career development that support these. In particular, it was noted how “supportive or oppressive” features of the interpersonal environment affect and are affected by cognitive and behavioural person factors’ (Lent et al., 1994 p. 117). Lent et al. (1994) responded to the call for theory convergence by proposing a social cognitive model of careers that takes into account individual perceptions within the context of their social environment. Lent et al., noted the potential for their model to guide inquiry on the careers of specific populations such as women and racial/ethnic minorities. The model views careers from an interpretive standpoint and so does not bias against the individual’s perceptions of what constitutes a career, even if they do not meet with the traditional achievement-oriented model.

Attempts have been made to explain the career perspectives of non-managerial employees. For instance, McDonald et al. (2002) used focus groups to explore the career experiences, concerns and interests of blue-collar workers in the United States. It was revealed that the target population had a range of previously unconsidered career needs and perspectives, thus emphasising the need for further studies and action regarding this key population. However, in McDonald’s study, each focus group began by defining the term career to participants. In doing so they impose their own set of definitions on the participants. Invariably, such action does not allow for individual interpretation by the target group.

Construction Craft Careers

In most labour market analysis there is a wide social and psychological distancing between professional/managerial and manual workers (Lewin and Mitchell, 1995). However, the construction industry’s labour intensive nature and the subsequent human capital implications that this presents (see Langford et al, 1995; Agapiou et al, 1995; Loosemore et al., 2003) makes trade and craft employees vital to the industry as

direct producers of its products, who are closest to the customer base (McDonald et al., 2002). Strategically, the paucity of knowledge with regards to these workers effectively means that little is known about the occupational groups that potentially have greatest impact on quality, productivity and competitiveness. Furthermore, Cappeli (1999) argued that reciprocity within the working arrangement is central to understanding how employment relations foster continued commitment. It is therefore surprising that little attention has been paid to this occupational group. Not only is the economic case compelling, but there is also the strong ethical argument of mutual action and fairness.

Currently, the construction industry lacks a well-defined progression route for many manual employees aspiring to move beyond craft positions. With the absence of seamless career progression structures and incentives, it is reasonable to hypothesise that only a minority of construction operatives are able to progress beyond craft positions. Although there is evidence that some organisations draw up career plans for their trainees, these tend to be informal and fragmented and little evidence exists as to the success of such initiatives. This paper represents the first part of a research project, which aims to help fill the knowledge gap in understanding trade and craft careers. The wider purpose of the research is to explain why people choose a career in the industry and whether their expectations are fulfilled. However, in order to understand the wider implications of the career concept, the research considers that the term itself must be defined from the perspective of those that experience it.

METHODOLOGY

In this research it was important to understand the specific relationship that trade and craft workers have with their employment and how these relate specific issues to their own wider context. There was also a demand for an awareness and insight of the individual's values and way's of organising their own working reality. A focus group methodology was therefore selected to promote open discussions around the definition of the term "Career" from the perspective of the target population. In total, 563 participants took part in 53 focus groups sessions. The groups ranged in size from between 4 to 26 individuals. The sessions were held at five further education institutions across the East Midlands. Table 1 reveals the characteristics of the sample population. Participants were all learners and new entrants enrolled on construction related courses at various levels (Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced Construction Award Schemes; NVQ's Levels 1, 2 and 3). Seventy-nine percent of the participants were employed and twenty-one percent were in full time education. Ages ranged from 16 to 50 years old, with a length of employment within the industry ranging from 4 weeks to 34 years.

Many authors have demonstrated the advantages of the focus group methodology (Goldman 1962; Johnson, 1988; and Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). These studies have shown that they are an effective method for listening to respondents, allowing them to use their own words to describe what they think. Schutz (1972) coined the term "inter-subjectivity" to describe the way in which conceptions and ordinary explanations shared by a set of social actors can emerge using this type of approach. This was deemed appropriate for this exploratory phase of the research.

All focus group discussions were digitally recorded. Using an analytical schema developed by Crinson (2001), the recordings were analysed under five distinct stages: Stage (i) involved transcribing recordings; Stage (ii) comprised an interpretation process, whereby all responses were assessed. A principle component of this stage was not to exclude any data, thus avoiding any bias or preordained selection.

Statements, issues and ideas raised were then interpretatively abstracted into a further set of indexed themes or conceptual categories (Stage iii). These themes essentially represent the accumulative perspective of participants (through interpretation). The “Theorisation” Stage (iv) involved relating the findings back to the definitions derived from the literature. A “Retroduction” process (Stage v), involved identifying the contextual factors under which the findings emerged (see Crinson, 2001).

Table 1. Focus group participants

Demographic Characteristics		N	Institution Characteristics		No of Groups	Qualification Levels		
			Institution	Occupation		Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Institution	A	314	A	Brickwork	4	1	3	
	B	92		Carpentry & Joinery	4	1	3	
	C	68		Plumbing & Heating & Ventilation	4	2	2	
	D	78		Electrical Instalation	2		1	1
	E	18		Painting & decorating	7	2	5	
Age	<17	198	B	Brickwork	2		1	1
	17 - 19	191		Carpentry & Joinery	2	2		
	19>	169		Plumbing & Heating & Ventilation	4		4	
Gender	Male	549	C	Brickwork	2		2	
	Female	14		Carpentry & Joinery	4	2	1	1
Ethnicity	Asian	15		Plumbing & Heating & Ventilation	1		1	
	Afro /Carribean	29		General Construction	1			1
	European	518		Painting & decorating	2	1	1	
Length of Employment	<1 Year	288	D	Brickwork	2		2	
	1 - 2 years	151		Carpentry & Joinery	3		2	1
	2>	124		Plumbing & Heating & Ventilation	4		3	1
Employment Status	Employed	445		Painting & decorating	4		3	1
	Fi/Unemployed	118		Painting & decorating	1	1		
Total Participants		N	Total No. of Groups			53		

RESULTS

Important to each definition of the term career, was the role of the individual and elements of subjectivity within a work-related context. Respondents were explicit in reference to an individual or subject as the central focus of a career. In total fifteen theme categories were generated from the statements provided by the focus group informants. Included with (1) The individual, others were: (2) status; (3) reward; (4) power; (5) foundation; (6) function; (7) skills; (8) responsibility; (9) education; (10) training; (11) security; (12) situation; (13) past; (14) present; and (15) future.

At the indexing phase, present, past and future were distinguished in terms of for example: present - “the type of job you do”; past - “when you have been in a job for a long time”; and future - “what you want to do in the future”. Items indexed as reward were typically statements that translated as “jobs where you earn a lot of money”. These were treated as distinct from statements of “what you do to earn money”, which were indexed in the foundation category.

Throughout discourse the terms of “Work”, “Career” and “Job” were punctuated intermittently, although, discussion at length relating to the words and syntax, realised a semantic differential. While work and jobs were seen as activities relating to a financial imperative, they lacked subjective input, opportunities for stimulation, or the element of choice. Careers, on the other hand, were seen as something that people wanted to do and chose to participate. Across all levels, the respondents distinguished careers from jobs by suggesting that the latter involved choice autonomy, and the opportunity for hierarchical advancement (either socially - status, or politically - power). Suggestions of: “a good job”; “a management job”; “office job” or “one where people work under you” were closely expressed. However, respondents’ view of advancement were less in terms of power and status afforded within hierarchical organisational structures, but more of autonomy afforded an individual as “your own boss”.

Statements regarding actual activities were highly prominent throughout the focus groups. For example, a career was defined as “what your occupation revolves

around” (function) or “type of work”. Also featured in discussions was the size and nature of the industry and/or organisation the individual is employed within (situation); the stability of which impacted on long-term tenure (security). Some examples of the responses inferred security in terms of knowledge and transferable skills, suggesting practical and academic investments (education; training; skills).

An emergent model of the craft “career”

During analysis, consistencies across responses suggested that definitions contained a few fundamental and basic elements of which an individuals actions, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours interact with, and react to. Through the retroduction process, the indexed themes were grouped under four distinct dimensions:

1. Content– the process involved in conducting and sustaining work;
2. Context – industry and organisation which work takes place;
3. Ordinal Metric – method of social or political ranking or value association; and
4. Time – the movement of the enumerated three from one state to another.

These dimensions and indexed themes, have been pictorially related in Figure 1.

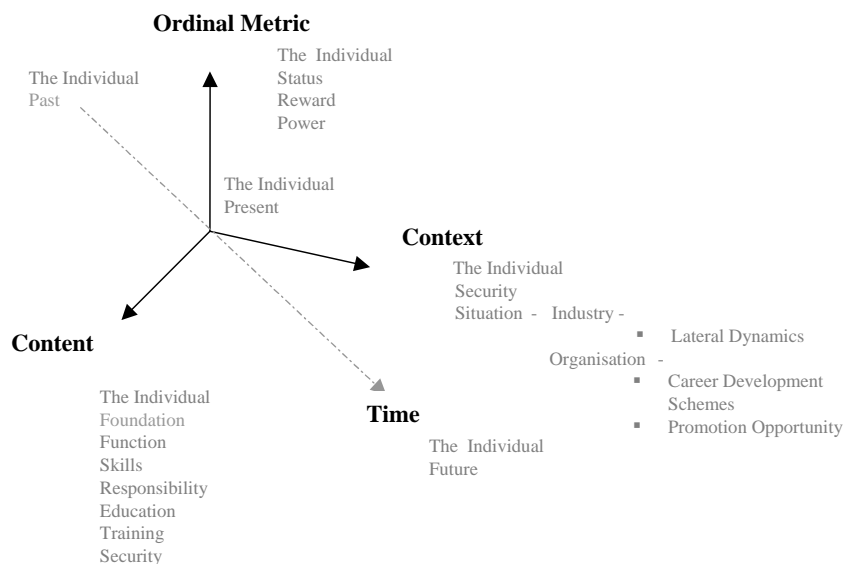


Figure 1: Four dimensional model of trade and craft careers

Although the collected data may be classified into pre-existing themes or descriptions and interpretations taken from existing literature, an overarching argument remains that those themes are undoubtedly related to managerial occupations. The indexed themes and dimensions have been developed through the definitions and interpretations of the principles under investigation in this research. The four-dimensional model is potentially useful as a conceptual link between the indexed themes and reflects the temporal and spatial dynamics of a career. On interpretation, the model represents the continual and reciprocal interaction of the individual within the context of a trade and craft career. Particularly in the context of self-employment the Ordinal Metric represents achievement-oriented criteria of assessing work involvement. The dimension of Content involved the skills, duties and responsibilities that respondents believe are prerequisite to developing careers. Particular to respondents, the Context was relative to the construction industry and any organisation respondents believe they will work within. As these dimensions change along a continuum (temporal conjunction) - Time is incorporated within the

model to represent respondents history of work, their current state and future aspirations (Figure 1).

INTERPRETIVE DISCUSSION

Respondents recognised that careers involve a progression of skills and responsibility which can be attained through further training and development. They recognised too that the context to which careers are set has an impact on the nature of an individuals work relationship. From respondents accounts careers have a degree of movement and transition of power and status. All factors are recognised as being affected over time. The definitions presented may bare similarity to the normative, achievement-oriented model of careers, although analysis of data would suggest that in the case of status and power, the aspirations are not of positions with boundaries of organisational structures.

A distinction was noticed between the definitions of careers that emerged with each academic level. This difference reflected an increased exposure within the work environment, which also indicated that it may influence future occupational movement.

NVQ Level 1

A few differences emerged from the NVQ Level 1 respondents across definitions (mostly 16 – 17 year-olds). These definitions were often narrow in scope, examples defined a career as a “job” or “something you do to make money”. This suggests that this group relates to work that is more a function of circumstance not through choice, but of necessity. However, statements such as: “a career is like work, but more important”, reflected the continued hierarchy of careers over jobs. Reflecting on the terms status and power, these groups considered careers to be “management jobs” or a “job in an office”. However there was a “yes” majority when asked explicitly if they regarded themselves as having careers.

NVQ Level 2

This group viewed a career as permanent, chosen employment or a specific field of work. However, some additional themes did emerge. Jobs were not only associated with extrinsic rewards but the desire for transferable skills in relation to long-term security and career succession. The concept of responsibility also became apparent within the work role but also in the wider social context with regard to taking care of family. It was considered that a greater variety of choice became a function of training and development. Individuals discussed career strategies and planning, and the concept of owning a career arose. This more sophisticated view of the career reflects a greater understanding of the individuals’ responsibility in setting goals and the subsequent active reinvestments of time associated with these processes.

NVQ Level 3

This group placed greater emphasis on intrinsic motivational factors and the dimension of career Content, in particular, the importance of enjoying work. There appeared to be an increase in the belief that additional skills and training were required in order to develop a career.

The introduction of “life role” themes was of particular importance because of: the participants increased long-term interests; and the identity that they perceive will emerge throughout their working life. In addition, responsibility became a more prevalent theme. Statements such as “commitment to your choice of work” and “long-term job” begin to suggest dedication and commitment. Although respondents did interpret the term career in relation to the status of official positions, its

significance in value was less in terms of an economic imperative, but a individually derived sense of achievement and personal development.

CONCLUSION

The belief that a career involves a long-term commitment to personal development is evident from respondents definitions and interpretations in this study. Although a consensus was not held amongst all of the respondents, definitions put forward suggest a sophisticated view on behalf of many informants, which belies many suggestions within the literature detailing trade and craft operative perspectives. This was particularly the case for higher-level trainees whose views centered on the importance of intrinsic satisfaction and development.

Although certain occupational experiences and groups within society are traditionally distinguished as “Career” oriented, individuals make sense of what they see and experience. Thus, the individual makes correlations between what they assume and perceive as a career (Schein, 1978). Remuneration is only one method of reducing the problems surrounding the retention of employees, so there is a need to place greater emphasis on career development initiatives. Careers within the construction industry are a dynamic interaction between individual, organisation and industry, and thus require mutual action for sustained development. In keeping with shifting theoretical perspectives of career research, there is a need to further explore the nature of careers from the perspective of all occupational groups, particularly those hitherto neglected. Further research will develop a deeper understanding of construction occupations. It will also help in examining the role of construction employers and the industry as a whole in the development of the individuals’ careers. Further examinations here, will be conducted into the extent to which the nature, structure and organisational dynamics of the industry impact on retention.

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