



Three faces of context and their implications for career: A study of public sector careers cut short

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 September 2015

Received in revised form 29 October 2015

Accepted 30 October 2015

Available online 31 October 2015

Keywords:

Context
Ideology
Career
Public sector

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of context on careers. It is based on a study of senior managers in an English local authority. It offers two important contributions: first, an empirical contribution examining how context matters to individuals in their career-making in the setting of the UK public sector. Our findings point to three aspects or faces of context: proximal events, ideology and enduring structural features. The first, context as ideology, attends to meaning-making that is collective in nature, and that incorporates concepts of power, domination, subordination and resistance. Our second refers to the enduring structural features. These are on-going trends and developments, predictable and traceable over the medium to long-term which offer rules and resources, thus structuring opportunity and constraint. Finally, the third face, context as proximal events, refers to (often unexpected) contingencies that arise at particular moments. Although bounded both spatially and temporally, they can significantly impact on career decision making. The second contribution of the paper builds upon this empirical base to develop theoretical and conceptual understanding of the link between career and context, illustrating the interconnectedness of the various faces of context and the dynamic ways in which these influence career-making over time.

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1. Introduction

Between 2008 and 2011 the face of English local government was transformed. In the wake of the global financial crash and the austerity agenda that followed, local authorities faced large cuts to budgets and huge swathes of public sector workers were made redundant. Such a fundamental reshaping raises many questions about the people who had spent their working lives within public sector organizations suddenly facing very different futures to the ones they had envisaged. We are privileged to have been given unique access to a group of senior employees who had worked together for over two decades in the social services department of an English local authority (which we are calling Starling County Council – SCC), and who left between 2010 and 2011, mainly taking advantage of early retirement packages that were available for a short time at the height of the budget cuts. What makes this group unusual and compelling from a research perspective is (a) the longevity of their working relationships; (b) that they are of a similar age (they were all born between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s); and (c) that years after leaving SCC they continued to regularly meet up as a group. They are therefore well-placed to provide insights into career-making in a local authority social services department and the impact of the financial crisis on employees' working lives.

Theoretically, we are interested in the nature and role of context and contextual change in the process of career-making. Richardson (2000) suggests that 'rapid change, while stressful and anxiety-provoking, also provides unique opportunities to see

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more clearly the impact of the social system on the individuals in that system' (p. 197). We agree. Given the scope of the financial crisis and austerity agenda, their profound implications for public sector work and workers, and the pace of change, we see SCC as an ideal site in which to examine the interplay of career and context. In this dynamic and highly politicized setting context is not some shady and obscure place in the background, but instead played a very immediate and visible role both in people's everyday experiences of work and over time. It was a permeating feature of all of our discussions with respondents, generating heated and passionate debate. By tracing respondents' career stories, from the decision to join the public sector social services through to the decision to leave, we examine the broad question of how we can conceptualize the role of diverse contextual features in the development of career.

Our analysis attends to both individual and collective accounts. This is important because one of the limitations of the careers literature is a dominant view of the career as an individualized phenomenon. Over the years careers scholars have critiqued this 'under-socialized' approach (Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyer, 2007), instead configuring career-making as a social process (Cohen, Duberley, & Mallon, 2004). Indeed, within vocational psychology there is a notable seam of research that highlights this collective dimension (Richardson, 2000; Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Schutheiss, 2007; Savickas et al., 2009; Blustein, 2011). However, within the field this remains a minority perspective. In this paper we draw upon individuals' recollections and shared histories in order to develop a richer picture of their complex, multi-faceted work setting, and examine how its evolution intersected with their own career-making.

In what follows we begin by considering how context has been conceptualized in the careers literature. Next we briefly introduce 'Career-making at SCC and Beyond' and present our research design. From there we present our findings. We offer two important contributions: our first contribution lies in the identification of three faces of context and the various ways in which these matter to individuals in their career-making in the setting of the UK public sector. The second contribution of the paper builds upon this empirical base to develop theoretical and conceptual understanding of the link between career and context, illustrating the interconnectedness of the various faces of context and the dynamic ways in which these influence career-making over time.

2. Conceptualising context

In the book *Outliers* social commentator Malcolm Gladwell argues that context matters: 'The culture we belong to and the legacies passed on by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievement in ways we cannot begin to imagine... This is not a book about tall trees. It is a book about forests' (2008, p. 19–20). These are his concluding words:

My great-great-great grandmother was bought at Alligator Pond. That act, in turn, gave her son, John Ford, the privilege of a skin color that spared him a life of slavery. The culture of possibility that Daisy Ford embraced and put to use so brilliantly on behalf of her daughters was passed on to her by the peculiarities of the West Indian social structure. And my mother's education was the product of the riots of 1937 and the industriousness of Mr Chance. These were history's gifts to my family — and if the resources of that grocer, the fruits of those riots, the possibilities of that culture, and the privileges of that skin tone had been extended to others, how many more would now live a life of fulfilment, in a beautiful house high on a hill (p. 285).

Somewhat less dramatically, this is the stuff that careers research is made of. It is increasingly being recognized that context influences career, not just in terms of the employing organization but also wider social, economic, cultural and political settings (Duffy & Dik, 2009; Patton & McMahon, 2015). Indeed it has been suggested that the increasingly turbulent occupational environment means that wider social context is now more salient than ever (Ali, Fall, & Hoffman, 2013; Grote & Hall, 2013).

Writing about organizational behavior generally rather than careers specifically, Johns (2006) suggests that 'contextual features are often studied in a piecemeal fashion, in isolation from each other' (2006, p. 389) and, we would add, depicted as quite distinct from the people who inhabit them. In contrast, in this paper we are interested in the mutuality of individuals and the diverse settings in which they are situated. Thus we construe context not as a benign backdrop, but as part of the action. However, an enduring criticism of the field relates to the decontextualization of career theory (Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015; Patton, Doherty, & Shield, 2014; Kang & Gottfredson, 2015). This is often traced back to the origins of much career theorizing in the discipline of psychology where, McMahon et al. (2014, p. 37) argue, wider environmental–societal influences may be seen as distal or indirect. An alternative explanation relates to the focus of much careers research on a fairly homogenous group — largely Western, white collar workers (Richardson, 2000; Dries, 2011), with only limited interest in issues of class, ethnicity/race and gender, and insufficient attention to those with little volition (Duffy & Dik, 2009; Ali et al., 2013; Blustein, 2011).

Nevertheless, a growing group of scholars agrees with Gladwell on the centrality of context to career-making (Savickas et al., 2009; Schutheiss, 2007; Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2011; Blustein, 2011; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012; McMahon et al., 2014), conceptualizing context in a variety of ways and vividly describing the diverse features through which people make their moves (Kaulisch & Enders, 2005; Lee, Kossek, Hall, & Litrico, 2011; Al-Ariss, Koal, Özbilgin, & Suutari, 2012; Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015). In recent years vocational psychologists such as Blustein, Schultheiss and Flum have introduced a relational perspective on work and career (Blustein et al., 2004; Schutheiss, 2007; Blustein, 2011). Critiquing what they see as the overly voluntaristic and individualized understandings that predominated in the literature, they propose a theory based on the idea of career development as a collective process, rooted in complex and profound relationships and commitments, and attending to issues of inequality. For Schutheiss (2007), career cannot be extracted from its context. Rather, her relational cultural paradigm depicts career (in her words 'worklife'), relationships and culture as inextricably fused. We can only understand these dimensions in relation to one another. Similarly, the idea of work and career development as deeply social activities underpins Blustein's relational theory of working. As he explains, 'we tend to work with others, which places working into an explicit social context; moreover, people throughout the life span and across the life space give working life meaning and context'

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