



Entry and exit as embodied career choice in professional sport



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ABSTRACT

The concept of an embodied career draws attention to the individual, corporally, socially, culturally and institutionally located in relationship with work. Career theories have tended to focus on psychological and social variables and measurements that narrow understanding of contexts and agency. It is thus timely to consider a more holistic approach to understanding contemporary careers as embodied processes. The paper works on three levels; first as an empirical illustration of professional sports careers as short-term careers, second as an application of Bourdieu's habitus to understand the relationship between social fields and accounts of career choice and, third in order to draw parallels with the embodied nature of work in a more general sense. Utilising empirical material from a study of elite UK professional rugby players, it is argued that understanding an embodied-career resonates with present concerns regarding career patterns of short-term contracts, which require the individual to be committed, flexible and adaptable, be prepared for exit, and yet remain immersed and dedicated to the current sphere of employment. It is proposed that this kind of immersion requires alternatives to be, temporarily at least, silenced and in this context renders the accrual of bodily capital as fit, but only temporarily fit for purpose.

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1. Introduction

In keeping with recent calls for new developments in career theory (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011) and a plea to move beyond variable and measurement driven career research (Van Maanen, 2015) the paper contributes to a better understanding of career choices. Career theorists who are interested in the individual in intersection with the institution of work tend to concentrate, in the main, on traditional work places. In contrast, this is a study of a professional sports organization – or more specifically the players who work for this organization. Empirical material from interviews with players who are performing at an elite level in a professional UK, Rugby League Football Club, hereafter given the pseudonym Northern Knights, is drawn upon. By deciding to discuss careers of sports professionals, it firmly locates interest in the notion of sport as work. It is argued that the context of sport offers an unusual viewpoint from which to observe how norms of a career are produced.

The theoretical background to the study draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Bourdieu's ideas facilitate an understanding of career as set within an intersection of 'societal history and individual biography' (Grandjean, 1981, p. 1057) and thus provides a useful framework to better understand careers (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011).

It is not the intention of the paper to provide a comprehensive account of Bourdieu's concepts, (see Ozbilgin and Tatli (2005) for an accessible summary), however it is argued that the application of the concept of habitus is of particular interest to career theorists (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Arnkelsson, 2013) as it provides a perspective which looks at career choice as both embodied and institutionalised. In basic terms, habitus provides strategies for individuals to act in social interactive spaces. While the spaces provide structuring conditions, the concept of habitus allows room for individual improvisation. Furthermore, choices, or accounts of choices, are selected from a range of possibilities whereby individuals' social histories enable them to perceive what is possible. Hence, career choices and

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their justifications are veiled, framed or couched within what is perceived to be appropriate to say. This is of interest to career scholars as an increased awareness of social and individual aspects of career choice enables a better understanding of structuring social forces.

In the remainder of the paper recent developments in career theory in sport and work contexts will be briefly examined, followed by details of the empirical context and study. The purpose of the paper is to illustrate some ordinarily invisible logics of embodied, temporary, careers through a study of professional athletes' accounts. This is achieved by utilising Bourdieu's theoretical concepts and applying them to accounts of career choice and hence demonstrating their wider applicability to career theorists. Career choice is demonstrated to be a socially-located phenomenon that is constructed from the resources available in a given context, from within a habitus crafted from past experience. Concerns with legitimacy or coherence feature in post-hoc choice rationalizations and predicted choice is constrained where a silent future self is deemed as unimaginable.

2. Career theories in professional sport contexts

While it is not the remit of the paper to review the vast amount of literature produced from within the sociology of sport, some key findings which are of particular significance to the study of careers more broadly are relevant. Many athletes begin competitive sport at a very early age, thus involvement in sport is reinforced by significant others. When associated with personal success this leads to a strong self-identification of the self as athlete (Baillie, 1993, p. 400). It has been suggested that the level of dedication and commitment required thereafter may result in a premature narrowing of focus with academic and social goals being subordinated to athletic achievement, hence a potential lack of consideration of alternative career options (Blann, 1985) and limits to opportunities for the development of alternative selves (Coakley, 1992; Lavalley, 2005). From career development studies Gati (1986) has argued that the career development decision making model works on the understanding that the individual sequentially eliminates occupational alternatives to arrive at career decisions at different stages of their career. It can be argued, therefore, that athletes' focus on the promise of a professional sporting career may have resulted in a premature elimination of other alternatives. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that athletes identify with and acquiesce towards managerially driven precepts (McGillivray, Fearn, & McIntosh, 2005) in their drive to be picked to play. Wacquant has described this as a 'coerced affection' for the game (Wacquant, 1995b, p. 521) with a lack of awareness of the operation of a dominant logic that precludes all alternatives and thus constructs the natural order of things. What is meant by the 'natural order of things' is that, decisions around what is appropriate in certain social spaces, including workplaces, become sedimented over time, hence they have been forgotten as part of a decision process and are taken for granted as 'the way things are'. Thus, subsequent and ongoing investment in the self-as-athlete reinforces a lack of consideration of alternatives beyond the playing career. This explains to a large extent the lack of take-up of post-playing career planning (Lavalley, 2005) by some professional sports people.

In professional sport there is an inevitable end to playing at a relatively early age (around mid-thirties, or earlier), whether it occurs suddenly through injury or slowly through deterioration in motivation or skills over time, it is a transition which cannot be avoided. Scholars have argued that these are difficult transitions due to the intense identification of an athlete with their sport 'who am I if I can no longer compete' (Day, Gordon, & Fink, 2012, p. 420). Players are subsequently labelled as 'retired' or veterans' in terms of their sporting careers. Thus, it is argued that there is evidently room for potential integration around the study of difficult career transitions and their identity implications in both work and sports contexts.

Much research into career choices of sports people are post-playing career explorations. Wainwright and Turner's (2006) study of ageing ballet dancers, for example, was of dancers who were coming to the end of their careers and where increasing age provided the epiphany that encouraged dancers to reflect on their embodied habitus and career. It is suggested that physical and psychological immersion would have already been in decline for these participants, hence the kind of immersion that renders norms and practices as taken for granted or invisible would be reducing in order for the individual to begin to contemplate an alternative career path. It is timely, appropriate and unusual, therefore to interview young, currently successful and hence fully immersed, sports people who are at the height of their playing careers (playing for one of the teams in the top league in the UK); in order for them to account for their career 'choice' and to imagine/predict future non-playing selves. The study provides an example of this.

Furthermore, much of the sport career research, which looks at transitions beyond sport, relies upon interviews with past players who have experienced job loss and have coped with repeated employer change (e.g., Roderick, 2014). While these accounts are useful to understand coping mechanisms, post-play, they do not illustrate how the prevailing dominant logic holds a player 'in thrall' while rising through their playing career. It is to this omission that the paper contributes.

3. Recent developments in work career theory

It is well understood that having a career as a professional sports person has a large degree of uncertainty about it. This has much in common with contemporary work career experiences of a number of people. However, there is one certainty to this career, that is, it will end rather prematurely in comparison to other careers (in terms of life span) and will therefore require the individual to re-craft a new career and re-construct a version of their selves in order to move forward with their working lives. One role of career theorists is to explore and explain how we make sense of life transitions especially within the messy contexts of non-linear, discontinuous, careers (Sullivan, 1999), causing the non-traditional career (however defined) to be increasingly the focus of empirical research. It is suggested that basic principles around work careers apply to professional sports' careers in several ways; differences in career performances lead to differing rewards, rewards are not necessarily material and the ultimate reward is prestige or a satisfactory sense of self (Goldschmidt, 1990, p. 109).

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