



Constructing careers through narrative and music: An analysis of *Desert Island Discs*



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ABSTRACT

The generation of brand new data seems to be an unwritten rule of much social research and the career field is no exception. However, in these austere economic times, we need to urgently reconsider our research norms and to think of creative ways of doing more for less. We would argue that given the 'ordinariness' of the career concept and hence the ubiquity of career stories in the public domain, for career researchers there are many sources of data which have yet to be explored. One such source is *Desert Island Discs*, a UK BBC program which was first broadcast in 1942 and has been on air weekly ever since. For a career researcher, *Desert Island Discs* provides extensive insights into people's career lifeworlds that are all the more fascinating because they are unsullied by the researcher's own agenda. In this paper we investigate what *Desert Island Disc* data can teach us about the performative dimension of career and critically evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using publicly available datasets from popular culture in career research.

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1. Introduction

The generation of brand new data has for many years appeared as an unwritten but accepted rule of much social research, and the career field is no exception. Notwithstanding the plethora of datasets that abound, it is still seen as imperative to get into the field to collect more. However, in these austere economic times with funding for basic research increasingly difficult to secure, we need to urgently reconsider our research norms, and to think of creative ways of doing more for less. Born out of necessity, such reflection is nevertheless important if our methods are to remain critical, timely and fresh.

In recent years, United Kingdom research funders have begun to challenge prevailing research practices, and have established publicly available archives based on the data generated in the projects they support. Researchers are being encouraged to mine these datasets rather than applying to research councils for funding to collect more raw material. For career researchers, these are incredibly rich resources and will no doubt produce some excellent, highly original work. However, we would argue that given the 'ordinariness' of the career concept and hence the ubiquity of career stories in the public domain (i.e. in the print and broadcast media, literature, theater, film etc.), for career researchers there are many other sources of data which have yet to be explored and could be the basis of a fascinating, new direction in career field.

One such source is *Desert Island Discs*, a UK BBC Radio 4 program which was first broadcast on 29 January 1942 and has been on air weekly ever since. The format is simple. For each 45 minute program a 'castaway' is asked to choose eight pieces of music, a book and a luxury item to take with them to a fictitious desert island. The music is used as a vehicle for castaways to reminisce on their lives and careers — the choices they made, the people whose lives they shared and who influenced how their careers developed, wider insights into the social, economic and political contexts in which they were situated, and their thoughts and feelings about their unfolding narratives. To date (we are writing this on 10 January, 2013) over 2500 castaways have been

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interviewed from a plethora of fields, including academia; art, fashion and design; business; food and drink; military and law; music, politics and public service; travel and exploration and many others.

For a career researcher, *Desert Island Discs* provides extensive insights into people's career lifeworlds that are all the more fascinating because they are unsullied by the researcher's own agenda. As *Guardian* journalist Elizabeth Mahoney recently commented, 'When *Desert Island Discs* excels there's really nothing quite like it. Not just on radio: the program's format brings a depth to the portrait of the subject that other interviews cannot easily match (Mahoney, 2011). Of course this is not to claim that these interviews are somehow more authentic than those elicited by other means, or that they represent respondents' spontaneous outpourings. On the contrary, they are explicitly public performances, produced to be dramatic and engaging, and 'castaways' are clearly aware that their stories will be listened to by people all over the world. However, when current presenter Kirsty Young was asked whether her respondents saw *Desert Island Discs* as their 'definitive interviews' she replied:

Some people do, but I very much hope they don't. In a way that's the joy of the format: it elastically stretches around what people – I don't want to flatter myself too much here – are prepared to talk about their lives. (Mahoney, 2011).

As career researchers we acknowledge that these are the most public of performances. Whereas we typically go to significant lengths to reassure our respondents of the confidentiality of our encounter, the whole point of *Desert Island Discs* is that people are presenting their lives to millions of people. Indeed, its very public nature is one of the things that most intrigues us about using *Desert Island Discs* as data. At a recent Careers conference (2009) Professor of Education Ron Barnett defined career as the 'public working out of one's possibility in an uncertain world'. This performative aspect of career is a dimension that has thus far received relatively little coverage in the career field, despite its ubiquity.

In our daily lives we perform careers in a myriad of contexts. In recruitment and selection, training and development programs, promotion processes, marketing activities and in documents like curriculum vitae, application forms, covering letters, performance review records and marketing brochures, we frame our experience in particular ways to illuminate salient aspects of our career lives, and to obscure others. Through social media such as Facebook and Linked In we construct and reconstruct our profiles to reach out to specific communities and to show the public desirable facets of our career trajectories and identities. And even in the most informal, everyday interactions with colleagues, other people in our work communities, family and friends we, in Professor Barnett's words, 'work out our possibilities'. In other words, we perform career. However, as career researchers we have tended to skirt around this important dimension.

Our goals in this paper are therefore twofold. Based on 34 interviews with high profile scientists broadcasted between 1988 and 2011, we examine what *Desert Island Disc* data can teach us about the performative dimension of career, and about scientific careers in particular. Second, we critically evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using publicly available datasets from popular culture in career research.

In the section that follows we will briefly explain our focus on scientific careers. We will then turn to the issue of performativity. We have chosen to use Irving Goffman's, 1959 essay, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, to frame our analysis of the 34 transcripts. In this partly conceptual, partly methodological section of the paper we will explain why we see this as a particularly appropriate framework, as well as highlighting potential shortcomings. Our empirical analysis comes next. Using Goffman, we will present the data in performative terms, highlighting four key narratives scientists drew on and developed in the course of their interviews. We will also highlight the insights provided by the musical dimension of the interviews. In the discussion we examine the contribution of this research to our understanding of scientists' careers and careers more generally, as well as reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the approach.

2. Researching scientific careers

For the purpose of this paper we are focusing on scientific careers. There has been a huge amount of change in the contexts within which scientific careers are played out. In particular, changes in the organization and management of public sector science have, it has been argued, transformed the nature of scientific careers and institutions (Boden & Epstein, 2011; Duberley, Cohen & Leeson, 2007; Etzkowitz, 2002). In addition, there has been some interesting work undertaken which looks at the careers of scientists from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives (Fletcher, Boden, Kent, & Tinson, 2007; Lam, 2010; Mallon, Duberley, & Cohen, 2005). However, a review of existing studies suggests that consideration of context in exploring career accounts rarely examines the complex interrelationship between work, family (people's experiences as children, parents, grandparents etc.) early educational experiences, class and career together. We are keen to see whether *Desert Island Discs*, with its emphasis on a more holistic account of a person's life course and the use of music in the process of narrative construction, can contribute anything new to our understandings of careers over and above these more conventional approaches to research.

Thus, in this paper we are turning our gaze to the construction of careers in castaways' accounts of their lives. In contrast to research interviews which are typically instigated by the researchers' preoccupations, in this very public setting, DID accounts are arguably more reflective of participants' concerns about how they represent themselves. We propose that a focus on *Desert Island Discs* interviews will yield fruitful insights into this performative dimension. Here of course *Desert Island Discs* presenters have a central role to play – but as part of the story we are examining rather than as the person who simply elicits the story.

Although we have only just touched on it thus far, one of the critical elements in *Desert Island Discs* is of course the music. Indeed, we would suggest that the musical dimension of the program has the potential to stimulate emotional responses that are simply unavailable through other means. We are inspired by Aldous Huxley's comment, in *Music at Night* (1931), that 'After

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