



## A career roles model of career development

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### ABSTRACT

Career development is described as the interactive progression of internal career identity formation and the growth of external career significance. Argued is the need for a content model of career development where the field is dominated by process theories. A theory is put forward of career development crystallizing in the acquisition of career roles. The new concept of career roles is outlined as a descriptive tool for careers, and a model of 6 universal career roles is presented. Not jobs but career roles are proposed as units to describe careers. A first study on self- and peer-reported career roles in relation to career success and career satisfaction is reported. Career roles were measured and distinguished reliably. Results indicate that combining different career roles predicts success as well as satisfaction. Research perspectives with the career roles construct are discussed.

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Over the last decades, we witnessed the transition from organizational careers to boundaryless or Protean careers (Arthur, 1994; Baruch, 2006; Hall & Moss, 1998; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Educated individuals became entrepreneurs of their own career, building a portable repertoire of competencies to maintain and enhance their market value. They choose jobs fitting their personal goals as far as market conditions allow. Organizations use varying strategies to commit those persons they value most in the labor market and offer temporary and non-committing contracts to the easier replaceable majority. Individuals are responsible for managing their own careers, and hence for negotiating employment conditions and opportunities for further development (Sullivan, 1999). To some extent, changes in career theory accompany this transition. A career is now defined broadly as the unfolding sequence of the person's work experiences over time (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005) or in more detail as “the sequence of employment-related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person” (Arnold, 2001). Earlier notions of climbing or systematic unfolding according to some master principle have disappeared. From fixed career stages, the focus has shifted to more dynamic and interactive models of career development (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Super, 1992). The career landscape has become more complex, dynamic, and open, and career theory shows signs of moving in that direction (Richardson, Constantine, & Washburn, 2005; Savickas, 2002). However, as Sullivan noted, organizational practices still outpace career theory (Sullivan, 1999) and conceptual theory development is needed in the career field.

In this article, I analyze career development as a process of acquiring different *career roles*, in an attempt to contribute to career theory. “Career role” is a descriptive construct at the person level and the organization level at the same time. Career roles are interactive products of individual and environmental processes: the continuous development of *career identity* on the personal side and of *career significance* on the environmental side (Hoekstra, 2006). I propose a taxonomy of career roles, explicitly intended to describe the content of career positions. In the following section, I discuss the career development processes behind the model. Next, I present the model and report some empirical evidence regarding model structure.

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## Career development: identity and significance

### *Career development as identity development in work life*

Careers are important as such, above the component jobs, because their story contains essential meaning for the individual as well as for the environment. For many individuals, their career holds a large part of the meaning of life's journey, and hence of their identity (Inkson, 2007). One's identity insofar it resides in the unfolding career may be called career identity. Although for some the career identity may be self-evident from childhood or adolescence, most often, it will gradually take shape through personal experiences over the years. In Western societies, careers are no longer predestined before birth, nor is their course and meaning fixed by families or clans at an early age. Individuals largely are free to conceive their career from their own dreams and motives. Realizing career dreams will generally succeed only by handling external pressures adequately, whether by ignoring opposition, negotiating opportunities, or outperforming competitors. In such processes, career identity takes further shape and direction.

A career is conceived here as the sequence of occupational positions through the life span. The word "position" is deliberately vague: it may denote a profession, a formal job title, an organizational hierarchy level, or a reputation. A career results from many transaction processes, short-term and long-term, between personal and contextual factors. In that respect, the psychology of adult development can inform career psychology, as Savickas and Richardson noted (Richardson, 2002; Savickas, 2002). Adult development is now seen as an open and dynamic interplay of biological, cultural, and individual forces (Staudinger & Lindenberger, 2003), no longer as a fixed course along common life stages. Individual variation turns out to be at least as important as shared developmental processes. Human development over the life span is understood as a complex process of changes in the individual in function of the adaptive capacity of the organism in its environment (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001b). This increased focus on adaptivity over the life span ties in well with the theory of boundaryless careers.

Individual career development is evidently constrained by biological factors like hardwired differences in health, temperament, personality, and mental ability (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). Just as evident is the influence of environmental and cultural conditions in constraining or enlarging one's options in life for career purposes (Blustein, 2001; Correll, 2004). Beyond these factors, however, individuals have decision space to choose options in life, set their own goals, and find their own way of coping with constraints encountered (Brandtstädter, 2002; Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). Such self-regulative possibilities are not independent of biological and cultural influences, they reside in the way people handle them (Ford & Lerner, 1992). I consider the formation of one's career identity over the years to be a self-regulative process: adaptive change of self and environment in relation to each other.

### *Career identity crystallizes in commitments*

Individual career development comprehends processes in two areas: the internal adaptive process of construing a *career identity* in a responsive environment, and the gradual formation in the person's environment of a certain *career significance* fed by results and reputation. Focusing on the identity side, Fugate et al. describe career identity as a cognitive structure representing all that one has become and might become in the realm of work (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). This view uses the concept of possible selves acting as cognitive schemas regulating future-directed behavior (Frazier & Hooker, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 1986) and applies it to career behavior. The person, according to Fugate et al., is continually narrating his or her career identity to self and others, needing permanent social validation (Bruner, 2001). The idea of career identity as a continually updated and revised "work in progress" on a complex cognitive structure fits well with the identity literature at large. Identity as multiple, a more or less organized set of self-images or "selves", is broadly accepted (Frazier & Hooker, 2006; Kunnen & Bosma, 2003; Rosenberg, 1997), as is the idea of identity formation as an adaptive, transactional process.

Bosma and Kunnen review recent developmental theories on the microprocesses involved in identity formation (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001a). They conclude that identity formation is to be seen as the ongoing development of *commitments*, being stable person-context links, yet in principle permanently open for reevaluation in a kind of assessment process that validates or changes one's identity. Following this view, I interpret the formation of career identity as an ongoing process of developing and validating career commitments, being evident relations of the person to essential subjective meanings to be realized in actions and positions at work. Such meanings may be long-term goals or values but one can also be committed to a particular organization, a product, an admired hero, or an approach. The persons' motives, values, and opportunities will to a large extent determine which commitments he or she develops. Commitments make up career identity as the facets of a structure, underlining its nature as multiple. On the other hand, career identity as a cognitive structure should have sufficient unity to be able to act as a stabilizing factor in a person's development (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Lutz & Ross, 2003; Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004). How much unity is required will probably depend on personal preferences and traits. Hence, career identity can be defined as a continually updated cognitive structure comprising a person's career commitments, while maintaining sufficient unity and continuity over the life course.

### *Career development as the formation of career significance*

The internal dynamic of career motives and goals meets continually with the external dynamic of environmental influences. From early on in life, the family, peer groups, schools, clubs, and communities offer challenges and opportunities to commit, by the facts of life and through expectancies regarding the person's career (Hargrove, Inman, & Crane, 2005; Schultheiss, 2006). Environmental influences remain important for careers over the life span, albeit differently for some groups, for instance,

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