EARLY CAREER EXPLORATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THWARTED
CAREER AMBITION

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Abstract

The literature on careers is replete with examples of changes in direction and people studying fields and topics that are under-utilised in their subsequent working lives. The research reported in this paper focuses on the thwarted career plans of young Indian men and women living in the UAE who embarked on undergraduate studies in a variety of chosen subject disciplines, but since graduation have been working in a job that was not their top priority.

The paper reports the findings from an interview study of young people who graduated over the last two years and are not employed in a job specialising in their area of undergraduate study. The interview research methods focus on narrative and episodic approaches, seeking to characterise interviewees' life stories and emergent career narratives in the contexts of disappointment and unfulfilled, early ambitions. The reported interviews consist of three meetings held over a period of two months. We conclude this paper with a schematic analysis of the past and present coping strategies deployed by the participants, as expressed through their interview accounts.

Keywords: Early Career Exploration, Graduate Employment, Work Experience.

Early career exploration

This paper concentrates on the thwarted career plans of young Indian men and women living in the UAE who embarked on undergraduate studies in a variety of chosen subject disciplines, but since graduation have felt under pressure to seek, accept and remain in employment working in a job that is definitely not their first priority. These individuals may be described as somewhat unhappy with their current job or jobless situation, and are generally de-motivated with the work they are doing. Moreover, they sense both supportiveness and disappointment from various quarters such as their families, friends, student peers and past teachers, many who expected they would be doing better than they currently are.

There are a range of available theories of individual development and careers to consider for understanding individuals' early career exploration. In this study we concentrate on the subjective accounts of individuals and assume that their attempts to develop their work competences and organisational careers are blocked in ways that create difficulties with individual involvement and development as well as delimit their social and material relationships with self and others.

Our chosen area of research is relevant to stage theories of careers since it draws attention to arrested development and incapacity to transition smoothly from one stage on to another. We also view these specific individual contexts of graduate under-employment and unemployment as relational and significant for adult development perspectives on careers which 'suggest that individuals are likely to encounter characteristic concerns about self, career, and family at every life stage' (Baird and Kram, 1983, p.63).

We are not proponents however of stage models of development or career (see Dall'Alba and Sandberg, 2006 for a critique), although evidently in terms of life course the 1-3 years following graduation and young people's experiences during this time in the labour market, employment, work and leisure is a distinctive stage in their early working lives. Consistent with life stage and career stage theories, it is a period then when many people are seeking to establish themselves more firmly in the adult world. Whereas not everyone during this time in their lives will want to develop a career or for that matter take on various adult reponsibilities, for those who do it is likely to be a formative and emergent process characterised by challenges, potential alternatives and a degree of uncertainty.

> 'During the establishment phase, at the outset of a career, people are most likely to need guidance and support to launch their careers. It is generally *a period of great uncertainty about one's competence and performance potential*. The person who is in the establishment phase is

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dependent on others for learning, support, and guidance, and at the same time is likely to resist dependence as attempts to establish competence are made. It is a period of building new roles both at work and in one's personal life. Questions about competence, *whether to commit oneself to a particular organization, and what kind of family relationships* to develop are primary concerns at this stage.' (*emphasis added*)

(Baird and Kram, 1983, p. 47)

As was mentioned earlier, the time in people's life we are concerned with is the period when they have left the education system to concentrate principally on engaging in remunerated work. While many researchers will point to the inherent ambiguity and multiplicity of identities expressed and attributed to any individual during their working life (e.g, Collinson, 2003) the initial departure from full-time education on to full-time working life undeniably is an objective and structural situation in the life course of many young adults. In relation to Levinson's (1978) life stage development model (e,g., Table 1 reproduced in Ornstein, Cron and Slocum, 1989), it is a stage in one's life typically around 23-28 years old, when one is understood by others to be 'entering into the adult world'. Levinson characterised it as a life stage when tasks to be accomplished include the development of a personal identity in the world of work and non-work. A stage preceded by having already made some transition from the institutions of youth (parents, school) and followed by evaluating one's accomplishments over one's 20's and adjusting to the life structure adopted.

From the perspective of career stage models such changes represent a trial stage where the psychological activities that characterise this particular stage include identifying interest, capabilities, fit between self and work, and professional self-image. The assumption of Super's (1957) career development model is that the trial stage will be followed sequentially by an establishment stage characterised by increased commitments to career, career advancement, and growth leading to development of a supposedly 'stable work and personal life'. While the stability and sequence of progression of these stage models has often been called into question, given the comparatively mixed and varied set of jobs and mobile careers (Feldman and Ng, 2007) which many people have experienced in industrial and post-industrial economies (Collinson, 2003), many of the more recent career theories have moved objective labour market realities into the background placing greater emphasis on psychological and subjective identities.

In these environments of increased global uncertainty, newer theories of career have made more effort to depict non-linear and turbulent career paths, consequently placing higher responsibility on employees to manage their own careers and working lives, in situations of

reduced likelihood of hierarchical progression and job security (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995; Trevor-Roberts, 2006). One explanation that helps to account for this change has been a move towards an increased global and economic emphasis on serving contingent labour market demands. This seems to have occurred while policy makers in some western countries have sought to reduce the assumed responsibilities and expectations on governments and employers to manage supply considerations, thus as a result accepting highly competitive labour market conditions and scarcity of employed work as the status quo.

Two well-known examples of more recent theories that question some of the normative assumptions of stage models and address environmental uncertainty in external and internal labour markets are Hall's (1996, 2002) Protean Careerists and Arthur and Rousseau's (1996) Boundaryless Career workers. Protean Careerists are said to transfer between more objectively insecure jobs, are flexible and value freedom, believe in continuous learning, and seek intrinsic rewards. Boundaryless Career workers are understood to move between separate employers, be marketeable outside of present employers, sustained by external networks and by valuable internal information, and seek to work across organisational boundaries. Interestingly, both theories are based on the assumption that people can and will find work, perhaps even if it is not really of their choosing. Their principal labour market dynamics assume also that these careerists and workers function from a background of jobs in the past. Our research though is interested primarily in people who have not been able to find work in their chosen calling or area of undergraduate study, and have not really got their foot on the first rung of the ladder. We do not include those significant groups of people who are fortunate enough to succeed within comparatively stable, traditional career paths (Kotter, 1982) or those who are able to "job hop" successfully from one lucrative position to another (Kunda, Barley and Evans, 2002). It is focused primarily on people who often have some form of previous work history and have found some employment that is generally low paid

The significance each individual accords to work and competence development varies and everyone has other commitments such as friends, families and perhaps other sources of paid and unpaid work and leisure activities. The development of competence at work necessitates though having access to relevant work environments, and people's understanding of work will only develop comprehensively when situated within a relational context of self and other people engaging in real work. Relational commitments to the community, work organisation and its people including managers, employees, suppliers and customers, therefore will only develop significantly through young graduates gaining sufficient access to workplaces.

A recent stream of research in organisational studies is attending to how employees are innovating, appropriating knowledge, pursuing career advancement and maintaining their employability through pragmatic and opportunistic moves in the internal (Anand, Gardner and Morris, 2007; Morris, 2001) and on the external, labour markets. This area of work concentrates mostly on exercise of individual agency in the workplace (Kamoche and Mueller, 1998; Pinnington, Morris and Pinnington, 2003; Pinnington, Kamoche and Suseno, 2009). Kamoche, Pang and Wong's (2011) study of career development and knowledge appropriation highlights employees' pragmatic tactics and strategies such as withholding knowledge deployed as leverage for career advancement and conditional conformity to their current employment conditions. Kamoche et al. (2011) cite the view of Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips (2006: 264) who advocate in favour of more pluralistic conceptualisations of organisations, employment and socialised agency cautioning their readers to remember that in asymmetric power relationships 'the modalities of power that can operate on the self are many and varied (including at least authority, seduction, coercion, and manipulation), and thus should not be reduced to any essential category, such as domination.' While these actual and potential employment relationships are likely to be relevant to employees who are at an early stage of career exploration, we will argue that they are nevertheless characterised by a situation of relative disadvantage since they have fewer opportunities to develop their work competences and advance their careers. We therefore are interested in how our category of young worker appropriates knowledge and seeks to derive rewards from work in an early career context of asymmetric power relationship with employing organisations, unfulfilled expectation and limited immediate job prospects.

Competence development in contexts of under-employment

A point of departure for this research on competence is the idea that managers and employees consistently face various physical, technical and social demands at work. These demands vary greatly across jobs and industries and such heterogeneity in the conditions of work is exacerbated by the relational complexity of many aspects of work and home life, meaning that individuals both encounter and enact multiple and conflicting identities, inside and outside of work.

An area of relative stability, however, within the dynamic social complexity of work we contend is that competence involves specific ways of being and understanding (Sandberg and Pinnington, 2009; Pinnington, 2011). Our theoretical perspective draws from the phenomenological tradition conceptualising competence as an ontological orientation and involved way of being that is integrated with a specific sense of self. We assume that the existential meaning of ways of being distinguish and integrate an individual's understanding

of self, work, other people and tools/things into distinct forms of competence in work performance (Sandberg, 2000; Sandberg and Targama, 2007)

To give a concrete example, Pinnington's (2011) study on the early career lawyer identifies diverse and distinct ways of being. These include particular forms of self-understanding (such as legal service provider, business advisor, professional and manager), a particular background, education and work experience, a level of identification with the occupation and its practices, and an orientation influenced by one's current position and role in the organisation (e.g., lawyer developing technical expertise– articled clerk/trainee, lawyer; lawyer developing management experience– lawyer; lawyer learning how to build the business– senior associate). They further include an understanding of work, (work as consisting of particular activities), which is based on unique and idiosyncratic clusters of work activity particular to the individual's own way of being and work practice. They also involve ways of relating to other people (e.g., colleagues, clients, support staff). There were three major relations to others identified in this study, where lawyers were principally focused on self, peers or clients. The self-orientated lawyer is individualist (prioritisation of work activities of self in the company of others); the peer-focused lawyer attends more to activities such as managing others and sustaining quality relationship with peers; the client-focused lawyer concentrates predominantly on serving clients (e.g. good communicator), here the emphasis is on managing clients and clients seen as business opportunities or as a source of individual reputation (e.g. clients as social capital resources).

Sandberg and Dall'Alba (2009) argue that the phenomenological concept of life-world is central to explaining competence and competence development. Their representation of life-world is one that involves a social-material entwinement with practice worlds, ways of being (a basis for human agency), a lived body (embodied practice), a social being termed being (with) others (practice as social), and a technical plethora of tools and equipment and body extension (inclusion in practice of objects and everything 'non-human'). The example given above on the early careers of lawyers covers these, although it did not mention anything about this final dimension of the life-world concept, tools and equipment. *Work* (and non-work) activities are entwined with a wide range of practice worlds, as well as their related roles and multitude of alternative identities. *Ways of being* are distinct and holistic orientations and commitments. They can remain relatively static or will evolve and change over time such as in competence development. Occasionally, change may be dramatic such as when the individual integrates completely new areas of practice, identification and involvement. The *self* is inextricably connected with the lived body and with other people, and so the orientation to *other* is considered as a relationship of being with others.

From a life-world perspective, Sandberg and Dall'Alba (2009: 1355) contend, '.. practices are conceptualized as specific worlds in which members dwell, made up of an array of activities, people, knowledge, equipment, concerns and so on ..' Their holistic theoretical approach to competence is especially useful when considering competence development during the early career exploration of young graduates failing to obtain jobs in their chosen areas of work. Quite simply, young people's experience and development is arrested when they do not have access to work they value, as a result they become incapable of transition to more involved and integrated ways of working. The individual is ignored, as if suspended in a social arena of comparative irrelevance, being denied access to work and immersion in its social-material activities and mainstream communities of practice.

The graduate working in a low paid job can still make the best of the situation and learn some analogous social and technical skills, as well perhaps as engaging in yet further education study to keep in contact with the discipline and its areas of knowledge and ways of understanding. However, in several respects the individual is evidently not entwined in the relevant work practices, is unable to develop more sophisticated ways of being due to having few opportunities for the exercise of relevant agency and work practice, is unable to live the workplace reality as an engaged and absorbed self and is prevented from working with others. This presents a fairly grim reality but one that many people experience at some times in their lives: on the one hand we do not have the relevant background experience and therefore are not contracted to do the work, and on the other hand we are consequently unable to develop the requisite experience, and so we should anticipate to continue to be denied the opportunity in the future. While there may be various ways forwards in any individual situation, it is clear that as general secondary and higher education levels continue to rise at a pace much faster than occupations and jobs are readily available in the world's national economies and global labour markets, we suggest therefore that more creative thinking on the roles of the state, employers and education institutions needs to be undertaken than hitherto has been the case.

Method

The interview research methods focus on qualitative, narrative and episodic approaches (Flick, 2009; Reissman, 2008; Wengraf, 2001), seeking to characterise interviewees' life stories and emergent career narratives in contexts of disappointment and unfulfilled, early ambitions. The reported interviews consist of three face-to-face meetings held with the second author over a period of two and a half months (mid-May– early July 2011) as well as frequent informal communication; these meetings were supplemented by telephone and email for additional information.

All three participants have known the second author since early childhood and are longstanding friends. This relationship has its advantages and disadvantages that have been hotly debated such as Bourdieu's qualitative approach to research interviews which relies on the interviewer being seen by the interviewee as sharing the same social circumstances and similar life-world (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008, p.24; Bourdieu et al., 1999), however, over time we argue that this methodology serves to provide a credible context for trusting, open communication and collaboration.

Narrative approaches have been used in careers research (Cochran, 1990; Cohen and Mallon, 2001) and careers counselling (e.g., Bujold, 2004; Christensen and Johnston, 2003; Cochran, 1990, 1997) for over two decades. For example, Larry Cochran (1997) articulated a counselling approach based on narrative that casts the individual as the main character in their career narrative in a way that is intended to be meaningful, productive, and fulfilling. Termed 'emplotment' this approach takes a structural approach to narrative viewing them simply as composed of a beginning, a middle and an end. Meaning and plot are key elements used to compose a life history and author a future narrative. Cochran's main contribution rests in transforming narrative research into a practical counselling technique to assist people with understanding their work and careers (Trevor-Roberts, 2004).

While we do not utilise our research interviews to inform counselling interventions, we agree with Bruner's (1990) line of argument that the narrative form both represents and to some extent constitutes reality. Our research study is however interested in informing future interventions and we hope that our findings will contribute to careers research and guidance. We sympathise with Derrida's (1973) poststructuralist discursive emphasis on 'text' where reality consists of an endless web of texts representing or evoking other texts. However, the perspective adopted in our study does not present narrative as discourse and thus as (a) reality (Boje, 2001). Rather, we adopt Bruner's (1990) viewpoint that individuals' narratives are both an invitation to their narrators' subjective perceptions of events and cultural norms as well as an introduction to narratively structured personal accounts of individual intentions and assigned meanings that inevitably demand analysis and interpretation.

In particular, we work with Bruner's observation that narrative is not just about the background and actuality of how things are, but simultaneously it offers a powerful way that people relate to others how they think things should be or could be. The central question in narrative analysis is not what story was told but rather 'why was that story told *that* way?' (Reissman, 1993, p.2, original emphasis). In this research we are interested in 'personal narrative' composed of 'talk organized around consequential events' (Reissman, 1993, p.3).

This is particularly important for our subjects whose consequentiality surrounds a significant degree of stasis and lack of purposeful progress and challenge. Unlike Orr's (1996) photocopier service technicians they are prevented from participation in a job they want to do (or at least think they want). They are socially and materially unable to be simultaneously absorbed and concerned with workplace goals, systems and activities in their chosen occupation and therefore are debarred from a range of work practices such as: 'fixing the broken photocopier at hand, handling the customer in a satisfactory manner, maintaining their reputation in the community of technicians, projecting a good image of the company to the customer, and sharing their experiences with colleagues' (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011: p.341).

The second author asked a number of open-ended questions during several face-to-face, telephone and email conversations over a three months long period. The questions posed included such topics as their background, past and current temporary, part-time and full-time work, job position and work responsibilities, current employment and intended career path, job search in and outside of Dubai, what jobs were applied for, what job search was completed in the final year of university, what offers and rejections were received, what advice was given by family and friends, what work friends are doing now and how often do you socialise with them, and what job search and career development is currently being undertaken?

The participants

P1 has a BSc in Biotechnology, MSc in Medical Biotechnology, Postgraduate Diploma in Patent Law and MBA (Pharmacology Business Management and Marketing). P2 has a BA Commerce and P3 holds a BSc in Engineering.

P1 does not have a Ministry of Health licence to practice in her field of specialisation and has been unable to find work in the disciplines of her qualifications. P1 earns income from an on-line academic writing job assisting students and companies with their essays and presentations.

P2 is employed as an administrator in an area of work outside of her interests in commerce and accounting. P2 works in an advertising company engaged mainly in secretarial tasks.

P3 is currently working not as an engineer but deployed on tasks within her father's company which is a software development firm. P3 works in generalist roles including seeking new business, representing the firm to clients and prospective clients and pursuing non-payment and debt issues.

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Results

All three participants confirm that they see their qualifications as worthwhile and still hope to practice in future in the specialised area of their first degrees.

P1 perceives some benefit from her current job in developing her research skills relevant to future doctoral study. She plans to study for a PhD outside of the UAE, but has not considered employment in another country. Currently, she is looking for employed work and does not intend to continue with on-line academic writing.

P2 views her job as an administrator as having developed her skills and as a stepping stone in her career. She says that she is bound by family values not to work outside of Dubai.

P3 sees the work in her father's firm as an interim measure following failure to obtain a job in engineering. P3 wants to remain living and working in Dubai and does not want to work elsewhere. She is looking out for vacancies in engineering as well as contemplating studying for an MBA

None feel under any particular pressure from their families to engage in the work they are currently doing. They consider their work situation as principally their own choice made under difficult constraints. P1 feels that there are limited vacancies in her area of work whereas P2 and P3 say they are a large number of vacancies but most require prior work experience.

For competence development related to work, P1 sees her job as developing her writing skills but it is only part-time work from home. P2 feels her current job is not challenging or developing new skills and is therefore trying to organize a transfer to the finance department of her current company of employment. By contrast, P3 believes she has learnt a lot of new things from working in her father's company.

Interestingly, all three recall they made few efforts in their final year of study at university to find employment. They focused on their academic studies during their last year at university.

> P1: "I haven't really looked for a job during the last year of my university as I was under the impression that I would get a job really quickly, so was just waiting to complete my education completely to get a job."

P2: "I have not done anything during my last year of my university as I was keen in completing my under graduation and then pursue my MBA in finance and marketing. I was under the impression that my qualification will lead me to the job that I have always dreamt about."

P3: "I have not done anything to get a job during the last year of my university as I have heard from others and I have seen in classifies regarding the job offers that is there in my field therefore I was hoping to get a job soon after my graduation."

They all assumed that their qualification would lead to readily obtaining a job in their area of specialisation.

In relation to job search, job interviews and job offers, P1 has turned down some suitable positions due to the low salary but mainly has been offered jobs without pay, primarily as an unpaid research assistant working for professors in higher education:

".., I have been trying my level best to get a job in my research field, but due to lack of experience and MOH license I have been unable to find one. Offers that I have received for the qualification that I have got is very limited and these limited ones where either rejected by me because of the salary or because the organization was not willing to pay me."

P2 has received a large number of offers from banks and construction companies but she felt the low pay and working hours obligations outweighed the career benefit of accepting the positions:

"I have got a lot of offers from banks, construction companys, etc but the pay that the companies were offering was not sufficient enough to take up that job and moreover being the eldest in the family I have got certain responsibilities towards my family which I would like to fulfill that's why I have been waiting to get a better job with a good pay. … Along with getting a lot of offers I have also been rejected by various companies some of them reject by saying that I am overqualified or most of the time its lack of an experience."

P3 has similarly received a number of offers but in sales and some in computer engineering, but again reportedly for very low pay:

> "I have got a lot of offers as sales engineer but the offers that I have received to work as computer engineer has been very limited or the pay was really bad. Rejection was numerous because of lack of experience."

In terms of their immediate family support from families and university peer group, the influence of parents predominates. P1 describes her parents as very supportive and understanding. P2 says that her parents did not require her to work and that she does not generally take advice from friends on jobs or her career. P3 says that she considers suggestions from her family but not really her friends. The final decision all three explain is theirs and not their parents or friends.

P1 said that her friends were doing a mixture of things, studying for PhDs in other countries, and working as secretaries, administrators and recruitment consultants rather than in the area of their qualification. P2 described her friends' situations as similar to her own and P3 said that a few are still looking for a job and some have got married. P1 and P3 said that they socialise frequently with their university friends and discussed each others careers, while P2 said that she met with her university friends only occasionally.

P1 hopes in the next 5-20 years to open her own pharmacy firm in Dubai. P2 plans to reach a middle management position during the same time frame, while P3 is uncertain what will be achieved but hopes to progress up the career ladder in engineering. In particular, P1 and P2 appear to be becoming quite concerned about the lack of development with their early career. P1 says she will now take any kind of office job with low travel time and P2 is seeking a job as an accountant payable officer or accountant:

> P1: "I am still looking out for a job, at times I actually feel that I am ready to take up any job in hand that I get if the pay is good. For past 2 years now I have been searching for a job in my relevant field but I have been unsuccessful in doing so that's why I think that rather than waiting it's best for me to take up a job which is good and which is paid well."

> P2: "Job search is still going on and I am really hoping for the best. I even been thinking about applying in my home country if I am not getting a job as per my qualification in Dubai."

Discussion

It is noticeable that all three participants did not undertake any job search during their final year at university and their efforts are directed mainly to reacting to advertised job vacancies. Their career planning is very ad hoc and it is evident that P2 and P3 are benefitting from their employment circumstances involving social interaction in the workplace rather than operating like P1 in the relatively more isolated context of working from home part-time on the internet. P2 is opportunistically seeking an internal job transfer to the finance and accounting department and P3 has been assigned a broad variety of sales (winning new business contracts), accounting (debt collection and payments) and promotional roles (representing the business owner at client meetings).

Possibly, they all were unrealistic about the starting pay that they could command during their first time working in a full-time job and over the initial few years of their employment. Rates of pay for different jobs range widely in the UAE although there is generally an identifiable income range typically obtained by people in specific occupations and job roles. All three participants mentioned that their parents have been very supportive and further declared that they are much more influential than their friends. While this may be somewhat of an over-simplification of the situation, it presents several problems since it is likely that their peer group of friends and past student colleagues engaging in a similar job search have access to more relevant and current information about local work prospects. Parents often have to rely upon asking others for information and may tend to generalise too much based on their own previous experience, which will not always be relevant to current developments in the local labour market.

Taking the research participants' viewpoint on face value that their parents continue to be highly influential, then a way of increasing their adaptation to current circumstances as well as improving their job seeking and career development activities, is also to inform and educate the parents on precise details facing their children. Up-to-date labour market and job-related information on a range of job seeking activities may well be useful to them all such as the current job vacancies in different occupations, methods of recruitment and selection and contemporary standards of self-presentation and application (e.g., styles of presenting letters and curriculum vitae), as well as advice on self-disciplined approaches to job search which sustain positive attitudes, nurture resilience and facilitate coping with rejection.

Other approaches include creation of more internet and local self-help groups composed perhaps of friends, other job-seekers, junior employees and counsellors. The accounts from these three participants suggest that they are comparatively isolated socially and possibly

even might not be utilising technology tools such as phones and social media as well as the young generation are generally assumed to be readily habituated. One area of particular support that can be offered is helping the successful applicant to appraise the value of various job offers made. All three told stories of not accepting many poorly paid or unpaid offers. While a number of these offers may best be rejected some of them might have been opportunities that should not have been so readily turned down. Employment counsellors working face-to-face, on the phone and over internet can perhaps help with talking over options and assisting with processes of comparison and evaluation.

These three young adults have all, so far, failed to gain a job in their preferred area of degree specialisation although they continue to hope to do so in the future. At the time of writing, it is not known what will happen to each of them, however, it seems clear that they are socially isolated from the work context of their area of career ambition. This situation may improve either dramatically or gradually in their favour, but they do not yet appear to be doing enough to make it happen.

From the theoretical perspectives addressed in the literature review their attempts to develop their work competences and organisational careers are blocked in ways that create difficulties with individual involvement and development although only P1 is experiencing highly constrained social and material relationships with self and others during work. For P1 and P2 the formative and emergent process of competence and career development at work is characterised by insufficient challenge, insufficient alternatives and some uncertainty on how the situation will change. Consistent with Baird and Kram's (1983) adult development perspective they are in need of greater guidance and support to launch their careers in their preferred direction of specialisation. Unfortunately, in relation to Levinson's (1978) life stage development model, they are in a state of limited growth and transition away from the institutions of youth (parents and school) and are making somewhat interrupted and hesitant moves towards the development of a satisfying sense of personal identity in the world of work.

From the perspective of career stage models this trial stage of work is not offering sufficient opportunities for identifying their interests, capabilities, fit between self and work, and professional self-image. Following the assumption of Super's (1957) career development model such slow progress will delay the establishment stage said to be characterised by increased commitments and stability. These first two years following graduation do not appear to be typical of Protean Careerists since all three have not changed their job. Likewise, they do not appear to be consistent with Boundaryless Career workers since they have few marketable skills to offer employers and they are not "job hopping". Neither are

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they behaving with much apparent guile or opportunism, as suggested by Kamoche, Pang and Wong (2011).

The significance each individual accords to work and competence development varies and everyone has other commitments such as friends, families and perhaps other sources of paid and unpaid work and leisure activities. The development of competence at work necessitates though having access to relevant work environments, and people's understanding of work will only develop comprehensively when situated within a relational context of self and other people engaging in real work. Relational commitments to the community, work organisation and its people including managers, employees, suppliers and customers, therefore will only develop significantly through young graduates gaining sufficient access to workplaces and, as it was proposed earlier, they seem to be at some disadvantage since they have fewer opportunities to develop their work competences and advance their careers. P1 appears to be deferring knowledge appropriation (Kamoche and Mueller, 1998) to doctoral study, P2 is seeking to make a job transfer into the desired area of work and P3 has been developing a number of entrepreneurial business management skills, but is unable to relate these to technical and career development in an engineering occupation.

Competence development in these contexts of relative under-employment is problematic since their competence as an ontological orientation and involved way of being is integrated with a specific sense of self that they partly want to disown. Their difficulties are compounded by the incompatibility of their limited knowledge and understanding of what they should be doing with what they are doing, leading to ways of being that are not developing a positive and motivating understanding of self, work, other people and tools/things. A consequence of this limited and dissatisfying way of being is under-developed distinctive forms of competence in work performance (Sandberg, 2000; Sandberg and Targama, 2007). In summary, P1 settles for improving her writing abilities, P2 is bored and concentrates on making a job transfer, and P3 hopes that the collection of entrepreneurial skills will in some way contribute to technical development as an engineer. P3's work involves orientations to self, work and clients, whereas P1 and P2 are predominantly focused on self and a modicum of disenchantment with their work.

Their life-worlds at work are comparatively unrewarding ones involving insufficient social-material entwinement with relevant practice worlds, consequently they can exert only very limited human agency in their job situation leading to under-developed ways of being. The implications for practice are a lack of material, technical and social development in work competences. However, the situation may change for all three. P1 may embark on successful PhD research and obtain a relevant job afterwards; P2 may make the move into

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accounting and finance and thrive in this new functional work environment and P3 may find a position as an engineer and develop rapidly in project teams partly by having already obtained relevant entrepreneurial and small business management skills.

Conclusion

We conclude that these three participants require more support in establishing and developing their careers. While they may not all be able to obtain work in their area of undergraduate specialisation, it is clear that they could have increased their opportunities to do so through a focused initial job search during their final year at university, a clearer system of appraising job opportunities and job offers, and once in their first job deploying a less ad hoc and more structured approach to finding employment of their choosing. Recommendations have been made on ways that more systematic careers guidance, advice on selection and recruitment practices and data on current labour market opportunities should be given to young graduate job seekers and their families.

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