ESRC Workshop on 'Careers and Identity'

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University of St Andrews

Organizers:
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Call for Papers

That the career is one of the central 'projects of the self' in contemporary society is not in doubt (Grey, 1994). Through the study of career, we can make sense of the material and symbolic organization of the service class. Moreover, we can begin to understand the processes of identity formation undergone by the service class itself. While career is a collective project that is inescapably historical, it is also an individual project through which members of the service class narrate stories that they live by. Such narratives may be confident, affirming their role as part of an international elite. In contrast, the stories may be altogether more dystopian. Tales of nefarious colleagues and unreliable organizations reflect the angst and anxiety that for many (Sennett, 2000) are a routine, perhaps defining, part of the contemporary workplace. The career constitutes an important means of social co-ordination, it is also one of the most important stories through which people construct their identity through. The career belongs therefore to the realm of both structure and agency.

How are we to make sense of the role of the career in contemporary society? The shifts in the global economy have done much to render Goldthorpe's (1969) analysis moribund. It is also quite clear that the representation of contemporary 'networked' and 'portfolio' careers mark a qualitative shift from Weber's perfect little cog in the ever more perfect, bureaucratic machine. What became of Weber's perfect little cog? Have corporate restructuring programmes consigned him or her to the managerial mausoleum? Or, is it still at large within organizations? What of the 'portfolio career', where do its antecedents lie? Will it prove to be an historically peculiarity of the present or does it mark the emergence of a secular trend?

The objective of this workshop is to shape an agenda for the future study of careers. Building on an eclectic range of insights from extant research within business history, organization studies and sociology, the workshop will engage with the following topics:
The Historical Emergence of Careers

Conventional accounts of business history emphasise the functional requirements of modern corporations. Thus imperatives of scale and scope are used to explain the invention of many of the occupational figurations that emerged during the twentieth century. While many occupations were ushered into being by the expansion of modern corporations and the state, such accounts fall silent on the making of the professionals themselves. Recent studies (McKinlay, 2002; McKinlay and Wilson, 2004) have taken a discursive turn, emphasizing the means through which the career is constructed through a range of disciplinary devices which amount to an organizational siege of the individual.

Organizational forms

Changing organizational forms have implications for changing the notion of a career within an organization. For instance, Archetype theory has illustrated the way in which changing dominant logics are in a close elective affinity with changing careers within an organization. How are careers carved in a context of turbulent organizations?

Making Career

Recent studies (Anderson-Gough et al, 2000; Hanlon, 1999) from the sociology of professions literature have contributed much to our understanding of how professional identity is formed. The studies have demonstrated the way in which a variety of discourses can play an important role in constructing the identity of a professional (Coupland, 2001). Equally, what do we know of the rites of passage that are navigated during the course of attaining a career?

The Unmaking of Career

What do we know of the downsized? What of those for whom their career has come to an abrupt end? How are we to understand the way in which people respond to the changing of their experience of work and career (Sennett, 2000)?

Please send submissions to Chris Carter at cc67@st-andrews.ac.uk by the 1st May, 2004.

References:


