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Critical Moments and Second-chance Education Constructing Socially Excluded Women's Stories of Career Success

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Critical moments and second-chance education constructing socially excluded women's stories of career success

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This study narrates the role of education/training in the career success stories of twelve women on an Irish active labour market programme, Community Employment (CE). All from lower socio-economic groups, having early school-leaving backgrounds, and, prior to CE, were long-term unemployed. CE enhances the employability of the long-term unemployed by offering job opportunities and providing education/training. Using narrative inquiry, it understands how the women (re)construct their interpretations of their career success following critical moments of change in their lives. The study narrates the stories on a case-by-case basis according to the category of critical moment that each participant experienced and then views the chronicles via the lens of social class as mediated through the educational structure. It, therefore, specifically recognises the micro-individual and macro-social aspects of a person's interpretation of his/her career and education/training experiences. To understand the change process inherent in the stories, a theoretical construct, the fateful moment, is operationalised by examining how the critical moments evolve in to fateful moments facilitated by the structural influence of the education/training provided by the expert system of CE. The study concludes by proposing three categories of career success for this sample to take account of their altered career structures.

Keywords: career success stories; second-chance education/training; change; critical and fateful moments; social inclusion

Introduction

Active labour market policies directly support labour market (re)integration. From the 1990s onwards, European governments have viewed such policies as tools to ameliorate unemployment, especially long-term unemployment (OECD 2009). The prevention of long-term and recurrent unemployment is perceived as a major contribution towards alleviating social exclusion (OECD 2009; Spicker 2008). Social exclusion occurs when an individual is deprived of aspects of full participation in different fields, with

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consequences for other fields (Cremer-Schäfer et al. 2001). Research indicates that opportunities to engage in areas like education/training have a positive effect on domains such as employment and earnings potential, and, conversely, the absence of such gateways may have a detrimental impact (e.g. Collins, Healy, and Reynolds 2010). Studies also demonstrate that different social classes possess varying degrees of cultural capital. For example, children from higher socio-economic groups outperform their counterparts from lower socio-economic ones (Entwisle and Alexander 1993), and a positive correlation has been found between participation in higher education and parents' socio-economic background (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009). Social inclusion, the process of combating exclusion, seeks to ensure that people become integrated in the networks of solidarity and support that apply to others (Spicker 2008). Education, including second-chance education, plays a crucial role in promoting social inclusion (Brandsma 2003; Forfás 2010).

Community Employment (CE) is Ireland's principal active labour market programme (OECD 2009). It was operated by FÁS, the country's training and employment authority, at the time the study's research was conducted, but these programmes now come within the remit of the Department of Social Protection (FÁS 2011). The scheme aims to enhance the employability and mobility of the socially excluded, such as the long-term unemployed (those who have been unemployed for over one year), by offering opportunities to partake in temporary work within their communities, whilst simultaneously availing of relevant education/training. CE facilitates participants to re-enter the active workforce by breaking their experience of unemployment through a return-to-work routine, and supports access to services for those individuals experiencing social exclusion (FÁS 2011). The participants are employed by sponsor organisations, such as community groups, and their responsibilities are contingent upon the exigencies of the sponsor's business. For example, the provision of childcare for pre-school children. The participants have individual learner plans, assisting their professional and personal development through the acquisition of formal certification and the attainment of specific on-the-job work-related competencies, with the objective of pursuing a career in active employment and/or further education/training (FÁS 2011). These learner plans are an essential component of CE, as 37% of participants have completed primary-level education only (Grubb, Singh, and Tergeist 2009).

Research has been conducted on women's experiences of such programmes (e.g. Rommes, Faulkner, and van Slooten 2005) and narratives approaches have been used in similar studies (e.g. Lawy 2010). These inquiries, however, tend to focus on studying the interpretations of participants on programmes to assist their progression from school to the labour market (e.g. Kammermann 2010). This study complements and supplements the existing literature by using narrative inquiry to explore the role of

education/training in the career success stories of twelve formerly long-term unemployed women from lower socio-economic groups, who all have early school-leaving backgrounds, and are now on an active labour market programme. There is a dearth of research specifically exploring the understanding of such participants of their career success experiences (Coakley 2005; Mulhall 2011a). This study bridges this gap by examining how these women comprehend their career success before and after partaking on CE, an active labour market programme promoting social inclusion (Mulhall 2011b).

In sharing these narratives, the aim is not to generalise the findings to a wider population. The study examines how change affects career actions by exploring how individuals devise strategies that are appropriate for altered career structures (Barley 1989; Weick 2001). The objective is to gain an insight in to the complex nature of how these women (re)construct their career and education/training identity following a critical moment of change in their lives (Thomson et al. 2002, 2004). The study narrates the stories on a case-by-case basis according to the category of critical moment that each participant experienced and then views the chronicles via the lens of social class as mediated through the educational structure. It, therefore, specifically recognises the micro-individual and macro-social aspects of a person's interpretation of his/her career and education/training experiences. To understand the change process inherent in the stories, a theoretical construct, Giddens' (1991) fateful moment, is operationalised by examining how the critical moments evolve in to fateful moments facilitated by the structural influence of the education/training provided by the expert system of CE. The study concludes by proposing three categories of career success for this sample to take account of their altered career structures.

Career experiences

Career

When considering the definitions given to the career concept over the years, in parallel with the changes occurring in society, there has been a shift in terminology: from jobs to experiences and from organisational to post-organisational (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005; Dries, Pepermans, and De Kerpel 2008). Consequently, there has been a noticeable evolution in the way career has been defined. The Chicago School of Sociologists, epitomised by Hughes (1937), observe that a career consists 'objectively, of a series of status and clearly defined offices' (Hughes 1937, 409) and 'subjectively ... is the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him' (Hughes 1937, 411). Wilensky (1961) refers to career as 'a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered (more-or-less predictable) sequence' (Wilensky 1961, 523). Super (1980) defines a career

as 'a sequence of positions held during the course of a lifetime' (Super 1980, 286). A consensus seems to have emerged that the established description of career emanates from Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989, 8) as 'the unfolding sequence of any person's work experiences over time' (e.g. Arnold and Cohen 2008; Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005; Dries, Pepermans, and Carlier 2008). These shifting definitions reflect a changed employment environment, with increased globalisation, rapid technological advancements, growing workforce diversity, and the expanding use of out-sourcing and part-time and temporary employees (Sullivan and Baruch 2009).

Career scholars propose an inherent two-sidedness of the career concept (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005). The objective element emulates the publicly observable positions, situations and statuses that serve as bench-marks for gauging a person's movement through the social locale (Barley 1989), comprising predictable stages and an ordered sequence of develop-ment. For example, remuneration and hierarchical level. The subjective dimension signals the individual's own sense of his/her career and what it is becoming (Barley 1989), characterised by the personal interpretations and values that identity bestows on him/her. For example, job satisfaction and contentment with career opportunities. These two sides, the objective and the subjective, are seen to be persistently dependent (Hughes 1937) and this interdependence occurs over time (Lawrence 1996).

Career success

Career success is an outcome of a person's career experiences and involves the individual's evaluation of desirable work-related outcomes at any point during these experiences (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005). As with careers, there are two ways of viewing career success – objective and sub-jective positions. Objective career success may be represented as an external perspective that delineates tangible indicators of an individual's career situa-tion (Van Maanen 1977). It reflects shared social comprehension, rather than individual understanding (Nicholson and De Waal-Andrews 2005). Measures of objective career success may, therefore, involve factors such as occupa-tion, mobility, task attributes, income and job level (Van Maanen 1977). Subjective career success may be described as a person's internal apprehen-sion and evaluation of his/her career, across any dimensions that are impor-tant to that individual (Van Maanen 1977). As people place different values on the same issues, subjective career success consists of utilities that are only identifiable by introspection, not by observation or consensual valida-tion (Nicholson and De Waal-Andrews 2005). Measures of subjective career success, consequently, may include a person's reactions to actual and antici-pated career-related attainments across a wide range of outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom 2005). It has been suggested that the depth and breadth of the career success construct can be

harnessed by looking through both lenses simultaneously, typifying the duality and interdependence between the objective and subjective sides of career (Barley 1989; Walton and Mallon 2004).

Whether career attainments lead people to experience career success is likely to depend upon the standards against which they are appraised. Objective and subjective career outcomes may be assessed relative to personal standards (self-referent criteria) or the achievements and expectations of others (other-referent criteria) (Heslin 2005). Self-referent factors reflect an individual's career-related standards and aspirations, whereas other-referent elements involve comparisons with others. Individuals can, therefore, evaluate their career success using self-referent and other-referent criteria drawn from both the objective and subjective domains, leading to four potential outcomes (Heslin 2005):

- Objective/self-referent (e.g. my financial and promotional aspirations).
- Objective/other-referent (e.g. my colleague's pay and my social standing).
- Subjective/self-referent (e.g. my goals for work-life balance and fulfilment).
- Subjective/other-referent (e.g. my stimulation and fun relative to my peers).

Career change

Commentators contend that contemporary careers are synonymous with change and that change is a constant feature of the career experience (e.g. Arnold and Cohen 2008; Hall 1996; Mulhall 2011a; Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Research indicates that transitions have material consequences for an individual's career identity, including, for example, how people deal with role transitions (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010), organisational restructuring (Walton and Mallon 2004) and job loss (Zikic and Richardson 2007). Such transformations are particularly relevant to career research, as they are often coupled with change.

A critical moment (Thomson et al. 2002, 2004) is a particular category of change event, one that involves unplanned and unanticipated experiences around that pivotal decisions revolve (Webster and Mertova 2007). Experiencing a critical moment may have a profound effect, potentially altering a person's meaning structure, thus having implications for identity (re)construction, including career identity (Holland and Thomson 2009; Plumridge and Thomson 2003; Thomson et al. 2002, 2004). Undergoing a critical moment may trigger individuals to re-assess their career and education/training experiences (Thomson et al. 2002, 2004), possibly encouraging them to participate on a scheme to (re)enter the active labour market and/or engage in additional education/training (Brandsma 2003).

This study's approach to the identification and understanding of change in a person's career has been informed by Giddens' (1991) fateful moment. A fateful moment constitutes a theoretical construct (Thomson et al. 2002), describing 'times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences' (Giddens 1991, 113). During these moments the routines of everyday life are disrupted, thus provoking the person to consider the consequences of particular choices and actions, and so conduct a risk assessment (Giddens 1991). In doing this, he/she is likely to engage in identity work, utilise expert systems, seek advice, carry out research and develop new skills. Expert systems deploy the technical knowledge of those whose training and specialisation certify their expertise, equipping them to prescribe risk and behaviour for all aspects of life. These experts tend to be brought in as a fateful moment approaches, or as a fateful decision has to be taken, 'but it is the individual concerned who has to run the risk in question' (Giddens 1991, 114). It is the taking of control and the exercising of agency that are crucial in the conceptualisation of the fateful moment (Holland and Thomson 2009). The empowerment and skills gained through a fateful moment have important effects for self-identity because 'consequential decisions once taken will reshape the reflexive project of identity through the lifestyle consequences which ensue' (Giddens 1991, 143). Integrating the concept of the fateful moment (Giddens 1991) in to this study analysis permits an examination of the relationship between the participant's agency, a critical component of the contemporary career (Hall 1996), and how he/she interprets his/her career experiences.

Approach

Background

This analysis is part of a wider inquiry, exploring how CE participants construct, interpret and make sense of their career experiences. It is concerned with the career success stories such participants tell, particularly what personal and social resources they rely upon during periods of change. The personal profiles of the 27 respondents from seven different CE schemes in Ireland are: 24 women and three men, spanning a range of ages; all 27 are white Irish; 17 are single; 20 of them have at least one child; they have achieved various levels of educational attainment; and represent a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

Methods

Using theoretical sampling (Flick 2009) and employing a narrative research strategy, the main study collects its empirical data through episodic interviews. Narrative research is a way of comprehending experience and assists

an inquirer to interpret life as lived and to understand and make meaning of experiences and events in a person's life through their stories (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). The relevance of narrative inquiry for careers research is in its ability to assist people to make sense of their experiences, decisions and transitions (Arnold and Cohen 2008). Telling stories facilitates individuals to reconstruct the equilibrium between what they were, what they are aspiring to and the demands of their environment, aiding identity (re)construction because narrating the self changes the self (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010).

As the research examines the career experiences of CE participants, the episodic interview, a narrative technique, is an appropriate modus operandi (Flick 2009). The episodic interview yields context-related presentations about particular experiences, events and/or situations that the interviewee remembers in the form of a narrative. Routine phenomena can be analysed with episodic interviewing, as it invites respondents to tell stories that are meaningful to them (Flick 2009). Episodic interviewing is often utilised in research sites where informants may have difficulty responding to a formal line of questioning (Flick 2009). It is, therefore, relevant for studies that focus on disadvantaged members of society, whose stories have not been previously privileged, that is, told, such as CE participants.

The interviews were conducted at the participants' workplaces and were based on an interview guide designed to orient the discussion to the topical domain under consideration (career success experiences). The interviews were tape-recorded with the respondents' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The average length of an interview emanating from the main study was 38 minutes, with a range of 20–60 minutes. Regarding the twelve stories in this study, the average was 35 minutes, with the range identical to the wider inquiry.

Analysis

The analysis of narrative interviews necessitates restorying the original data, which involves reading the transcript, interpreting it to understand the living experiences and then retelling the story (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). Having collected the stories from the 27 participants in the main study, a common feature surfaced: all of the interviewees experienced a critical moment in their lives (Thomson et al. 2002, 2004) prior to engaging on CE, such as encountering a different stage in the cycle of family responsibilities, coping with bereavement, illness or parenthood, or engaging with an expert system.

The participants' narratives were worked through interpretivistically, restorying their experiences in a two-stage procedure suitable for analysing data from episodic interviews (Flick 2009). Step one entailed restorying the transcripts by charting how the critical moments in the participants' lives impacted on their interpretations of their career success and education/training experiences. Step two plotted the participants' reactions to the critical

moments by describing what criteria they used to evaluate their career success and education/training experiences, and recounting their perception of their agency, before and after these critical moments.

Findings: individual influences and critical moments

Introduction

To explore the usefulness of the approach in the understanding of individual responses to a critical moment impacting on a person's construal of their career success and education/training experiences, twelve stories are examined more closely (Mulhall 2011b). These accounts are the only chronicles from the principal inquiry that centre on women from lower socio-economic groups with early school-leaving backgrounds, who have experienced a critical moment and refer to the educational system, particularly CE, as a crucial component in their career experiences. Their stories thus provide an excellent opportunity for studying how critical moments and second-chance education influence the construction of socially excluded women's interpretations of their career success. The narratives are rendered according to the category of critical moment encountered: different stages of family responsibilities (5 stories); bereavement (4 stories); and a miscellaneous grouping, comprising the effect of illness, engagement with an expert system, and parenthood (3 stories) (Figure 1).
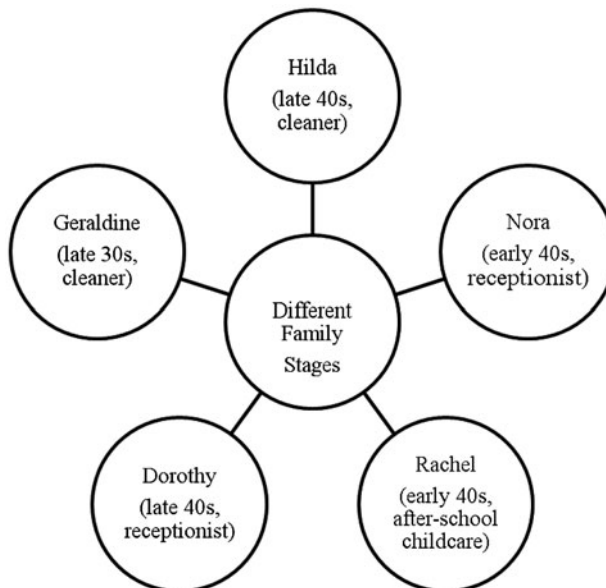

Figure 1.   Stories of different stages of family responsibilities.

Different stages of family responsibilities

Hilda (late 40s) recently returned to the workplace after a 20-year break. During this hiatus, she occasionally cleaned other people's homes. When her youngest son reached adulthood, she wanted to be financially self-sufficient rather than depend on welfare, so returned to work as a cleaner on CE. Her criterion of career success is the fun and happiness that she generates with her colleagues on CE. Hilda considers that she always had, and still has, choices in whatever she decides to do. It is her doubt about her future direction that makes her career decision difficult, but Hilda recognises that the training on CE can assist her to plan her next career move:

> I'm getting this opportunity ... to get something out of it ... for my future.

Despite her relatively young age (early 40s), Nora has worked for nearly thirty years. As her children are grown-up, she now considers it an apt time to do something for herself, so has joined CE as a receptionist. Nora characterises her previous jobs (cleaning and manufacturing) as vehicles to earn money for her family. She feels that she did not have choices regarding what jobs she applied for in the past because she did not possess qualifications. Having spent two years on CE gaining certification, Nora believes that she now has choices and can realise her career aspirations to work as a receptionist. She currently measures her career success by the training courses that she participates on and the concomitant learning she achieves on CE:

> I had no training. ... Once I do the training ... I should be able to succeed.

Rachel's (early 40s) employment history of short-term contracts in the hospitality sector has been interspersed with taking time out to care for her family. When her youngest grandchild went to playschool, she felt it was time to re-enter the labour market, thus commenced on CE as an after-school childcare worker. Rachel believes that engaging on CE has enhanced her confidence, as it allows her to do a job that she loves and partake in relevant training. For most of her career, Rachel's criterion of success was her ability to financially support her children. Recently, her career orientation changed, facilitated by her participation on CE. She now measures her career success by the pleasure she gains from performing her childcare role and the training she receives on CE:

> They [children] are happy … that's what makes me [happy]. … I've got loads of courses. … I'll have something … for the future.

Dorothy (late 40s) works on CE as a receptionist and is using the scheme to gain the qualifications that she yearned for all of her life. This decision was

prompted by her desire to assist her son with his final state examination. Prior to joining the scheme, Dorothy felt a lack of career agency and considered that she was working to subsist. Since engaging on the scheme and undertaking training, she feels that she has control over her career outcomes and views career success as learning through participating on programmes to progress herself. Dorothy believes that her future career (receptionist) will be successful, but only if she does additional courses:

> Before I just felt that I was in this rut. … [CE] gives you the extra training that you need.

Leaving school at 16 with no qualifications due to a difficult family situation led Geraldine (late 30s) down a path of unskilled labour. Following time out to look after her children, Geraldine commenced on CE as a cleaner when her youngest son went to school. Prior to joining the scheme, Geraldine worked in jobs that she disliked, evaluating her career success by her ability to cater for the economic needs of her family. CE has afforded her the chance to return to education, and, consequently, she has changed her career goal to seeking to advance herself through obtaining educational certification. This has been a long held aspiration for Geraldine, but, due to her prior personal circumstances (lone parent) and financial situation (surviving), she was not in a position to do so until now:

> It's really good the training they [CE] give. … I have more of a choice now.

Bereavement

Wendy (late 30s) left school at 14, because, as the fifth child of 10 children, remaining within the educational system was not an option. She consequently worked in basic jobs, but following the death of her brother four years ago, Wendy reassessed her life and decided to obtain qualifications as a childcare worker on CE. Her current definition of career success involves engaging on training courses to gain knowledge and certification, whereas previously it entailed not receiving negative feedback from others regarding her job performance (Figure 2). Wendy believes she had no choices in her early career because of her limited educational attainment, but now considers that she has opportunities due to her recently acquired childcare accreditation on CE:

> I wouldn't have been able to get one [career] if I hadn't done CE … because I left school when I was 14.

Following the death of her husband, Katrina (late 50s) returned to the labour market after a 35 year absence, working on CE in childcare. Until recently, Katrina did not take the initiative in her career: it was her parents who told
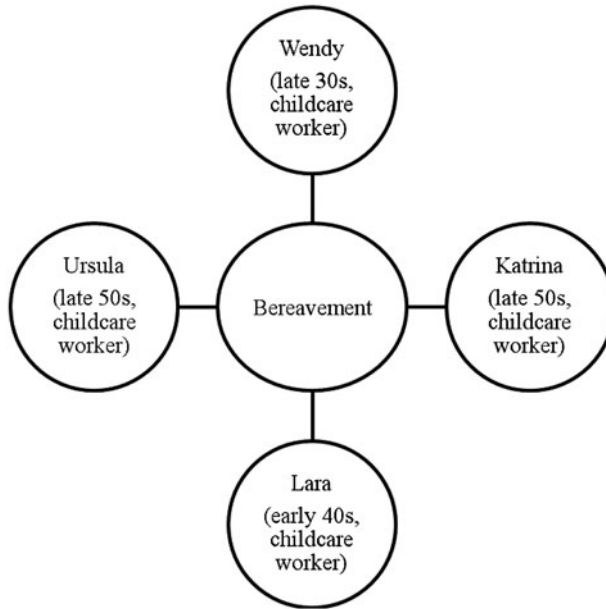
Figure 2.   Stories of bereavement.

her what job to get when she was a teenager; and it was her daughter who secured her present role following her husband's bereavement. Participating on CE has instilled a sense of confidence in her and Katrina recognises her transformation: from a person who perceived her career success in terms of what a weekly wage would purchase, to someone who now wants a fulfilling career in childcare; and from a woman lacking in self-belief, who would not submit an application for a job herself, to a self-assured person, proactively job searching. After undergoing the education/training on CE, Katrina believes that she has the skills and confidence to secure and successfully carry out a childcare role:

> I've lost an awful lot of shyness, got a lot of confidence 'cos I always worked just within the home.

Lara's (early 40s) initial career was in retail, whereupon she voluntarily took time out to be a homemaker for 19 years. In the latter part of this period, she achieved qualifications with a view to setting up her own childcare business. When her husband died suddenly, her entrepreneurial endeavours ended. Still aspiring to work in childcare, she participated on CE. Engaging on the scheme, in tandem with attaining appropriate certification, has helped to engender heightened confidence in her abilities. Lara always viewed her career outcomes in terms of her acquisition of knowledge and qualifications and feels that she had choices over what decisions she made. Participation on the scheme has provided Lara with a platform from which to launch her

childcare career, endowing her with the experience and additional training to achieve her ambition:

> There's so much help there [CE], for everyone, so much courses going on.

Ursula (late 50s) left school before she completed her final state examination, as a result of a disagreement between her father and the school. She then married and became a homemaker, combining her family responsibilities with cleaning other people's homes. Following her husband's death, Ursula joined CE as a childcare worker. A consistent thread wove through Ursula's career story until recently: the requirement to earn money to supplement her spouses' income. After her husband passed away, she joined CE to re-commence her tuition, fulfilling an ongoing desire to return to education. As this role provides training, it satisfies her current career success criteria of knowledge and qualifications, assisting her ambition to work in childcare:

> I have the choice for whatever I want to do now. … I have my qualifications. … It's on paper.

Illness, engagement with an expert system and parenthood

In a career spanning over four decades, Anna (late 50s) continually searches for fun, but did not always enjoy her jobs (predominantly operative positions) (Figure 3). The contentment Anna seeks from her life (and career)
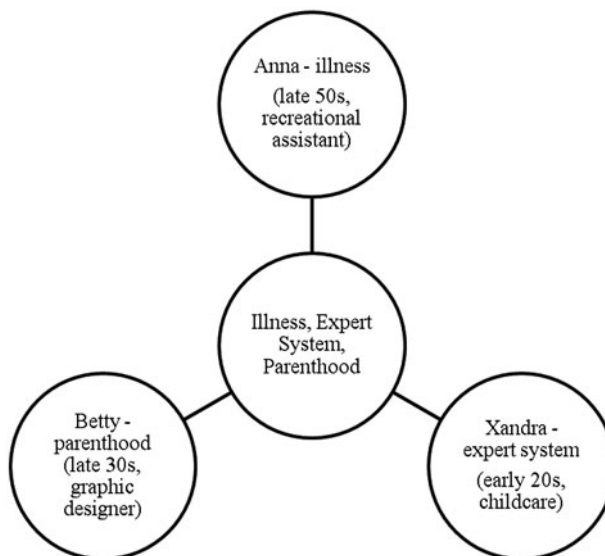
Figure 3.   Stories of illness, an expert system and parenthood.

was recently tested by a nervous breakdown, but her optimistic disposition has helped her to deal with the situation. This resulted in her re-evaluating her priorities and deciding to participate on CE. Anna is now employed as a recreational assistant in a hospital providing care to elderly patients. She finds this role fulfilling, both in terms of its operational requirements and the training provided. When asked what career success means for her, Anna cites her own happiness as the yardstick:

> I'd be much more concerned with: 'am I happy in the job I am doing?'

Xandra (early 20s) left school at 16 and was unemployed for two years. She then decided that she wanted a childcare position, so approached her local community centre requesting advice as to her career options. Fulsome in her praise of the centre, she is now employed there as a childcare worker on CE. Xandra highlights her interaction with this locale as instigating her new career in childcare. For her, career success entails learning, training and qualifications. In her opinion, Xandra has achieved two out of these three whilst partaking on CE (learning and training) and believes that she will soon realise the third (qualifications):

> I kind of need a lot of courses. … I have to do a lot of them.

In Betty's (late 30s) early adult years, she was unemployed, which was followed by a succession of operative jobs. Becoming a parent motivated her to transform her life by returning to education, as she did not want her son to witness her performing menial roles. She did a graphic design course and is now working as a graphic designer on CE. Prior to returning to college, Betty worked for money, regardless of the conditions of employment. After attaining her qualifications, this emphasis changed to self-advancement, aspiring to knowledge and learning. In her eyes, education engenders confidence, which, in turn, presents her with choices. This is a situation that she did not feel she previously possessed, but does now, facilitated by the practical experience and additional training gained on CE:

> The scheme, it has built up my confidence. … It's changed my life for the better.

Summarising twelve individual stories

Table 1 summarises the impact that the critical moments of change and subsequent participation on CE has had on the women's career stories, including the evaluation of their career success and their perception of agency over their career outcomes.

Table 1. Impact of critical moment and participation on CE on women's career stories.

Person	Career story			Evaluation of outcome of career experiences (i.e. career success)*			Evaluation of agency over outcome of career experiences (i.e. career success)		
	Critical moment	Jobs before critical moment	Career goal after critical moment and CE**	Before critical moment	After critical moment and CE	Change in evaluation	Before critical moment	After critical moment and CE	Into future
Hilda	Stage in cycle of family responsibilities (empty nest)	Retail, production positions	Uncertain of future direction	Subjective self-referent factors (fun, enjoyment with colleagues)	Subjective self-referent factors (fun, enjoyment with colleagues)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nora	Stage in cycle of family responsibilities (empty nest)	Factories, house/office cleaning, home help	Receptionist	Objective self-referent factor (earnings)	Subjective self-referent factors (knowledge, learning, qualifications)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Rachel	Stage in cycle of family responsibilities (finished caring for grandchild)	Hospitality	Professional care worker	Objective self-referent factor (earnings)	Subjective self-referent factors (enjoyment, satisfaction, pleasure)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Dorothy	Stage in cycle of family responsibilities (supporting son doing exams)	Apprentice hairdresser, retail, cafés, dry cleaners	Receptionist	Objective self-referent factor (earnings)	Subjective self-referent factors (knowledge, learning, self-improvement)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Geraldine	Stage in cycle of family responsibilities	Dry cleaners, retail,	Fitness instructor	Objective self-referent factor (earnings)	Subjective self-referent factors (knowledge,	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

	(youngest child started school)	informal childcare				learning, qualifications)			
Wendy	Bereavement (death of brother)	Factories, shops	Professional childcare worker	Subjective other-referent factor (no negative feedback from others)	Subjective self-referent factors (knowledge, qualifications)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Katrina	Bereavement (death of husband)	Factory operative	Professional childcare worker	Objective self-referent factor (earnings)	Subjective self-referent factors (enjoyment, fulfilment)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Lara	Bereavement (death of husband)	Retail	Professional childcare worker	Subjective self-referent factors (knowledge, learning, qualifications, enjoyment)	Subjective self-referent factors (knowledge, learning, qualifications, enjoyment)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ursula	Bereavement (death of husband)	Cleaner in informal labour market	Professional childcare worker	Objective self-referent factor (earnings)	Subjective self-referent factors (knowledge, qualifications, satisfaction, enjoyment)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Anna	Illness (nervous breakdown)	Factories, printers, licensed premises	Uncertain of future direction	Subjective self-referent factors (happiness, content, enjoyment)	Subjective self-referent factors (happiness, content, enjoyment)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (*Continued*).

Person	Career story			Evaluation of outcome of career experiences (i.e. career success)*			Evaluation of agency over outcome of career experiences (i.e. career success)		
	Critical moment	Jobs before critical moment	Career goal after critical moment and CE**	Before critical moment	After critical moment and CE	Change in evaluation	Before critical moment	After critical moment and CE	Into future
Xandra	Engagement with expert system (community centre)	Unemployment	Professional childcare worker	Subjective self-referent factors (learning, training, qualifications, enjoyment)	Subjective self-referent factors (learning, training, qualifications, enjoyment)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Betty	Parenthood	Factories, bakeries, newsagents delicatessen	Graphic designer	Objective self-referent factor (earnings)	Subjective self-referent factors (knowledge, learning)	No	No	Yes	Yes

*Using Helin's (2005) criteria of career success.
**CE (Irish active labour market programme promoting social inclusion).

The table outlines the critical moments encountered by the group, the type of jobs they held prior to these incidents and their career goals subsequent to these turning points and ensuing engagement on CE. Each woman perceives a more enriching future career experience because of their participation on CE: Katrina, Lara, Ursula, Wendy and Xandra aspire to be professional childcare workers; Dorothy and Nora desire to be receptionists; Betty a graphic designer; Geraldine a fitness instructor; and Rachel a qualified care worker. Anna and Hilda, however, are still uncertain as to their impending directions, but appreciate that engagement on CE will inform their decision-making process.

How the women interpret their career success before and after their critical moments is also detailed. Four individuals (Anna, Hilda, Lara and Xandra) retain the same criteria when assessing their career success. This quartet also believes that they always had agency over their career outcomes, but all recognise that CE has enhanced their control. For eight participants (Betty, Dorothy, Geraldine, Katrina, Nora, Rachel, Ursula and Wendy) the perception of their career success has changed following the critical moment and consequent participation on CE. Of this octet, seven women (Betty, Dorothy, Geraldine, Katrina, Nora, Rachel and Ursula) previously evaluated their career success using objective self-referent factors, such as earnings, but now utilise subjective self-referent ones, like knowledge (Heslin 2005). All of the eight women who have transformed their views of career success also now perceive a greater degree of control over their career experiences than previously.

To varying degrees, engagement on CE is now acting as a form of career liberation for these 12 early school leavers, all from lower socio-economic groups. Their stories illustrate how education/training on CE provides emancipation from a state of being a mere extension of a given environment to an active agent who can choose who she will be.

Discussion: structural influences and fateful moments

Introduction

The narration of these stories explores how individual critical moments of change, and subsequent participation on CE, influences the career and education/training experiences of the women. The stories are told from the perspective of what this study terms a 'narrow-angle lens', allowing the reader to distinguish the fine detail of each chronicle. Careers, however, do not present infinite possibilities for people because macro-structural factors fashion available opportunity (Arnold and Cohen 2008). What is also required, therefore, is what this study calls a 'wide-angle lens' (Mulhall 2011b), facilitating further interpretation of the chronicles in the context of the broader elements that mould career openings, choices and decisions. Education is identified from the women's narratives as a crucial macro-structural factor in

their stories, emphasising the significance that Giddens (1991) attaches to expert systems, such as the educational structure and active labour market programmes like CE, in formulating the construct of the fateful moment.

Educational structure

The narratives demonstrate the vital role that education occupies in the women's career stories. When viewed through the lens of social class as mediated via the educational system, their accounts underline that education is the key to many other exchanges: 'the most important chain of exchanges is knowledge for qualifications, qualified activity for high pay, and pay for goods and services' (Willis 1977, 64). These women classify themselves as occupying low socio-economic status: six declare they are semi-skilled; five maintain unskilled; and one says manual skilled. Their stories epitomise Willis' (1977, 107) contention that for the working class 'as the shopfloor becomes a prison, education is seen retrospectively … as the only escape'.

All of the women left school prematurely, illustrating the requirement in many families from lower socio-economic groups of the need for their young adults to secure a wage. Their careers, consequently, commenced in low-paid work, exemplifying the phenomenon of the education premium (Collins, Healy, and Reynolds 2010):

- Anna started sewing in a clothing factory at the age of 14, and then became an operative, working in laundries, factories, print companies and licensed premises.
- Betty was initially unemployed and subsequently worked in factories, bakeries, newsagents and delicatessens.
- Dorothy originally trained as an apprentice hairdresser, but left the profession, later holding various roles in supermarkets, dry cleaners and cafés.
- Geraldine picked vegetables on a farm, worked in supermarkets, shops and a launderette, and minded children in another person's home.
- Hilda was employed in retail and production positions.
- Katrina worked as a factory operative, remaining there until she married.
- Lara was employed in shop work.
- Nora held jobs in factories, house and office cleaning, and home help.
- Ursula predominantly worked in the informal labour market cleaning people's homes.
- Rachel left school at 15 and was employed in the hospitality sector thereafter.
- Wendy worked in factories and shops.
- Xandra left school at 16 and was unemployed for two years before participating on CE.

Studies indicate the role of schooling in reproducing social inequalities on the basis of class (e.g. Clancy 2003). Social class within the educational system is specifically referred to by three participants, vividly portraying how structural factors influence career and education/training experiences. Ursula (late 50s) recognises that a student's social standing impacted on how a pupil was inculcated in her school. She tells a tale of when she questioned why the bank managers' daughters and farmers' daughters were taught commerce, whilst all of the other students, including herself, received instruction in Latin. Her teacher's response was to lock Ursula in a music room for two days. When her father discovered this, he removed her from the school system:

> I said: 'are we black and they're white?' She [teacher] just grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and threw me into a music cell and I was left there all day.

Lara (early 40s) also observes the socio-economic distinction made in her school, and how it affected the way that students were dealt with. Money, or the dearth of it, shaped how a child was treated by the school hierarchy, ignored if you did not come from a family of financial means and/or status:

> School wouldn't have been happy. … I always felt, because we didn't have the money … we were chosen to be ignored.

The issue of a family's inability to pay for school fees is central to Anna's (late 50s) career chronicle. She was born in the early 1950s, so went to school prior to the implementation of free second-level education in Ireland, which was introduced in 1967 (Redmond and Heanue 2000). Even as a young teenager, Anna appreciated that her family's meagre pecuniary circumstances influenced the expectations of both her parents and her teachers, precipitating her leaving school at 14 to work in a laundry:

> We came from a poor family. … The moment you were going to be 14 you were going to work. … I think probably the teachers knew that we would be heading to the laundry.

The twelve stories illustrate how social inclusion schemes with a strong education/training component are used to transcend these educational inequalities.

Fateful moments

Building on Table 1, to ascertain whether the women's critical moments plus subsequent on CE have had material consequences for their careers, that is, if they have evolved in to fateful moments (Giddens 1991), their career

stories are cross-referenced with the principal elements of how Giddens conceptualises the fateful moment. Table 2 summarises this cross-categorisation.

Giddens (1991) maintains that eight factors need to be present to create a fateful moment – considering choices and actions, conducting a risk assessment, engaging in identity work, utilising expert systems, seeking advice, carrying out research, developing new skills, and taking control and exercising agency (Mulhall 2012). Of the 12 women, 11 satisfy all of Giddens' (1991) eight criteria. Triggered by a critical moment in their lives, these participants have had to evaluate their particular set of circumstances, research the options available, seek advice from appropriate state agencies and take a risk by moving in to an unfamiliar environment by engaging with an expert system, CE. This has enabled them to upgrade their skills and control their career outcomes, as evidenced from Table 1. Only one person, Katrina, does not fully exhibit the characteristics of the fateful moment. She did not display agency in the initial decision to engage with CE, as her daughter instigated contact with that domain. Consequently, she only fulfils five of Giddens' (1991) requirements (risk assessment, identity work, expert system, enhancement of skills and career control).

The critical moments in the women's lives have precipitated fateful moments (Giddens 1991) in their careers, and, although this has been enhanced through the expert system of CE, it has also been facilitated by their own risk taking. They all took a risk by partaking on the scheme, which enabled them to realise opportunities and control their present and anticipated future career destiny.

Career success and career change

To provide a deeper description of the participants in this study, and developing further Tables 1 and 2, the analysis sub-divides the sample based on their varying perceptions of career success following change in their lives and fateful moments in their careers. Three categories of career success are proposed, relevant to individuals, who, subsequent to a critical moment of change, are now engaging on the expert system of CE – 'advancers', 'enjoyment seekers' and 'monetarists' (Mulhall 2012).

- 'Advancers' – people who place partaking in education and training at the heart of how they interpret the outcome of their career experiences (Betty, Dorothy, Geraldine, Katrina, Lara, Nora, Ursula, Wendy and Xandra). They use subjective, self-referent criteria to assess their career success, for example, learning and knowledge. This group are analogous to those with a disposition towards learning goals to evaluate themselves and are concerned with increasing their competence (Dweck and Leggett 1988), but, in contrast to this cluster, do not pursue mastery of a task, desiring knowledge instead.

- 'Enjoyment seekers' – individuals who emphasise deriving fun and pleasure when considering the outcome of their career experiences (Anna, Hilda and Rachel). They refer to subjective, self-referent criteria when gauging their career success, for example, enjoyment and happiness. This category is similar to people with a calling orientation (Hall and Chandler 2005), but, unlike this group, only attend to fun and pleasure.
- 'Monetarists' – participants who focus on the purchasing power that their earnings can acquire when reviewing the outcome of their career experiences (previously Betty, Dorothy, Geraldine, Katrina, Nora, Rachel and Ursula could have been described as 'monetarists', but all seven have since altered their perception of career success). This typology employs objective, self-referent criteria when measuring their career success, for example, salary level. They are comparable to individuals with a job orientation (Wrzesniewski et al. 1997), but, distinct from this set, focus only on financial rewards.

The aim of these categories is to locate the women's interpretation of their career experiences within a framework of change, highlighting the continuous, evolving nature of the career concept. It underlines the impact that both transition and engagement with an expert system has on a person's career identity. The analysis supports the position adopted by Inkson and Elkin (2008, 70) of 'agency informed by structure'. This study accepts the assumption of agentic human action and self responsibility, and, similar to Inkson and Elkin (2008), it seeks to take account of the macro-social context in which people enact their careers. Structural processes, specifically CE, have been identified as significant influences on the participants' views of their career success and how they enact their career outcomes (Mulhall 2012). The dialectical relationship between agency and structure (Giddens 1993[1976]) is manifest in all of the women's stories. This association espouses that human action is at least partly pre-determined based on the varying contextual rules under which it occurs, but the structure and rules, however, are not permanent and external, as they are sustained and modified by behaviour. These actions are constrained and enabled by structures, which are, in turn, produced and reproduced by actions. This creates a situation whereby people live careers partly in response to their own constructions, but their agency is bounded because 'human beings produce society, but they do so as historically located actors and not under conditions of their own choosing' (Giddens 1993[1976], 168). The stories support this duality of structure, reinforcing the contention that, in times of change, such as after encountering a critical moment, people increasingly enact their social constraints, including their career systems (Weick 2001). The newly influential process in their lives (CE) has displaced their original, but weakened actions (unemployment interspersed with low-paid employment). Career scripts

Table 2. Cross-referencing participants' career stories with the conceptualisation of the fateful moment.

Person	Critical moment	Evaluation of career success	Evaluation of agency	Conceptualisation of the fateful moment							
				Choices/ actions	Risk assessment	Identity work	Expert system	Advice	Research	Skills	Control/ agency
Anna	Illness	Subjective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Betty	Parenthood	Objective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Lack of agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dorothy	Family responsibility	Objective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Lack of agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geraldine	Family responsibility	Objective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Lack of agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hilda	Family responsibility	Subjective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Katrina	Bereavement	Objective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Lack of agency to agency	X	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓
Lara	Bereavement	Subjective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Nora	Family responsibility	Objective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Lack of agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ursula	Bereavement	Objective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Lack of agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Queenie	Bereavement	Subjective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rachel	Family responsibility	Objective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Lack of agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Xandra	Expert system	Subjective self-referent to subjective self-referent	Agency to agency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

mediate this structuring (Barley 1989; Weick 2001), so when boundaries begin to dissolve, such as following critical and fateful moments of change, established patterns become less appropriate as guides for action, and, simultaneously, revised interactions become more habitualised, as the participants adapt their behaviour to cope with ambiguity.

Conclusion, limitations and further research

Recognising both the micro-individual and macro-social dimensions of a person's biography, this study utilises narrative research to capture the role of education/training in the career success stories of twelve socially excluded women on an active labour market programme (CE) in Ireland. It explores how the women (re)construct their interpretations of their career success following critical moments of change in their lives. To comprehend this transformation, a theoretical construct, Giddens' (1991) fateful moment, is operationalised by examining how these critical moments evolve in to fateful moments facilitated by the structural influence of the education/training provided by the expert system of CE. The suggested typologies of career success for the sample (advancer, enjoyment seeker and monetarist) are exploratory groupings, attempting to reflect the change synonymous with the contemporary career experience. This is an important contribution to careers research, as it broadens our understanding of the complex concerns facing individuals following critical moments in their lives and fateful moments in their careers. The findings contribute to bridging a gap in careers literature, specifically pertaining to the altered experiences of this particular sample of participants. It furthers our knowledge on the nature of career construction as encountered by the sample, narrating how they have taken control and exercised agency over their altered circumstances, facilitated by the expert system of CE.

Two words of caution need to be sounded. First, these women, and indeed the entire sample from which this analysis emanates, are CE participants. Partaking on the scheme is indicative of some form of prior agency, as prospective applicants must communicate with their local employment service for information about these programmes. To engage on CE suggests that the person has already taken a level of control over his/her career. The critical moment had, therefore, commenced crystallising the participants' thinking about their careers before the study was conducted, so they had previously started to exercise agency, a crucial component in the conceptualisation of the contemporary career, before they were interviewed. Second, the experience garnered from similar research (Holland and Thomson 2009; Plumridge and Thomson 2003; Thomson et al. 2002, 2004) points towards the shortcomings of one-off narratives, as there is a threshold to what can be revealed. It is recognised, therefore, that this research requires a more detailed study over a longer timeframe.

In conclusion, this study appreciates that social exclusion can occur at different points during a person's life, potentially precipitated by personal critical moments of change. Acknowledging that certain groups, such as early school-leavers from lower socio-economic groups, may be more negatively affected by these transitions (Brandsma 2003; Forfás 2010), the study advocates adopting a life cycle perspective to understanding the role of second-chance education/training as a tool in combating social exclusion (Brandsma 2003). A holistic approach to alleviating social exclusion (Forfás 2010; Tessaring and Wannan 2010), integrating, *inter alia*, labour market, education, employment, health and social protection supports, is recommended for policy-makers, requiring all stakeholders to work in partnership, thus situating social inclusion within a wider policy framework.

Notes on contributor

Having worked in human resource management and training/education positions in a variety of state, commercial and not-for-profit companies, Sue Mulhall is now lecturing in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). She is a pracademic, combining theory and practice, particularly in the field of career management. Prior to joining DIT to lecture in Human Resource Development and Leadership, she ran her own human resource training, consulting and coaching business for over a decade and previously was a human resource practitioner for 13 years. Her award winning doctorate researched the stories of career success from participants on an active labour market programme in Ireland, called CE. Her current research interests include using narrative inquiry to explore how personal transitions can potentially trigger processes of critical self-reflection, thus having material consequences for a person's evaluation of his or her career experiences. She is also a regular contributor to the Irish broadcast, print and online media on career and management issues.

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