Articles

2014

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Published online: 27 Nov 2014.

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(Re)Constructing Career Strategies After Experiencing Involuntary Job Loss

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ABSTRACT   *This research article focuses on experiences of involuntary job loss following organizational change as occasions for career (re)construction. Using narrative inquiry, it explores the career stories of four former professionals on an Irish active labour market programme assisting the long-term unemployed to transition to employment. The article portrays how, and in what ways, the participants respond when confronted with transformation. Offering an empirically grounded understanding of the character and conduct of those encountering transition with greater nuance than that currently found in the literature, the article comprehends the approach that the former professionals use to (re)construct their career strategies. By integrating the concepts of the fateful moment and sensemaking, the article locates career identity within its wider societal and organizational contexts. It outlines the reactions of the professionals to the involuntary job loss by describing the criteria they use to evaluate their career success ('envisionment') and recounting their perception of control over their career outcomes ('enactment'). The article identifies four possible career (re)construction strategies – changed envisionment/changed enactment, constant envisionment/changed enactment, constant envisionment/constant enactment and changed envisionment/constant enactment. Three new categories of career success are proposed to take account of the participant's altered career scripts – 'monetarists', 'recognition seekers' and 'security seekers'.*

KEY WORDS: Career (re)construction, agency, job loss, narrative

Introduction

Commentators contend that contemporary careers are synonymous with change and that change is a constant feature of the career experience (e.g. Arnold & Cohen, 2008; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). By understanding how change affects

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career structures and career actions, individuals can devise strategies appropriate for altered career structures (Barley, 1989; Weick, 2001). This article characterizes change in terms of the degree to which events themselves are within a person's control and the degree to which he/she can respond to the ensuing circumstances (Holland & Thomson, 2009). An example of a change within the individual's sphere of influence is voluntary redundancy, as compared to a change arising from events beyond his/her remit, such as involuntary job loss (Zikic & Richardson, 2007). Reactions to such occurrences can be represented by the extent to which a person is subsequently able to attend to the change, characterized as responses embodying the presence of agency (fateful) or responses typified by the absence of agency (fatalistic) (Thomson et al., 2002).

This article focuses on experiences of organizational change processes and subsequent involuntary job loss as occasions for career (re)construction. It concentrates on how four former professionals having undergone significant change interpret their career success and career agency before, during and after transformational times. Research has been conducted on involuntary job loss (e.g. Ezzy, 2000) and narrative approaches have been used in such studies (e.g. Gabriel, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2010). These inquiries, however, tend to examine the perceptions of managerial and professional employees (e.g. Zikic & Richardson, 2007) who are currently unemployed (e.g. Blustein, Kozan, & Connors-Kellgren, 2013) or have been re-employed in the private sector (e.g. Zatzick & Iverson, 2006). This article draws on empirical material from narrative inquiries exploring the career experiences of an under-explored group in careers research, participants engaging in an Irish active labour market programme, Community Employment (Mulhall, 2012, 2014). This scheme enhances the employability of disadvantaged individuals, such as the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities. It offers opportunities to partake in temporary work within community-based not-for-profit organizations, while simultaneously availing of relevant education/training (Kelly, McGuinness, & O'Connell, 2011). The article chronicles four former professionals' career (re)construction strategies, who, following organizational restructuring and subsequent involuntary job loss and extended unemployment, now work in administrative roles in Community Employment (CE).

Using an under-researched aspect of job loss, the way people incorporate the experience of job loss into their career stories (Gabriel et al., 2010), the article charts how involuntary job loss impacts on the four participants' career experiences and interpretations of career success and career agency. Similar to other narrative studies on identity work rendering a small number of stories (e.g. Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Ezzy, 2000; Watson, 2008), the aim is not to generalize the findings to a wider population. The objective is to gain insight into the complex nature of how this quartet (re)constructs their career identity when they reflect on the outcome of their career experiences (Heslin, 2005) following a period of employment discontinuity (Weick, 1995). The article argues that their experiences provide an excellent opportunity for studying occurrences of career (re)construction for two reasons. First, scholars observe how change in people's lives may be decisive in facilitating processes of self-reflection and transformation (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Holland & Thomson, 2009; Thomson et al., 2002). Second, research also indicates that such transformation has material

consequences for career identity, including, for example, how people deal with organizational restructuring (Walton & Mallon, 2004), work and working life transitions (Billett & Pavlova, 2005), role changes (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) and job changes (Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001).

The article, therefore, is intended as a contribution to two academic fields. One addresses the aftermath of job loss (see e.g. Zatzick & Iverson, 2006; Zikic & Richardson, 2007), specifically using an active labour market programme as a site to study the impact of involuntary job loss on individuals' perceptions of their career experiences, having previously encountered discontinuity in their careers (Blustein et al., 2013). The second attends to narrative constructions of identity and career experiences (see e.g. Bujold, 2004; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), particularly focusing on the strategies employed by former professionals as they interpret and (re)construct their career experiences and career success stories in an attempt to make sense of their job loss (Gabriel et al., 2010).

Career Experiences and Job Loss

Career

When considering the definitions given to career over the years, in parallel with the changes occurring in society, there has been a shift in terminology: from jobs to experiences and from organizational to post-organizational (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). Consequently, there has been a noticeable evolution in the way career has been described. Traditionally, careers were typically characterized in terms of an individual's relationship to an employing organization (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). For example, a career was conceived of 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, p. 523) or a 'sequence of positions held during the course of a lifetime' (Super, 1980, p. 286). The Chicago School of Sociologists was a notable exception to this organizational focus, maintaining that a career consisted 'objectively, of a series of status and clearly defined offices' (Hughes, 1937, p. 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' (p. 411). Environmental fluidity, such as increased globalization, rapid technological advancements, greater workforce diversity, expanding use of outsourcing, flatter hierarchical structures, flexible employer–employee relationships and an altered work context, has created changes in how individuals enact their careers (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). To reflect this varied landscape, a consensus seems to have emerged that the established description of career emanates from Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989, p. 8) as 'the unfolding sequence of any person's work experiences over time' (e.g. Arnold & Cohen, 2008; Arthur et al., 2005; Dries, 2011).

Career scholars propose an inherent two-sidedness to the career concept (Arthur et al. 1989; Maurer & Chapman, 2013; Walton & Mallon, 2004). The objective element emulates the publicly observable positions, situations and statuses that serve as benchmarks for gauging peoples' movements through the social locale

(Arnold & Cohen, 2008), comprising predictable stages and an ordered sequence of development (e.g. remuneration). The subjective dimension signals individuals' own sense of their career and what it is becoming (Arnold & Cohen, 2008), characterized by the personal interpretations and values that identity bestows on them (e.g. job satisfaction). These objective and subjective sides are seen to be persistently dependent and this interdependence occurs over time (Arthur et al., 2005; Barley, 1989; Heslin, 2005).

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 et al., 2005; Maurer & Chapman, 2013). As with careers, there are two ways of viewing career success – objective and subjective positions. Objective career success may be represented as an external perspective that delineates tangible indicators of an individual's career situation reflecting shared social comprehension, rather than individual understanding (Dries, 2011). Measures of objective career success involve factors such as income and job level (Nicholson & De Waal-Andrews, 2005). Subjective career success may be described as a person's internal apprehension and evaluation of his/her career, across any dimensions that are important to that individual (Dries, 2011). 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 validation (Arnold & Cohen, 2008). Measures of subjective career success include a person's reactions to actual and anticipated career-related attainments across a wide range of outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Nicholson & De Waal-Andrews, 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 (Arthur et al., 1989; Maurer & Chapman, 2013; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Whether career attainments lead people to experience career success is likely to depend upon the standards against which they are appraised (Walton & Mallon, 2004). 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).

Job Loss

This article's approach to the identification and comprehension of change in a person's career, including job loss, 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, p. 113). During these fateful moments, the routines of everyday life are disrupted (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), thus provoking the person to consider the consequences of particular choices and actions, and, therefore, conduct a risk assessment (Giddens, 1991). In doing this, the individual is likely to engage in identity work. The article draws on Watson's (2008) usage of identity work, defined as

> the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives. (p. 129)

Following a fateful moment, Giddens (1991) maintains that people utilize expert systems, seek advice, carry out research and develop new skills. Expert systems deploy the technical knowledge of those whose training and specialization certify their expertize, equipping them to prescribe risk and behaviour for all aspects of life. Consequently, Giddens (1991) suggests that experts tend to be brought in as a fateful moment approaches or as a fateful decision has to be taken. The 'information derived from abstract systems may help in risk assessment, but it is the individual concerned who has to run the risk in question' (Giddens, 1991, p. 114). It is, therefore, the taking of control and the exercising of agency that are crucial in the conceptualization of the fateful moment (Holland & Thomson, 2009). The empowerment and expertize gained through a fateful moment have significant effects for self-identity because 'consequential decisions once taken will reshape the reflexive project of identity through the lifestyle consequences which ensue' (Giddens, 1991, p. 143).

Integrating the concept of the fateful moment (Giddens, 1991) into the article's analysis permits an examination of the relationship between the participants' agency, a critical component of the contemporary career (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009), and how they interpret their career experience. In examining how job loss shapes the CE participants' (former professionals) career stories, a sense of how they experience the world is captured. By comparing these transitions across the sample, and noting the relative presence/absence of agency, insight is obtained into what resources people rely upon during times of change (Holland & Thomson, 2009; Thomson et al., 2002). This article uses Weick's (1995, 2001, 2009) sensemaking to facilitate the participants' self-exploration by drawing out the impact of job loss on the construction of their career experiences. To talk about sensemaking is to refer to reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the circumstances in which they find themselves, thus there is a strong reflective quality to this practice.

Sensemaking provides a useful discussion of the dynamics that lead to the formation of situational understanding and direction, particularly in times of ambiguity and uncertainty. This approach is relevant for the article's sample, CE participants, whose engagement in an active labour market programme is preceded by organizational restructuring and ensuing involuntary job loss and long-term unemployment. Utilizing sesnsemaking enables an exploration of Weick's (2001) contention that 'interrupted career paths can be opportunities. When people make sense of these interruptions and use them as occasions for improvization and learning, 'triumphs of adaptation' occur' (p.107).

Research Method

Background

This analysis is part of a wider inquiry concerned with the career success stories of 27 participants from 7 different CE schemes in Ireland. CE is the country's foremost active labour market programme (Kelly et al., 2011). It facilitates participants to re-enter the workforce by breaking their experience of unemployment through a return-to-work routine, in addition to promoting access to employment services. The participants are employed by community-based, not-for-profit sponsor organizations and work part-time. Their responsibilities are contingent upon the exigencies of the firm's business, for example, an administrator in a local resource centre or a receptionist in a parish centre. The participants have individual learner plans that support their development through the acquisition of formal certification and the attainment of specific work-related competencies achieved on-site, aimed at acquiring active employment and/or further education/training (Kelly et al., 2011).

  The profiles of the 27 respondents from the principal study are as follows: 24 women and 3 men, spanning an array of ages; all white Irish; 17 are single; 20 of them have at least 1 child; 4 have a disability and 3 have serious health concerns; self-reporting a range of socio-economic status and possessing various educational qualifications. In relation to the four participants in this analysis from three different CE schemes, the profiles are as follows: three women and one man, covering a range of ages; all are white Irish; equal split between those who report a single or a separated marital status, with only the latter category having children; one has a disability and two have significant health issues; self-classifying from upper socio-economic classes and three participants possessing a degree (the other noting lower-secondary school attainment).

Methods

The core research explores how the 27 participants construct, interpret and make sense of their career experiences. The topical domains under consideration include the meaning of career and career success, experiences in CE, personal and social resources relied upon during transitional times, choice and agency, identity and primary/secondary socialization and perceptions of structural institutions. Using theoretical sampling (Flick, 2014) and employing a narrative research strategy,

both the main study and this article's analysis collect their 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 peoples' lives through their stories (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narrating stories encourages individuals to reconstruct the equilibrium between what they were, what they are aspiring to and the demands of their environment (Bujold, 2004; Watson, 2008). The relevance of narrative inquiry for careers research is in its ability to assist people to make sense of their experiences, decisions and transitions (Blustein et al., 2013; Ezzy, 2000). Telling stories of these experiences aids identity (re)construction because narrating the self changes the self (Creed et al., 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

As the principal research and this analysis examines the career experiences of CE participants, the episodic interview, a narrative technique, is an appropriate modus operandi (Flick, 2014). The episodic interview yields context-related presentations about particular experiences that the interviewee remembers in the form of a narrative. Routine phenomena, such as job loss (Gabriel et al., 2010), can be explored with episodic interviewing as it invites respondents to examine their everyday knowledge about a meaningful issue (Flick, 2014). This allows the researcher to compare the knowledge of interviewees from different social groups, that is, as a social representation (Flick, 2014).

The interviews were conducted at the participants' workplaces in spring 2009 and were based on an interview guide designed to orient the discussion to the matter under consideration (career experiences). The interviews were tape recorded with the respondents' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The average length of an interview in the wider study was 38 minutes, with a range of 20–60 minutes. In relation to the stories of relevance to this inquiry, the average was 47 minutes, with a range of 43–51 minutes.

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 & Rosiek, 2007). The participants' narratives are analysed in a two-stage thematic coding procedure suitable for examining data from episodic interviews (Flick, 2014): First, interpreting the single case and producing a description for each case; second, cross-checking the developed categories and thematic domains linked to the single cases for comparative purposes. A common feature surfaced during the initial manual coding process: all of the participants experienced a change in their lives prior to partaking in CE, such as coping with bereavement, illness, parenthood or job loss. To retell their stories, step one of the two-stage approach outlines their reactions to this change by describing the criteria they use to evaluate their career outcomes (i.e. career success) and step two recounts their perception of their career control (i.e. agency) before and after these changes (Mulhall, 2012).

To explore the usefulness of this methodology in the interpretation of individual responses to transformation impacting on a person's career (re)construction, four stories about job loss are examined more closely. These accounts (from Elizabeth, Isobel, Maura and Oliver) are the only chronicles from the main research that recount the occurrence of job loss following organizational restructuring, precipitating unemployment and subsequent engagement in CE. The other participants refer to different reasons leading to unemployment and CE involvement, for example, health/disability difficulties, altered personal circumstances. The renditions from this quartet of former professionals thus represent situations where the individuals have diminished agency over the outcome of their career experiences following a change process.

Stories of Career (Re)Construction

Elizabeth's Story

Career experiences before and after involuntary job loss: Elizabeth is a separated woman in her early 40s, with a young daughter. She was employed as a Tax Official by the UK Revenue, but, following her marriage break up, went to work in a Dublin hospital on a contract basis. Unexpectedly, Elizabeth became pregnant. On her maternity leave, unbeknownst to her, her position was advertised during a reorganization programme. As she was not advised of this situation, Elizabeth did not have an opportunity to apply for her own job, and, consequently, her contract was not renewed on her return from maternity leave. As an out-of-work, lone parent, Elizabeth felt financially pressurized to continue earning, and so participated in a scheme where she received a training allowance. When this course ended, she applied for her current role, as an administrator with a resource centre in CE. Her involuntary job loss and the resultant changed career direction led Elizabeth down a road that she would not have previously contemplated. She is now working in the not-for-profit sector, assisting her local community by providing training advice and support:

> My career was going okay until I had the child. ... After that my contract wasn't renewed when I came back from maternity leave. ... I sort of felt like my career was cut short. ... I had the rug pulled from me.

Evaluation of career outcomes (*career success*) *and career control* (*agency*): Elizabeth uses objective, self-referent factors in her interpretation of her career outcomes. Prior to her job loss, her criterion of career success was her ability to obtain discretionary assets, whereas now it revolves around maintaining a basic standard of living through sourcing the euphemistic permanent, pensionable job. In the past, Elizabeth considers that she had control over her career outcomes, but now she no longer feels that sense of agency, believing she has limited options and opportunities because of her family and financial situation:

> [In the past] I probably have got Botox ... Now I would be just concentrating on saving money or more practical things.

Isobel's Story

Career experiences before and after involuntary job loss: Isobel is a single woman in her late 30s whose life and career have been defined by a debilitating disease, which manifested itself at the age of 23. The disease she has is a stress-related illness, never named, labelled or identified by Isobel. It has an escalating, negative effect on her body: the more stressed Isobel becomes, the sicker she feels; the more the illness develops, the further her body deteriorates, adding to the pain she already endures. Isobel recognizes that the disease impacted on her past employment, is affecting her present career and will influence her future choices. She narrates a story of involuntary job loss following corporate downsizing. Isobel describes how her organization terminated her contract (managerial position) during a restructuring process, claiming that she could not perform physical duties due to her illness, although her responsibilities were desk-bound. Following medical advice to take a relatively flexible, part-time role, she is now in CE as an administrator in a community centre:

> When I was 23 I got very sick, so I ended up I can only work part-time. . . . Some jobs not very positive . . . cut your contract so that they don't have to keep you on. . . . They didn't trust me; they thought I would play that [illness].

Evaluation of career outcomes (*career success*) *and career control* (*agency*): Isobel's interpretation of career success is her ability to buy a house, pay her bills and to have security of tenure to allow her to achieve this (objective, self-referent factors). These are the criteria that she feels she has not yet satisfied. Isobel utilizes obligation-orientated language to illustrate her circumstances. Continuously using words such as 'must', 'have to' and 'need to', Isobel represents her present career post-illness and subsequent to the ensuing restructuring/involuntary job loss as a situation lacking in freedom. She does, however, believe that with the training she receives in CE, her future career looks brighter:

> I have to pay rent, I have to pay bills, I have a car to run. . . . There's no choice on the matter. . . . [CE] help me out with training if I want and that's a huge, massive benefit.

Maura's Story

Career experiences before and after involuntary job loss: Maura is a divorced woman in her early 50s, with two grown-up daughters. Her career story reflects three distinct phases of her life: working as a bookkeeper; a critical episode in her life involving a marital break up followed by a nervous breakdown and ensuing loss of her job and employment in CE. The majority of Maura's career was spent as a bookkeeper with one company (clothing retailer). She constantly describes her sense of fulfilment in carrying out her duties there and the status she felt attached to that position. Following the dissolution of her marriage, Maura had a nervous breakdown, and, consequently, experienced job loss when

her contract was terminated during a compulsory redundancy programme. For the past two years Maura has worked in CE as a receptionist in a parish centre.

> Unfortunately my marriage broke down and I broke down then. . . . My job got bigger and bigger and harder and harder and longer and longer. . . . I couldn't continue.

Evaluation of career outcomes (*career success*) *and career control* (*agency*): As a bookkeeper, Maura's perception of career success revolved around contributing to the profitability of her organization by producing quality work (objective, other-referent factor). She claims that she was highly successful in that role and felt in control of her career. Currently in CE, Maura feels she is doing an insignificant job in a meaningless system, and, by default, does not believe that she has a successful career. She is scathing about the system and participates in CE to maximize her monetary return, that is, to claim social protection benefits. Maura now works for money (objective and self-referent factor) and does not consider that she can influence her career, as she must remain in the welfare system to earn sufficient money to survive:

> The CE things are Mickey Mouse. . . . There's no value for me. . . . It's only for money. . . . It pays my food.

Oliver's Story

Career experiences before and after involuntary job loss: Oliver is a single man in his late 20s, who graduated with an engineering degree, but disliked the mechanics of the discipline, and so decided to commence his career in non-engineering roles in the USA. On arriving there, he worked in the hospitality sector and then in the property industry. In both scenarios he deemed himself successful, explaining that he managed a bar with 22 staff, and, subsequently, held a financial investment in a property company. For Oliver, work was all-consuming when he was stateside. While employed by the property company, Oliver became ill (unspecified nature, but possibly a nervous breakdown) during a company streamlining programme. His contract was consequently terminated and he returned to Ireland. Following a medical recommendation to assist with his recuperation, Oliver started in his CE position, working in administration with an advocacy organization for people with disabilities. Oliver metaphorically describes the impact that his job loss had on his career:

> I'd say a career is a series of rocks in a river and there're spaces between the rocks. I'd say the job is a rock. . . . I was in the water with no life jacket.

Evaluation of career outcomes (*career success*) *and career control* (*agency*): Oliver feels that he has always been instrumental in orchestrating his career outcomes. For him, career success revolves around his ability to contribute to the business bottom line and to obtain external recognition from others for his involvement in a thriving enterprise (objective, other-referent factors). Oliver believes

that he was successful in his roles in the USA, producing a financial return for his employers. He does not, however, consider that he is flourishing in his current position, principally because he lacks confidence. Oliver hopes that this situation will alter by participating in CE, using this role as a stepping stone to becoming a self-employed, property consultant. For Oliver, a job is integral to his identity, engendering confidence, something he is presently lacking due to his illness and subsequent job loss, but is seeking to rekindle:

> I had confidence all my life. . . . I became unwell and suddenly it literally vanished overnight. I don't know where it went. . . . I'm still searching for [it]. It will come back.

Four Stories

Table 1 provides a summary of the four former professionals' stories. It details the participants' evaluation of the outcome of their career experiences (career success) before and after their involuntary job losses, plus their perception of agency over the outcome of these experiences, also before and after their job losses and into the future.

Following change in their careers, Elizabeth and Maura have transformed their construal of career success, but Isobel and Oliver's interpretations remain the same. All four locate their perceptions of career success within the objective domain (Heslin, 2005). In relation to career agency (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009), the three women have revised their assessment of their sense of control, with the trio feeling that their influence has deteriorated, with only Isobel expecting a future improvement. Oliver's view of his capability to act independently in his career remains unaltered, having always felt an agentic career actor.

Analysis of Career (Re)Construction Strategies

Introduction

The participants' stories depict the disruption in the everyday routines of their lives and careers (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) when they encounter involuntary job loss and subsequent long-term unemployment emanating from corporate reorganization. It is recognized, however, that the quartet has an additional involuntary aspect to their job loss stories, that is, either illness (Isobel, Maura and Oliver) or the inclusion of maternity leave/non-renewal of contract (Elizabeth). With regard to illness, it is a significant factor in Isobel and Oliver's chronicles, but less crucial in Maura's rendition. All four accounts are characterized by a lack of individual control over the initial events (illness/maternity leave followed by involuntary job loss), but demonstrate varied responses (fateful and fatalistic) to the ensuing changed circumstances. This section explores the career (re)construction strategies the former professionals employ to interpret their career identity following involuntary job loss.

Table 1. Summary of career stories

Person (former profession)	Evaluation of career success			Perception of career agency		
	Criteria before job loss	Criteria after job loss	Impact of job loss	Before job loss	After job loss	Into future
Elizabeth (tax)	Objective self-referent (acquire assets)	Objective self-referent (basic standard of living, security of tenure)	Changed criteria	Yes	No	No
Isobel (management)	Objective self-referent (acquire assets, security of tenure)	Objective self-referent (acquire assets, security of tenure)	Same criteria	Yes	No	Yes
Maura (finance)	Objective other-referent (contribute to corporate profitability)	Objective self-referent (personal income)	Changed criteria	Yes	No	No
Oliver (engineering)	Objective other-referent (contribute to corporate profitability, financial recognition of input)	Objective other-referent (contribute to corporate profitability, financial recognition of input)	Same criteria	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Adapted from Mulhall (2014, p. 14–16).
Note: Using Heslin's (2005) criteria of career success.

Conceptualizing Individual Strategies of Career (Re)Construction

According to Weick (1995, 2001, 2009), people adapt to change in one of two ways: adjusting to it by weakening their commitments and altering their actions; or manipulating it by reaffirming their commitments and strengthening their actions. To relate these conditions to careers research, the article develops a schematic presentation (Figure 1) connecting the participants' evaluations of their career outcomes, that is, their career success, with their assessment of agency over these outcomes (Mulhall, 2012). These two parameters capture the essence of the fateful moment (Giddens, 1991) when applied to transitions in careers research for two reasons: First, including the undertaking of identity work to consider how one's career achievements are perceived during such experiences, what this article terms 'envisionment' (comparable to Weick's (2001, 2009) terminology); second, incorporating the exercising of agency over these career outcomes, what this article labels 'enactment' (similar to Weick's (1995, 2001, 2009) definition).
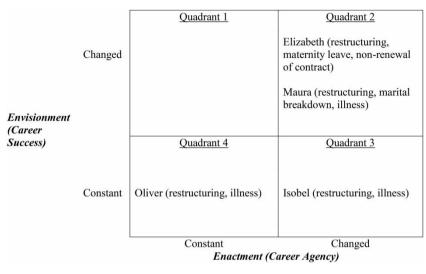
Figure 1. Strategies of career (re)construction using an envisionment/enactment matrix.
Source: Mulhall (2012).

Figure 1 builds upon Table 1, drawing upon narrative inquiry to map the impact of involuntary job loss on the participants' (re)constructions of their career experiences. Charting the individual strategies of career (re)construction, Figure 1 classifies the participants' approaches according to the influence that the job loss represents in their assessment of their career outcomes (changed or constant envisionment) and how they perceive their sense of control over these outcomes following the job loss (changed or constant enactment). To construct the envisionment axis, an individual's evaluation of the outcome of his/her career experiences before and after the job loss is compared. The enactment axis is created by considering a person's appraisal of his/her agency over the outcome of his/her career experiences, also before and after the job loss. Four strategies of career (re)construction can be distinguished in a 2×2 matrix – changed envisionment and constant enactment (quadrant 1), changed envisionment and changed enactment (quadrant 2), constant envisionment and changed enactment (quadrant 3) and constant envisionment and constant enactment (quadrant 4).

Charting Individual Strategies of Career (Re)Construction

The plotting exercise (Figure 1) yields two former professionals with changed envisionment and changed enactment (Elizabeth and Maura), one person displaying constant envisionment and changed enactment (Isobel) and one maintaining constant envisionment and constant enactment (Oliver). For example, Maura has altered her perception of career success from objective, other-referent criteria (contributing to corporate profitability) to objective, self-referent factors (earning personal income) (Heslin, 2005). She also feels a lack of control over her career outcomes, differing from her previous position of agency (Weick, 1995, 2001,

Table 2. Career (re)construction approaches within an envisionment/enactment matrix

Overall career (re)construction strategy	Transition within strategy	Person (confluence of event(s) triggering job loss)
Changed envisionment/ changed enactment (quadrant 2)	Objective self-referent to objective self-referent criteria (different factors) Feeling of agency to lack of agency	Elizabeth (restructuring, maternity leave, non-renewal of contract)
Changed envisionmen/ changed enactment (quadrant 2)	Objective other-referent to objective self-referent criteria Feeling of agency to lack of agency	Maura (restructuring, marital breakdown, illness)
Constant envisionment/ changed enactment (quadrant 3)	Objective self-referent to objective self-referent criteria Feeling of agency to lack of agency to feeling of agency	Isobel (restructuring, illness)
Constant envisionment/ constant enactment (quadrant 4)	Objective other-referent to objective other-referent criteria Feeling of agency to feeling of agency	Oliver (restructuring, illness)

Source: Mulhall (2012).

2009). Maura is, therefore, located in quadrant two (changed envisionment and changed enactment):

> I was a success in my job. ... I was very successful for 30 years. ... [Now] it suits me for to be staying inside the welfare system.

As illustrated in Table 2, there are, however, differences within quadrant two. Elizabeth has modified her views of career success, and although her criteria altered (from acquiring assets to ensuring basic living standards), they still remain under the global heading of objective, self-referent factors. Similar to Maura, Elizabeth no longer believes that she has influence over her career outcomes:

> It's [career] something I have to work at, whereas before it was just there.

To ascertain if the participants' job loss experiences have material consequences for their careers, that is, if they have evolved into fateful moments (Giddens, 1991), each persons' career (re)construction strategy is cross-referenced with the principal elements of how Giddens (1991) conceptualizes the fateful moment (Mulhall, 2012). 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, utilizing expert systems, seeking advice, carrying out research, developing new skills and taking control in tandem with exercising agency. Table 3 summarizes this cross-categorization.

Table 3. Career (re)construction strategies and the fateful moment

| Person | Overall career strategy | Transition within strategy | Event(s) triggering job loss | Conceptualization of fateful moment | | | | | | | |
				Choice/ actions	Risk assess ment	Identity work	Expert system	Advice	Research	Skills	Control/ agency
Elizabeth	Changed envisionment/ changed enactment (quadrant 2)	Objective self-referent to objective self-referent (different criteria) Agency to lack of agency	Restructuring, maternity leave, non-renewal of contract	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
Maura	Changed envisionment/ changed enactment (quadrant 2)	Objective other-referent to objective self-referent Agency to lack of agency	Restructuring, marital breakdown, illness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
Isobel	Constant envisionment/ changed enactment (quadrant 3)	Objective self-referent to objective self-referent Agency to lack of agency to agency	Restructuring, illness	X	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓
Oliver	Constant envisionment/ constant enactment (quadrant 4)	Objective other-referent to objective other-referent Agency to agency	Restructuring, illness	X	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓

Source: Mulhall (2012).

Triggered by the involuntary job loss in their lives, these four former professionals have had to evaluate their circumstances and take a risk by moving into an unfamiliar environment by engaging with an expert system (CE). This enabled them to upgrade their skills and undertake identity work. None of the participants have, however, fully satisfied Giddens' (1991) eight criteria. Two respondents (Elizabeth and Maura) comply with seven of the factors, but as they perceive their career experiences deteriorating since their job loss, they do not feel in control of their career outcomes. Maura explains that she is participating in a programme she disrespects. She asserts that those engaging in the scheme are involved in a state-sponsored welfare scam, legitimately defrauding the system by partaking in futile programmes (Mulhall, 2013). Maura is aware of her contradictory position; that is, notwithstanding that she believes the scheme is a con, she is still involved with it. Her Janus-faced approach is legitimized by her as follows: she does not value the scheme, so she 'skives' off; she witnesses other people 'skiving off', so she deems it not a personal abuse of the system, but a systemic issue and as she needs the money that the scheme provides, she engages in a system that she disrespects:

> There's a stigma attached to CE and to the welfare system. . . . I disrespect it obviously. I use it obviously, but as far as I can see, that is the structure of it.

Where illness is the crucial component of the involuntary job loss story (Isobel and Oliver's accounts), the respondents do not perceive themselves as agentic actors because they were directed by medical practitioners to partake in CE. Consequently, they did not actively seek guidance regarding their next career move, nor research the available options. Isobel's narrative indicates that she was instructed to participate in CE by the medical profession:

> I was told by [hospital name]. I was told that this was the opportunity that I should take.

In Oliver's situation, the decision to return to Ireland from the USA after becoming ill there was made by an unnamed third party (in the context of the discussion, it is probably his father in conjunction with his doctor). The reason he is partaking in CE stems from advice provided by medical personnel:

> On medical advice . . . not to go back to work full-time again for a period of time, just to make sure I'm back to full health. ... The criteria matched me starting in this position.

Identity, including career identity, is therefore not stable, but a process that develops over time and circumstance. Identity work (Giddens, 1991; Watson, 2008) is evident in the stories and strategies rendered in this article. Elizabeth, Isobel and Maura have transformed their career identity along the envisionment and/or the enactment dimensions of the career (re)construction matrix, and for Oliver, his situation has provided him with an opportunity to reaffirm his career orientations (Mulhall, 2012).

Discussion of Career (Re)Construction Strategies

Categories of Career Success

Tables 2 and 3 and Figure 1 describe the four former professionals' evolving career (re)construction strategies. These strategies involve envisionment and enactment, which exhibit Weickian (1995, 2001, 2009) properties and utilize criteria based on Heslin's (2005) conceptualization of career success. To provide a deeper description of the participants in this study, Table 4 subdivides the sample based on their varying perceptions of career success following their involuntary job loss, as derived from the interview narratives.

From this interpretation of the interviews, the three categories of career success relevant to individuals who, *inter alia*, subsequent to organizational change, are now engaging in CE are as follows:

- 'Monetarists' – persons who focus on the purchasing power that their earnings can acquire when reviewing the outcome of their career experiences (Isobel and Maura). They employ objective, self-referent criteria when measuring their career success (e.g. salary level). The category is comparable to individuals with a job orientation (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), but, distinct from this set, focus only on financial rewards. Isobel's comments typify this category:

  I have to make money, end of story. . . . Career [is] able to work at where you're going to be able to provide for yourself. ... [Career success is] my own home and basically being financially able to run my own home.

- 'Recognition seekers' – respondents who strive for acknowledgement from others when evaluating the outcome of their career experiences (Oliver). They utilize objective, other-referent criteria when benchmarking their career success (e.g. tangible measures of output). This typology is akin to those with a penchant for employing performance goals to assess themselves and seeking favourable judgements regarding their competence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). It differs in that these individuals desire to be judged competent only; incompetence does not seem to feature in their criteria. This category is exemplified by Oliver's observations regarding his success:
  Career success ... making a progression in what you want to do and feeling at the end of the day you've accomplished something. . . . When people stopped you in the street and your colleagues stopped you and said: 'well done [states his name], things are going really well'. Yeah, it's success.

- 'Security seekers' – individuals who stress the attainment of the metaphorical permanent, pensionable position when judging the outcomes of their career experiences (Elizabeth). They point to objective, self-referent criteria when gauging their career success (e.g. security of tenure). This grouping exhibits an intention to remain, but are different to the current conceptualization (Higgins & Thomas, 2001), in that they do not covet promotion. Elizabeth's remarks embody this category:

Table 4. New categories of career success following organizational restructuring and involuntary job loss

Label	Criteria	Informed by literature	Person	Career (re)construction strategy	Transition within strategy
Monetarist	Purchasing power	Wrzesniewski et al. (1997)	Isobel	Constant envisionment and changed enactment	Objective self-referent to objective self-referent criteria
	Salary/wages				Agency to lack of agency to agency
	Acquisition of goods, services and assets				
			Maura	Changed envisionment and changed enactment	Objective other-referent to objective self-referent criteria
					Agency to lack of agency
Recognition seeker	Recognition from others	Dweck and Leggett (1988)	Oliver	Constant envisionment and constant enactment	Objective other-referent to objective other-referent criteria
	Tangible or figurative measures of output				Agency to agency
Security seeker	Security of tenure	Higgins and Thomas (2001)	Elizabeth	Changed envisionment and changed enactment	Objective self-referent to objective self-referent criteria (different factors)
					Agency to lack of agency

Source: Mulhall (2012).

> A good job would be working in a pensionable job. . . . Trying to aim towards things where there might be some kind of security ... longevity of the contract.

These classifications expand our understanding regarding the complexity of concerns persons are faced with when they encounter involuntary transition points in their lives, which impact on the choices and decisions that they make. The taxonomy positions the former professionals' interpretations of their career success, including their experiences of organizational restructuring and subsequent involuntary job loss, within a framework of change. This highlights the continuous, evolving nature of the career concept, in addition to the impact that

transformation has on career identity and career (re)construction. It is particularly evident from Maura's story, as she is now a 'monetarist', but heretofore was a 'recognition seeker'.

Revised Career Scripts

The four participants' employment/unemployment experiences have been critical in prompting processes of self-reflection for the quartets' careers, but have occurred in tandem with the involvement of an expert system (CE). This highlights the dialectic relationship between agency and structure (Barley, 1989; Giddens, 1993; Weick, 2001) whereby all human action is at least partly predetermined based on the varying contextual rules under which it occurs. The structure and rules, however, are not permanent and external, as they are sustained and modified by human behaviour. These actions are constrained and enabled by structures, which are, in turn, produced and reproduced by actions (Creed et al., 2010; Watson, 2008).

The four individuals, to a greater or lesser extent, as evidenced from their transitions within the career (re)construction envisionment/enactment matrix, support this duality of structure. Their stories reinforce the contention that, in times of change and discontinuity, people increasingly enact their social constraints, including their career systems, and that the newly influential process in their lives (CE) displaces the original, but weakened actions (starting point in the career (re)construction envisionment/enactment matrix). This strengthens their actions, thus producing a situation whereby people live careers partly in response to their own constructions (Weick, 2001). Career scripts, which Barley (1989, p. 53) describes as 'plans for recurrent patterns of action that define, in observable terms, the essence of actors' roles', mediate this structuring (Weick, 2001). When boundaries begin to dissolve, such as following organizational change and ensuing job loss, established patterns become less appropriate as guides for action, and, simultaneously, revised interactions become more habitualized. In adapting their behaviour to cope with the resultant ambiguity (Mulhall, 2012, 2013, 2014), the former professionals exert agency in the face of structural constraints to maintain continuity in their lives by enacting their career experiences in ways that broadly served their personal interests and goals (Billett & Pavlova, 2005). The analysis of the participants' narratives reinforces the position adopted by Inkson and Elkin (2008, p. 70) of 'agency informed by structure'. This article accepts the assumption of agentic human action and self-responsibility, especially following periods of change. Similar to other studies (e.g. Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Blustein et al., 2013; Creed et al., 2010; Dries, 2011; Watson, 2008), it seeks to take into consideration the macro-social context in which people enact their careers. Structural processes, specifically CE, have been identified as significant influences on the former professionals' views of their career experiences and how they enact their career outcomes (Mulhall, 2012, 2013, 2014).

The article advocates that policy-makers be cognizant of the role that organizational change and subsequent involuntary job loss play in constructing individuals' interpretations of their career experiences and shaping the strategies they

adopt in response to such change. Participants on active labour market pro-
grammes, such as CE, who have become long-term unemployed following invo-
luntary job loss, require varied work experiences and education/training
opportunities to take account of their diverse job loss reactions. For example,
those who exhibit fatalistic responses (typified by the absence of agency) may
require additional support and guidance from the expert systems than those
demonstrating fateful responses (embodying the presence of agency). Prac-
titioners ought to recognize the different needs of former professionals who
have recently returned to the workplace following an extended period of unem-
ployment precipitated by organizational change and involuntary job loss; for
example, reflecting on how the experience of job loss and long-term unemploy-
ment impacts on their human resource policies, particularly resourcing and devel-
opment. Integrating labour market, education/training and employment initiatives
is recommended, requiring stake-holders to work together in partnership, thus
situating organizational restructuring and the ensuing job loss within a wider
policy framework.

Conclusion

The article contributes to the development of an exploratory framework for con-
sidering the experience of organizational change processes and consequent invo-
luntary job loss as occasions for career (re)construction. It makes four
contributions to the literature on involuntary job loss and narrative constructions
of identity and career experiences. First, it presents a narrative conceptualization
of micro-oriented research, focusing on how former professionals in active labour
market programmes tell their stories of the effects of change arising from, *inter
alia,* corporate reorganization. Second, by drawing on cases of individuals
engaged in making sense of their job loss experiences, the article illustrates the
practice of this sensemaking, portraying how, and in what ways, the participants
respond when confronted with transformation. Third, by focusing on the living
experiences of the participants, it offers an empirically grounded understanding
of the character and conduct of those encountering such transition with greater
nuance than currently found in the literature. Finally, the article understands the
approach that the former professionals use to (re)construct their career strategies
within a broader, macro-social perspective, thus locating career identity in its
wider organizational and societal contexts.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the article recognizes that there is poten-
tial for further research: conducting a longitudinal study of the four former pro-
fessionals' stories; comparing and contrasting their narratives with the other 23
respondents from the core study and expanding the inquiry to include participants
from different geographical jurisdictions.

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