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Making Sense of Our Working Lives: The concept of the career imagination

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Abstract

This essay considers how the traditional concept of career retains its power in an age of contingency, short-termism and gig work. To answer this question, it introduces and explicates the concept of the 'career imagination'. This concept has three key dimensions: perceptions of enablement and constraint, time and identity. Situated in the nexus of structure and agency, it is through our career imagination that we envisage and evaluate the progress of our working lives. Encapsulating continuity and change, our career imagination helps us to understand the enduring legitimacy of the traditional career as a yardstick by which to measure success, and the emergence of new possibilities.

Keywords

activity theory, careers, identity, legitimacy, practice theory, reputation, structuration, time

> In 2001 foot and mouth hit and obviously devastated the business completely. So it's a honeypot village and literally it was as though somebody had put a gate against it. It was incredible. There were no cars, the kids were just riding bikes up and down the road, playing football. I don't know if you remember but Blair said, 'keep out of the country' and they did! Sometimes it feels as though I've not been in charge of my own destiny to some degree. You know, you always seem to be overtaken by a series of events that lead you somewhere. (Sylvia, hotel owner; Cohen, 2014)
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> Jill was all excited about the possibility of getting a modem that would enable her to work from

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> home! Commenting on the modem story nearly twenty years later, Jill observed that 'any firm is a technology firm now. It's probably the biggest cultural shift of the last century.' (Cohen, 2014, pp. 78, 79)

> The notion of vocational public service has become passé through 'managerialising' and 'targetising' the service. What's gone is the notion of voluntary effort and endeavour that went alongside what you were being paid for. There would have been no welfare rights service created in the 1980s if the people setting it up had just turned up at 9 o'clock and left at 5 o'clock. It came to be because people actually lived the creation. That's impossible to achieve in an environment which is all about targets set from on high, and action plans on Excel spreadsheets. (Pete, welfare rights officer; Cohen, Duberley & Smith, 2019).

These quotes, taken from our own research (Cohen, 2014; Cohen et al., 2019) vividly highlight the ongoing evolution of our working lives and careers. As we write this essay, in Autumn 2020, this change feels more dramatic and closer than ever, fuelled not only by well-rehearsed, long-term social, economic and technological transformation (Grimshaw, 2020), but also by the shock of the Covid 19 crisis and impending Brexit. For some commentators such ongoing change offers the potential to forge 'boundaryless' (Tams & Arthur, 2010) and entrepreneurial careers (Liguori, Winkler, Vanevenhoven, Winkel, & James, 2020): as the Uber pitch to potential drivers goes, 'no shifts, no boss, no limits' (Kessler, 2018, p. 12). For others, though, the picture is far bleaker (Snyder, 2016), with increased insecurity and a lack of stable foundations from which to develop a work identity (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019, p. 158) and make sense of effort as part of a meaningful, ongoing project of forging a meaningful career.

Both perspectives lead us to question how the traditional concept of career, steeped in notions of bureaucracy, stability and masculinity (Gowler & Legge, 1989) retains its power in an age of contingency, short-termism and gig work (Snyder, 2016). In this essay we answer this question through the introduction and explication of the concept of 'career imagination'. Situated in the nexus of structure and agency, it is through our career imagination that we envisage and evaluate the progress of our working lives. Encapsulating continuity and change, it helps us to understand the enduring legitimacy of the traditional career as a yardstick by which to measure success, and the emergence of new possibilities as well.

In *Learning to Labour*, Paul Willis shows how education links culture and class in the reproduction of social hierarchy; in other words, how cultural and institutional processes explain how and why 'working class lads come to accept working class jobs through their own apparent choice' (Willis, 1977, p. 185). It may seem surprising to relate back to Willis's work in discussions of the relevance of the career concept to contemporary work. Willis did not talk about careers per se and probably would not position *Learning to Labour* in the careers literature. However, given its focus on how and why it is that people's working lives happen in particular ways, we see his study as making a valuable contribution to our understandings of career. As we will show, Willis's work helps us to reflect upon how the meanings individuals attach to the material world significantly direct their actions. These meanings are not handed down through generations unthinkingly, but are instead actively produced through interactions with material conditions, thereby remaking and transforming those conditions. This is important because while some career theorists (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2017) acknowledge the centrality of social structure, there have been few attempts to describe or theorize these conditions, or how they intersect with career meaning-making. This is not to suggest that career scholars ignore context (Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009; Montanari, Mizzau, Razzoli, & Rodighiero, 2020), but rather that there is limited work that expressly seeks to theorize the relationship between structure and action in the enactment of career.

In the course of our research extending over two decades, we have listened to respondents'

career stories, to their rich and detailed pictures, not only of what they did or the way they did it, but also the understandings and imperatives that underpin these actions. These pictures form the basis of what we are proposing is the career imagination, first introduced by one of us in 2014. The idea builds on Barley's (1989) structurational model of career, further developed by Duberley, Cohen and Mallon (2006), in which career is positioned as mediating between institutions and individual agency, thus conceptually linking macro structures, and structural change, with individuals' meaning-making. In this essay we extend Cohen's (2014) initial approach, examining the dimensions of the career imagination and considering its significance in the current context of uncertainty and hyper-flexibility at work.

Back in 1959, Wright Mills asked: 'In what period have so many men been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such an earthquake of change?' (Wright-Mills, 1959, p. 4). Today feels like another such earthquake. Given the apparent precarious, flexible, ever-changing nature of work, we might go on to ask why the concept of career continues to be relevant. In this essay we will argue that by examining and explicating the career imagination, we can begin to appreciate its ongoing salience. As we will show, it is through the workings of the career imagination that we begin to understand how it is that dominant ideas about what makes a legitimate career persist, and the process by which some options become obsolete, and alternatives emerge. Imagining their career, a person establishes their position in their social world: they envisage the possibilities of their working lives (and what is impossible); chart their route; and evaluate their progress.

Defining and Situating the Career Imagination

The career imagination concerns how an individual thinks about their working life. It defines and delimits what they see as possible, legitimate and appropriate in a particular landscape and timescape, and where a person positions themself within this setting. An individual's career imagination thus offers a career trajectory and prescribes (sometimes competing) criteria for success. Related concepts within the careers field include career self-efficacy and career self-concept, drawn largely from vocational psychology (Hackett & Betz, 1981; Super, 1990). However, following Barley, we situate the career imagination more sociologically, within structuration theory, in the interpretive space between structure and agency (Giddens, 1979).

As we have argued elsewhere, (Duberley et al., 2006) career is a valuable concept because it links individuals to their social contexts and highlights the mutuality of these dimensions. However, the question is, how does it do this? Barley (1989) offered a model which we see as a useful starting point. He suggested that people navigate the contexts in which they are situated through their career thinking and enactment, drawing on career scripts: 'interpretive schemes, resources and norms for fashioning a course through the social world' (Barley, 1989, p. 53). According to Barley, these scripts are social phenomena – the products of particular groupings, like organizations or occupational communities. They work as a kind of scaffolding through which people plot their course in the conduct of their working lives.

In their 1997 paper Barley and Tolbert refine Barley's earlier conceptualization, describing it first and foremost in behavioural terms and referring to specific activities and patterns of interaction. However, in this narrower focus cognitive, interpretive and discursive dimensions are largely relegated to the sidelines. Furthermore, in privileging action, important elements such as values, judgements, lifestyles and identities are missed out. And because career scripts are closely aligned with particular occupational communities and fields, they do not attend to non-work aspects of our lives that help to define and delimit our career possibilities.

Although the script concept is valuable in revealing how an individual's career actions are influenced by the norms of particular fields, its deterministic overtones underplay the importance of agency. Of course, people do deviate

from the script and Barley himself makes the point that we all behave a little differently in relation to scripts; however, such deviation serves to highlight the prescriptive nature of the concept. Considering questions about career possibilities, impossibilities and how these are associated with our own career-making, we need to look beyond these field-defined prescriptions. Through the concept of the career imagination, we seek to revive the cognitive and interpretive aspects of career that appeared in Barley's initial conceptualization. We are not suggesting that it should replace the script, but rather that the two concepts work together, recursively, within Giddens's broader structuration framework.

We are using the term 'imagination' for a number of reasons. First, we appreciate its ordinariness. Situating the concept firmly in daily life makes it relatable, gives it purpose. Indeed, we find ourselves referring to career imagination in our everyday conversations – unexceptional talk about, say, our parents' working lives or what our children see as their future possibilities. However, while this commonsense appeal is a great strength, it also raises concerns precisely because of its everyday usage, in diverse and even contradictory ways. On the one hand imagination connotes flights of fancy, thoughts that transcend everyday life and take us to new places and possibilities. However, we are not using the term in this sense. Rather, career imagination is a bounded concept, defining the limits of what a person sees as feasible and justifiable in career terms, and in so doing, also what is impossible and unsanctioned. So the career imagination is as constraining as it is enabling.

Our second reason for choosing 'imagination' is because it is linked to social and occupational contexts, but not confined to them. So, a respondent's career imagination will be associated with her training as a scientist, a social worker, or an entrepreneur, but it will also be informed by, among other things, family background, gender, class, age, geographical setting and her domestic circumstances. The career imagination, then, is based on a view of career as deeply entangled and embedded in facets of one's life and experience that transcend the boundaries of work and occupation. It is not just about what one does, or intends to do, but is about associated values and commitments, judgements, lifestyle concerns and identities.

Third, the term 'career imagination' echoes academic discourses in which 'imagination' is used to reflect a way of thinking about a subject that at once extends conventional understandings, but at the same time defines the boundaries of what is possible from that perspective, and what is not. Most notably, writing of sociology's capacity to illuminate the relationship between social structure and individual agency, Wright Mills argues that the 'sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society. That is its task and its promise' (Wright Mills, 1959, p. 6). Almost 50 years later moral philosopher Charles Taylor describes the usefulness of the concept of the social imaginary for understanding how we make sense of our worlds:

> the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. . . I speak of imaginary because I'm talking about the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends. . . What is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. . . This understanding is both factual and 'normative'; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go. (Taylor, 2002, p. 106)

The relevance of Taylor's description of the social imaginary to career is evident. He eloquently captures our interest in the everydayness of the concept of career imagination, its articulation through discourse – in the case of our research, interview accounts, but more widely through diverse genres and forms of interaction; its descriptive and normative facets

which together construct our notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy in career thinking and action. These processes of social ratification, central to Taylor's conceptualization, are likewise at the heart of the career imagination. As Willis (1977) so effectively shows, people's understandings of what careers can look like are informed by what is collectively perceived as appropriate in particular social locations.

Taylor's emphasis on collective understanding echoes Wright Mills' notion of 'issues':

> matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the . . . ways in which various milieu overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter. (Wright Mills, 1959, p. 8)

His reference to 'images, stories, and legends' can be seen as examples of these public representations. They help us to move away from a conceptualization of career as a purely individual matter, to a social one. In our own research, these shared concerns are articulated in people's accounts of their working lives. This is exemplified in our identification of the 'grand narratives' recounted by *Desert Island Discs* scientists (Cohen & Duberley, 2013) where we contrast these socially legitimate representations and their heroes and lofty ideals, with castaways' own day-to-day 'troubles'. For example, while scientists across the dataset described science as a collective endeavour and their scientific team in terms of a close-knit and supportive community, astronomer Jocelyn Bell Burnell's account of how her PhD supervisor had taken credit for her discovery told a different story.

In other work, Taylor explains how this idea of people as embedded in their social contexts is linked to their sense of identity – who they are in the world:

> To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. It is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (Taylor, 1989, p. 27)

As we will go on to explain, this notion of identity as part of knowing where one is in the world is central to the career imagination.

The career imagination sits alongside and interrelates with the career script. It has a clear position within the individual, though it is both framed and influenced by social structure. Here there are two important points to note. First, by highlighting the career imagination as situated within the individual, we are not locating it towards the voluntaristic end of a voluntarism/determinism dichotomy. Our interest is in the duality of structure and agency (Giddens, 1979), not dualism. Second, although our perspective is individual, it emerges from collective understandings and experiences. In other words, the career imagination has a powerful, social dimension. This takes us back to Willis and *Learning to Labour*, as it helps us to understand how particular groups of individuals become socialized into accepting certain forms of work as appropriate for them but does not lose sight of agency and the possibility to do otherwise.

Bloor and Dawson (1994) use Giddens' concepts of signification, domination and legitimation to shed light on this process. Signification is the way in which patterns of meaning-making are 'learned through socialisation; refined and consolidated through use. . . through continuous and on-going interaction'. For instance, respondents in the engineering study explained how early exposure to women in STEM made a career seem possible. They explained that for members of their peer group who lacked such opportunities, engineering wasn't even on their radar.

Domination and legitimation refer to the more politicized processes through which ideas, values, beliefs and ways of acting are positioned in a pecking order, working in the interests of some (rather than others), and how this leads to normative regulation – the acceptance of certain views of reality as the norm. With respect to dominance, women engineers highlighted the support of powerful people in their

organizations as being central to this decision. Legitimation is how particular arrangements come to be seen as natural, for instance, the extent to which women engineers are included, not as exceptional, but as unremarkable and uncontested. Part of the process of legitimation is the crystallization of a viable script such that people can not only see themselves in a particular role or position, but also how to get there.

Dimensions of the Career Imagination

At a macro level, we argue that the career imagination is influenced by the multi-layered structural, cultural and temporal context within which an individual is situated. The individual's perceptions of this context, experienced as enablement and constraint, is our first dimension. Our second dimension is time. Time is inherent in the concept of career, underpinning metaphors like 'story' and 'chronology' and bureaucratic modes of organizing people's working lives. However, we would argue that it is given insufficient explicit attention in Barley's framework, at best it is implicit in his concept of career scripts. As we will go on to show, temporality is prominent in the career imagination. Finally, at the level of the individual, the career imagination is influenced by an individual's identity, including affiliations, values and aspects of concern to vocational psychologists like self-efficacy (Hackett & Betz, 1981) and self-esteem (Judge & Bono, 2001). This is our third dimension.

Following Mouzelis (1989), we recognize that these levels are 'recursively instantiated as agents draw on [them] in their day-to-day social existence' (Mouzelis, 1989, p. 614). Thus, in part, identities are derived from context, or from an interpretive perspective, from people's understandings of these contexts as enabling or constraining. At the same time, identities help to constitute (reproduce/transform) these perceptions and, ultimately, the structures from which they emerge. An example here, taken from our work on the impact of external jolts on career-making, is lawyer Barbara Mills. In her interview on *Desert Island Discs*, Mills explained how early in her career, women had been precluded from senior positions in the UK Civil Service. However, when the rules changed and they started taking applications from women, she began to realize that this was something she could do. As the first woman Director of Public Prosecutions, Mills created opportunities for other women to follow in her wake, contributing to a transformation in the field, and in perceptions of what was appropriate and feasible for women in public life.

We expand on these three dimensions below.

Perceptions of enablement and constraint

The career imagination is contextually situated. That is to say, it is circumscribed by structural conditions: political, economic, social and cultural, including characteristics such as class, gender, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, etc., and the (organizational, occupational, domestic) regimes that construct and support particular arrangements. These structural conditions create patterns of career opportunity and constraint. For example, our research on scientists' careers highlights the multiple institutional contexts which they see as both constraining or enabling them in developing a career, including their branch of science, profession, family arrangements, government and national culture. Our research showed how each of these institutions incorporates rules and typifications which identify categories of social actor and appropriate behaviours (Duberley et al., 2006).

As mentioned earlier, while those working in the careers field acknowledge the importance of social structure, there have been few attempts to describe or theorize these conditions and their interplay with career meaning-making, possibly because much of the literature is rooted within approaches stemming from occupational and organizational psychology. An exception comes from the work of Duberley, Carrigan, Ferreira and Bosangit (2017) who utilized Joan Acker's (2006, 2009) ideas around gender regimes to examine the development of careers in the

jewellery industry. This work offers insight into the ways in which careers are enabled and constrained by social structures. However, we would argue that using Acker's wider concept of inequality regimes which she defines as 'loosely inter-related practices, processes, actions and meaning that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organizations' (Acker, 2006, p. 443) provides a more holistic view of how careers are shaped through the interaction of structure and agency.

The power of the inequality regime construct with respect to the career imagination lies in its identification of the multiplicity of factors – formal and informal, regulatory, material, interpretive and discursive – that impact on a person's perception of what is possible and what is beyond reach. The work of Boogaard and Roggeband (2010) focusing on inequality in the Dutch police force is instructive here. They adopt a structuration perspective derived from Heracleous and Hendry (2000) which sees structures as both discursive and material whereby 'the discursive structure (re)produces subject positions, social relationships and systems of knowledge and belief that constitute the material structure, while the material structure, in turn, provides the condition of possibility for certain discourses to emerge' (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007, p. 1375). However, in common with our earlier work on structuration and careers, they view employees as agents who are both reflexive about their situation and are able to act upon it to reinforce the status quo or create change. Significantly, the inequality regime framework considers the formal and the informal processes and the interaction of macro, meso and micro levels of analysis and how these combine to create and most importantly to continuously reproduce these patterns. Boogaard and Roggeband show how inequality regimes act together as a 'matrix of domination' (Hill Collins, 1990) which produces different experiences of inequality depending upon social location. They also highlight the paradoxical ways in which individuals who deploy positive identities to empower themselves can contribute to reproducing inequality. For example, they show how executive policewomen deploy gendered stereotypes to distinguish themselves as full-time working executives from their 'lower status' female administrative colleagues.

Of course, perceptions of what both enables and constrains career progress are not only linked to the formal, work arena. Earlier, in making the case for distinguishing the career imagination from career scripts, we argued for the need not only to attend to the interpretive realm, but also to extend our gaze beyond work and occupation, to other spheres of life. Acker's analysis helps us to see how these other spheres come together in the career imagination. Our own work on women's careers (Cohen, 2014; Duberley & Carmichael, 2016; Duberley & Carrigan, 2013) depicts a changing relationship between work and personal spheres as women move through the life course, encouraging us to look beyond the work sphere in considering how we make sense of careers and position ourselves within these meaning systems. For example, our study of 'mumpreneurs' highlights how perceived societal expectations around mothering influenced a group of middle-class women's perceptions of possible career trajectories (Duberley & Carrigan, 2013). Here Taylor's (2002) concept of the social imaginary comes to the fore, showing the importance of collective understandings in defining our notions of legitimacy, appropriateness and conversely what is seen to be incorrect. Again, we are reminded of Willis's work and his powerful depiction of how his respondents' social positioning informed their perceptions and expectations of their working lives. Thus, it is certainly not the case that we are free to imagine the interplay of work and personal life however we like. Instead, our imagination is bounded by what is socially ratified at a particular place and moment in time. As we discussed above, the processes of signification, domination and legitimation (Bloor & Dawson, 1994) underpin the role of the career imagination in both continuity and change. We turn to time in the next section.

Time

A temporal dimension is implicit in traditional understandings of career. Using metaphors of stages and cycles, theories of career development seek to demonstrate that over time careers develop in certain, predictable ways (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Super, 1957). This work represents the career as progressive, age-linked and the product of individual endeavour. It is interesting that within these theories there is something of a paradox between a hint of biological determinism sitting alongside a strong, underpinning sense of individual agency – individuals forging their careers based on their own needs, preoccupations and desires. Thus, we see time as working as part of people's perceptions of contexts of enablement and constraint, and also part of their identities – how they see themselves as positioned within these settings.

Feminist scholars (Davies, 1990; Gallos, 1989; Pringle & McCulloch Dixon, 2003) have taken issue with the androcentricity of the established, developmental theories and suggested alternatives which they argue more adequately convey the rhythms of women's lives, in particular highlighting communal rather than highly agentic orientations (Marshall, 1989). However, notwithstanding this emphasis on relationships, within many of these approaches we see the paradox discussed above, combining an emphasis on individual agency (although women might position themselves as 'we' instead of 'I', this is still construed as a matter of individual choice) with a set of biologically driven expectations about how women's lives progress. Thus, for example, in the popular 'kaleidoscope' model of career (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008) it is assumed that women's orientations to work change in a predictable way as they age and that they have the power to reformulate the nature of their labour market participation. In contrast, our research studies into women's careers in later life has highlighted the impact of family on women's career decision-making, the discontinuous and fragmented nature of many women's relationship to formal employment and the blurred boundary between work and non-work which make career and retirement problematic concepts for many (Cohen, 2014; Duberley & Carmichael, 2016).

From an alternative vantage point (Fineman, 2011), we might look at careers, not in terms of development, but as social performances within which time-based scripts become so embedded that we accept them as inevitable. From our own research, in our study of a local authority social services department (Cohen et al., 2019) respondents' expectation that they would retire at 65 and the sense of discomfort and disorientation they experienced when they were 'eased out' of their organizations several years earlier, is but one example. This view of career behaviour as temporally inscribed echoes sociological perspectives on the life course (Elder, 1992). Elder defines the life course as 'age graded life patterns embedded in social institutions and subject to historical change' (1992, p. 1121), highlighting the role of exogenous factors in structuring a person's work and career opportunities. This is not to negate the role of personal agency. Rather, faced with change at every level, Macmillan (2005, p. 16) argues that 'modernization has increasingly loosened cultural and social ties that embedded individuals in familial and other local contexts. A key consequence of this is that domains of agency increasingly expand and the life course increasingly becomes a particular or deliberate project.'

Snyder (2016) likewise highlights new opportunities for agency created by new approaches to time associated with flexible capitalism. However, he sees this less as a project of the entrepreneurial self, and more a 'Faustian bargain' – the flip side of this greater agency is increasing instability, disorder and uncertainty. Snyder argues that a consequence of this trade-off is a new morality. To be seen as being 'good' and 'economically useful', people have to think about work and career in different ways, including different conceptions of time. Snyder shows how this creates a focus on the heroic individual and supports his analysis by giving examples of individuals who are lauded for having embraced instability as an expected source of freedom and

who extol the virtues of resilience in the face of work intensification.

Whereas previously the concept of career connoted predictability, order and steady progress along an organizationally prescribed timeline (which interestingly mirrored developmental approaches noted above), Snyder maintains that flexible capitalism has disrupted these timelines, creating new 'rhythms, timescapes and time maps' (Snyder, 2016, p. 10). Essentially this means that the shape of careers has changed for many and that in order to support the 'disruptive innovation that keeps flexible capitalism alive' (p. 201) workers lose the ability to see work as a smooth flow in the way that developmental career theorists might have predicted. Instead work takes place in sharp short bursts, and the focus on the short or medium term means that it becomes harder to project far into the future and the lack of continuity makes the past an unreliable basis on which to form future expectations.

This might be seen as a challenge to the idea of a career imagination; however, Snyder argues the importance of what he calls time maps. These are:

> schemas of movement in institutions that structure people's lives into particular trajectories. . . shaped by shared narratives that hint at what kind of lives have been available in the past, how those life trajectories will proceed through the current moment, and where they will take us into the future. These maps give us a sense of order – they are maps of the possible. (Snyder, 2016, p. 16)

The career imagination both reflects and constitutes time maps. What we appreciate about Snyder's contribution is not only his new configuration of work time and conceptualization of time as a social practice, but also his argument that these arrangements are imbued with normative judgement, and associated notions of legitimacy and social consensus. This point emerged vividly in Cohen's (2014) study of women entrepreneurs in which she interviewed her respondents in the early 1990s and again twenty years later, observing how women's normative evaluations of their own and others' career-making had changed during that period. What we are arguing, therefore, is that time emerges as a dimension of the career imagination that is linked both to context and agency, interacting with career scripts to guide action. This offers a much more nuanced understanding of the temporal aspect of careers than is typical in the traditional careers literature, where time is incorporated in a more limited way, as suggested above, often through implicit assumptions around career motivations associated with different stages of the life course.

Identity

The career imagination is not only about occupations that a person can envisage (or not envisage) doing, and the time maps that might inform their choices, but also includes the identities, including the values and ideals, that underpin these understandings and inform ideas about future 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The career imagination both reflects and bestows an identity – a way of thinking about oneself and one's position both in the workplace and in wider society. This conceptualization of social identity provides 'templates for action' (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001, p. 48). We do not take this notion of career identity to mean essentialist statements about a single, coherent career identity. Rather, we see career identity as 'co-constructed, socially situated and performed in interaction' (LaPointe, 2010, p. 2). Thus 'self-understanding is also defined through the social actions seen as possible and legitimate. . . In this way identity and social action specify, enable and entail each other' (Wetherell, 2009, p. 3). Within the careers literature, much of the research into identity is associated with concepts such as self-efficacy (Betz & Hackett, 2006) which are well-rehearsed in the applied psychology literature. However, what's often missing from those perspectives is the idea of career identity as embedded in and inextricably linked to social settings.

As we highlighted above, identity is central to Taylor's concept of the social imaginary and, we would argue, to the career imagination. Taylor argues that because stability in a social context is fundamental to identity, when for whatever

reason that connection is ruptured, the result can be an 'acute form of disorientation' or, in other words, an 'identity crisis'. He goes on to say:

> [Those who experience this identity crisis] lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good and meaningful, others as bad or trivial. The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed, labile, or undetermined. This is a painful and frightening experience. (Taylor, 1989, pp. 27–28)

This was the case for some of the respondents in a study we undertook looking at the experiences of senior managers coming to the end of their employment in social services (Cohen a Duberley, 2015). After decades within their organization, in response to the 2008 financial crash and austerity measures that were introduced as a result, these senior managers found that not only were their own careers cut short, but before leaving they were charged with dismantling departments that they had been building for over two decades. The time maps they had constructed over decades were effectively torn up, familiar structures of enablement and constraint were redrawn, and they found themselves feeling untethered, facing a retirement which they had not planned for. In other words, their career imagination had lost its reference points and they weren't sure quite how to proceed.

All of our interviewees talked at length about the values which had underpinned their careers in local government. Notably, there was a significantly different response among the men and the women. Most of the women in the study had alternative aspects to their identity which, over time, made them feel liberated and able to forge other trajectories, related to family, community or sometimes to creative projects. However, for some of the men in the study, it was a deeply destabilizing time as they found it difficult to imagine a different life.

Scope for Change

The career imagination informs the possibilities we see for ourselves and the trajectories we might follow. It incorporates the ways in which we see ourselves, and how these intersect with perceptions of our structural conditions and time maps. It defines the fruits of career, both material and abstract: the financial rewards, the lifestyles and the identities that careers bestow. It is a thickly textured, multi-dimensional construct with powerful implications for people's career enactment. Consistent with the duality of structuration, the career imagination interacts with career scripts in a reciprocal way, such that each both reflects and constitutes the other.

In the introduction we explained that, in part, we are using the term 'imagination' because of its everydayness, because it speaks to our ordinary lives and our research. Indeed, we see the career imagination as a concept which we felt we needed to better understand our respondents' accounts, how they considered careers in general, their own career possibilities, and how they acted on these prescriptions or definitions. It gave Laurie (Cohen, 2014) new insights into the self-employed women she studied, who said that back when they were starting out on their careers, they envisaged only three things that they could be: a teacher, a secretary or a nurse. They spoke of how this very narrow horizon had influenced their career-making, their growing feelings of discontent, and their trepidation at the prospect of forging a different path. For Jo (Duberley et al., 2006; Fernando, Cohen, & Duberley, 2018) it helped her to understand why some young women, as a result of their education, experiences, family circumstances and relationships, felt able to embark upon careers in highly masculine environments such as engineering and the military while many others did not.

In our view, the concept is now more pertinent than ever. As Wright Mills' 1959 comment reminded us, we are always in the midst of change, and how we make sense of the ongoing entanglement of context, meaning-making and action is a perennial question. However, today feels different in scope and scale. We have for years been grappling with the transformation of work – evidenced in both the academic and more popular discourse. Taking the example of

technology, Grimshaw's recent article (2020) highlights not only current challenges related to IT developments, inequality and precarity, but also some different ways in which commentators make sense of these changes and envisage the future. On top of these familiar narratives, the pandemic which has become the pervasive issue of these times has already hastened the end of certain occupations, the emergence of others, and left many with the sense that old career maps have become obsolete but that new ones have yet to emerge. The concept of the career imagination can help us to understand how people position themselves in this unfolding landscape.

We have elsewhere (Duberley et al., 2006) argued for the importance of attending to the interpretive dimension of career scripts to better understand the interplay of understanding and action in career-making. By 'reclaiming' the interpretive dimension, delineating it from script, defining it and recasting it as the career imagination, our aim is not to reify either concept. Instead, we seek to better understand each, and their interrelationship.

To elucidate the distinction between script and imagination, we have used Barley and Tolbert's conceptualization of script to refer to 'observable recurrent activities and patterns of interaction' (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). The career imagination underpins and is a product of these scripts. It consists of cognition and interpretation including, as we have detailed above: structures, conceptualized as perceptions of enablement and constraint; time, in particular Snyder's notions of timescapes and time maps; and identity. We suggest that together these elements constitute the career imagination which works reciprocally with career scripts such that each is both representative and constitutive of the other.

Two examples from our study of women engineers illustrate this relationship. Part of the dataset included group interviews with girls doing science and maths A-levels. The girls described a 'traditional' script that led scientific girls to fields like medicine, dentistry and slightly less conventionally, chemistry. Indeed, many of their teachers and tutors had guided them along such routes. In other words, these scripts made sense and girls could imagine following the trajectories they prescribed. However, within these groups were girls who saw things differently. Typically, these were people whose *fathers* were engineers (interestingly *not* mothers, and often in families where there were no brothers), who had attended taster programmes in engineering, or who had friends doing engineering at university. They knew what engineering was, they had tried it out (under the car with their dad or in the lab on a school or university programme), and had a very different career imagination and, with that, a different script to follow. They could see themselves as engineers and could envisage the pathway to get there.

Our study also included a cohort of women who worked as engineers, in manufacturing, automotive or petroleum sectors. There were so many stories of women 'falling off the engineering pipeline' and we wanted to hear why these women had stayed on. Our respondents pointed to four main factors: care and support, feedback, opportunities to do higher-level work, and role models (Fernando et al., 2018). These factors mattered because together they made women realize that a future in engineering was feasible. The interesting thing here is that although organizations offered specific developmental pathways, respondents explained that for many women these routes felt unavailable. They could not imagine themselves in those spaces or advancing in those ways. What differentiated our respondents from the women who dropped out is that their exposure to those factors made them realize that these trajectories were available to them; they could picture themselves travelling along them. In our sample there was a difference between the older women and the younger ones. The older ones could in some senses be seen as trailblazers, with an 'engineering imagination' but no socially ratified script to follow. However, their presence as senior figures within their organizations served to legitimate the pathway for the new generation of women engineers.

So, is the career imagination a mechanism of continuity or change? We would argue that it is both. The career imagination is both reproduced and transformed through the process of structuration. As discussed earlier, Bloor and Dawson (1994) use Giddens' concepts of signification, domination and legitimation to show how this process works. We suggest that these concepts help us to understand how the career imagination endures, and also its evolution.

For example, if we return to our discussion of Paul Willis's landmark book, *Learning to Labour*, on one hand it reminds us of the power of the career imagination in perpetuating the status quo. The interplay of the young people's understandings of their own career possibilities, and the scripts which appeared to be at once most accessible and most legitimate, continued in a mutually reinforcing cycle. To this extent, the career imagination can be seen as a repository of history and experience, drawing on and constituting its particular time map, offering and validating particular identities. However, it is also susceptible to rupture and can be a mechanism of change. This is vividly elucidated at the moment, as countries around the world are still in the grip of Covid 19, working out how and when to 're-open' or even reconfigure societies and economies. As familiar career scripts become less stable and less available, a rift has emerged between how people have previously imagined their career futures, and what is possible. The hospitality sector is a good illustration. Take the young person, recently graduated from university with a degree in hospitality and catering. They have learned how the sector works, and have likely been exposed to it first hand through employment and internships. They have perceptions of the opportunities and constraints within the sector, of its timescapes, and they are developing a sense of who they are in the field. Then Covid hit, the sector was shut down, jobs are being lost and no one can predict how the sector will look as it emerges from the crisis. To this young person, the future might well feel unimaginable (Dias, Joyce, & Keiller, 2020).

From a more positive perspective, if we look at professional organizations, it has long been recognized that while many offer impressive flexible working policies, it is difficult for those taking them up (predominantly women) to progress to higher levels of the organization (Brown, Harris, Morrow, & Soane, 2019; Pringle et al., 2017). But now senior people from all sorts of sectors are working remotely and many businesses are reluctant to reopen workplaces (Inman, 2020). Although the scripts are not yet in place, people are rethinking what's possible, and desirable, in some very new ways. As people's career imaginations continue to evolve to incorporate different ways of working, this will lead to the emergence of new organizational and occupational scripts.

Conclusion

At the start of this article we asked why the concept of career continues to make sense in work settings that are continuously evolving, and which today look very different to how they looked in the heyday of 20th-century bureaucracies. Our answer is that this is because when we imagine our careers, we imagine our future selves, our connection with work and the world around us, and how we inhabit that connection. We conceptualize structures of opportunity and constraint, timescapes (and how, over time, these become our time maps), and the systems of values through which we evaluate our own (and others') possibilities. Indeed, these changes are elucidated in the definition of career itself which moves in and out of organizations, is more or less deterministic or voluntaristic, predictable and orderly or uncertain and unstable, and inclusive or exclusive of non-work spheres of life.

In this article we proposed the concept of the career imagination, distinguishing it from the career script in its focus on interpretation, and situating both in a broader structuration framework. We argue that the value of this conceptual distinction is that our focus on interpretation helps us to better understand both the reproduction of the status quo (in Willis's terms, why it is that working-class kids get working-class jobs) and change, through the meaning-making or

meaning-giving processes of signification, domination and legitimation. We have suggested that consistent with the duality of structuration, the career imagination and career scripts interact in a reciprocal way, such that each is both reflective and constitutive of the other.

Based on our analysis and reflections on the current context, we might speculate that at times of radical change this relationship breaks down, such that what people might imagine for their career futures is no longer supported by available scripts, or likewise, that in the absence of familiar scripts people's career imaginations become obsolete. As people find themselves thinking about their working lives in new ways, new scripts will emerge, and as new scripts are established, people's understandings of what's possible, desirable and legitimate will likewise adapt to incorporate these emergent possibilities. But this is speculation. More research is needed to further explore the relationship between the career imagination and career scripts. We suggest that times of crisis and change provide the ideal opportunity for such an endeavour.

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