

# **Narrative as an emotion-focused coping strategy in career**

**John Michael Blenkinsopp**

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**Newcastle University Business School  
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences  
University of Newcastle upon Tyne**

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## Acknowledgements

I have ploughed my own furrow with my PhD, but stating that does not diminish my gratitude to the wealth of people who helped me along the way. In many cases, they tried to help me and I foolishly ignored them, but I should still like to say thank you!

To begin at the beginning. When I first started to think about my PhD, Neil Ritson kindly gave up a whole day of his vacation to give me reams of eminently sensible advice which I have almost entirely ignored but which I suspect I shall repeat verbatim to every PhD student I will ever supervise! Monica Lee tried in vain to dissuade me from pursuing my first proposal – I should have listened. Cathy Cassell, my first supervisor, showed extraordinary patience as I bumbled around trying to work out what my PhD might possibly be about. Richard Hull, my second supervisor, brought useful sociological thinking to bear on my work: we parted amicably when we realised that he was supervising a different PhD to the one I was moving towards doing, but he pushed me to make choices and his input was invaluable. Yvonne Turner first alerted me to the existence of autoethnography, and her interest in my progress was always heartening. At a point at which I was seriously contemplating PhD by publication, Kasia Zdunczyk cajoled and supported me to go back to my thesis. Simon Down, my third and final supervisor, helped me to rein in and focus my prose style, and annoyed and provoked me on a regular basis, inspiring me to stomp off to write some more, just to show him I was right. I often wasn't, but I'm not telling him that. Susan Plunkett, whom I met through the Autoethnography listserv, was willing to read draft chapters, as was Tracy Scurry, and both provided valuable feedback. Patrick Reedy lived to regret mentioning narrative in his interview presentation, but graciously gave up his time and a copy of his PhD thesis to help me. I didn't know half of his references and he didn't know half of mine, which was instructive and reassured me that narrative is not a field, it's a prairie, and a degree of selection was both necessary and defensible.

In the acknowledgments section of *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann write dismissively of those who offer acknowledgments to their wives 'for scientifically irrelevant performances of private roles'. Despite my admiration for their work, this is the blackest of black marks in my book. For five long years my PhD and its trappings have loomed all too large in my home life. I have left papers all over the house, and stayed up till all hours. As I came closer to completion I have been grumpy, stressed and practically obsessed with this damn thing. I should therefore like to thank my wife Lynn for her unfailing support. I have been studying something all the years we have been together, she has been a study in patience and love all this time.

I should like to dedicate this thesis to my late grandmother, Mary Esther (Molly) Blenkinsopp (nee Stacey). It was from her lips that I first heard of a PhD and decided that one day I should have to get one of those. There is an old Jewish joke about a mother running frantically along the beach screaming "Help! Help! My son, the doctor, is drowning!" No-one in the world would have been prouder, for all the right reasons and all the wrong reasons, to see me complete this.

## Abstract

This thesis develops a theoretical framework for studying the impact of emotion on career, following Kidd's lament that emotion is 'an absent presence in career theory' (Kidd, 1998). In the proposed framework, career is treated as a narrative construction (Bujold, 2004) and viewed as a significant component of an individual's identity (McAdams, 1995). Events which disrupt the career narrative will be experienced as disruptive to identity and to the achievement of the individual's goals, and will therefore stimulate emotion which in turn leads to sensemaking aimed at repairing the disruption (Weick et al, 2005). This sensemaking produces a revised career narrative, which the individual subsequently enacts.

This proposition is explored through the use of autoethnographic case studies, and the use of this methodology is itself one of the major contributions of this thesis; autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) is an uncommon methodology in social science generally and its use is unheard of within organisational psychology. The case studies allow for theory development, though do not represent an empirical test of the framework, so following the autoethnographic analyses, a refined framework is outlined, together with proposals for research to test the framework.

The thesis concludes that narrative coping is the dominant response to emotion in career, and outlines a number of implications for this proposition, including important directions for future research.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Hard labour

*A classroom, early summer. Our hero sits looking out of the window, watching the grass being cut and wishing himself elsewhere. Look at his face, take in that expression. You will see it again before much longer.*

*A warehouse, season unknown. Our hero pulls at a pallet truck, the pallet itself is taller than him, he leans back at 45 degrees and puts all his weight on the handle just to try to get the truck moving. His face is a study in boredom.*

*An office building, early winter. Through the window we see our hero alone at a desk, he is busy working at a computer, this time he looks interested and engaged. The phone rings, he frowns and looks annoyed. He leans forward till his face is right over the phone and hisses “why don’t you just sod off?” before picking up the receiver and saying, in a sing song voice, “John Blenkinsopp”. A moment later he says “Hello, Catherine, how are you?”, managing to evince ‘pleasantly surprised’ with every note.*

*A conference room, late spring....*

Well, you get the idea. Or perhaps you don’t – it seems obvious to me, but then I have spent 20 odd years thinking about it. The idea is this. I find work difficult. Not always, not every day. But as a general rule, I find that work brings hassles which engender an emotional response that I have to cope with. I’m sure it does for most people. This coping, for me, has always been coping with a purpose and in its simplest expression that purpose is ‘in order to have a career’. That is to say, I endure work situations I would rather exit on the basis of a calculation that there will be future career benefits. Sometimes this calculation is couched in negative terms, for example, “I can’t leave because I don’t have anything else to go to” or “I can’t leave because I’ve only been here 5 minutes and it would look bad on my CV”. Sometimes

the calculation is more positive, for example, “I’m getting loads of good experience in this job and if I can stick it out for another year I’ll be laughing”.

In chapter 7 I will describe something of my early career and some of the events which led to me being simultaneously anxious about my career and yet with little to offer prospective employers which might furnish me the career opportunities I craved. For now, the important point is that the situation in which I found myself at the age of 18 produced a degree of volatility to my early career which had two consequences of significance for this thesis. The first is that, in my effort to make the best of what I had to offer and deal with the emotions I experienced in my working life, I became a career storyteller – a weaver of stories about my career (its history, present and future). The second is that I became a career theorist – someone with working theories about the nature of work and career, developed in response to my experiences and as part of my efforts to develop a ‘good’ career. I will revisit these multiple ‘selves’ in chapter 6.

### **The career of my PhD**

Given how elegantly the narrative of my career and its central concerns leads towards this thesis, one might expect that my research journey will have been a natural progression. One might, but one would be very much wide of the mark.

When have we not preferred some going round  
To going straight to where we are?

(From ‘Our Bias’, W.H. Auden)

I have preferred a great deal of going round in my time as a PhD student. My initial proposal was to investigate why line managers don’t adopt good HR practice, despite apparently agreeing that such a strategy would have merit. This topic was quickly ditched in favour of an earlier idea to look at whistle-blowing, more specifically at why most people *don’t* blow the whistle. My curiosity had been piqued by experience of investigating disciplinary cases arising from allegations of patient abuse (I was an HR manager in the NHS in a previous life). When I first started to investigate such cases, I assumed that when we interviewed staff we would find that no one had seen

anything (or that those who had wouldn't talk). In fact, I tended to find that not only had staff witnessed the events described in the allegations but they were prepared to say so and to admit to having done little or nothing to prevent them. I read widely on this issue, but refining it to form a thesis ran into two problems, both arising from my extensive direct experience of the matter. Firstly, although I could find numerous theoretical frameworks which appeared to have something to say on the matter (e.g. bystander apathy, collective myopia, pluralistic ignorance) I could always find subtle ways in which they failed to describe the situations I had observed. Secondly, I struggled to devise an appropriate research design. This latter issue troubled me for quite some time, till I eventually realised my problem was more motivational than technical; I couldn't bring myself to undertake research which would be a pale imitation of the real life cases I had investigated. I eventually started thinking about drawing directly upon these cases, coining the phrase 'retrospective participant observation' to describe this approach. I was conscious of needing to be able to justify this in any Methodology chapter, and found that references to such approaches tended to be commonest in situations where the individual had serendipitously collected 'field notes' – typically police officers or health care professionals, but also sometimes individuals who kept ordinary diaries. In all cases, the key point was that these individuals had contemporaneous notes to which they could refer. I began to feel I had reached a dead end.

My colleague Yvonne Turner suggested that I might want to look at autoethnography, which I duly did. I became hugely excited about the possibilities of this approach, made a trip back to a hospital I had worked for to get copies of the record of a particular disciplinary case, and began to write extensively. One chapter, tentatively titled 'A Portrait of the Researcher as a Young Man(ager)', grew particularly quickly. This chapter was concerned with describing the background of life and career which gave a picture of my personal and professional development at the time of the case, trying to capture what a turbulent, emotional period it was for me. Despite progress with this chapter, and some on a very factual chapter based on the case notes, I began to have difficulties with the thesis. Having initially seen autoethnography as the solution to my problems I expected to make rapid progress, but it was not going as I expected. Gradually I began to realise why: autoethnography is autobiographical, and it was not *my* experiences and perspective which I was seeking to understand. I

wanted to know why the nurses had not stood up for their patients or challenged their colleague or reported her to management – all questions which autoethnography *could* attempt to answer but only if I had been one of the nurses. I could only write about what was involved in handling the complex disciplinary case and the emotionally draining nature of the experience...relevant issues no doubt, but not what I was trying to understand.

By this stage, I had become a convert to autoethnography, and I realised somewhat to my surprise that my criterion for a new thesis topic was effectively ‘you can investigate anything, as long as it can be done through autoethnography’. The progress of the ‘portrait of the researcher...’ chapter alerted me to the idea of exploring something in this area, though I was unsure what. Coming across the Kidd article ‘Emotion: an ‘absent presence’ in career theory’ (Kidd, 1998) was a moment of revelation – here was a theoretical problem which chimed in with my own work experience, and for which I saw autoethnography as an ideal research method. Given that narrative is a theme of this whole thesis, and that I will later examine ways in which we can proceed on the basis of narratives born out of a misapprehension, it is worth noting that my eventual turn to career theory as a field for my thesis offers a perfect illustration of this. In 2001, if I had been pressed to describe the field I knew most about, it would have been careers. Quite why I had to go off galloping through endless other fields before coming back to it is beyond me.

### **Autoethnography and I**

Autoethnography is the methodology used in this thesis, and this has huge implications for the entire work. It seems useful to begin by offering a simple description of what I have done with this approach. I have examined in considerable detail specific emotion episodes within my own career which had significant implications for my subsequent career development. Linking this autoethnographic material to existing literature, I have developed a theoretical framework for studying the interaction of emotion and career. I suggest that this interaction can be most usefully framed as a form of emotion-focused coping based on the use of narrative.



### *What is autoethnography?*

Autoethnography draws upon a range of ideas, and researchers come to autoethnography from a range of disciplines. For organisational researchers, it is most usefully framed in terms of the distinction between troubles and issues proposed by C. Wright Mills:

*“Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his (sic) immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware. [...] A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened.*

*“Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened.”*

(C. Wright Mills, 1959: 8, italics in original)

Autoethnographic research is principally of interest where one's own troubles also happen to correspond to wider issues. Sometimes this correspondence will be clear, for example there is much autoethnographic work on illness, self-evidently an issue as well as a trouble. In other cases, autoethnographic researchers present their own 'troubles' on the basis of a judgement that they will have some resonance for others. Observational comedy treads a similar line, for which comedians have developed a stock phrase – “Is it just me or....?”. In search of new material, comics find new areas of life to explore, always risking a response from the audience of, “Yes, it's just you”. In the context of this thesis, I suggest that my 'trouble' (having to engage in significant efforts at emotional self-management to be able to develop a career) is a common 'issue', that is to say, widely experienced and of significance for other individuals, and for organisations. From the age of 16 until the present day, I have had to work at work. I have had to struggle with an apparently innate tendency to think “sod this for a game of soldiers”, an instinctive yen to find the exit. I may be

completely alone in this. It is possible that no-one reading this thesis will recognise one whit of the tendency described. However, I am proceeding on the basis that my *trouble* (“I have to expend a great deal of mental effort to manage my feelings towards work such that I can remain in work and pursue a career”) is an *issue*, or at the very least a trouble widely experienced. I am prepared to risk being a pathological case study, but I hope to demonstrate by the end of this thesis that emotion and career intertwine like a double helix, connected not through peptide links but through narrative.

### *Debating autoethnography*

Although methodological discussion is a feature of any social science thesis, the content of this discussion can be seen to range across a continuum from, as it were, ‘mostly method’ to ‘mostly -ology’. In some fields it is deemed reasonable merely to describe the method, justifying its use on the basis that it is a standard, well-validated method. In other fields, the methodological discussion will be expected to debate epistemology and ontology, and may blur into a broader discussion of social theory. Autoethnography tends towards the latter approach, and in autoethnographic articles the need for reflexivity can sometimes lead to a surfeit of ‘methodological asides’ which disrupts the narrative of the article rather in the style of a postmodern novel. In some instances, the substance of the article becomes subordinate to the methodological discussion. My instincts are to minimise such asides within this thesis – a key contribution of this thesis is an argument for the application of autoethnography to organisational research and this argument is best supported by actually using autoethnography to produce something of substance. However, I cannot choose to disregard the particular issues raised by use of an autoethnographic approach for the thesis and this requires that I reflect on the nature of autoethnography and some of the tensions its use creates for the development and construction of a thesis. To develop this discussion without it becoming intrusive, I have chosen to explore these issues at various points throughout the thesis.

In this first chapter, I have confined myself to describing in basic terms what I have used autoethnography, and introduced a particular framing of this approach which I think is most relevant to organisational researchers. In chapter 5 I work through the underlying logic for the use of autoethnography in researching emotion in career, in

the process producing a methodological justification which I view as one of the major contributions of this thesis. In chapter 6 I explore some of the particular issues associated with reading and writing autoethnographic work, in particular those around the unusual status of the author as protagonist, storyteller and theorist. In chapter 11 I examine what conclusions can reasonably be drawn from research based on autoethnography, noting in particular issues of recollection and validity, and conclude the discussion in chapter 12 by noting the potential for applying autoethnographic research to other areas of organisational research.

### **A Voyage Around My Library**

The major concerns of this thesis arose from my own career development, but as an academic piece it represents a response to Kidd's lament that emotion is 'an absent presence in career theory' (Kidd, 1998) and her call to develop theory and research in this area (Kidd, 2004). If my research journey had been more direct, I might have been able to add to the autobiographical narrative of the thesis by developing a literature review framed in terms of my encounter with the material. It has not, and I cannot. In this section, I will step away from the autoethnographic approach for a moment in order to locate the thesis within the existing literature, thus orienting the reader to the resolutely non-autobiographical literature reviews chapters which follow.

Kidd (2004) notes a number of areas in which researchers might study the relevance of emotion to career theory, including work-role transitions, career decisions and vocational guidance. However, within the present thesis I wish to focus largely on the sort of situation described so aptly by Briner:

*Jane is asked to carry out a difficult project, usually only given to more experienced colleagues. She feels valued, flattered and trusted – and also a little worried.*

*While working hard on the project her emotions range from excitement and elation to fear and frustration.*

*She completes the task well and feels proud and relieved.*

*Jane tells her boss and shows her completed work.*

*Boss gives no thanks or praise and picks out a trivial error.*

*She then feels resentful and angry and thinks she will never again 'put herself out' for her boss.*

*Thinks about looking for another job.*

*Doesn't volunteer to do additional tasks any more.*

*Starts to feel sad and disappointed.*

*Updates her CV and regularly starts looking at job advertisements.*

(Briner, 1999: 17)

Exactly what 'sort of situation' this is takes some explaining; when a phenomenon is readily recognised, but has yet to be described in the literature, it can be surprisingly difficult to capture it succinctly. There is a broad literature on career theory, occupational socialisation, organisational socialisation, role transition etc. Much of this literature assumes a certain stability to situations – that, in essence, people have periods of relative stability punctuated by short periods of instability and transition. There is little in the literature which reflects my experience that, almost daily, I go through peaks and troughs, experience challenges to my identity, imagine possible career paths and possible career mistakes, etc. What Briner's vignette offers is an example of the challenges which the everyday hassles of working life pose for our career development. Frijda (1993) uses the term 'emotion episode' to describe such linked sequences of events and emotional responses. We can see in this particular emotion episode that the sequence of events triggered emotional responses in Jane which in turn triggered behavioural responses with potential career implications: she withdrew from the sort of extra-role behaviours which might serve to mark her out for advancement, and started to look for another job.

In one sense then this thesis starts from a premise that there are numerous negative elements to work. This is not an inherently pessimistic or critical standpoint. If we assume the workplace is as likely to be filled with emotions (positive and negative) as any other location (Fineman, 1993; Briner and Totterdall, 2002) this leads logically to a proposition that individuals will experience a broad range of emotions at work, not only over the course of their working lives, but perhaps even within each working day. Our daily experiences at work will include numerous 'affective events' (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996); events which stimulate an emotional response. As the literature indicates that negative experiences seem to have the greatest emotional

impact (Taylor, 1991) it seems likely they will be writ largest in any story. The thesis is therefore concerned with exploring the way in which we ‘manage’ our emotions in order to be able to sustain and persist in the workplace when, almost daily, we are assailed by frustrations, hassles, setbacks and irritations (and also the occasional uplift!) I did not intentionally narrow the thesis solely to the impact of negative affective events; this could produce an incomplete picture, most obviously by excluding the possibility that positive affective events might to some extent ameliorate the impact of negative affective events (a point argued strongly by Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). Nevertheless, the autoethnographic cases do show a strong emphasis on a narrow range of negative emotions, an issue I will discuss in chapter 11.

Some workplace events may be unique but many will be chronic, regular, repeated. Both types of event are to be found in the cases, however I wish to argue that in general we do not face the challenge of managing unusual, one-off emotional experiences, we face the challenge of managing broadly similar emotional experiences day after day. It is the regular, repetitive nature of the emotional self-management which particularly pushes it into the field of career theory. Since this may not seem obvious, I will briefly explain why I make this claim. My point, put very simply, is that the repetitive nature of workplace emotional experiences will invoke some form of temporal reflection. Being shouted at by a passing drunk may be upsetting, but the emotion will dissipate relatively quickly. Being shouted at by the same drunk every night as you wait alone at the bus stop to go home from work is a very different situation, as it can be anticipated, perhaps dreaded. The idea that something will occur for the foreseeable future creates a greater need to cope with the situation.

So, we are placed in ongoing situations replete with numerous affective events in which we must manage our emotions in order to be able to a) deliver an acceptable performance, and b) remain in post. Sometimes this may be to purely financial ends – the individual has no alternative and must hold on to their job. This last point might seem to hark back to an ‘old-fashioned’ notion of a career pursued within a single organisation, but this is mistaken. It might be more precise to restate it as ‘to remain in post *for now*’. Whether or not careers have become the volatile free-for-all

described by some writers – see Currie et al (2006) – there is an important sense in which we are, at any given moment, ‘trapped’ by our careers. That is to say, our behaviour is constrained by a range of career-related considerations; even if we envisage remaining in a role for only a matter of weeks, we are still inclined to manage our behaviour mindful of things such as the possible need for a reference, or the Sod’s Law likelihood of running into these individuals again at some point. Indeed, the significance of these constraints is perhaps only truly visible in situations in which individuals perceive there are zero career considerations: such individuals are all but unmanageable.

In many career situations the individual may feel s/he would be able to get another post, but is conscious that long-term career considerations are better served by waiting:

*I’ve been hacked off with this place for a while, but if I left now it would have to be for a sideways move, whereas if I could hang on another 18 months I reckon I’d have enough on my CV to get an SL somewhere.*

Even if career considerations are not so well thought through, we are rarely in a position to exit a job at the precise moment at which an affective event fills us with the urge to do so. We must therefore seek to regulate our emotions in order to allow us to remain for as long as is ‘necessary’. Sometimes ‘as long as is necessary’ may be quite objectively bounded e.g. a student on a placement year might count down the days till s/he leaves. However, it may often be a highly subjective judgement; in earlier research (Blenkinsopp, 2002) I found that individuals could ‘talk themselves into’ remaining in situations which with hindsight they felt they ought to have exited earlier. Marshall (2000) described how the senior women managers in her study faced ongoing adversity and thus an ongoing choice as to whether to *persist* or *desist*. In their model of depression, Barton et al (2007, in press) note that individuals may remain committed to pursuing unachievable occupational goals, even when these are the very goals whose non-achievement triggered their depression.

## **Building Work: thesis construction**

In this section I want to describe something of how this thesis was constructed, highlighting some of the difficulties involved in reconciling form and content. There is a certain tension to writing up a narrative thesis within a field like organisational psychology, a tension which is usefully captured by Bruner's distinction between narrative and paradigmatic modes of thought:

There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another...One leads to a search for universal truth conditions, the other for likely particular connections between two events.

[The paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode] employs categorisation or conceptualisation and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealised, and related one to the other to form a system.

[The] narrative mode leads instead to good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily "true") historical accounts.

(Bruner, 1986: 11-14)

This distinction has been highly influential, and reflects the challenge for researchers working with narrative. The challenge is not only in the research itself, but in its writing up. Gross (1990) argued that all scientific writing relies upon rhetorical devices in asserting truth claims, and there is therefore a sense in which the paradigmatic mode of thought (Bruner, 1986) is unavoidably re-worked into narrative in the process of writing up, in telling the 'story' of the research. However, academic writing conventions presuppose a paradigmatic mode of thought, and this means that even where the subject matter is narrative, there is an implicit pressure to write up one's findings in a manner which offers "categorisation or conceptualisation and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealised, and related one to the other to form a system". On the other hand, resisting this pressure, to insist upon a narrative account of narrative research, risks producing work which is

‘merely’ a story, in which the researcher’s analysis and conclusions are unclear. Situating the research within the interpretivist paradigm allows one to emphasise description, but still carries an assumption that paradigmatic statements will be made in analysis. Working within a highly conventional field of a generally conventional discipline, I originally felt I needed to write up my thesis in a traditional form, meaning I followed the usual format of a thesis, and confined autoethnographic material to the relevant chapters where it was framed as ‘data’. Yet the subject matter of the thesis and its autobiographical nature meant this approach produced a certain dissonance between sections. I have therefore tried to develop a thesis which is more thoroughly narrative, though in places it is necessary to step away from the narrative and autoethnographic approach in order to present some of the standard elements of any PhD thesis, notably literature review and methodology.

In presenting the autoethnographic material, especially within the cases, I have sought to avoid writing in the form of a chronicle – ‘just one damn thing after another’ (Elbert Hubbard, cited in Goldie, 2003b). I have used monologues, dialogues, poetry, and vignettes to attempt to convey the situations being examined. These stylistic innovations within the thesis are innovations only in the sense that they are unusual within organisational psychology. They have been used, though not extensively, in organisation studies (Rhodes and Brown, 2005) and in other fields where autoethnography is used they are commonplace (Ellis, 2004). In using these techniques, I am not following a deconstructionist agenda – I am not ‘breaking the body of the text’ (Hopfl, 1999). Nor am I striving merely to be evocative, one of the approaches which Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest autoethnographers may choose. Instead, I am seeking to bring the reader into the situation, to let them see how I saw it. There are risks to this approach. In *Hard Times*, when we read of Gradgrind taking a class our empathy is, as Dickens intends, with Sissy Jupe, who knows all there is to be known about horses, but cannot answer Gradgrind’s demand that she should ‘define’ a horse. Writing social science using literary forms positions the author closer to the novelist, whose skill it is to create a scene such that the reader sees it as the author intended...without having to say to the reader ‘you should see it this way, this is what I mean’. A theme which I explore later is the seductive quality of a plausible tale, and inevitably this issue also arises in respect of the narratives presented by the author – if skilfully and evocatively presented, the reader is



encouraged to accept the author's claims. This is not a new issue, we can date concerns over rhetorical power back to Plato. However, it is a particular issue for autoethnography in the sense that the 'warrant of voice' of a particular account and interpretation may be contingent substantially upon the writer's skill *and* the reader's experience, an uncomfortable position for a social scientific account. For example, an early version of chapter 10 was submitted for review to an academic journal. Both reviewers saw merit to the article, but whilst one was enthused with the depiction of a situation s/he recognised only too well, the other seemed unconvinced that the 'phenomenon' being described was anything other than an experience unique to me. The autoethnographer must therefore work hard to depict faithfully but evocatively the experiences being explored, the reader must read critically but openly, accepting the work as a 'speech act' with its attendant ethical imperatives. Both must also accept the possibility of unintended error in the account, an issue which I will deal with at length in chapter 11.

#### *How the thesis grew – the role of the cases*

My basic proposition is that career and emotion are linked through narrative, and it will be seen in the autoethnographic material presented that I drew tacitly upon this idea from an early stage in my career. As a more academic proposition it was first glimpsed in conference papers written before it became the topic of my thesis (e.g. Blenkinsopp, 2002 and 2003) and was hammered out through the process of writing the journal articles which became the 'findings' chapters. The articles based on the cases referred to an as-yet unpublished theoretical framework, which became a theoretical Godot – constantly referred to, central to the piece, yet never seen. Nevertheless, writing these papers required me to think through the theoretical issues in some detail, such that by the time this 'virtual' theory was finally committed to paper, it had gone through considerable revisions. One result of this approach was a gradual change in the focus of the thesis. The claim that narrative is the link between emotion and career began to seem increasingly bold. I became concerned with delineating those situations in which this proposition might seem most apposite; having written the 'case studies' before the literature review I was aware that they were specific to certain types of situation. Rather than making ambitious claims about the generalizability of my findings it seemed more appropriate to draw in the scope of the thesis. Yet in narrowing the scope of the thesis in one sense, I broadened it in

another. The idea of narrative coping is not easily confined to career, just as career is not easily confined to work. The emotions with which we need to cope in order to manage our careers successfully do not necessarily arise in career, and if they do, they do not necessarily stay in career. Emotion arises as a response to events which disrupt our projects, and are therefore important in career only inasmuch as a career is part of an individual's life-project. In chapter 8 I offer a particular example of life and career concerns interacting, and in chapter 11 I explore the link between narrative coping and narrative therapy.

## **Contribution**

This thesis will make two major contributions, one theoretical and one methodological.

### *Theoretical contribution*

The major theoretical contribution of this thesis is the development of the concept of narrative coping as the major link between emotion and career, and the thesis can thus be viewed as responding to Kidd's call for greater research on the interaction of emotion and career (Kidd, 1998, 2004). In developing this concept, I locate it within a broader theoretical framework – this is not the main focus of the thesis and is thus less well-developed, but has considerable potential and its further development is explored in the final chapter. A second minor contribution of the thesis comes through its use of the sensemaking paradigm to explore issues of emotion. Magala (1997) suggests that the sensemaking paradigm can be seen to offer an embryonic theory of organisational emotions, and Weick et al (2005) concur that sensemaking has much to offer in this area. This thesis offers an example of that in its use of sensemaking as the underlying theoretical framework to link emotion and career.

### *Methodological contribution*

This thesis serves both to highlight the considerable methodological difficulties involved in researching careers and emotion, and to suggest autoethnography as a highly innovative way forward. The thesis also makes a contribution to the growing literature on autoethnography, by providing a closely argued rationale for using this approach. Much of the literature on autoethnography takes a resolutely post-modern

stance: it would be not be overly pejorative to suggest that many writers in this area eschew justification in favour of self-righteousness. This is highly problematic for researchers working within conservative disciplines, who simply cannot get away with appeals to the value of listening to the lived experience. (I am not decrying the value of such endeavours, merely noting that in more conservative disciplines this will not be seen as a sufficient rationale.) Those researchers who provide arguments for autoethnography tend to frame these arguments in terms which would be familiar and acceptable to what might be called the Denzin and Lincoln audience. By seeking to develop my argument with a more conservative audience in mind, I might hope to open up new areas for autoethnographic research. I am conscious that this hints at the development of a sophistic rationale for ‘getting away with’ doing autoethnography in a conservative discipline, much as Soviet era psychologists used to “teach Freud and call it Pavlov”. However, I firmly believe that autoethnography is a good deal less radical than both its critics and proponents suggest, and finding a way to present it in a manner which doesn’t frighten the horses, and allows wider use of this approach, seems worthwhile.

### **Thesis structure**

The final structure detailed here reflects the theoretical exploration and progression in the thesis from career to emotion in career to narrative coping in career. After this introductory chapter, chapters 2 to 4 form the literature review. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the literatures on career and sensemaking, showing how the latter can be deployed as an underlying theoretical framework for emotion in career. In chapter 3 I review some of the key ideas on narrative, self and identity, building on the issues developed in the present chapter. Chapter 4 draws together the arguments to present a summary of the theoretical framework, and uses managerial careers as a worked example to provide an exposition of it. These literature review chapters map out the key theoretical contribution of this thesis, drawing upon a range of relevant literature. It is conventional to locate all the literature upon which one intends to draw within a formal literature review. In writing the case study chapters, I identified links with a broader range of theory and research, and initially contemplated revising the Literature Review to incorporate these references. However, I concluded that this was not appropriate, for various reasons. It might seem trite to suggest that I omitted this

material from the literature review because to include it would require a ‘note to reader’ along the lines of ‘you might not see why this is relevant, but it is, and I’ll make clear why in due course’. However, I think this is an important and legitimate point to make, especially in the context of a PhD thesis. Though the model developed in the literature review is the central theoretical contribution, the links made to other literatures within the other chapters are also important, and it is appropriate to locate those contributions where the reader can most readily evaluate the claims made.

Chapter 5 is the Methodology section, in which I develop an argument for the use of autoethnography for studying the impact of emotion on career. In chapter 6 I build upon this discussion to examine the issues of authorial voice and identity which inevitably pervade an autoethnographic thesis.

Chapters 7 – 10 are autoethnographic cases. Chapter 7 shows how emotion acts as a trigger to sensemaking and story-telling in career. It examines my early career experiences, taking as a starting point my decision to drop out of university after just three weeks. Tracing backwards from this event to earlier decisions, I show how the influence of emotion on my career narratives led to poor decision making and an underlying career narrative based on a misunderstanding of myself which was to shape my career for almost a decade. In exploring this pattern, I examine two key influences (social class and geographical location) which set a certain emotional tone for my early career, producing a particularly anxious, driven quality to my career thinking. I show how certain narrative themes may develop and persist over an extended period, exercising a powerful ongoing influence over career despite having been originally developed in response to specific situations at a very different time in one’s life and career.

Having shown in chapter 7 how my sensemaking in response to affective events was, to use Weick’s phrase, “driven by plausibility rather than accuracy”, I develop this idea in chapter 8 by exploring the ways in which we draw upon cultural resources to make sense of our own emotions and the potential to be mistaken and deceived in this process. The case examines a period in my career in which I was struggling to make a crucial decision with major implications for my career and personal life. I show how I unintentionally drew upon a cultural resource (poetry) in my efforts to make sense of

the situation, and highlight how this endeavour lead me to develop multiple interpretations. I draw upon this experience to reflect upon the issues raised by Gabriel (2004) concerning narrative truth and verisimilitude.

These first two Findings chapters sketch out, in broad terms, how the proposed framework could be applied to understanding the process by which emotion might have an impact on career. This overall framework may, in time, come to be the most important idea to come from this thesis. However, this framework requires further empirical work (described in chapter 12), and the major contribution of the thesis is the development of a specific instance of the overall framework, looking at the role of narrative coping within career. This is the focus of chapters 9 and 10.

In chapter 9 I examine an episode of my career in which organisational change produced a very difficult working situation. This situation exemplified what I describe in chapter 4 as the trinity of factors making emotion important for career – affective events, a careerist orientation and constraints on behaviour. The case examines my experience of organisational change during a formative stage in my academic career, in which my occupational commitment came to be at odds with my organisational commitment. The chapter sets out an example of emotion-focused coping in a career context, which I suggest may take place through what I term ‘narrative coping’: the development of career narratives through the sensemaking process, in response to the emotion aroused by disruptions to the career narrative. Noting the view that emotion-focused coping is often seen as a sub-optimal response, I raise the question of when narrative coping might actually be dysfunctional.

In chapter 10, I build upon the notion of narrative coping, showing how narratives can lead to perpetuation of the very situations with which they are intended to cope. This chapter offers an example of narrative coping during a key phase of my career, when a difficult working relationship with my line manager made exit an attractive option, but I perceived that career considerations were better served by remaining in post. Pursuing the question of when narrative coping might be dysfunctional, raised in chapter 9, I show how my efforts to narrate an ‘acceptable’ career story to deal with the emotion (whilst remaining in post) actually served to focus my attention even more resolutely on the difficulties of the situation.

In chapter 11 I begin by revisiting the methodological issues of the thesis in order to identify comprises the Discussion chapter. It is in the nature of qualitative research to mix data presentation, analysis and discussion, and so many of the key themes for the thesis emerge through the case study chapters. In this chapter I therefore seek to draw out some of the meta-issues, many of which relate to the methodological approach. I examine the areas which might be viewed as absences in the thesis, before revisiting the theoretical framework in order to show how this has been developed through the thesis, identifying narrative coping as the key theoretical contribution. Finally in chapter 12, after noting how autoethnography might be applied to organisational research, I suggest that the proposed framework needs empirical testing, and I identify a research programme aimed at addressing this matter, before setting out avenues for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Career, emotion and sensemaking**

The structure of this chapter is as follows. I start by mapping out key developments in career theory, and in the context in which career development occurs, which seem likely to have increased the significance of emotion for career. I show how the subjective dimension of career has become increasingly important, a shift which (along with other factors) has led some researchers to examine career in narrative terms. This shift originates to some extent within the careers guidance field (e.g. Bujold, 1990; Cochran, 1990) but is linked strongly to more organisational perspectives by Weick's sensemaking analysis of the boundaryless career (Weick, 1996; Cohen and Mallon, 2001).

I then turn to an examination of the sensemaking paradigm. Starting with its relevance to career, I examine how sensemaking deals with emotion, arguing that despite its unfulfilled potential as a theory of organisational emotions (Magala, 1997) it offers an adequate framework for examining emotion in career. I show how the emphasis on identity construction within sensemaking chimes closely with ideas of career as a source of identity. Weick (1995) suggests sensemaking is stimulated by disruption to ongoing projects and is primarily concerned with developing interpretations of a situation which repairs the disruption and allows projects to resume. We can thus view our ongoing career project as part of the development of a life narrative, which links to ideas of narrative identity, explored in more detail in the next chapter. Finally, I show how this use of a sensemaking approach to link emotion and careers leads logically to a re-formulation of this link in terms of coping.

### **Career**

Kidd (1998) suggests the significance of emotion for career theory has grown in recent years due to changes in the context of careers. I will therefore begin by providing an overview of the development of career, drawing out two matters of considerable significance for this thesis – the definition of career (in particular, its scope) and the subjective-objective conceptualisation. I highlight the growing importance of the subjective dimension and seek to explain why the growing

importance of this dimension makes emotion an increasingly important influence on career.

### *Defining career*

A term like career theory suggests a specific theoretical framework, or at least a clearly defined field. In fact career theory offers neither, being instead a very broad spectrum of approaches to a particular phenomenon ('career') which is defined in various ways by researchers from a range of disciplines. As Kidd (1999) noted, researchers "use the term career in quite specific ways...have their own viewpoint...use different methodologies and language, and rarely read each other's publications!". Within this thesis, I am concerned with career theory as approached from a broadly psychological perspective, both vocational and organisational, though as the field is inherently multi-disciplinary, the thesis will not draw solely on authors from this tradition.

Definitional debates within fields are common, and within career theory these debates have served to narrow or broaden the field at various times. Viewed historically, the subject matter of career theory over time affects an hourglass shape. Some of the influential early work on careers (e.g. Parsons, 1911) was concerned with occupational choice, and made little distinction between prestigious occupations offering 'career advancement' and manual occupations which were 'merely' paid work. The work of the Chicago school of sociology, a major and continuing influence on career theory, broadened out the notion of career even further, evident in ideas that one might study the 'career' of a juvenile delinquent or a drug addict – as Hughes (1937) drily noted, 'it is possible to have a career in an avocation as well as in a vocation'. They adopted 'career' as a concept for describing the trajectory of an individual life in interaction with social institutions.

The Chicago approach was criticised by Wilensky (1960), who argued that 'the concept of "career" loses its utility when we speak of the "career of ditch-digger"'. His formulation of career as 'a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which person move in an ordered (more-or-less predictable) sequence' (Wilensky, 1961: 523) has been highly influential, and it should be acknowledged that his definition is probably consistent with the concept of career in



general use amongst people at work. Wilensky's definition narrowed career to being something only relevant to a relatively small minority of the workforce, but it also served to emphasise the idea of careers as being measurable in terms of progression through a series of jobs. More recently careers researchers have returned to a less exclusive notion of career – consider for example Arnold's influential description of a career as “the sequence of employment-related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person” (Arnold, 1997: 16).

In presenting early ideas from this thesis, I encountered the criticism that emotion in career will not be an issue for some individuals: where the individual is perceived to have ‘just a job’, s/he will not experience career-related emotion. This seems to me mistaken in two senses. Firstly, it implicitly privileges a narrow definition of career which effectively restricts the concept to those occupations which experience hierarchical advancement (Wilensky, 1961). Secondly, it fails to recognise the extent to which individuals in even the most menial jobs have to deal with the emotions arising from the hassles of working life in order to be able to persist in such posts. My first ever job was in a Social Security office, and from dealing with numerous recently unemployed clients I can readily confirm that people can and do leave jobs which they ‘cannot afford to leave’ for reasons which are highly emotional. Nevertheless, people may vary considerably in the extent to which their career represents a significant concern in their lives. As one of his Laws of Emotion, Frijda (1988: 60) proposed the law of concern – “*Emotions arise in response to events that are important to the individual's goals, motives, or concerns*”. Following this logic, we might expect most workers would have an emotional response to something like being made redundant, but only ‘careerists’<sup>1</sup> might react to something like a promotional opportunity being advertised externally as well as internally.

### *Subjective and objective dimensions to career*

The idea that career has objective and subjective dimensions, which has proved such a

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<sup>1</sup> OED: “A person (esp. a holder of a public or responsible position) who is mainly intent on the furtherance of his career, often in an unscrupulous manner”. I have in mind something less pejorative and use it to mean simply individuals who consider career to be a matter of importance to them.

durable and significant conceptualisation, was originally articulated by Hughes:

A career consists, objectively, of a series of statuses and clearly defined offices...subjectively, a career 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 that happen to him. (Hughes, 1937: 413)

After Wilensky, the 'subjective' side of careers was effectively bracketed for quite some time, with career researchers tending to focus more on the objective (Barley, 1989). Influential ideas such as the protean career (Hall 1976, 1996) and boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) began to (re)assert the importance of subjective dimensions to the career. Barley's notion of the 'career script' provides an important nexus by which the objective and subjective aspect of career can be reconciled. Drawing upon structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) he suggests that:

Careers can be thought of as temporally extended scripts that mediate between institutions and interactions. Like all scripts, careers should therefore offer actors interpretive schemes, resources, and norms for fashioning a course through some social world. (Barley, 1989: 53)

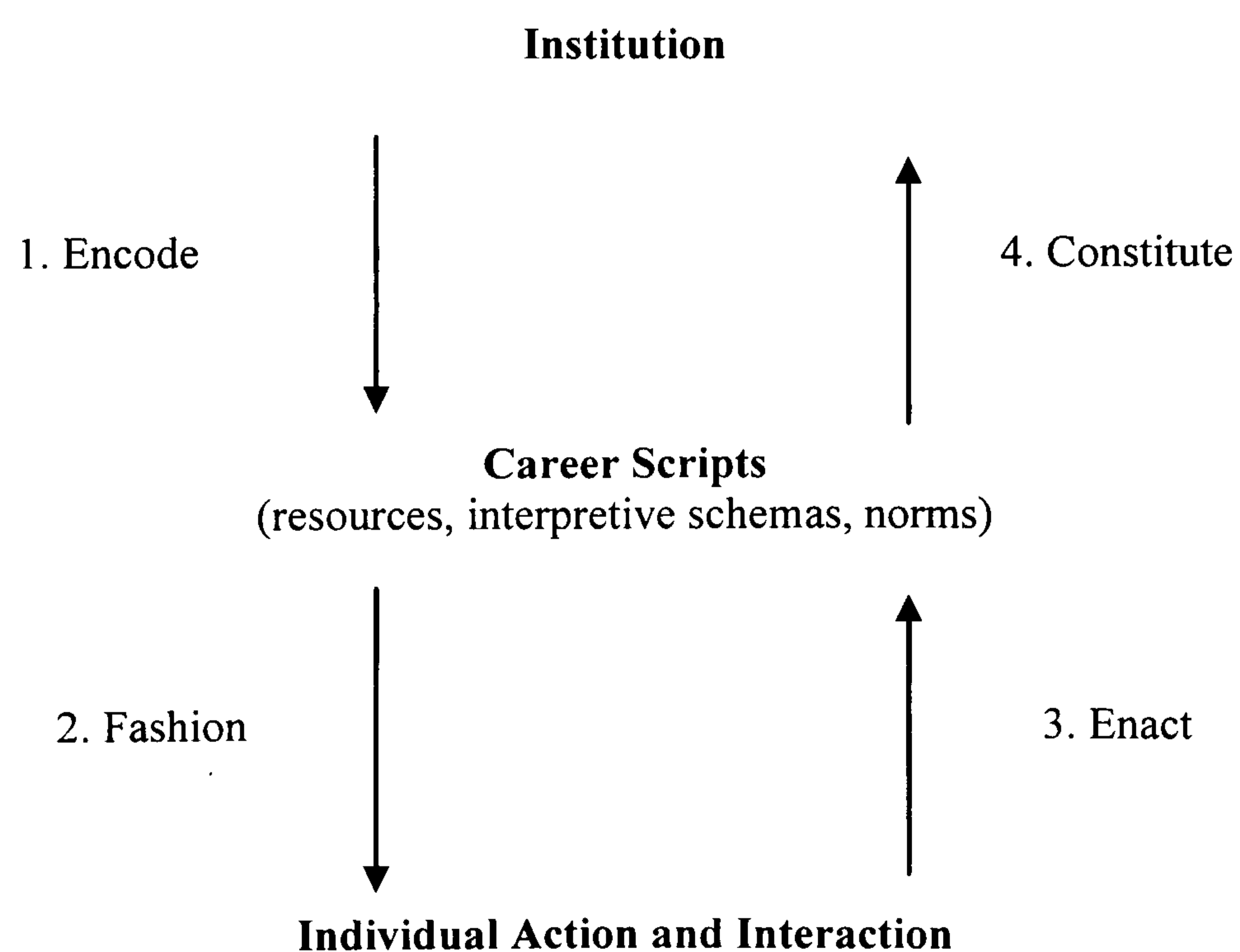


Figure 1: Career's role in the structuring process (Barley, 1989)

This ‘course through a social world’ can be seen as the individual’s career story. The question of how career scripts relate to career stories is a significant one, made difficult by the fact that one is metaphorical and the other literal. Working with the script metaphor for the moment, we might draw two analogies: some playwrights (e.g. Samuel Beckett) produce work which has meticulous direction for the actors, and some actors deliver performances which stick religiously to the script (cf. Robert Mitchum’s quip, ‘I just stand on my mark and read my lines’). The traditional view of careers would be individuals adhering closely to a highly detailed script (Mitchum performing Beckett). The ‘new careers’ paradigm suggests that scripts have become less prescriptive and career actors have become more inclined to bring their own interpretation to these scripts. Nevertheless, we would still expect considerable variation between individuals in their inclination and freedom to ‘interpret’ and variation between careers in the degree of interpretation permitted<sup>2</sup>.

Although this thesis focuses on the impact of emotion on individual careers, the career scripts concept may offer an insight into how the impact might be rather more widely felt. Individuals ‘enact’ their careers in a manner consistent with available career scripts, and in doing so adopt certain norms but also certain expectations: norms about what one ‘ought to do’ to be successful in one’s career, and expectations about what success might come of this. If the script is followed faithfully, but expectations are confounded, this will provide a disruption to the career project which will stimulate emotion and lead to sensemaking. This may lead to a revised career story, enacted by the individual. Given sufficient disruptions amongst sufficient individuals, who develop and enact innovative career stories, new scripts will eventually develop, through processes of constitution and encoding. The idea (or stereotype) of ‘Generation X’<sup>3</sup> can be seen as an example of this: large numbers of individuals who found that following the prevailing career norms (especially on education) paid limited dividends in terms of career and lifestyle. The negative emotions this engendered led to them developing a new career story, to some extent eschewing the very notion of career success. I will examine the sensemaking process underlying this

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<sup>2</sup> Medicine offers an intriguing illustration of this: as a career it is still tightly scripted, perhaps now more than ever, and yet it tends to be pursued by individuals whose social background and intellectual ability would allow them to choose from a wide range of occupations.

<sup>3</sup> Young people who came to adulthood after the end of the post-war economic boom, and found that they were over-educated, under-employed and yet still had high living expenses.

in more detail later in the chapter. Notwithstanding this possibility of a ‘reversed’ direction of influence (emotion to career to society), at the level of the single individual we would always expect that the influence of society on the individual is much easier to trace. In the next section therefore I will outline some of the social and economic changes which are argued to have significantly changed the nature of career.

*The ‘new careers’ - old wine in new bottles?*

Kidd (1998) notes that significant changes in the career context within most western countries (especially the UK) have raised the importance of the subjective career as the dominant lens through which to view contemporary careers (Collin and Watts, 1996). Structural changes in Western societies have reduced job security and changed the demographics of the workforce. As organisations have de-layered, fewer traditional career opportunities exist. Pursuing one’s career within a single organisation is less likely to be a reliable basis for accruing career capital and this reduces the transaction costs involved in changing organisation. As median time in post reduces, and rapid job change becomes more typical, more and more of the workforce will come into the bracket of just changing or about to change. More importantly, even those whose objective careers appear more stable are perhaps more likely to contemplate exit and/or be less tolerant of unacceptable working life. Modern careers have been described as “just sex, not marriage” (Mirvis and Hall, 1994: 377) and this reflects the much greater ease of movement between jobs (though see Dany (2003) on the French cadre system as a notable exception to this trend).

At least that’s the theory. Weick’s comment that careers ‘rise prospectively in fragments and fall retrospectively in patterns’ might equally be offered as a description of career theory. The rapidly changing employment context in the advanced industrial nations has formed the backdrop to career over decades, and as such career theory has walked a tightrope between prophecy and description. Where concepts in career theory arise from analysis of novel and interesting innovations in the career, they implicitly paraphrase the Seiko slogan (‘someday all careers will be made this way’) with the inevitable risk that with hindsight these new career patterns will turn out to represent not a vision of the future but a passing trend. Researchers such as Guest and Mackenzie-Davey (1996) have cautioned career researchers not to

get carried away in assuming the 'new careers' represent a wholesale replacement of traditional careers. Collin and Watts (1996) suggested the changes in the career landscape were due to the threefold impact of post-Fordism (Piore and Sabel, 1984), the emergence of an information society (Bell, 1973) and the influence of postmodernity (Harvey, 1989). The importance of all three have been greatly contested (e.g. Kumar, 1992) and indeed in a later article 'taking stock' of career, Watts and Kidd (2000) stressed the need not to exaggerate the degree of change, noting that job tenure has remained broadly consistent and, after the seismic shocks of the early 1980s, perceived job security appears to have remained relatively stable (Guest and Conway, 1999).

Currie et al (2006) suggest that careers are still bounded, but to a lesser extent than before and within changing boundaries. If organisational boundaries have become less rigid however, occupational boundaries appear to have become stronger and more actively defined – noting evidence of increased inter-organisational mobility but decreased occupational mobility, they suggest there is “a re-orientation towards occupation in the face of the demise of the organisation-career” (Currie et al, 2006: 765). Dany, Mallon and Arthur (2003) suggest the boundaryless career requires greater research to provide an empirical base to support the claims made by theorists. The major issues are:

The lack of knowledge about new employment conditions, the balancing of individual and organisational concerns, the development of new norms and the shift of risk to the individual. (Dany et al, 2003: 710)

These issues are substantial – for example, they suggest that the question of whether boundaryless careers are predominantly a US phenomenon remains largely unanswered.

### *Critical views of the new career*

The new careers were seen to favour individuals who could cope with rapid change and lifelong learning, with some accounts offering what amounts to a psychological profile (e.g. Hall and Mirvis, 1996). Yet Pringle and Mallon (2003) suggest groups which were traditionally disadvantaged in their careers appear to remain

disadvantaged in this brave new career world. Furthermore, the supposedly liberating nature of the new careers, freeing individuals from dutifully following career scripts laid down by organisations, may become disempowering as the new careers become normative and those outside of them become 'deviant'. The significance of this comes from the shifting of risk from the organisation to the individual (Hirsch and Shanley, 1996), though Baruch (2004) detects a renewed willingness by organisations to engage in career management, perhaps reflecting an extended period of relatively low unemployment, a labour market situation in which the boundaryless career may suit the individual more than the organisation.

In his analysis of 'Future Work and its Emotional Implications', Herriot (2001) critiques the generally optimistic assumptions concerning the future direction of organisations which underpin the new careers paradigm, and suggests that the top management of organisations will increasingly seek to establish employment relationship based on expectations of compliance, difference of treatment and acceptance of change:

These expectations will be consistently and repeatedly expressed by means of action or communication events embedded in a series of episodes. Hence, the emotions with which employees respond to these events are themselves likely to be frequent and consistent. They are, therefore, likely to affect profoundly employees' selves, or their actions in the employment relationship, or both. (Herriot, 2001: 314)

*The Compliance Expectation:* Rules and goals will be an increasing feature of the workplace, which will increasingly engender negative emotional responses from the workforce: hostility (at attempts to insist on compliance), frustration (at the ubiquity and lack of contingency in the rules), and mistrust and cynicism (at the mismatch between managerial rhetoric and organisational reality).

*The Difference Expectation:* Employment relationships will be handled in increasingly diverse ways not just between organisations, but within them (there will be winners and losers). This creates the potential for feelings of inequity and procedural and interactional injustice. If such differences are also accompanied by

the rhetoric of ‘people are our biggest asset’, feelings of mistrust and cynicism may be added to the list:

The difference expectation, then, is in a sense an extension of the compliance expectation. Not only will a majority of employees be expected to comply; they will be expected to do so even when they realise that there are other employees who enjoy very different relationships, and of whom very different expectations are held. (Herriot, 2001: 319)

*The Change Expectation:* The claimed imperative for rapid, deep-seated and ongoing change organisational change is not supported by the evidence – it is not the organisations which get ‘lean and mean’ and/or set out to change their cultures which prosper:

It is those which grow. And the more mature the market, the better the larger and more staid organizations perform. (Herriot, 2001: 319)

Announcements of restructuring, jobs cuts, or culture change pose threats to the employees’ identity producing emotional reactions: they may feel anxious, insecure, resentful and mistrusting. Yet their experience of the process may be that change is rarely as significant as promised, that what occurs is temporary upheaval rather than actual change, and worse, that the current change programme will pass, leaving only a lull before the next one. As with the compliance and difference expectations, one of the most obvious effects may be the creation of cynicism and mistrust within the employment relationship, as employees compare management rhetoric with their own experience.

Taken together, these three expectations seem likely to exert a baleful influence on employment relationships. They might appear to undermine the assumptions which lie behind concepts such as the boundaryless or protean career, both of which have a certain ‘brave new world’ flavour to them, stressing personal growth and change. Yet within the context of this thesis, the two arguments are not incompatible. Indeed, I would suggest that they lead to a clear conclusion: changes in the career context mean

that individuals are more likely to pursue boundaryless careers, but will do so in the context of a less hospitable climate for employment relationships.

*A working definition*

Collin (1998) suggests that career is studied from two main perspectives – guidance and organizational. Both tend to be dominated by positivist assumptions which lead to research focused on the individual, treating the environment as an independent variable. Baruch (2004) suggests this led to career theory being traditionally dominated by psychologists. Whilst a lack of inter-disciplinary working is a common lament in social science, career theory goes one better by managing to have a lack of *intra*-disciplinary working, with vocational and organizational psychologists barely cognisant of each other's field. Nevertheless, there has been an increasing emphasis on examining career from the perspective of the individual (Walton and Mallon, 2004) which Baruch (2004) suggests is consistent with evidence of a generational shift towards greater individualism (Triandis, 1995). Examples of definitions which reflect this individual perspective include:

The pattern of work-related experience that span the course of a person's life. (Greenhaus and Callanan, 1994)

An evolving sequence of a person's work experience over time. (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989)

The sequence of employment-related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person. (Arnold, 1997)

Arthur, Inkson and Pringle (1999) suggest the question 'who owns the career?' is a significant one for individuals and organisations. Whilst this is important in terms of who is seen as responsible for career development, the definitions above suggest that in the end a career is 'inscribed upon' the individual. Within this thesis, I will examine career from an individual perspective, seeking however to place that within an organizational context. The 'individual perspective' means not only an individual level of analysis, but also viewing career in terms of the meaning it has for the individual – the subjective career (Hughes, 1937). In doing so, I will adopt the



argument that viewed from this perspective the career narrative *is* the career (Bujold, 2004), being the individual's description/interpretation of the meaning of his/her career.

This produces a working definition of career based simply on adopting an individual perspective and emphasising the subjective dimension. Having reviewed some of the debates on the new careers in detail, it will be clear that this is a rather simplistic definition. However, as Dany et al (2003) acknowledge, the sheer complexity of career makes it difficult to keep in view all elements and levels of analysis at once. The question then arises of the extent to which the approach taken in this thesis speaks to a narrower or broader range of career situations. It is a question which I cannot answer, nor indeed have I set out to answer it – the aim of the thesis is to develop a theoretical framework for studying emotion in career, not to test this framework empirically. I shall therefore persist with my working definition, which views careers as relatively more free-form, and relatively more individually driven. This career provides few(er) external markers/guides which indicate to the individual how (in career terms) s/he 'should' respond (Weick, 1996). There are more choices available to the individual, and there is less prescription (i.e. no longer do you 'just have to put up with it'). When the Exit door is in principle always open, it requires ongoing self-management to remain in situ and deal with the situation, and for this reason, among others, the impact of emotion on career is likely to have grown in importance in recent years. Individuals will therefore require considerable coping resources to manage their career development, a proposition I will develop in more detail in chapter 4. In the next section, I will examine how the sensemaking paradigm frames these challenges of the 'new careers'.

## **Sensemaking**

### *Sensemaking in careers*

Weick (1996) frames the boundaryless career in terms of Michel's notion of weak situations (Mischel, 1968). He suggests we increasingly pursue careers in the absence of external markers of what is expected, such that we are required to engage in active and continuous sensemaking. Weick and Berlinger (1989: 321) argue that 'in the absence of such external markers, the objective career dissolves and in its place the

subjective career becomes externalised and treated as a framework for career growth'. In one sense then, an individual's career is what s/he thinks it is and objective measures become meaningless. Weick avoids this extreme position however, drawing upon Barley's concept of career scripts as the mediating influence on sensemaking, the "conduit" by which institutional factors shape individual careers.

I referred briefly to the importance of enactment in the context of career scripts, and I will develop this idea further. Enactment is one of the key concepts in sensemaking, and Weick borrows the term from the idea of enacting legislation – an action which is both a response to, and an attempt to change, one's environment. In developing this idea, he draws upon the symbolic interactionist notion of 'lines of action' (Blumer, 1969):

The idea that action can be inhibited, abandoned, checked or redirected, as well as expressed, suggests that there are many ways in which action can affect meaning other than by producing visible consequences in the world.  
(Weick, 1995: 37)

This is an important clarification in the context of career – the sense individuals make of their careers at any point in time can be understood in terms of an intended line of action. Feldman suggests that it may often be the case that sensemaking does not lead to action, instead leading to understanding 'that an action should not be taken or that a better understanding of the event or situation is needed' (Feldman, 1989: 20). If this sensemaking was triggered by an affective event, the rejection of action as an available option in a given situation has consequences for coping: it precludes our adoption of a problem-focused coping strategy, and requires us to engage in emotion-focused coping.

We can see then that emotion has a growing potential to influence the unfolding of a career to a significant degree. Political careers offer an interesting illustration – politicians are widely perceived to be willing to sacrifice almost anything to advance their careers, but political biography and autobiography provides interesting examples of politicians foregoing likely advancement because of emotional reactions to

colleagues or situations.<sup>4</sup> Though the impact upon the objective dimension of career may be measurable, I suggest that this impact will generally be indirect, having its effect through the subjective dimension. Granted, an emotional response such as losing one's temper and punching a rude customer may have a very direct impact on the objective career. However, for much of the time we deal with the emotion aroused by such events (and many more minor ones) through the self-management we impose upon ourselves for what are, broadly-speaking, career considerations (Grey, 1994). This self-management will influence how we perceive that aspect of the job, the job as a whole, the occupation, organisation, our career etc. In other words, it will have an impact upon our subjective career, and that impact will in turn influence our career choices, the effectiveness of work-role transitions, our willingness to engage in OCBs and a range of other matters which will have an impact upon our objective careers. Affective events can therefore be seen as 'extracted cues' (Weick, 1995) – elements of a situation which we bracket off for closer attention and from which we make sense of the whole. In the next section, I will examine the sensemaking paradigm in more detail, showing how it offers a useful theoretical lens to examine the impact of emotion on career.

### *Sensemaking as an underlying theoretical framework*

Although I have presented narrative as the leitmotif of this thesis, this does not provide an underpinning theoretical framework nor, in and of itself, a recognisable paradigm. Whilst not hugely attracted to 'paradigm wars', I recognise the usefulness for a thesis of working within a broad paradigm such that the various theories and methods drawn upon have a degree of 'commensurability' (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In the last section, I showed how the sensemaking paradigm could provide a useful theoretical lens with which to examine the boundaryless career. In this section, I will show it can be similarly functional when applied to emotion, and thus can provide an underpinning theoretical framework for examining the impact of emotion on career. I have chosen to draw upon the sensemaking approach as an underpinning theoretical framework for several reasons. Firstly, it is an implicitly narrative

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Heseltine stands as the epitome of vaulting ambition in politics, but it is worth noting that at the time of his famous resignation he was far from being a Prime Minister in waiting: his ambitions would have been better served by remaining in the Cabinet. In *Maggie*, John Sergeant notes that Heseltine found Mrs Thatcher impossible to work for, having a strong, negative emotional reaction to the combination of flirtation and bulldozing she used to manage her Cabinet.

approach. Secondly, it has already been applied within career theory (Weick and Berliner, 1989; Weick, 1996; Glanz, 2003). Thirdly, it incorporates a role for emotion, albeit one which could be more fully developed – Magala argued that Weick’s failure to develop this aspect is “perhaps the most important lost theoretical opportunity in the whole study” (Magala 1997: 324). Whilst agreeing with his view that the theory requires further development, in the specific context of careers it is surprisingly sufficient. Finally, it can be located within the interpretivist paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) which is in keeping with overall approach taken within this thesis e.g. its ideographic methodology.

### *Emotion and sensemaking*

Emotion was identified as a key element of sensemaking from the outset, and Weick makes the following key points with respect to emotion in sensemaking:

An interruption to a flow typically induces an emotional response, which then paves the way for emotion to influence sensemaking. It is precisely because ongoing flows are subject to interruption that sensemaking is infused with feeling. (Weick, 1995: 45)

Following Berscheid (1983) and Mandler (1984), Weick sees interruptions as stimulating arousal of the autonomic nervous system. He suggests that interruption stimulates rudimentary sensemaking, and the brief delay between interruption and arousal allows for direct action which serves to correct for the interruption:

Thus the autonomic system is a back-up system that is activated if direct action fails. Once heightened arousal is perceived, it is appraised, and people try to construct some link between the present situation and “relevant” prior situations to make sense of the arousal. Arousal leads people to search for an answer to the question, “What’s up?” (Weick, 1995: 46)

The emphasis on interruptions is important, Weick suggests, because organisational situations will vary considerably in their potential for interruption. Loosely coupled, underspecified situations, lacking in standard operating procedures (SOPs), are inherently less interruptible and hence less likely to generate emotion. Tightly

coupled situations with extensive SOPs in which a high level of predictability is normally experienced are, somewhat counter-intuitively, *more* likely to experience interruptions: such situations may be more predictable, but their very predictability means that any deviation is experienced as an interruption. Boundaryless careers would appear to be extremely loosely coupled situations, but at any given point we may be working with a premise that certain elements are tightly coupled and can be relied upon. Even if we recognise that assumptions are potentially dubious, we may find it necessary to make those assumptions in order to act. When we walk tentatively along in icy conditions, we are nevertheless shocked and upset if we slip and fall over!

Weick suggests that interruptions may produce negative or positive emotions: negative in the case of interruptions perceived as harmful or detrimental to the achievement of one's projects, positive in the case of events which involve the unexpected removal of an interrupting stimulus, or allow the accelerated completion of a plan. In the context of relationships at work, Weick offers the pessimistic analysis that, as we come to work more effectively and closely with colleagues, opportunities for positive emotions become fewer because the element of unexpectedness will inevitably diminish. In everyday terms, their ability to surprise and delight us diminishes, but their ability to disappoint and upset us remains!

Weick et al suggest the primary instigation of sensemaking is when “the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world” (Weick et al, 2005: 409). The key trigger is thus the breaching of an expectation of continuity. This may not always be a change in circumstances, it may be a recognition that what seemed to be correct is not – perhaps a dawning realisation that the career story is not unfolding quite to plan:

*At the age of 37  
She realized she'd never ride  
Through Paris in a sports car  
With the warm wind in her hair.*

*(The Ballad of Lucy Jordan, by Shel Silverstein)*

The realisations in career may not be quite so wistful, or lead to such unhappy outcomes, but they are nevertheless likely to be sources of emotion.

### *Key concepts in emotion research*

Having briefly outlined how emotion is treated within sensemaking, and suggested that sensemaking can be usefully drawn upon as a theory of emotion (Magala, 1997) it is important to show how sensemaking fits with the treatment of emotion elsewhere within organisational psychology. The ‘emotional turn’ (to coin a phrase) within organisational psychology is still relatively recent. It follows on from a rapid growth in research on emotion in psychology as whole from the mid-1970s onwards (Frijda, 1988). However, Briner and Kiefer (2005) suggest its development in organisational psychology has also been influenced by work from other disciplines, most notably the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), which served to kick-start a growth of interest amongst organisational researchers. Writers such as Fineman (1993) added to this impetus, as did the development of the concept of emotional intelligence (Salovey and Meyer, 1990) and its subsequent popularisation by Goleman (1995).

Although these various research streams can be viewed as collectively serving greatly to increase the attention paid to issues of emotion at work, there is much less evidence of multi-disciplinary endeavour in the research itself. Perhaps this is because much of the research ideas emerged from the ‘parent’ disciplines (psychology and sociology) rather than within the broad field of organisation studies, and as such has drawn upon researchers who are working within more defined disciplinary boundaries. In any event, the comparison with the discussion of career theory is striking – there I was able to range reasonably freely across different approaches, but trying to take a similar approach to research on emotions raised considerable issues of incommensurability. Briner and Kiefer note the excellent work on emotions originating outside of organizational psychology starts with “different sets of ontological and epistemological assumptions that have little overlap with the sorts of assumptions typically made in organizational psychology about the nature of knowledge” (Briner and Kiefer, 2005: 423). Where appropriate I have drawn upon work from outside this paradigm, but in general the theoretical approach to emotion taken in this thesis reflects a strongly psychological orientation and I acknowledge the extent to which

this omits significant research on emotion labour and work coming from a psychodynamic tradition, as well as other broadly sociological approaches.

Returning to the review of the development of emotions research, an important development has been the attempt to gain some clarity about what is (and is not) emotion<sup>5</sup>. Weiss and Cronpanzano suggest emotion resists simple definition because “an emotional reaction is not one reaction, but a constellation of related reactions” (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996: 17). Whilst acknowledging the continuing debate on definition, Briner and Kiefer (2005) suggest there is a degree of consensus that emotion involves a number of components:

Definitions of emotion describe an internal feeling state involving thoughts, physiological changes, behavioural tendencies and expression...Common to all of these classic theories is that emotions...are described as a reaction to an event. (Briner and Kiefer 2005: 425-6)

Consistent with this component approach, Scherer (2000: 158) defines an emotion as “an episode of interrelated, synchronized changes in these components in response to an event of major significance”. ‘Major significance’ is obviously a crucial term here, and draws in the importance of meaning for understanding emotional responses.

Lazarus puts it well:

Individual differences in the way people react to the same or similar events make it difficult to understand why a person reacts with an emotion unless we know the events that preceded the provocation and what the reacting person is like. In other words, to make sense of why the figural action or inaction was emotionally provocative, we need to know the background, which includes the

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<sup>5</sup> Although this thesis is primarily concerned with emotion, the distinction between emotion and mood is insufficiently sharp to allow moods to be ignored. In general, moods are viewed as more diffuse – they lack a focus and are generally of lower intensity. Frijda (1993) suggests that emotions can become moods as the focus on the precipitating event (or object) is lost, but that moods can turn back to emotion if the salient stimulus is brought back to one’s attention. This reflects the common experience of feeling ‘fed up’ (for example), struggling to recall why, remembering why and as a result experiencing a step change in the intensity of that feeling. Significantly, Morris (1989) suggests that moods can arise as a result of attempts to manage one’s emotions.

personality characteristics of the participants in the encounter and the history of the relationship. (Lazarus 2006: 14)

This identifies not only the importance of meaning, but also its narrative form.

The idea of emotions as something stimulated by events is central to its role in sensemaking, but events are prominent in many treatments of emotion. Within the literature on emotion at work, Affective Events Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) is the most influential statement of this approach:

Affective Events Theory focuses on the structure, causes and consequences of affective experiences at work...[it] directs attention away from features of the environment and towards events as proximal causes of affective reactions. Things happen to people in work settings and people often react emotionally to these events [...] We are...tentatively suggesting that environmental features influence affect primarily by making affective events (or the recall or imagination of affective events) more or less likely. (Weiss and Cronpanzano, 1996: 11)

Such an approach emphasises that, on a day to day basis, people experience uplifts, hassles, setbacks, frustrations etc. However, this emphasis on short run emotional fluctuations is tempered by the idea of “emotion episodes” (Frijda, 1993):

An “emotion episode” is the sequence of affective processes corresponding to a given person-environment interaction. (Frijda, 1993: 382)

Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) drew upon this concept to emphasise “the ebb and flow of emotional experience over time”, and also the extent to which emotional responses to events are influenced by previous, related events (cf. Lazarus, 2006). At times we seem to return repeatedly to a particular emotional state (or states). Bereavement is an obvious example of an 'affective event' which can lead to individuals experiencing a range of emotions related to a dominant event, over an extended period of time, during which other affective events become ‘sub-events’, appraised and experienced against the backdrop of the dominant ‘motif’. Other authors (e.g. Stein, Trabasso and



Liwanag, 1993) use the term emotion episode to refer to a very specific, time-bounded, implicitly brief experience, but Weiss (2005, personal communication) confirms that within AET the concept was used in a broader fashion (as Frijda appears to have intended) and envisaged the possibility that an emotion episode might be quite protracted, with a range of emotions and moods being experienced. I suggest that an emotion episode is narrative in form, with later events and emotions being ‘folded into’ the narrative already produced by processes of employment arising from the initial events. The idea of the emotion episode is of particular significance to career – emotions are short-run phenomena, careers long-term phenomena, but emotion episodes can be seen partially to bridge the gap in terms of timescales. To borrow terms more usually applied to structure, we might view emotions, emotion episodes and careers as operating at micro, meso and macro timescales respectively. In the next chapter, I will examine some of the ideas developed by Lazarus (1999, 2006) which serve to locate emotion within the context of longer, narratively framed timescales.

### **Sensemaking, Emotion and Coping**

The sensemaking treatment of emotion is as a reaction to disruption of our projects, which in turn triggers a response from the individual. This sequence maps closely onto the formulation of coping with the stress and emotion literature. Lazarus (1999) argues that stress, emotion and coping are a unified phenomenon:

We should view stress, emotion, and coping as existing in a part-whole relationship. Separating them is justified only for the convenience of analysis because the separation distorts the phenomena as they appear in nature. The three concepts [...] belong together and form a conceptual unit, with emotion being the superordinate concept because it includes stress and coping.

(Lazarus, 1999: 37)

He emphasises a relational approach, suggesting that stress and emotion arise through the person-environment relationship. Though he cautions against viewing the processes in linear terms (Lazarus, 2006) I will start by doing so, as a useful simplification.

Individuals can be viewed as ‘going about their business’ for much of the time, but always attentive to their environment (Mandler, 1984). This attentiveness is termed *primary appraising* and is concerned with monitoring “whether or not what is happening is relevant to one’s values, goals, goal commitments, beliefs about self and world, and situational intentions” (Lazarus, 1999: 76). This can be framed in terms of goal relevance (does it matter to me?), goal congruence (are these events helping or hindering achievement of my goals?) and type of ego involvement. Lazarus (1991) proposes six types of ego-involvement, all of which are of relevance to career - social and self-esteem, moral values, ego ideals, meaning and ideas, other persons and their well-being, and life goals. If a situation is appraised as goal relevant, the primary appraising process leads to an evaluation of whether the situation is one of *harm/loss* (damage has already occurred), *threat* (damage is possible), *challenge* (the situation will stretch the individual but this is welcomed) or *benefit*. Goal relevance determines whether or not there will be an emotional response, goal congruence (helping or hindering goal achievement) whether that response will be positive or negative, and the type of ego involvement will determine the particular emotion that is expressed.

The *secondary appraising* process focuses on what can be done, in light of the primary appraisal of the situation. Lazarus describes this process as “nothing more than an evaluation of coping options” (Lazarus, 1999: 76). However, he suggests that appraisal and coping are closely linked, and we can recognise this in the way in which momentary panic over a problem subsides once we think of a potential solution, long before that solution is implemented. In respect of emotion, he suggests that secondary appraising also involves evaluating blame or credit for an outcome (who is responsible?, was the action under that person’s control?, did s/he intend to produce that outcome?) and future expectations (is this a one-off?, is this situation likely to get better or worse?). He suggests that these elements allow us to describe core relational themes for 15 key emotions e.g. for anger it is ‘a demeaning offence against me and mine’ (Lazarus, 1991: 122).

I noted above that Lazarus cautioned against adopting a linear approach. This is because the process is inherently iterative. For example, primary appraising is influenced by previous experience, such that an apparently innocuous event is appraised as threat. Similarly secondary appraising is influenced by awareness of

available coping resources – we recognise that, when tired or ill, we become distressed by events which would barely register when refreshed and in good health.

Snyder and Dinoff propose the following definition of coping which they suggest is consistent with a range of views:

Coping is a response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional, and psychological burden that is linked to stressful life events and daily hassles. (Snyder and Dinoff, 1999: 5)

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest that coping can be either emotion-focused or problem-focused, although Lazarus (2006) later expressed a degree of regret at this binary formulation, noting that both types of coping are typically used simultaneously and also might be usefully seen as a continuum. Emotion-focused coping is concerned with dealing with the emotion stimulated by a situation, problem-focused coping with taking action to address the situation. Emotion-focused coping strategies are generally perceived as less effective since they do not deal with the problem (Ashkanasy, Ashton-James and Jordan, 2004), however in situations where the problem cannot be changed, emotion-focused strategies are more appropriate (Sears, Unizar and Garrett, 2000). Snyder and Dinoff (1999) note that emotion-focused coping is found to be the best response to serious ill-health, consistent with the idea that positive illusions can be linked to well-being (Taylor, 1989).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I've sought to forge links between ideas which hitherto have, at best, been only loosely connected within the literature. The argument is that careers have become more likely sites for emotion, that emotion in career can be usefully studied in terms of sensemaking, and that the way in which a sensemaking approach conceptualises emotion is inherently narrative in form and maps closely to the literature on coping.

The framework developed in this chapter makes several important assumptions about the nature of work and career. First, that workplaces are sites in which events occur

which trigger emotion. Second, that they are locations of considerable behavioural constraints, limiting the individual's capacity to take action in response to this emotion. Third, that part of this constraint is self-imposed in light of career considerations, consistent with Grey's argument that career is a project of the self in which the individual exercises disciplinary techniques on the self (Grey, 1994).

Not all individuals will engage in the emotional self-management which has been at the heart of this thesis. One occasionally encounters people who have quit or been fired repeatedly over the course of their working lives. Those I have met never seemed bemused by this – they understood the consequences of their actions, but been unwilling to 'knuckle under' to any degree. Such individuals still fit within the general model outlined above – it is simply that their sensemaking produces narratives which lead to very action-oriented enactment! I suggest these individuals are not typical, and certainly not typical of what I have termed careerists. For careerists, behaviour is particularly self-disciplined, because they have an attitude of future orientation (Gunz, 1989) which leads them to look much further ahead when considering the consequences of their actions. For careerists, the sensemaking in response to emotion is likely to lead to narratives which seek to reframe the situation (to cope with the emotion), and to enactment which is less about action and more about understanding that action cannot or should not be taken at present (Feldman, 1989). The overall emphasis then is on the repeated re-storying of career narratives. In the next chapter I will examine in detail these issues of narrative and identity, which are so closely bound up the sensemaking approach.

## Chapter 3: Narrative, Self and Identity

A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reaction of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*.

(Giddens, 1991: 54)

One of the key outcomes of my research journey was what might be described as a personal 'narrative turn' mirroring its historical development. Narrative seemed to be the logical conclusion both to the specific methodological issues encountered (see chapter 5) and to developments within careers and emotions research. In terms of the thesis itself, I concluded that emotion and career are linked through narrative: through the stories we tell ourselves and others to make sense of, and cope with, the emotions involved in our careers. We narrate our lives (Bruner, 1986; McAdams, 1993; Sarbin, 1986), and career is suffused with emotion to the extent to which it is central to our life narrative. Emotion is caused by a disruption to our career narrative (after Weick) and stimulates sensemaking to repair the disruption, through the development of a 'new' career narrative: this may be through minor refinement, through returning to an older narrative, or through development of a wholly new narrative.

In this chapter, I wish to set out some of the key ideas on narrative. Narrative and narrative identity run through this thesis, yet they are drawn upon so implicitly by many of the models discussed that it is almost disruptive to the flow of the thesis to deal with them more directly. Work on narrative has been marked by an extraordinary degree of cross-fertilisation between disciplines: it is notable that Bruner, Propp and Ricoeur are widely cited in many fields, despite being formally a psychologist, folklorist and philosopher respectively. Other authors such as MacIntyre, Polkinghorne and Nabov are similarly influential in fields far away from their home disciplines. In some ways, the sheer wealth of material makes it tempting to bracket a discussion of narrative, perhaps choosing merely to identify it as a conceptual device which is common to the literatures on career, emotion and sensemaking drawn upon in this thesis. However, there are valuable insights within the growing narrative tradition, particularly on emotion, narrative and the life story, which repay closer inspection.

## A brief history of the narrative turn

The study of narrative can be dated back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, but Bruner (2002) notes that its central concern with mimesis (crudely, how art mimics life) did not occupy the attention of Western scholars until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Vladimir Propp's work on narrative structures in the fairytale revived interest (Propp, 1928/1968). Halliwell (1987) suggests the influence of the *Poetics* has actually waxed and waned several times. It was not widely known in antiquity, was rediscovered by the Italian humanists of the sixteenth century, but fell out of favour following the Romanticism of the eighteenth century. Though it never regained its pre-eminent position within literary theory, it did make something of a return in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, having been cited approvingly by T S Eliot and the Chicago school. More recently, Ricoeur (1985) has drawn heavily upon the *Poetics* in his hugely influential work *Time and Narrative*.

The narrative turn can be seen to take broadly two forms, weak and strong (Brown et al, 1996). The terms 'weak' and 'strong' are sometimes used to distinguish theoretical positions which are metaphorical from those which are literal (e.g. weak and strong Artificial Intelligence). Thus the 'weak form' of the narrative turn suggests it might be useful to examine human experience 'as if' it was narrative in form. Arguably this is a methodological position rather than a theoretical one. By contrast, the 'strong form' is more ontological than epistemological – consider this description from Somers (1994):

narrative is an ontological condition of social life. [...] stories guide action...people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories...“experience” is constituted through narratives...people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way integrate these happenings within one or more narratives....people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives. (Somers, 1994: 613-4)

Atkinson (1997) argues for something of a hybrid position, critiquing what he perceives as the privileging of narrative, whilst acknowledging its importance. His description of its relevance to studies of health and illness can be equally applied to other fields:

The narrative organisation of health and illness, and of medical work, is unquestionable. The temporal trajectory of illness careers is organised through the narrative unfolding of events and evaluations; the illness trajectory is a situated production, enacted through the occasioned tellings of illness experience. The meaning of illness is projected retrospectively and prospectively through oral and written language acts. (Atkinson, 1997: 340)

Within psychology, there are examples of both strong and weak forms, but (perhaps surprisingly) it has been the strong form which has been most influential. Two of the most important contributions were both published in 1986: Sarbin's edited text *Narrative Psychology*, in which he develops the argument for narrative as a root metaphor for psychology, and Bruner's *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Both claim that narrative is the central organising principle for human experience. Bruner (1990) suggests we appear to have an almost hard-wired preference for narrative forms. That is not to say that we are born with story templates which we like, more that we seem to have an inherent propensity to make sense of the world through narrative, and that through our development in a given culture, we acquire the canonical forms of that culture's stories.

### **The narrative turn in careers research**

Having briefly sketched out the development of the narrative turn, I want to outline how this development influenced research on emotion and, firstly, career. There is a growing interest in narrative within careers research, though narrative has been evident in career development practice for a much longer period. Notwithstanding the availability of numerous psychometric 'instruments' for assessing preferences, aptitudes, occupational fit etc. there has always been a dimension to vocational guidance work which elicits and values clients' stories. There has also been a very pragmatic recognition of the significance of a clear 'story' in the context of practical

career matters such as writing a CV or covering letter, or preparing for an interview. Nevertheless, in many areas of both practice and research, a broadly positivist stance remains dominant (Bujold, 2004) and narrative approaches still represent something of an ‘alternative’ approach. Bujold (1990) and Cochran (1990) were among the first to champion explicitly narrative approaches to career, although with hindsight many contributions to the seminal Handbook of Career Theory (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989) can be seen to anticipate the growth in narrative approaches to career during the 1990s.

Bujold (1990) advocated what he termed a ‘biographical-hermeneutical’ approach to research. In doing so, he makes a number of important links to other narrative approaches within psychology, in particular to the ideas developed by personality psychologists such as McAdams (1988) of treating the individual’s life narrative as a crucial element of personhood. Bujold stresses the considerable potential of such an approach for research into career development, whilst acknowledging the difficulties involved in interpreting life narratives. Citing Outhwaite (1986), he suggests that a crucial dimension to the approach is to consider “people as subjects rather than objects”. Unlike the traditional scientific method, which seeks manipulation and control, biographical-hermeneutical approaches “aim at mutual understanding” (Bujold, 1990: 66). Rather pragmatically, he suggests such approaches might precede more traditional methods: “attempts to quantify before carefully listening to subjects and closely examining the phenomena under study are likely to prevent access to what is really going on in the life of individuals who are in constant interaction with both their past history and their current living conditions” (Bujold, 1990: 67). This highlights an important issue for narrative approaches, anticipated above in the discussion of strong versus weak forms of the narrative turn. Narrative *can* be viewed as a way of getting at the “phenomena under study” but such an approach suggests an implicitly realist ontology: we wade through the language to find out what is ‘really’ going on. Although Atkinson (1997) is criticising a very different kind of narrative approach, he raises a highly relevant concern when he suggests that some narrative approaches risk endorsing “the romantic image of the interior self – a self that is also anterior to the realm of social action” (Atkinson, 1997: 342). I shall return to this issue later.



By contrast with Bujold, Cochran (1990) offers an argument for narrative research in careers which is unequivocally of the strong form of the narrative turn. His major contribution is his suggestion that narrative research can be separated into two divisions – narrative construction and narrative criticism – noting that “one develops the story” whilst the second “draws out what is of significance in it”. In the narrative construction division he suggests the researcher’s problem is to “construct narratives that are sound and trustworthy”, noting that this is a problem without a definitive solution. He suggests that case study research is the preferred method, as it allows the researcher to gather “divergent sources of evidence and rich, compelling details to support convergence into a narrative description” (Bujold, 1990: 79). Narrative criticism, a term coined by Bujold with a nod to literary criticism, is concerned with questions about the plot and meaning of the story, the nature of the explanations offered, the characters involved etc. Like narrative construction, it is open to a range of possible methods. In both divisions, we can discern a methodological openness which is both a strength and an invitation to criticism from more positivist quarters.

I noted above that narrative approaches to careers research originated in the guidance field. They are also increasingly used by organisational careers researchers, and Cohen and Mallon (2001) offer a useful summary of how these ideas have developed. An important point to note is that many organisational researchers study stories as (in crude terms) an artefact of organisational culture (e.g. Gabriel, 1998; Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993, Sackman, 1991). In such approaches, the veracity of stories is not necessarily significant – they are important for what they communicate, their symbolism, what they reveal. For example, Gabriel (1998) suggests stories can be analysed in a fashion similar to literary analysis or the interpretation of dreams, and we might therefore have little concern for whether they are ‘true’ (though see Gabriel (2004) for a discussion of his growing misgivings about the issue of truth in organizational storytelling research). Within careers research, whilst we might readily accept a degree of latitude on accuracy, it might seem problematic to work with career stories which are phantasy. However, Wiersma (1988) suggests such stories can be useful in revealing individual and cultural expectations about the nature of career. Cohen and Mallon (2001) also view career stories as being “deeply embedded in social and culture practice” and suggest that such stories handle the dual nature of career (cf. Hughes, 1937) whilst avoiding the fragmentary nature of more positivistic

explanations (Collin and Young, 2000). Cohen and Mallon also make a strong link to sensemaking, suggesting that career stories provide an ideal research method for exploring how individuals make sense of their boundaryless careers.

The literature on narrative approaches to careers described thus far reflects two trends – the growing use of career stories as research data, and the use of narrative approaches within career guidance. To some extent both approaches involve an acknowledgement of the way in which the individual's narrative is what creates the modern career i.e. that the external markers which 'made sense' of careers in the past are no longer widely available (Berlinger and Weick, 1989), and the creation of a successful career is more about personal learning and development (Hall, 1996). However, these approaches have as yet not engaged fully with some of the significant theoretical issues concerned with autobiographical narrative which have been the subject of much debate within philosophy and the emerging field of narrative psychology.

The idea of career narratives is potentially much more than merely methodological. McAdams (1995) suggests that narrative is an old methodology in social science, albeit one that has gone through something of a renaissance in recent years. However, what is new is the development of narrative as a construct:

To put the distinction simply, not only may human lives be examined through storytelling methods, but human lives themselves may now be understood as narrative constructions. (McAdams, 1995: 207)

In the context of career, this suggests we might view a career narrative as more than simply a tale told to a researcher or an interview panel: the narrative *is* the career. Our career narratives will be shaped and constrained by the available career scripts (see Fig 1). Career narratives are not career scripts, but they are in part woven from a repertoire of 'permitted' stories which come from career scripts (cf. Somers, 1994). However, career stories can *become* career scripts through a process of enactment: individuals can imagine *new* stories and then perform them. Walton and Mallon offer a

neat summary of this idea:

over time, enactment, both individual and collective, of revised career scripts both reproduces and acts to change them, such that they become new resources and norms that guide (and both constrain and enable) career behaviour (Walton and Mallon, 2004: 78)

I suggest that despite appearing to be inherently subjective, career narratives incorporate both objective and subjective, through the influence of canonical forms (Bruner, 1990) and the need to achieve narrative plausibility (see also the discussion of Sarbin's notion of emotion narratives as rhetoric in the next section).

Bruner (1990) suggests that the cultural and social influence on individual agency can be observed in terms of the canonical forms of narrative which exist within a given culture. Not all stories are 'permitted': some can be told only by men, or by members of the ruling class, some cannot be told at all. Career stories must also fall into certain canonical forms: in the next chapter, I will suggest managerial careers offer a particularly clear example. Such careers are doubly constrained because, following the idea of organisational career logics (Gunz, 1989), they must also conform to local, organisational canonical forms governing the kind of stories which can be told. This also links to Barley's claim that career 'scripts' shaped by institutional forces offer 'interpretive schemes, resources, and norms for fashioning a course through some social world' (Barley, 1989: 53).

In seeking to emphasise the polyphonic and polysemic nature of narrative in organisations, Boje (2001) proposes the idea of antenarratives, ante meaning both before and a bet. An antenarrative is a fragment, a would-be narrative, a bet that this fragment can find an audience and a fully-fledged narrative can be told. I suggested earlier that we write and re-write our career stories in response to affective events, and it is tempting to view these multiple career stories as personal antenarratives in the context of career. However, this would be misleading, taking an idea from the organizational level of analysis and misapplying it to the individual. Instead, there is only one narrative 'in play' at any moment, but that there are numerous alternative narratives which can be invoked in response to events. At the simplest level, we can

readily envisage a dual-narrative situation, in which an individual has good days where everything is going fine and the narrative is ‘a career on track to where I want to go’ and bad days where nothing seems to be falling into place and the narrative is ‘wasting my time stuck in a dead-end job’. The important points to stress are a) the completeness of the narratives and b) their inherent volatility. In terms of career stories, we are ‘serial monogamists’ – completely faithful to our current story, yet liable to switch to another at any time and perhaps frequently.

The volatility of narratives arising out of the sensemaking process is noted by Glanz who suggests that “apparently random moments of revelation can overturn well established belief and behaviour in a very short time frame and as a result of an infinite number of variables” (Glanz, 2003: 262). Marshall suggests stories “undergo changes and reformulations as relatively routine life processes” (Marshall, 2000: 206).

### **The narrative turn in emotions research**

In his final article, published posthumously, Richard S Lazarus stated “I have come to believe that emotions are best regarded and studied as dramatic stories or narratives” (Lazarus, 2006: 28). This statement seems to capture a prevailing mood amongst many emotions researchers in psychology albeit one which, as yet, has not translated to a substantial shift in orientation. This is perhaps understandable: the field was built upon broadly biological conceptions of emotion, and developed empirically through ingenious laboratory experiments or field experiments involving techniques such as measuring galvanic skin responses. A wholesale move to a narrative paradigm, if it ever occurs, will be a genuinely Kuhnian paradigm shift.

Lazarus (1999) defines an emotion narrative as:

A dramatic story or plot that describes the provocation of the emotion and its background, which helps define what made some action, or lack of action when it is desired, provocative, and how it progressed and turned out. The drama begins with the provoking action and proceeds through the continuing transaction – usually interpersonal. The provocation is best viewed as the figure in a *figure-ground* relationship. (Lazarus, 1999: 205)

As noted in the previous chapter, this means we need information on the background to understand an emotional response. Lazarus (1999) stresses the ongoing nature of emotion narratives:

Emotional encounters proceed continuously over time, as in a drama or motion picture film, and when they end – if they ever do – it may be only temporarily, as the parties separate, resolve their conflict, or terminate the transaction or business...In most relationships, each new transaction tends to repeat previous ones, though the details are likely to differ and new issues may emerge.

(Lazarus, 1999: 206)

This formulation of the emotion narrative is consistent with two hugely important ideas already introduced. Firstly, it meshes perfectly with the notion that sensemaking is ongoing and retrospective. Secondly, it fits with the idea of an emotion episode (Frijda, 1993) and suggests an even greater temporal range to this concept. Family get-togethers provide the perfect illustration – within minutes of meeting up, relatives separated for an age may nevertheless fall into emotional transactions which replay old transactions (good or bad).

Lazarus (1999) suggests there are prototypical emotion narratives for a range of emotions, that is to say, an underlying structure (cf. Propp, 1928) for narratives about emotions such as anger, gratitude or jealousy. Sarbin (1995) similarly argues for a narrative approach to emotion, suggesting we focus on the idea of emotional life, rather than emotions. Criticising the use of ‘psychophysiological symbolism’, which treats the body as a container for emotion, he argues that we might regard “the 400 or more entries in the lexicon of emotions as being names for narrative plots rather than names for patterns of bodily perturbations” (Sarbin, 1995:214).

Sarbin (1995) proposes that these narrative plots should be viewed as rhetoric – “use of oral and gestural actions for the purpose of persuading others (and self) of the credibility of the speaker’s moral position”. This is consistent with Davidson (1980) who suggests that narratives are rationalisations in which reasons are offered as causal explanations. Sarbin suggests that rhetorical actions can have two types of authorship

– dramaturgical and dramatic:

The author of dramaturgical actions is the actor himself or herself who engages in various stratagems to advance his or her moral position [s/he is] author-playwright and director [whereas] the authorship of dramatic rhetoric is far removed from the actor. The actor's commerce with stories lived and stories told provides plots for interpreting the conduct of others and for guiding one's own conduct. (Sarbin, 1995: 217)

This links to the discussion in the last chapter about career scripts, and the extent to which they are performed or interpreted by career actors. Following the distinction proposed by Sarbin, we might speculate that career scripts will be 'performed' in a dramatic fashion where they describe well-worn and predictable career paths, but will be 'interpreted' in career situations where the script offers less clearly defined roles, norms etc. This has two important implications for the study of emotion in career:

1. In 'standard' careers, emotion will tend to be narrated in dramatic terms: events such as failing to win a promotion, or being offered a particularly attractive post, will elicit emotions for which there are well-known and widely shared narratives.
2. In boundaryless careers, the script is a much more open text (Eco, 1979) and disruptions which occur are a) less predictable and b) more personal and idiosyncratic. Failure, disappointment, and difficulties in the boundaryless career are thus more difficult to deal with. They stimulate not just sensemaking to understand 'what's the story here?' but also to understand 'how should I feel?' In the absence of readymade scripts to answer these questions, much greater sensemaking is required and authorship is therefore resolutely dramaturgical.

The present thesis focuses very much on the latter case, but the former suggests another avenue for research e.g. what are the canonical forms for narratives of emotion in career?

## **A narrative model of the self**

I noted above the concern raised by Atkinson (1997) that narrative approaches risk re-centring the individual. His basic argument chimes in with concerns raised by Gabriel (2004) about the notion of poetic truth in narrative. Both Atkinson and Gabriel, in quite different ways, focus attention upon the notion of an authentic narrative: a narrative which is claimed to be true in a profound sense even if factually inaccurate. Victim stories are perhaps the most obvious example of such narratives. Once you introduce these notions of authenticity and verisimilitude (however tacitly) it is but a short step to the notion of the real or authentic self, a notion which sits uncomfortably with the various intellectual traditions which have informed modern narrative approaches within social science. Narrative approaches can seem resolutely post-modern – identity is a story, stories are permanently in flux, multiple stories can be told, stories told are shaped by power relations etc. The self is de-centred and we have successfully emptied people's heads of thought. In its more extreme forms, this notion has considerable resonance with the Jewish myth of the Golem: a creature made of clay which follows the instructions written on a scroll placed in its head. Such notions of the person are hugely problematic for psychology, an issue which Burr (2003) bravely tackles head-on:

Social constructionism threatens to dispense with the need for psychology as a study of the experience and subjectivity of persons. Macro social constructionism tends towards the 'death of the subject', where the constitutive force of prevailing discourse produce all the features of being a person with which we are familiar. There is no need of a psychology here. [...] Micro social constructionism loses the person in a different way. Discursive psychology brackets off the person who is the user of the discursive devices, preferring to study only the latter and the accounts that are constructed with them. (Burr, 2003: 178-9)

I will focus on the micro social constructionist problem here. It is in one sense an issue of motivation, though such a concept seems out of place in social constructionist approaches. People are portrayed as skilled in deploying discursive devices to achieve certain outcomes, but the issue of why exactly they should do this remains

unexplained. Such an approach effectively brackets mental processes just as resolutely as behaviourism ever did, thus problematizing notions of agency and thought. Yet the new careers have an implicitly agentic model of the person – whilst acknowledging the considerable influence of institutions on career development, individuals are viewed as negotiating their own course (within these constraints). We therefore need a narrative model of the person which can allow for agency and thought.

Burr praises the attempt of approaches such as structuration theory to elide the agency/structure dualism, but clearly this is not a psychological theory. She suggests that symbolic interactionism, deriving from Mead (1934) has much to offer:

Mead's contribution lies in transcending the dualism of self/other, and in providing an account of the individual that is thoroughly social. (Burr, 2003: 193)

Strauss (1956) suggested that Mead's classic 'Mind, Self and Society' would have been better titled 'Society, Self and Mind', to reflect both the temporal sequence of development and the radicalism of Mead's scheme. Thought and agency can exist in an interactionist concept of self. Our personal theory of mind, and sense of self, develop in interaction, principally through the medium of language. The processes through which these develop also lead to an ability to put ourselves in the mind of another, to imagine the meaning of a situation for them:

We can imagine what would happen if we were to act in certain way and can therefore consider alternative actions, which is a way of describing agency. (Burr, 2003: 194)

This approach offers us a concept of self which is thoroughly social but can also be understood to be agentic and with an inner narrative which not merely the Golem's scroll of discourse. However, this conception inevitably brings with it the Meadian notion of "a parliament of selves" and raises significant issue of identity, to which we now turn.



## **Narrative identity**

McAdams (1997) suggests that postmodern ideas of the fragmented nature of identity run counter to our lived experience of a some degree of coherence and continuity to our lives (see also Crossley, 2000). He notes that many authors who argue for a multiplicity in the self also express a degree of ambivalence as to whether this is positive, and also whether in practice the self is quite so thoroughly multiple. For example, although arguing for a protean self, Lifton (1993) suggests that the individual nevertheless seeks to achieve a “certain poise or balance” in order to function. This is seen as difficult:

That poise is bound up with agility, with flexible adaptation, and is less a matter of steady and predictable direction than of manoeuvrability and talent for coping with widely divergent circumstances. (Lifton, 1993)

This reads almost as a description of the challenges of managing a protean career (Hall, 1996). McAdams (1997) draws upon James’s (1892) notion of the I and the Me in order to address some of these issues. He starts by emphasising the notion of self as a process – selfing:

To self – or to maintain the “stance” of an I in the world (Blasi, 1988) – is to apprehend and appropriate experience as a subject, to grasp phenomenal experience as one’s own, as belonging “to me”. (McAdams, 1997: 56)

The I is therefore a process, whose product is the Me. It is tempting to say ‘products’, ‘in that the me contains all that I consider to be “mine”, the me is a motley collection of self-attributions’ (McAdams, 1997: 60). McAdams argues that, although the Me has no intrinsic unity, there are cultural expectations to exhibit a degree of unity (consistency, purpose, integration) among our various selves: identity is ‘a desired quality of selfhood in a society that expects individual lives to express an individuated patterning suggestive of life unity and purpose’ (McAdams, 1997: 60). McAdams

suggests that we strive towards the construction of such identity through narrative:

The challenge of identity demands that the modern adult construct a narrative of the self that synthesizes the synchronic and diachronic elements of the me to suggest that (1) despite its many facets the me is coherent and unified and (2) despite the many changes that attend the passage of time, the me of the past led up to or set the stage for the me of the present, which in turn will lead up to or set the stage for the me of the future. (McAdams, 1997: 63)

In the context of careers, this has two key implications. First, that our career stories will need to accommodate the various relevant facets (Marshall, 2000). Second, the volatility of career stories means that the narrative will have to deal with issues of consistency and continuity: if nothing else, the narrative will need to offer an account of why previously told career stories are no longer seen as valid.

These points link to Somers (1994) more sociological notions of narrative identity:

social action can only be intelligible if we recognise that people are guided to act by the structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded and by the stories through which they constitute their identities...a narrative identity approach assumes people act in particular ways because *not* to do so would fundamentally violate their sense of *being* at that particular time and place. (Somers, 1994: 624)

She argues that narrative identities are ‘constituted *in* time and *over* time’. Thus the career actor will act in a manner consistent with their narrative identity at that moment but this identity has some degree of fluidity over time. Identity is constituted ‘by the intricate interweaving of history, narrativity, social knowledge, and relationality, as well as institutional and culture practices’ (Somers, 1994: 634). Somers describes “the stories social actors use to make sense of – and indeed act in – their lives” (Somers, 1994: 618) as *ontological narratives*, and suggests they arise from *public narratives*, “intersubjective webs of relationality [that] sustain and transform narratives over time” (ibid: 618). Public narratives can be ‘local or grand, micro or

macro-stories' and provide an extraordinarily rich cultural resource from which ontological narratives can be woven.

### **Narrative, self and identity - issues for autoethnography**

In order to understand the protagonist, we need to have some sense of how he made his way through the world – what he thought, and what he thought he was doing. This apparently simple matter raises a significant meta-theoretical issue concerning the ontology of the self drawn upon within this thesis. An autoethnographic thesis will be full of 'I' and the reader needs to know 'who is using this 'I' and what does he mean by it?' I have already discussed the issues of agency raised by social constructionist notions of the self. Whilst impressed by poststructuralist accounts of the self, I have difficulty with the extent to which they empty people's heads. The ways in which this is problematic for psychology (Burr, 2003; Hollway, 2001) were discussed earlier, but it is equally problematic as an account of our lived experience (McAdams, 1997).

When people are described as having 'a rich inner life', this is sometimes meant pejoratively to mean they have a Walter Mitty quality, but more often this phrase is an observation that a particular individual seems to think a great deal about things. A version of the self which brackets off this inner life seems to neglect a great deal of importance, and to go against the trend of increased individualism (Triandis, 1995), and the idea of the self as a reflexive identity project (Giddens, 1991). Significantly for this thesis, it also runs counter to the way in which autoethnographic writing typically seeks to capture the author's thoughts and feelings – two phenomena which are inescapably mental, albeit equally inescapably social.

My own everyday 'theory of self' includes a significant role for thinking. I think a great deal, and I attribute at least some of my subsequent actions to this thinking. It is arguable that I should make such an attribution for *all* my actions, if we follow the distinction between action and behaviour where the latter is largely involuntary/instinctual and the former is intentional e.g. Mead (1934). Yet the qualifying 'some' seems important in that it draws attention to the potential for dissociation between thinking and action. I am not thinking here of a Cartesian dualism, instead I have in mind Davidson's (1980) idea of explanations as rationalisations which invoke reasons as causal factors. That is to say, we may

develop narrative thinking which accounts for our actions (taken or intended) in a manner which is plausible but misleading – see the discussion of Wiersma (1988) below.

Following this line of argument, I perceive that my thoughts come from ‘somewhere’ and for me that somewhere is resolutely cultural. My supervisor has taken me to task for what he calls my Peter Ustinov tendencies, and has encouraged me to weed out many of the cultural references which littered these chapters. He is right to do so, but some remain, and in doing so bear testament to the ways in which culture influences our thinking and the stories we tell. However, we are not player pianos, and culture does not merely fill us with tunes and then crank the handle. Bruner suggests that narrative “mediates between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes” (Bruner, 1990: 52). Rosenwald and Ochberg capture this well:

the character of spontaneity is never extinguished in the person...desire enters at best reluctantly into compromises with social and cultural conventions. Subjectivity is the restless force that society seeks to master. This conception rules out social adaptation as an intrinsic terminus of human development and relegates it to the position of a forced settlement. Subjectivity is not the romantic fiction of a self prior to and safe from socialisation. On the contrary, it is what bears the marks of the person’s interaction with the world and seeks yet to erase them. (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992: 7)

Taken together then, I am working with a model of the self which is agentic and thoughtful, but resolutely located in a cultural milieu. There are a number of models which posit such a self (Bruner, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Burr, 2003) all of which tend to show the influence of theorists such as James (1892) and Mead (1934). The model of the self which most aptly describes my own working model is offered by McAdams (1996). It draws upon theorists such as Gergen, Giddens and Taylor, but remains a resolutely *psychological* model of the self. His interpretation of William James’s

“duplex self”, the I and the Me is captured by his suggestion that the modern self:

includes both those private narrative musings about “who I really am” and public narrative manoeuvrings that are strongly driven by role and situational demands (McAdams, 1996: 307).

Both are influenced by culture, both influence each other, and both aspects loom large in career, and link (though not as a perfect mapping) to the subjective and objective dimensions of career (Hughes, 1937). It is perhaps unsurprising, though worth stating, that this model of the self preferred by the Theorist coincides neatly with the ‘working’ model of self in use by the Protagonist.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to map out what is meant by narrative as the link between emotion and career. In doing so, I have been conscious of the tension between my sense of the boldness of this claim, and my sense of its inherent rightness. Narrative seems so ephemeral, soft and ‘virtual’ when faced with hard career ‘realities’ such as discrimination or redundancy, that one feels almost duty bound to withdraw the claim. Yet the role of narrative in our lives is ubiquitous, and the idea that narratives have a strong influence on our lives is difficult to deny. Somers (1994) suggests narrative is part of the constitution of society, and McAdams (1997) that it is the means through which we attain a sense of self which allows us to function in that society. Career actors therefore are not merely making sense of their careers through narrative; they create their careers through storytelling, weaving a career story from the materials available, materials which are themselves narrative.

Goldie (2003) stresses the importance of narrative whilst seeking to temper the tendency of over-zealous aficionados (including, he admits, his younger self) to overstate matters:

It has been argued...that a life is a narrative, of which the person living the life is the author. If one insists upon the importance of narrative, as I do, one can be tempted in that direction. But it is a mistake. [...] the denial that we are

*literally* authors of our lives does not imply that narratives are not central to how we lead our lives. We think, talk and write *about* our lives as narratives and our doing this can profoundly affect our lives as such, in our engagement with, and response to, our past lives, and in our practical reasoning about what to do in the future. Narrative thought and talk about our lives, or segments of our lives, can this be embedded in, and profoundly influence, the lives that we lead, even though those lives are not themselves narratives.

(Goldie, 2003: 303)

He has in mind approaches which “elide the notion of narrative and what a narrative is about...between representation and what is represented”. It is of course possible to argue that when ‘what is represented’ is a sense of self or of identity, then this sense may be narrative and there is no difference.

What is missing from this account, though it will not be pursued in this thesis, is embodiment. Somers (1994) notes that apparently material things of occupational life (“bread and wages”) are to some extent symbolic and can be drawn upon as a narrative resource in different ways at different times. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, they are nevertheless also material, and this gives them a certain non-negotiability. In the remainder of this thesis, I shall bracket the notion of embodiment; however it is an area for further research. Embodiment may have significant implications for emotion in career in certain situations, perhaps most obviously where career is disrupted through ill health or disability. Such disruptions will indeed stimulate sensemaking and re-storying, but the body will be writ much larger in such stories – see Hockey (2005) for an account of the researcher’s identity work in dealing with long-term injury.

Narrative, then, will be treated both as conceptual device through which we might examine career and the means through which individuals organise their experience – “experience is moulded, root and branch, by narrative forms...its narrative quality is altogether primitive” (Crites, 1971). Careers are thus understood and developed, shaped and reshaped, in narratives woven in response to changes and disruptions and the emotions they elicit. In the next chapter I will show how this conceptualisation

can be applied to studying emotion in careers, using managerial careers as worked example.

## Chapter 4: Managerial Careers as a Worked Example

In the previous chapters I have sought to explore some of the key developments in career, why these have increased the importance of emotion in career, and how this can best be understood in terms of identity, narrative and sensemaking. In this chapter, I will pull together these ideas into an explicit statement of the basic theoretical framework, after which I will provide an exposition of this framework through the ‘worked example’ of managerial careers. I want to start by showing how sensemaking might offer a theoretical framework for understanding the interaction of emotion and career.

### **Career, emotion and sensemaking: events, projects and commitment**

The literatures on career, emotion and sensemaking can be drawn together through a focus on three key concepts – events, projects and commitment. What links these concepts, and represents the key link between emotion and career, is narrative.

*Events:* As noted, Affective Events Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) has been hugely influential in sensitising researchers to the importance of events for understanding emotion at work, moving away from general conditions to look at specific ‘triggers’ which might produce an emotional response. Events are also an important concept within the sensemaking literature, with events being specified in terms of occurrences which stimulate the question “what’s the story here?” (Weick et al, 2005).

*Projects:* The idea of the career as a project fits well with other influential uses of the project concept e.g. the notion of identity as a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991). Crites (1986) emphasises projects as a linkage between past, present and future in narrative accounts. Recent work on sensemaking has also emphasised the importance of projects. Weick et al (2005) suggests that, in the normal course of life, we are immersed in projects, and it is disruption to these projects (events) which trigger



sensemaking:

Explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world. In such circumstances there is a shift from the experience of immersion in projects to a sense that the flow of action has become unintelligible in some way. (Weick et al, 2005: 409)

The boundaryless career concept locates career as a project which is much less predictable and more readily disrupted than the traditional organisational career.

*Commitment:* Becker (1960) noted that the concept of commitment had wide appeal for social scientists, but was rarely defined. His development of the concept has proved hugely influential in various areas, and especially to research on occupational and organisational commitment. These two types of commitment are self-evidently relevant to career, but the idea of *behavioural* commitment (Salancik, 1977) is also relevant. Weick (1993) argues that where behaviour is public, volitional and irreversible, we need to make sense of our actions. Individuals at work will have behavioural commitment to varying degrees, but are likely to have developed considerable commitment to their careers. This overlaps with occupational and organisational commitment, with the key element being that our career histories are something which we cannot lightly eschew. In keeping with this, Weick (1995) suggests we become committed to a certain line of action as a result of enactment. This is analogous to the idea of escalation – our early commitment to a particular interpretation makes it more difficult to change that interpretation (Drummond and Chell, 2001).

*Events, projects and commitment:* We can draw these three elements together in the following terms – events are disruptions which produce emotions which stimulate sensemaking in order to allow the resumption of projects to which we are committed:

[where] an expectation of continuity is breached...efforts are made to construct a plausible sense of what is happening, and this sense of plausibility

normalizes the breach, restores the expectation, and enables projects to continue (Weick et al, 2005: 414)

We might expect then that any events which disrupt the career project will be causes of emotion, and will engender significant sensemaking activity to 'restore the expectation' inherent in the career script (Barley, 1989) currently being enacted. Repeated events which effect similar breaches (in the expectations of continuity) are likely to cause an emotion episode (Frijda, 1993), which may ultimately prevent sensemaking which could normalise the breach. This will lead to the writing and enacting of a new career script. This is not to suggest that every setback cause a re-write of one's entire career story. Rather, that each event will stimulate sensemaking, producing some small tale that fits into the broader career story, perhaps subtly altering it. A junior management accountant spoken to abruptly by the Finance Director leaves the office muttering to himself, 'calm yourself down, this time next year you'll have finished your CIMA exams and you can tell him where to stick it': he is drawing upon an implicit career narrative with an envisaged future where he will have completed his professional qualification and will be in a position to move on to 'better things'.

Weick et al (2005) suggest that:

Sensemaking is not about truth and getting it right...it is about the continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism. (Weick et al 2005: 415)

One problem with this description is the emphasis on an emerging story: Weick et al seem to assume a story gradually emerges and is honed, but of course individuals can and do deal with multiple stories to account for the same information, shifting between them as enactment makes a particular storyline seem more or less plausible.

### *Career as an identity project*

I referred above to the idea of career as a project, and I want to develop this further. Career is a very particular kind of project: it is closely interwoven with other aspects

of life, tends to be a project to which we are highly committed and for many is central to identity. The sensemaking involved in the career project is therefore likely to be of great consequence and tightly bound up with identity construction. Weick (1995) places 'grounded in identity construction' first in his seven properties of sensemaking. He notes that "controlled, intentional sensemaking is triggered by a failure to confirm one's self" and that it occurs "in the service of maintaining a consistent, positive self-conception" (Weick, 1995: 23). The interpretations we place upon situations speak as much to our own identities as to the situation. Weick suggests five nuances to the importance of identity construction in sensemaking:

Controlled intentional sensemaking is triggered by a failure to confirm one's self...sensemaking occurs in the service of maintaining a consistent, positive self-conception...people learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing their consequences...people simultaneously try to shape and react to the environment they face...The idea that sensemaking is self-referential suggests that self, rather than the environment, may be the text in need of interpretation. (Weick 1995: 23)

This may seem to locate sensemaking within the individual, but it is important to stress that we are always in the process of attempting to understand what is going on 'out there':

Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances.

(Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005: 409)

Sensemaking is complemented by sensegiving: creating meanings for a given audience. Cary Grant commented that he eventually became Cary Grant – the suave, debonair persona of his films – but of course he was 'really' Archibald Leach, a

former street urchin from Bristol. This notion is particularly relevant to career, because sensegiving is much more future oriented. When we build prospective career paths and attempt to follow them, we are in part seeing whether we can ‘pull off’ the prospective identity we have projected for ourselves: this is seen most vividly in interviews, where we put forward what we believe to be our ‘best’ identity (which may be more potential than actual at that point). Sensemaking is influenced by responses to our sensegiving, captured by the recipe “how can I know who we are becoming until I see what they say and do with our actions?” (Weick et al, 2005: 416).

### **Managerial Careers as a worked example**

The theoretical framework set out above leads to the following propositions. *One*, career is a *domain* in which emotions are likely to be experienced, and that these emotions are likely to have an impact upon career development. *Two*, emotion in career is likely to be most commonly experienced, and of greatest significance, for individuals who are *careerist*. *Three*, for such individuals career is central to their *identity*. McAdams (1997) and Somers (1994) suggest that identity can best be conceptualised in narrative terms, a stance which chimes in with approaches to career adopted by researchers such as Bujold (1990, 2004) and Cochran (1990) and leads to proposition *four*: career and emotion are linked through *narrative*. *Five*, career considerations place *constraints* on our behaviour which both provoke emotion and inhibits its expression such that, *six*, individuals are likely to adopt *emotion-focused coping* as their main coping strategy. Finally, *seven*, the dominant mode of emotion-focused coping will be narrative coping<sup>6</sup>.

Managerial careers represent a particularly appropriate site for investigation, since these propositions can be readily observed in play in this setting. Managerial careers are hugely significant for organisations. Gunz and Jalland (1996) go as far as to suggest managerial career systems will have an impact on the strategic direction of organisations. Like any other occupation, managers may experience emotion arising from, and having an influence over, the subjective career i.e. their own perspective on

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<sup>6</sup> I will not consider this final proposition within the present chapter, as it emerges more appropriately as a theme in the cases (chapter 9 and 10).

their careers. However it could be argued that emotion is actually *more* likely to be a factor in managerial careers. The impact of emotion upon managerial careers is therefore a topic worthy of study.

### *Defining managers*

Research on managerial careers appears implicitly to be about general managers, yet the growth of management has come in part from the trend to designate senior professional roles in managerial terms. Accountants, engineers, and nurses are just a few of the professions in which senior staff are now perceived as managers. Yet Currie et al (2006) note that in the face of job insecurity, professional and technical expertise, rather than managerial competence and experience, is seen to be the more convertible currency on the labour market. This can lead to ‘managers’ engaging in considerable identity work to re-position themselves as professionals (in HR, finance, marketing, engineering) rather than managers. Baruch and Blenkinsopp (2007, in press) describe such individuals as technocratic managers. In the context of career, this issue of career orientation will be important for understanding how events stimulate emotion, as it speaks to the meaning these events will have for the individual manager. For the purposes of this thesis however, I will work with an implicit definition of managers as ‘those who view themselves as managers’.

### *Domain*

Researchers examining work-life balance draw upon the idea that there are various ‘domains’ (e.g. occupational, educational, family) through which individuals move. These domains overlap and interact, but nevertheless exhibit some separation. Career can be viewed as part of the occupational domain, or as an aspect of the life course which crosses domains (e.g. educational, occupational, family). I will prefer the former, rather narrower conceptualisation within the present thesis, but the latter approach does suggest avenues for further research examining how the emotion arising in career affects the personal life, and vice versa, an issue I touch upon in chapter 8. There are two aspects to the managers’ occupational domain which make managerial careers particularly likely sites for emotion: the first is their close identification with the organisation and its ‘ups and downs’, the second is the underlying assumption of hierarchical progression within managerial careers.

Gunz (1989) suggests that for managerial careers the objective/subjective distinction (Hughes, 1937) might be framed in terms of organisational and individual ‘career logics’. Organisational career logics (OCLs) are “the reasons an observer infers for particular firms showing particular patterns in the careers of their managers” (Gunz, 1988: 539). The idea that one might be able to discern such patterns assumes that managers pursue their careers within a single organisation. Historically, this may have been the case – management was seen as the definitive organizational career, with managers assumed to be in their present position by dint of organization-specific knowledge gained during their ascent through the ranks of the company. The rise of management as a profession, with the associated belief that it can be learned and thus applied in a range of settings (i.e. it is not organisation-specific knowledge) means that managers are now as likely as many other occupations to pursue their careers across organisational boundaries<sup>7</sup>.

This shift may appear to make managerial careers more similar to other occupations, but there are a number of features which continue to make the managerial career a ‘special case’. The first is that managers are closely engaged with the organisation<sup>8</sup>. In this respect, managerial careers remain relatively tightly-coupled situations: the organisation’s trials and tribulations are a more pressing concern for managers, on a day to day basis, than for other employees. We might compare it with the difference between a train passenger trying to read and one trying to write – the former may be subject to some distractions (loud fellow passengers, ticket inspections) but will be oblivious to the practically continuous distractions (cornering, changes of speed, a particularly bumpy stretch of track) which affect the passenger trying to write.

The second feature is the emphasis on hierarchical progression. I noted in chapter 2 that Wilensky’s definition of career in these terms is in many ways still the ‘working definition’ amongst people at work. Managerial careers are almost unavoidably defined in these terms – how else can one be seen to make career progress as a manager, other than by obtaining a post at the next level up? This has important implications for managers’ perceptions of their careers. In his examination of the

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<sup>7</sup> Stewart (1997) suggests that the modern trend to downplay the significance of organisation-specific knowledge greatly underestimates its importance to managerial performance.

<sup>8</sup> This may overstate the position, one can certainly encounter apparently disengaged managers! We might rather say that they are less able than most workers to follow a strategy of minimal engagement.

career narratives of middle-aged businessmen, Ochberg found their narratives had a common plot structure – the plots showed “relentless forward movement, shaped by career culture, which demands constant advancement” (Ochberg, 1988: 173).

### *Managers as Careerists*

If management is an inherently careerist occupation, it does not necessarily follow that managers are inherently ‘careerist’. However, Ochberg (1988) suggests that even where managers would seek to reject the careerist strictures of their occupation, the dominant career culture ‘forces’ them to think in career terms. In chapter 8, I will discuss an example from my own career of considerable emotion stimulated just by the act of contemplating a move which implicitly rejected this meta-narrative of progression.

Generally then, managers are to some extent ‘careerist’ – their careers are of importance to them, and thus the Law of Concern (Frijda, 1988) applies to them. There is however another consequence, which links back to Ochberg’s notion of a career culture which prizes advancement. Managerial careers develop over an extended period. Whilst not predictable, in the sense of being readily planned, their hierarchical nature means that the individual can look forward and see certain ‘staging posts’ in their anticipated/hoped for career: rather like mountaineers planning an ascent on a previously unclimbed peak, they may have a sense of roughly where they want or need to be at different points in time, even though the actual climbing will be contingent and improvised. One consequence of this is that managers are always to some extent looking ahead, they have an “attitude of future orientation” which Gunz suggest is implicit to career (Gunz, 1989: 239). Future orientation is a crucial factor in understanding the impact of emotion on career – it implicitly defines a time horizon for ‘gratification deferred’ and thus sets bounds to the individual’s willingness to engage in emotional regulation. Gunz suggests people vary in the extent to which they are future-orientated, both generally and at any given time. Thus, some individuals are willing to take posts which they find unrewarding (or leave jobs they find hugely rewarding) on the basis of a calculation of future career benefits. Other individuals seem oblivious to such considerations, and may leave jobs which seem to

offer much in career terms, simply because they want out:

Not everyone thinks in these terms, and not all the time. The chances are that future-oriented thinking will emerge, if it is going to at all, at the point when individuals have a choice to make. (Gunz, 1989: 240)

Gunz seems to be viewing future orientation in binary terms (one has it or not) but logically all individuals must have a degree of future orientation, only the time horizon will vary.

### *Identity*

In the last chapter I suggested that for many individuals career narratives are a significant element of narrative identity. Certainly a managerial career story is a major narrative, central to the individual manager's identity<sup>9</sup>. As such, it engages with many of the aspects of "selfing" described in the last chapter (McAdams, 1997). We can readily understand that the identity construction taking place is in part aspirational and ambitious: whilst not everyone aspires to be Chief Executive, everyone will aspire to progress and many will therefore inevitably be disappointed. The individual thus narrates a career story and project which may well not come to pass, and is therefore chronically fragile. Unless s/he is lacking in self-awareness, s/he will regularly encounter minor 'hassles or uplifts' in the workplace which appear to have the potential to disrupt the career project, accelerating progress and creating joy, or decelerating progress and thus disconfirming the positive career narrative and identity. We might draw an analogy with a taxi ride to the airport on a tight timescale – every red light hit, even if it delays us only for a matter of seconds, is a source of anxiety as it slows the pace of the journey, every green light run through a source of hope that we might, after all, catch the damn plane. Weick et al (2005) suggest we are immersed in projects, and that disruption to our projects 'surfaces' us from this immersion, and leads us to ask 'what's the story?' Sensemaking is therefore about providing an answer (a 'story') which allows us to re-submerge and continue with our projects. I suggest that, in managerial careers, very minor events may disrupt the

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term central merely to indicate that it highly salient – it is not necessarily dominant.



career identity project, causing us to ‘surface’, and thus forcing repeated re-writes of the career story.

*Narrative*

Before looking at the individual’s career narratives, I want to consider the broader public narratives (Somers, 1994) which Ochberg (1988) and Gunz (1989) suggest can be observed underlying managerial career stories. Somers defines public narratives as “those narratives attached to cultural and institutional frameworks larger than the single individual” (Somers, 1994:619). Ochberg (1988) suggests that the public narrative of advancement as the defining characteristic of a managerial career produces a certain ‘drivenness’. That is not to say that individual managers are all Type-A personalities, or have drive and ambition as their most pronounced characteristics. We might better frame it by suggesting that a managerial career has ‘onwards and upwards’ as its motto. I will come to a consideration of the constraints under which managerial careers are experienced in due course, taken together these produce an almost folkloric plot structure in which the protagonist faces obstacles on a quest from which s/he cannot turn back.

Although Gunz (1989) does not frame his analysis in terms of narrative, his notion of ‘individual career logics’ has a narrative quality:

Individual career logic’s are the observer’s attempt to infer the manager’s motivations in choosing their [career] route... (Gunz, 1989: 236)

Gunz suggests that the individual career logics of managerial careers can be classified in terms of future orientation and deviance:

		Orientation to organizational career climbing-frame	
		Non-deviant	Deviant
Future oriented?	No	Subsisting	Subsisting
	Yes	Building	Searching

Figure 2: Individual career logics (from Gunz, 1989)

Following Weiss (1981), he emphasises that the individual career logic is an ‘intelligent guess’ by the observer about ‘logics of action [which] are the intentions of goal-seeking activities, seen from the point of view of the observer rather than the actor’ (Gunz, 1989: 242). Taking the perspective of the observer is helpful in describing the way in which the individual’s actions appear to be directed towards certain goals. However, this may underestimate the degree of volatility in individuals’ career thinking. Gunz implicitly acknowledges this, noting ‘the more we understand what is going on in managers’ minds the confident we can be that we have identified correctly the individual logics at work’ (Gunz, 1989: 242).

For managerial careers, the individual career logic may often appear obvious and indeed managers are often conscious of the need to present themselves in a ‘careerist’ manner which conforms to expectations. In chapter 2 I noted the importance to sensemaking of the symbolic interactionist notion of ‘lines of action’ (Blumer, 1969), which allows us to include action not taken as an important constituent of the meaning a situation has for the individual. This is particularly important for understanding emotion in managerial careers – the narrative of future direction and progression may be carefully thought through and yet individuals may choose to keep their own counsel on these plans. Emotion (e.g. disappointment at being passed over for promotion) may cause a significant revision of the individual’s career narrative (e.g. a private acknowledgement by the individual that this indicates s/he will not make it as far as s/he had hoped) which does not translate to action (because the individual judges it wise not to advertise this change of career thinking). The managerial career story is stimulated by emotion and yet it also forms the project whose disruption stimulates an emotional response, in an iterative fashion. If the project is ‘merely’ a thought-through narrative (Goldie, 2003) then Gunz’s observer would be baffled by emotional responses to matters which appear to have no bearing on the individual career logic inferred from observation.

### *Constraints*

The unique constraints on behaviour experienced by managers are another reason why emotion will be of particular importance in managerial careers. As Gunz (1989) notes, managers are ‘an artefact of organization’ and managerial careers ‘the process by which organisations renew themselves’. Being seen in these terms means that they

are expected to exhibit a degree of loyalty, conformity, and reliability. Chatman et al (1986) emphasise that managers, unlike many workers, are affected by the identity of the organisation; they in part create that identity and have their own identity shaped by it. This will have important implications for their career stories, and the career decisions they take. Take the example of a corporate scandal; the manager can choose to defend or criticise the organisation, to quit or go down with the ship, blow the whistle or assist in a cover-up. Lavelle (2003) suggests that the actions of Sherron Watkins in blowing the whistle on Enron were not entirely altruistic

I am incredibly nervous that we will implode in a wave of accounting scandals. My eight years of Enron work history will be worth nothing on my resume, the business world will consider the past successes as nothing but an elaborate accounting hoax.

This passage from Watkins' first e-mail to Kenneth Lay suggests she was initially most concerned about the impact on her career.

Whatever the industrial relations climate within the wider organisation, management typically assumes a unitarist perspective within its own ranks, such that the very notion that the interests and views of the manager and the organisation might be divergent is viewed as unacceptable (Weinstein, 1979). Managers are therefore very conscious of appearance in their careers: they understand the considerable importance of having a career history which shows an appropriate balance between stability and change. Career volatility might be forgivable in a specialist, but not for a potential steward of the organisation. They are also aware that there are particular emotional display rules for managers. They are expected to behave in a professional manner in 'all directions': not only to their staff and their own managers, but also to their managerial peers, with whom they jockey for position in the career 'tournament' (Rosenbaum, 1984). Taken together, these constraints often mean that a manager's perceived freedom to act, in response to an affective event, is greatly curtailed and s/he must deal with the situation in other ways.

## Conclusion

Career is a narrative construction, an element of the individual's narrative identity (Bujold, 2004). As such, it shapes the meanings which we ascribe to a range of life events (occupational or otherwise). Events which disrupt our career narrative threaten our identity construction and stimulate sensemaking in order to 'repair the breach' (Weick et al, 2005). These 'running repairs' draw upon other narratives, personal and public, which mean that the career narrative tends to remain broadly within the canonical forms (cf. career scripts, Barley 1989) for life and career narratives within that culture. The narrative developed is then enacted by the individual. This process can be represented diagrammatically as follows:

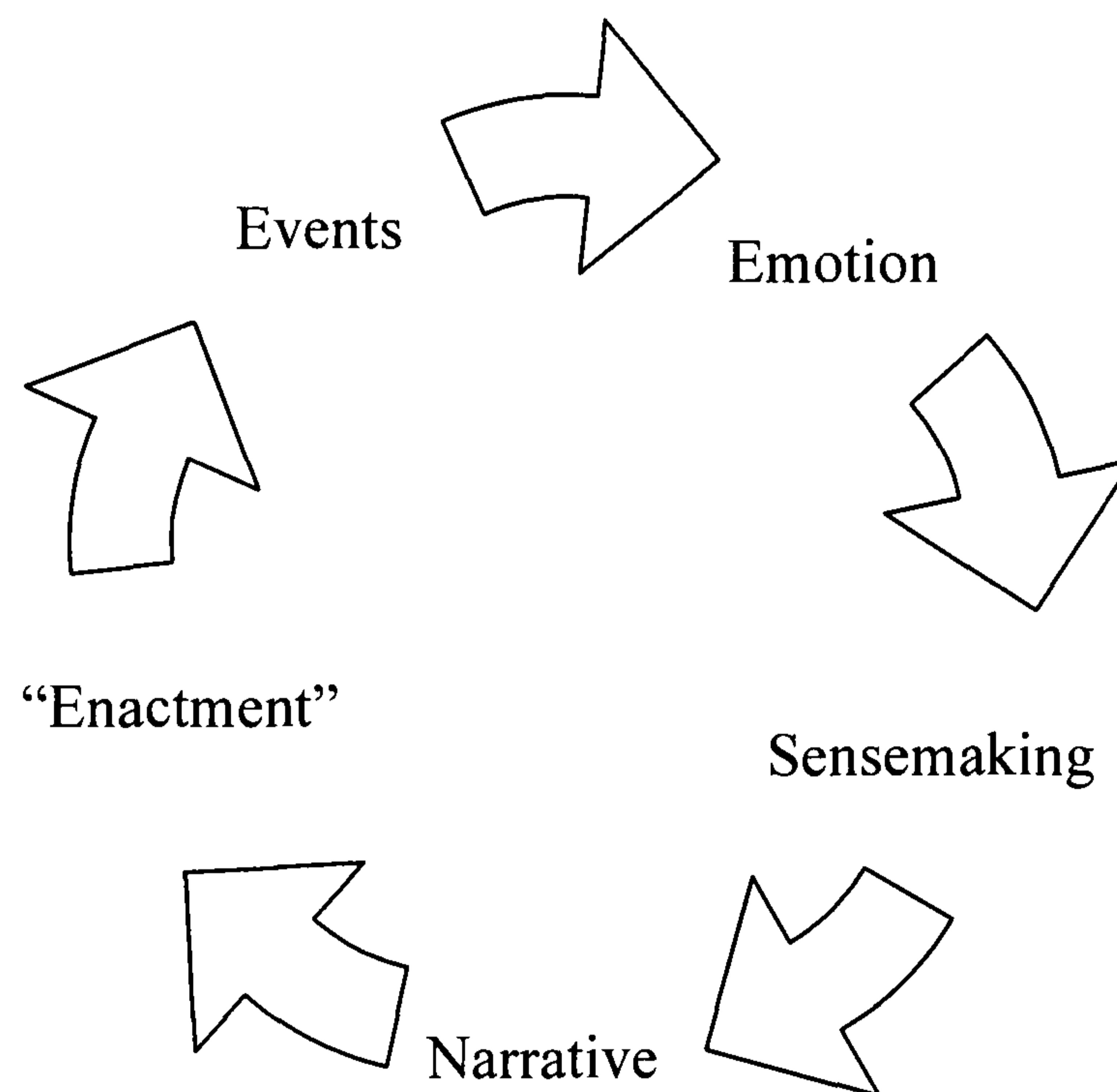


Figure 3: A process model of the impact of emotion in career

It should be noted that it is possible to start at any point in the circle – I have tended to emphasise events as the start of the process, but that is merely because an event inevitably represents an obvious starting place, however as Weick (1995) and Lazarus (1999) emphasise, emotion can only be understood as part of an ongoing flow. In summary then, workplace events trigger emotions which stimulate sensemaking through which the individual refines and revises a career narrative which s/he subsequently enacts.

The present chapter has offered a 'worked example' of this framework and in doing so has led us to back to emotion-focused versus problem-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In some career situations a problem may be appraised as unchangeable because the change required is seen as too drastic. Alternatively, the change may be seen as possible but not immediately available e.g. the individual decides to leave, but only when s/he has found another job to go to. In either case, the individual will be forced to engage in emotion-focused coping over an extended period. In the context of managerial careers, it can be seen that managers may often find themselves in situations in which problem-focused coping is perceived as largely unavailable to them, in the sense that possible solutions may be perceived as having negative career consequences. The manager thus endures a situation in calculation of longer-term career benefits. Managers are not unique in this, but we can see that they will be especially likely to experience the trinity of factors (affective events, a strong careerist orientation, and constraints on behaviour) which push them towards emotion-focused coping in career situations. In the findings chapters, I will develop the claims made within this chapter through detailed examination of various episodes in my own career.

# Chapter 5: Methodology

## Introduction

*In order to be universal you must be specific – David Cronenberg*

This chapter develops the argument for the adoption of autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) as a solution to the methodological problems inherent in researching the impact of emotion on career. Although, following Cronenberg's maxim, the chapter is located in the context of the specific research problem of this thesis, I will argue that autoethnographic approaches have much to commend them in addressing a broad range of research questions. The methodological approach described is narrative in nature and, that being so, it is perhaps appropriate that the argument within the chapter forms something of a story. The story told is to some extent a fiction, which suggests that I approached the research problem as a positivist and turned to narrative in response to my conclusion that there were significant methodological and epistemological issues which could not be resolved by more traditional research methods. This was not the actual sequence of events, but it represents a useful account, in two ways. Firstly, it makes the chapter more accessible – partly in terms of prose style, but more importantly in terms of the reader's epistemological orientation. The reader can follow the story, and see why I thought I should make this epistemological break for the border, even if they think it unnecessary. Indeed, they may even feel able to grant the proposed methodology the status traditionally accorded to a range of qualitative methods i.e. viewing it as a useful technique for exploratory research, as a prelude to more quantitative hypothesis-testing work. This would not be possible if I proclaimed the Gospel according to Narrative.

Secondly, it maps out a serious methodological problem for researchers looking to examine emotions in the career context, namely the incommensurability of the theoretical time frames of emotion and career. Whilst careers unfold over extended periods of time, on a day to day basis there are hassles, setbacks, frustrations etc. I will focus specifically on the methodological issues involved in working with these

short run emotional fluctuations, returning at the end to a discussion of how the proposed solution (autoethnography) might be more widely applied.

### **The Research Problem and its Methodological Challenge**

In their review of Affective Events Theory (AET), Weiss and Beal (2005) note that the original Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) article had an aim broader than the study of emotions:

AET was intended to encourage looking at within-person variability. It was intended to focus on the things that happen to people, rather than the features of the work environment. It was intended to encourage organizational researchers to pay closer attention to the way work is experienced, the way time is psychologically structured, the way life naturally ebbs and flows at work. (Weiss and Beal, 2005: 30-1)

For research examining the influence of emotion upon career, there is an obvious tension inherent in terms of the apparently incommensurate time frames. In their re-working of Super's framework, Hall and Mirvis (1996) envisage that the classic Exploration, Trial, Establishment and Mastery model (Super, 1992) will now take place over a series of much shorter cycles – not across the arc of an entire career, but within a mere handful of years. Whilst in career terms this represents a significant increase in volatility, it still operates on practically geological timescales when compared to the fluctuations in affective states. So, the temporal 'range of application' for theories of career and theories of emotion is radically different.

Discussing the methodological difficulties involved in studying emotions at work, Briner (1999) noted:

When studying quite mundane processes that unfold over time, more-favoured techniques such as questionnaires or interviews seem to be of limited value. Qualitative and quantitative diary studies, experience sampling, observation, and even introspection may prove to be a more effective means of unravelling emotional processes at work. (Briner, 1999: 19)

These ideas encourage us to consider the relevance of alternative ways of thinking about, and hence investigating, the lived, emotional experience of work.

### **Tackling the Methodological Problem**

In all methodological approaches, there is an inevitable trade-off between richness and detail on the one hand, and striving to capture the experiences of a broad range of people on the other. Such tensions are writ large throughout social science, and for psychology the tension is still probably best articulated by Allport's development of Windelbrand's idiographic and nomothetic distinction (e.g. Allport, 1962). Seeking to locate the fine detail of emotion, within the broader context of an individual's career, is a self-evidently idiographic undertaking. The strength of autoethnography lies in its potential for gathering an astonishing richness of data. It is an idiographic method par excellence.

Various research methods could be used to capture the 'long arc' of the career, and the rapid shifts/cycles of emotion. It is instructive to set out the kind of research design which, following traditional research methods, might be adopted to gather data to explore the relationship between emotion and career. One would need a reasonably large sample of participants, most obviously if seeking to generalise for the population as a whole, but even if seeking to make inferences about a specific sub-population e.g. university-educated individuals pursuing managerial careers. Then, one would need to gather data on the pattern of experienced emotion within this sample. Following the emphasis on rapid change in emotion, one would need frequent data gathering, ideally twice each day. And one would need to gather this data over a prolonged period of time, to allow for the slower processes of career to unfold and any patterns or relationships (between emotion and career) to become apparent. We might, for sake of argument, seek to shorten the length of time required by choosing to look at individuals in a particularly active phase of their careers – perhaps recent graduates starting a graduate training scheme, or individuals who are in a self-reported phase of re-evaluating their careers (such individuals might be relatively easily identified in large organisations which offer career development interventions). In either case, we would still require several months of data in order to gain any sense of whether emotion does indeed impact on career (or vice versa), and



even with this extended time frame, there is a risk that we would only be capturing what might be term ‘career angst’ – in other words, a particularly volatile period in terms of emotion, which passes and leaves the objective career pathway unaffected.

This overall design is consistent with the typology of research questions for which Bolger et al (2003) suggest diary studies are particularly suited:

Three broad types of research goals can be achieved using diary design: a) obtaining reliable person-level information; b) obtaining estimates of within-person change over time, as well as individual differences in such change; and c) conducting a causal analysis of within-person changes and individual differences in these changes. (Bolger et al, 2003: 581)

For the purposes of this discussion therefore, I will examine diary studies as a apparent best-fit solution for the methodological problem outlined above, using the diary study partly as a methodological straw man (sic).

A recent issue of the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology contained a special section on the use of diary methods (including experience sampling). Five studies were reported, with the following profile:

Authors	Sample	Sampling technique	Data gathering frequency	Duration
Butler et al	91	PDAs	Daily, at the end of the day	14 days
Miner, Glomb & Hulin	41	PDAs	Five times daily, once in the morning and 4 times during the workday	14-21 days
Tschan, Rochat & Zapf	78	Paper-based pro forma, plus questionnaires	Asked to record all interactions which lasted 10 minutes or more	7 days
Waddington	20	Diary records, based on Rochester Interaction Record	Completed at least daily, and ideally within a short time of the interaction.	10 days
Elfering et al	23	Pocket diaries, standard format.	Asked to record all stressful experiences.	7 days

Table 1: Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Special Section on Diary Methods, 78(2), 151-252.

The guest editors (van Eerde, Holman and Totterdell) suggest that these five studies reflect the various ways diary methods can be used, and thus the studies provide a useful basis for evaluation. A number of features are striking:

1. The relatively short time period. The longest (Miner et al) was said to last '2-3 weeks', but in fact the average participant only completed 11 days, and the range was from 6 to 15 days.
2. The inverse relationship between intensity of data gathering (frequency and duration) and sample size. The apparent exception is Miner et al, but is worth noting that they started with a sample of 68, reduced to 48 by the start of the recording period, only 41 'completed' the study and, as noted above, few participants persisted for the 2-3 weeks envisaged in the research design.
3. All researchers were aware of the difficulties in getting full participation. A degree of resignation to the inevitable is apparent in all papers – that it not to devalue their findings, merely to reflect that they saw the level of participation involved as demanding and thus 100% participation would be difficult to achieve.
4. Some sought to make the experience sampling process more straightforward, but in doing made it inevitably more formulaic i.e. they constrained the responses available to the participants, thus reducing the richness of the data.

Taken together, this provides a strong indication that any diary study exploring emotion in career would experience significant participant attrition - Miner et al couldn't get a single participant to complete more than 15 days, and the hypothetical research design mapped out above would require as a minimum several months of participation.

### **Narrative Approaches – an alternative solution?**

I suggested that temporal incommensurability is the central methodological problem for research on the interaction of emotion and career. In this next section, I will develop an argument for considering narrative approaches as a solution to this problem. One of the key benefits of narrative approaches is that it is within the very nature of narrative to be able to 'handle' temporal issues. Through the ongoing process of emplotment (Ricoeur, 1988) we select events and link them to produce a

‘successful’ narrative (Somers, 1994), that is one which is coherent, meaningful and has emotional import (Goldie, 2003) – three characteristics which in and of themselves can be seen to produce career stories which are inherently illuminating of the interaction between emotion and career.

By contrast, something like a diary study methodology would produce a chronicle – a detailed temporal sequence with no patterning other than the passage of physical time (Danto, 1985 cited in Cochran, 1990), which must then be shaped and ordered by the researcher. Gergen and Gergen argue:

The developmental theorist can scarcely describe simple, disconnected events [...] to do so would be considered pointless. [...] maximal intelligibility is achieved when the theorist includes in the analysis those events, and only those events, related to some evaluative endpoint. Ideally, these events should also be causally linked. In effect, to adhere to the characteristics of the well-formed narrative, the theoretical account must give unity, direction and coherence to the life course. Further, this narrative is likely to draw from the pool of commonly accepted narratives within the culture.

(Gergen and Gergen, 1986: 31)

In the context of careers research, one of the implications of this last point is that career stories will of necessity deal with both the objective and the subjective dimensions of career (Cohen, Duberley and Mallon, 2004).

The use of stories in career research has grown in recent years, and it is useful to put the development of narrative methods in career research into an historical context. The use of stories and narratives in career research provides an excellent illustration of the complex history of qualitative research, representing as it does both a longstanding and renascent tradition. As Barley (1989) notes, the ‘life history’ represented the standard methodological approach in a great deal of work originating within and influenced by the Chicago School of Sociology. This approach was subsequently somewhat neglected and it is only relatively recently that careers researchers have revived this tradition, although in many instances they appear unaware of this earlier work. The more recent use of stories, narratives, life history

etc. arises as part of the numerous 'turns' (linguistic, narrative, postmodern) which have led many social scientists to move away from traditional approaches modelled on the paradigms of the natural sciences.

Cohen and Mallon (2001) explore the various terms in use within narrative approaches to research. Whilst acknowledging the definitional claims of researchers such as Gabriel and Czarniaska-Joerges, they suggest that for career research, the term story is preferable precisely because of its "familiar, everyday connotations":

"Story" reminds us of the ways in which we all continuously cast and recast our life experiences in different contexts and for different audiences as diverse as our children, parents, friends, colleagues, and ourselves. (Cohen and Mallon 2001: 50)

To which one might add that as curriculum vitae means 'the story of my life', story seems a highly apt term. In chapter 3, I noted McAdams suggestion that "not only may human lives be examined through storytelling methods, but human lives themselves may now be understood as narrative constructions" (McAdams, 1995: 207). Our career stories are thus both a reflection of, and an ongoing influence upon, our careers and as such will reflect and incorporate the influence of emotion in our careers.

### **Case study research: an argument for the 'sample of one' approach**

The use of career stories may thus resolve the temporal aspect of the methodological problem outlined above, but the richness of data required still poses a significant problem in terms of the burden placed upon participants. The researcher would need a participant to expend considerable time and effort in recalling, reflecting upon and to some extent analysing the emotional experiences on which the researcher wishes to focus. The sort of interactions which might produce the required data would be more akin to psychotherapy than research i.e. regular interviews over an extended time, exploring and going back over key events in detail. It will be readily apparent that the researcher would only be able to work with a tiny number of participants, but this in

all likelihood would be a moot point, since the number of willing participants is likely to be even smaller.

This discussion leads inexorably towards the logic of the ‘sample of one’ approach which underpins case study research (e.g. Buchanan, 1999; Yin, 2003). This allows for the richest, most detailed exploration of these issues, albeit with all the attendant risks in terms of validity. Of course, many qualitative researchers eschew the traditional positivist emphasis on concepts such as validity, hypothesis testing etc. However, I suspect even many avowedly qualitative researchers would balk at the idea of undertaking research on just a single participant. There are important differences between this and typical case study research, but the basic criticism, that the case represents a unique instance from which generalisation is impossible, can be levelled at both approaches.

Case study research, almost by definition, examines a single case in great detail. It seems appropriate therefore to examine the ways in which researchers justify this approach. Of great relevance to the present study is the framework developed by Stake (2000), who identifies three types of case study – intrinsic, instrumental and collective – with the difference hinging not upon methodology but upon the reasons why the researcher undertakes the case study.

Case study type	Intrinsic	Instrumental	Collective
Reason undertaken	To provide better understanding of this particular case.	To provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalisation.	To investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition.

Table 2: Stake’s case study typology (Stake, 2000: 437)

Stake suggests that case study, when based on a single case, draws upon an ‘epistemology of the particular’ – ‘how we learn from the singular case is related to how the case is like and unlike other cases’ (Stake, 2000: 442). Following this logic, the underlying rationale for case studies can be justified in broadly two ways – either that the case is typical and allows for generalisation, or that the case is worthy of

investigation in and of itself, regardless of whether it is typical. These two approaches are not by any means exclusive, it is clearly possible to study an individual case for its intrinsic interest, yet to find in that case matters of wider significance.

Within organisational research, a good example of the individual case study is offered by Buchanan's work on political action within organisations, in which he uses a single individual's account of his own political action (Buchanan, 1999). Buchanan suggests two types of generalisation are possible from the individual case study – analytical generalisation (Yin, 2003) and naturalistic generalisation (Stake, 2000). In a similar vein, Lazarus and Cohen-Charash (2001) suggest that clinical case studies (which are often of a single patient) may offer a good model for emotions research intended to take a more interactional approach.

Whilst case studies have been compared unfavourably to sample-based research, in terms of the ability to extrapolate, Mitchell suggests that there is a general misperception about the rationale for extrapolation from a statistical sample to a population. He notes it is based upon two largely independent inferential processes:

Statistical inference...makes a statement about the confidence we may have that the surface relationship observed in our sample will in fact occur in the parent population...logical or scientific inference...makes a statement about the confidence we have that the theoretically necessary or logical connections among the features observed in the sample pertain also to the parent population. (Mitchell, 1983: 207)

Yin (2003) suggests that from these inferential processes we can make *statistical* generalisations and *analytic* generalisations. Case study research makes no claim to offer a basis for statistical generalisation, however it can offer a basis for analytic generalisation. It permits theory building and also to some extent theory testing, and is of course a familiar approach within a number of natural sciences. Palaeontology is an obvious example – researchers examining a unique fossil know it may well be an unusual example of the species in question, but nevertheless attempt to construct their best understanding of the species from that data. Given our current low level of

theoretical understanding of the interaction of emotion and career (Kidd, 2004; Briner and Kiefer, 2005) it is arguable that even a single, detailed case study could provide a considerable advance.

### **Autoethnography as a logical solution to the methodological problem**

I have so far suggested that incommensurability between the temporal frames of emotion and careers create methodological problems for the researcher, that these problems cannot easily be overcome using the usual methods in organisational psychology, that narrative inquiry, specifically the use of career stories, holds out considerable promise for addressing these problems, and finally that one might be justified in examining in detail just a single case for the insights it can offer.

These arguments for using a single life story as a basis for the research lead me to consider the possibility of using my own story. It is worth noting that this step represents the key point at which this methodology departs from the substantial and varied literature within what is loosely described as narrative psychology. It is a step at once trivial and groundbreaking. Trivial, in the sense that all the arguments in favour of narrative research based on detailed exploration of a life history can be applied equally to the study of one's own life. Groundbreaking, in that researchers within this field have thus far not taken this step.

Dealing with experience is one of the major challenges within psychology, a challenge famously bracketed by behaviourism, and thus by mainstream psychology, for several decades. Working with one's own life history shifts the problem from "why should the *researcher* believe what the *participants* say?" to "why should the *reader* believe what the *researcher* says about his/her own life?". The answer to such a question of necessity draws upon literary theory and philosophy as much or indeed more than social science. However, Bruner (1995) offers a useful attempt to frame an 'autobiographical theory' for social science. It is helpful to begin with the conclusion to his article:

I have no grand conclusion to offer save that autobiography is life construction through 'text' construction. To look at a life as if it were independent of the

autobiographical text that constructs it is as futile a quest for reality as the physicist's search for a Nature that is independent of the theories that lead him to measure this rather than that phenomenon. (Bruner, 1995: 176)

Bruner thus offers a different perspective to Goldie, suggesting that it is impossible to 'get at' the reality of life, except through its narrative. He suggests autobiographies draw upon discourses of witness and interpretation, and can be evaluated in terms of their verisimilitude.

Feature ( <i>literary name</i> )	Description
Discourse of witness ( <i>mimesis</i> )	"Accounts of happenings in which one participated..."
Discourse of interpretation ( <i>diegesis</i> )	"Organises the detailed constituents of witness into larger-scale sequences...and places them into evaluational frames...it considers paths not taken; it is couched retrospectively and counterfactually"

Table 3: Features of autobiography (based on Bruner, 1995)

Eliciting participants' career stories can produce accounts which offer both aspects, but the discourse of interpretation requires an ongoing, reflexive act for which autoethnography is particularly well-attuned.

### Defining autoethnography

I have, thus far, conspicuously failed to provide a definition of autoethnography. I will start with a simple etymological definition:

*Ethno* means people or culture; *graphy* means writing or describing.

Ethnography then means writing about or describing people and culture.

(Ellis, 2004: 26)

Since *auto* mean self, autoethnography can be seen as writing about oneself as a particular person and a member of a particular culture – Ellis suggests it straddles



autobiography and ethnography, and is both yet neither. The baggage dragged in even by this simple deconstruction back to the Greek is considerable. I will return to this issue when I consider how autoethnography might be evaluated. The standard definition of autoethnography (i.e. most widely cited) comes from Ellis and Bochner (2000):

Autoethnography is...an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations.

(Ellis and Bochner, 2000)

Since, as they acknowledge, the term has come to encompass an astonishingly broad array of approaches from all social science disciplines, in which the researcher to some degree or other 'gets in front of the camera', it is hardly surprising that this definition of what autoethnography *is* and what autoethnographers *do* is highly contestable. In their highly influential chapter in Denzin and Lincoln, Ellis and Bochner (2000) list 68 different names for approaches in which the researcher's autobiographical experience forms some element of the research, noting that autoethnography has increasingly become "the term of choice in describing studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural". This was in many ways a useful exercise in creating a recognisable 'brand'. By consolidating the use of the term autoethnography, Ellis and Bochner almost overnight created a critical mass of autoethnographic researchers: 68 people using 68 apparently unrelated approaches have limited impact, 68 people all 'doing autoethnography' (even if some of them eschew the label) leads in time to the situation we encounter today, where key gatekeepers such as journal editors and PhD supervisors have heard of autoethnography, even if many are suspicious of it. This process has been enhanced by the publication of Carolyn Ellis's "The Ethnographic I" (Ellis, 2004). An authoritative and highly readable treatment, it has quickly become required reading for doctoral students working with this approach and, therefore, something of a

gateway into autoethnography. I suggest this has inadvertently elevated her particular approach into a standard model.

This thesis takes an approach to autoethnography which is at some distance from the Ellis model. Although ethnography is now widely used within the social sciences, it came out of anthropology and this was also the field in which the earliest recognisably autoethnographic work was done. As Buzard (2003) makes clear, in its earliest form autoethnography was a response to longstanding issues within anthropology concerning the construction of ‘subjects’ as the exotic and the Other, and the reawakening of interest in ‘domestic’ anthropology. By contrast, my interest in autoethnography stems from a very different methodological issue, namely the difficulties involved in gathering data on both the long arc of career and the short run fluctuations of emotion. I suggest, in the context of the present research problem, that what autoethnography involves is the development of an exceptionally detailed life history, through the practical benefit of having a participant (the researcher) who is willing and able to write and re-write his/her career story on demand in pursuance of a deeper understanding of how the processes (by which emotion impacts on career) unfold. My own autobiographical experiences therefore become ‘data’, available for analysis in much the same way interview notes might be. Nevertheless, the reflexive nature of autoethnography is retained and can be found not only in the ‘data’ but in the writing, consistent with the idea of writing as a ‘method of inquiry’ (Richardson, 1994). Hence the thesis includes not merely the author’s analysis of his experience, but also some reflections on the process of writing, identifying ways in which particular interpretations or analyses have been developed.

### **Why the autoethnographer’s career?**

I have presented a rationale for why almost any given case might be considered worthy of investigation, and suggested that a researcher’s own career might therefore in principle be a legitimate case study. Yet the relevance of oneself as an individual case does need to be considered – as Stake (2000) notes:

How we learn from the singular case is related to how the case is like and unlike other cases (i.e., comparisons). (Stake, 2000: 442)

The autoethnographer asks herself questions which come from essentially two perspectives – ‘do I have experience of X, upon which I could usefully draw?’ and/or ‘is my experience of Y a useful example of something?’ She may be interested in a particular matter e.g. prejudice, and ask herself whether she has personal experience might be considered relevant to, or even an illustration of, this matter. Or she may draw upon personal experience in framing the initial questions. The latter case is most relevant and interesting for situations where she wonders whether other people have similar experiences to her own, as she finds little in the literature, yet doubts that her experience of whatever is unique to her. An example of such an issue currently starting to gain popular attention is what might be termed ‘non-maternal mothers’ – women who do not find the experience of motherhood to be positive, and who do not feel for their children in the way they are ‘supposed to feel’. A researcher who has personally experienced this could make a valuable contribution to our understanding by writing about her own experience, and drawing upon relevant theory and research in order to analyse that experience. The researcher must be clear about the nature of her ‘truth claims’ – what it is she claims to be illustrating via examining aspects of her own life story. Even if one follows the Ellis and Bochner argument that it may be sufficient for it to be evocative (Ellis and Bochner, 2000), it still needs an orientation – is the author saying ‘I am trying to help you understand how it feels to experience X’, or ‘I have experienced X, I believe other people do, I speculate that I have captured something general’?

In the context of career research, the researcher must therefore reflect upon his/her own career. The Chicago School was influential in encouraging the idea that broader social trends and forces are played out on the stage of individual careers working, of course, with an especially broad notion of career (Barley, 1989). The notion of a typical career is a chimera, but one must be alive to the extent to which one’s own career is particularly idiosyncratic e.g. current Hollywood stars who are the sons or daughters of stars of previous generations are probably an atypical example of career pathways into film acting. Career researchers choosing to adopt an autoethnographic approach will need to offer some justification for the assumption that their own careers are sufficiently relevant to the subject matter to warrant treatment as ‘data’. Sparkes (2002) writes evocatively about the charge of self-indulgence which is levelled at autoethnography (Coffey, 1999), but in one sense all research risks self-

indulgence – every researcher makes a assumption s/he has an interesting story to tell, autoethnographic researchers ‘merely’ take the apparently narcissistic step of assuming their life stories are interesting. In chapter 6 and 10 I will describe some of the ways in which I believe my career may reflect wider issues.

### **Evaluating autoethnography**

One of the difficulties in attempting to evaluate autoethnographic research is that, as noted above, autoethnography is a very broad church, which embraces researchers coming from significantly different epistemological positions. Richardson (2000) usefully sets out the criteria which she uses when reviewing papers – Substantive contribution, Aesthetic merit, Reflexivity, Impact and Expression of a reality. Yet in unpacking these criteria, she reveals a set of assumptions about the paradigm from which researchers are assumed to be working e.g. under the Reflexivity heading, she wants to know ‘Is the author cognizant of the epistemology of postmodernism?’

One problem, I believe, is that the significant flowering of interest in autoethnographic work can be traced partly to the influence of the chapter on autoethnography in Denzin and Lincoln (2000) by Ellis and Bochner, and the subsequent publication of Carolyn Ellis’s innovative ‘methodological novel’, *The Ethnographic I* (Ellis, 2004). Although both emphasise the breadth of approaches to autoethnography, one can already discern the development of a distinct Ellis and Bochner version of autoethnography.

Alternative approaches to evaluating autoethnography can be found in narrative research. Polkinghorne suggests that the “test of truth of historical narrative is its capacity to yield a plot from a set of first-order real events. This is the truth of coherence” (Polkinghorne 1988: 62). This seems a useful test for career stories, both for researchers and for individuals. Polkinghorne cites historical narrative, literature and myth as the three types of narrative discourse which “produce meaning through plot structures”. He suggests all three modes are “grounded in the actual generalised experience of a people and are the results of cultural attempts to impose a satisfactory, graspable, humanising shape on experience” (Polkinghorne 1988: 62).

Cochran (1990) makes an important distinction between narrative construction and narrative criticism:

The first is concerned with developing a well-founded story that is faithful to life. The second is concerned with drawing out the meaning, plot, or explanation embedded within a story (or set of stories).

Cochran (1990: 78)

Cochran acknowledges that either can occur independently, but suggests they complement each other as phases of a project. The problem for autoethnography is that it is almost impossible to separate the two – as Bruner notes:

Writing or telling ‘your life story’...is a unique process...it involves...a narrator here and now telling about a protagonist of the same name, there and then.

(Bruner, 1995: 167)

When the narrator, here and now, is a researcher fully aware of the research question, it can be very difficult to separate construction from criticism – to write the story, then analyse it.

Holt (2003), reflecting on his experiences of submitting autoethnographic work for publication, notes that reviewers tend to raise two broad areas of concern, very much consistent with the concepts of validity and rigour. The first area of concern is the difficulty of applying traditional verification strategies in autoethnographic work. Holt argues that the various techniques for establishing validity in qualitative research are not easily applied to autoethnography. However, whilst replication is out of the question, triangulation may not be – the experiences described will not have occurred in a social vacuum, and the researcher may be able to ‘compare notes’ with the other people involved to get both alternative perspectives and factual corrections. In two of the cases presented in this thesis (chapters 9 and 10) such triangulation proved difficult, due to the sensitivity of the situations described. In a third (chapter 8) the difficulty arose more from the nature of the situation – the emotion in career issue there took place very much as an inner dialogue. However, the first case offered more

scope for testing out my view of the situation, and in chapter 11 I will explore the alternative perspectives in some detail. The second area of concern described by Holt (2003) is the use of the self as the only data source, a point addressed above in terms of the quite different basis for case study as opposed to sample-based approaches to research.

### **Additional opportunities offered by autoethnographic research**

#### *Ethical issues and multiple career stories*

Career theory is not a field one might normally consider to be replete with ethical problems, but one which has arisen in my own research relates to the impact of eliciting career stories. Bateson (1994) examined continuity and discontinuity in life histories. She noted that stories emphasising continuity and stories emphasising discontinuity could be constructed from the same facts. Inspired by this, I once asked Executive MBA students to undertake an exercise in which they told their career stories to each other in pairs. They were asked to do it twice – first the story as they typically tell it to an interview panel or as shown on a CV, then with more detail, including wrinkles they had ironed out, mistakes they had glossed over etc. The aim of the exercise was to make them aware of their own ‘career scripts’ (Barley, 1989).

There were a number of interesting things which emerged from this exercise. Most students were surprised at the degree of difference between the two versions. Some were rather reluctant to undertake the exercise, and where the exercise made them aware of a definite career script, seemed unwilling to contemplate the possibility that one might be able to write a different script (though the exercise had a lasting effect on at least one such student, who later informed me that a radical career change was stimulated by this exercise).

The exercise raised *my* awareness (as a researcher) of the extent to which any given career story must be treated as a construction and thus, at least to some extent, a methodological artefact. That is not to say that these stories do not ‘belong’ to the participants, that they merely produce stories of a certain type in response to the ‘demand characteristics’ of the research design – although see Moir (1993), for a discourse analytic approach which makes that very claim. Rather, it highlights the

extent to which there are multiple stories to be told. Crossley describes self-exploration as a “characteristically ‘modern’ enterprise” (Crossley, 2000: 20). What makes the current ‘enterprise’ somewhat more postmodern is the acknowledgement of multiple stories (Watson, 2004). Autoethnography is particularly well-suited to eliciting multiple versions.

Eliciting stories leads participants to reflect upon their career script – both reviewing the career story they commonly tell, and examining their career to date and where it would seem to be heading. In research on career mistakes Blenkinsopp and Zdunczyk (2005) noted this could have unforeseen consequences, in that some participants became aware of the extent to which their ‘story’ was not credible, that it was a press release (Wiersma, 1988), a ‘defensive’ story they told to make their situation bearable. As researchers we thus inadvertently drew participants attention to their unhappy situation, an outcome my co-researcher compared to *The Bridges of Madison County*, in which the heroine goes from being unhappy but unaware of her unhappiness, to being unhappy and aware of it yet feeling unable to change the situation. Such issues *may* occur in autoethnography, but if so it will be the researchers who take the risk of losing their positive self-illusions (Taylor, 1989).

### *Truth and honesty*

A very different ethical issue raised by autoethnography concerns truth and honesty. The researcher presents data for which there is limited corroborating evidence. The reader can apply a variety of explicit and implicit criteria to evaluating the account given, but is nevertheless to some degree reliant upon the narrator providing an account which is above all honest. Yet honesty is itself a problematic concept – the researcher’s recall is inevitably imperfect, and is shaped by a variety of factors, not least the reason for which particular events are recalled. Evidence that recall is affected by mood is also self-evidently an important issue for autoethnographic research on emotion in career.

Since epistemological positions which have embraced some or all of the various ‘turns’ (linguistic, narrative, rhetorical etc.) effectively problematize notions of ‘truth’, there is an inherent tension in invoking truth as an evaluative criterion for career stories. Gabriel (2004) cites as an example of an ‘untruthful’ autobiographical

account that offered by Wilkomirski of his experiences as a child in a concentration camp. The account is plausible, and is written in a manner which is highly evocative, and carries the imprimatur of verisimilitude. It is however not true, in the simple, everyday sense – Wilkomirski was never in these camps, the story is not his story. Lejeune (1989, cited in Bruner, 1995) suggests that there is an ‘autobiographical pact’, between writer and reader, which may allow a degree of ‘poetic licence’ but assumes a reasonable level of factual accuracy, and Gabriel (2004) proposes an analogous ‘narrative contract’ which sets some bounds to poetic licence.

*Dealing with objective and subjective dimensions of career*

Arnold (1997) notes that it is difficult, and in some ways meaningless, to consider a career at any given moment. Careers by definition have a history, and can only be understood in terms of where they’ve come from and may be going to – Crites (1986) makes a similar point in his discussion of issues of recollection and future ‘pro-jects’ in life narratives. Despite this, when we think about our own careers, we inevitably do so at a particular point in time and we therefore interpret our careers from the standpoint of that moment (Mishler, 1992). This makes a career story potentially very volatile – a minor change in perception, a small fresh piece of information, or a different mood may serve to cast a different light on our careers and cause us to radically revise our perception of what is going on (Glanz, 2003). And that volatility is chronic – a minor event, a change of mood, for example, might make the old career story once again more appealing/credible. Although I have drawn parallels with the idea of plot twists which, in an instant, force the reader to re-interpret the story to date, it is important to bear in mind that the individual is both reader and author of their own career story:

In the life narrative, the self is the narrator of its own story. Unlike authors of fictional narratives, however, the self has to integrate the materials that are at hand. Authors of historical and fictional narratives describe events that have already ended, but the self is in the middle of its story and has to revise the plot constantly without knowing how the story will end.

(Polkinghorne, 1988: 69)



So, the individual can re-write the story on a daily basis in light of affective events. For example, a colleague related his experience of conference attendance, which invariably undermined his confidence in his own burgeoning research track and lead him to despair of ever building a substantial body of work and to question the point of attempting to pursue an academic career. Yet within a relatively short time some other event (e.g. receiving positive referees' comments) would give him renewed confidence and encourage him to revert to his 'usual' career story in which he has made good progress to date, and aspires to join the professorial ranks.

In this example, temporal incommensurability dissolves, at least in terms of the subjective aspect of career. The career as perceived by the individual may be apprehended at any moment in a manner which is coterminous with the ebb and flow of emotions. A striking example is offered in the last chapter of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. In a few short minutes, the protagonist (Mr Stevens, a butler at a great house) goes from a realisation, tearfully confessed to a stranger he has just met, that he has wasted his life, to speculating upon the nature of bantering and how he might improve his bantering skills, the better to serve his new employer. Volatility in the career story is however tempered and moderated – this is where the objective dimension of the career comes into play. The objective (or at the very least, the individual's perception of the objective) provides a 'brake', a moderating influence on the subjective, volatile apprehension of one's own career story. Here we see the significance of Barley's concept of career scripts (Barley, 1989). Individuals' career stories can be viewed as interpretations of career scripts and are narrated within a cultural context which influences what would be seen as having 'narrative credibility'.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to develop a justification for autoethnography which implicitly acknowledges some of the potential criticism. In doing so, I am aware of the extent to which many people using autoethnography resent demands to justify it. There is a tension here – I am implicitly positioning myself between two paradigms, and risk being acceptable to neither. My involvement in the autoethnography listserv started by Carolyn Ellis has made me particularly conscious of this. In developing this thesis, I made a number of posts to the listserv around this issue of 'justifying' the

use of autoethnography for researchers working in a conservative field, and issues of how to write up the work. These posts have drawn bafflement, misunderstanding or silence in response from the key players. Yet at the same time, I have received off-list from other members saying “I have the same issues”.

I have chosen to try to manage this balance, because I think autoethnography can and should be brought into areas in which it is currently seen as somewhat avant-garde. It has considerable potential for organisational research generally, and in the specific area of careers research perhaps the most exciting prospect which autoethnography holds out is the possibility of dealing with the subjective and objective with equal richness. By exploring the detailed, ongoing edits and re-writes of the career story, one can gain an understanding of the impact of affective events upon subjective career. However, since these activities are not divorced from objective career concerns (about advancement, the labour market, opportunities, risks) one can also explore how individuals engage with and make sense of the more objective aspects of the career. We can see how this strength of autoethnography could readily be used to explore a range of other organisational issues, such as response to change, leadership, whistle-blowing – indeed almost any phenomenon where the focus of study is the individual in context.

## Chapter 6: About the Author

In the last chapter I developed a detailed justification for the use of autoethnography to research emotion in careers. In this chapter I want to draw attention to an issue which the use of autoethnography creates for this thesis and indeed for all autoethnographic work. In simple terms the issue can be described as follows – the word I is used throughout but not in a consistent manner. In the last chapter I quoted Bruner’s lovely description of autobiography being ‘a narrator here and now telling about a protagonist of the same name there and then’ (Bruner, 1995: 167). For autoethnography we might add ‘and with a theorist of the same name commenting upon the doings of each’. At the risk of letting a Catholic boyhood intrude upon my theorising, one might describe it in terms of a Trinity – the Protagonist, the Storyteller and the Theorist, united in the person of the Author.

The Theorist brings certain expectations to the thesis which leads him to attend more closely to some stories rather than others which leads the Storyteller to tell particular stories, in ways which produce a certain theatricality – a staging of the Protagonist’s life to demonstrate the Theorist’s ideas. The Author sees parallels with the criticism levelled at Iris Murdoch, that Murdoch the Novelist created characters and plots merely to explore the concerns of Murdoch the Philosopher. In non-autoethnographic work, the participant and researcher are separately protagonist and theorist respectively, though both parties also act as storytellers. In autoethnographic research the Author is all three, and these ‘characters’ can be found in play throughout the thesis, often simultaneously. In this thesis, it will be clear that the Protagonist was a Storyteller from the outset, and also a Theorist, as he drew upon and developed various working theories long before becoming an academic theorist. A good illustration of this is to be found in chapter 7, in which I comment that I changed my ‘A’ levels in order to ensure that my university application did not give away the fact that I had only recently decided that I wanted a career in medicine. This simple anecdote shows all three characters in play, both at the time and in the thesis; the Protagonist who takes action, the Storyteller who crafts the plausible tale, the Theorist who has developed a working theory about how Medical Schools view their

applications. This threefold distinction maps loosely to the overall narrative logic of a progression from career to emotion to narrative coping.

These issues are to be found on almost every page of the thesis, and I hope a degree of reflexivity and awareness of this unusual problem for the authorial voice is also apparent throughout. In the present chapter however, I want to draw attention to this issue and to do so I will use the deliberately intrusive device of writing the remainder of this chapter in the third person, ditching the use of 'I' in favour of the characters of the Author, the Protagonist, the Storyteller and the Theorist. This produces an intentionally rather laboured style, to highlight the tension between the various versions of 'I'.

### **The protagonist, the storyteller and the theorist**

The Protagonist is most distant in time and character from the other two characters. Younger and less experienced, he lives more in the moment because he must. Yet he also tells stories and gives them imagined endings the truth of which he cannot know. The Storyteller is the Protagonist with hindsight. He knows how those stories unfolded and his telling of them is less provisional. However, he knows he is also the Protagonist of a future storytelling self. The Theorist attempts to be neither the Protagonist nor the Storyteller. He strives to go beyond the moment, and also beyond the provisional nature of stories, to craft a meta-narrative which is not provisional. Yet he also knows the thoughts of the Protagonist and the Storyteller, and he knows that in a less ambitious way they too sought to make sense of these things. His voice can be heard, quiet at first but getting clearer, in the voices of the Protagonist and the Storyteller at different times and places. He understands it was they who set him this task of trying to understand their problems.

In writing autoethnography, the Author appears to have considerable advantages in attempting to understand the Protagonist but he must avoid two pitfalls. The first is to assume that this understanding will be shared by the Reader. The second is to substitute the Storyteller or Theorist's present understanding for the Protagonist's

understanding at the time. When the Reader comes across a statement made in the first person, it may be unclear whether the voice is that of the Protagonist at the time, the Storyteller with the benefit of hindsight, or the Theorist with the benefit of analysis. What implications does this have for the present document as a PhD thesis?

In chapter 2 the Author described the model of the self the Theorist is working with. It should be evident that there is a duality to this (in addition to the duality of the self) since he is both the Theorist and the Protagonist and this duality plays out in the Storyteller's accounts. What was described is both the Theorist's ontological theory of the self as an academic and the Protagonist's ontological theory of the self 'in use' as a person in the world. It seems relevant then to note Weick's comments on 'ontological oscillation' (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Burrell and Morgan (1979) note that theorists may:

stress a highly subjectivist stance which denies the existence of social structures and concrete social reality of any form. Yet the attempt to operationalize their ideas within an empirical context frequently leads them to admit a more realist form of ontology through the back door... (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 266)

Weick suggests that as individuals we are quite happy to oscillate ontologically – we interpret situations as thoroughgoing social constructionists, but having formed our interpretations, may then act upon these interpretations as realists:

If people have multiple identities and deal with multiple realities, why should we expect them to be ontological purists? To do so is to limit their capability for sensemaking. More likely is the possibility that over time, people will act as interpretivists, functionalists, radical humanists, and radical structuralists. (Weick, 1995: 35)

This is a significant point for an autoethnographic thesis – it will be almost impossible for the Theorist to straitjacket the Protagonist or the Storyteller into a definitive ontological position on the self, because these fickle younger selves will no doubt at

various points have thought, spoken, written and acted in a manner quite at odds with this ontology. This can be shown with a simple quote from chapter 10:

Catherine's style was to make relatively infrequent contacts with her staff, and so my strategy of avoidance was not noticeable.

The Author can choose to be conspicuously reflexive about this within the text, perhaps telling the reader that he thinks that the Storyteller has accurately depicted the situation as perceived at the time by the Protagonist, whilst acknowledging that he cannot be sure. He can point out that he has used a rather grand term, 'strategy of avoidance', which positions himself as an individual who is rather smart about these matters. However, this raises the question of who is being presented as rather smart – is he suggesting the Protagonist acted smartly at the time, is he 'showing off' as the Storyteller in using this phrase, or is the smartness unintended, is the phrase merely the natural language of the Theorist?

In the cases presented in the next few chapters, the Author has resisted such unpacking, because he thinks that to do this would be to rob statements such as this of their status in the writer's mind as a social fact. Or rather, their status as the Author's opinion of what his younger self (the Protagonist) viewed to be a social fact. Yet social facts like this are rarely once and forever determinations, and the Author also knows that the 'social fact' that Catherine didn't notice the Protagonist's avoidance was more accurately a view of the situation to which the Storyteller usually held against occasional attacks of anxiety that perhaps she *had* noticed the Protagonist keeping a low profile and was taking a dim view of it.

So, instead of this 'unpacking' approach the Author, in writing the findings chapters (7-10), has sought to structure them in a relatively conventional fashion, mirroring a classic 'data then analysis' approach. The autoethnographic cases have something of the story about them, which is both appropriate and useful, and is to some extent enabled by the separation of data and analysis; the Author can allow the Storyteller a degree of poetic licence, knowing that the Theorist's 'dry' social science is coming up later. This separation produces chapters which are easier to follow, and also provides the reader with a clearer indication of how the Theorist draws the inferences he does.

It is not unproblematic however, since the Storyteller who weaves the story, is one and the same with the Theorist who subsequently analyses it. The questions the Theorist asks of the story, the clarifications he demands of the Storyteller, are questions which spring from the mind of a 38 year old academic, who happens at one stage to have been, for example, the 18-year old university drop-out who is the Protagonist of chapter 7's story.

Such an approach requires considerable reflexivity from the Author, and an effort (however unsatisfactory) to render these difficulties in the text. In a discussion of the ethics of biographical reading, Regard suggests the reader must necessarily engage with 'the truth of the other' (that is, the subject of the biography):

the narrated or the narrating author's identity is not therefore a truth that has degenerated into a fiction, but a fiction that aspires to the condition of 'truth'...The ethics of lifewriting lie in this unsurpassable contradiction: a subjectivity is produced by a poetic, but a poetic that denies itself the possibility of being a 'pure' poetic, a poetic that must constantly remind itself that it is what Jacques Ranciere calls 'a poetic of knowledge', the ambition of which remains a hermeneutic approach to the inexpressible singularity of a past self. (Regard, 2000: 404)

This is an ambitious undertaking even in biography, but at least there the narrating author has certain constraints placed upon this reflexivity by the limits of the material from which s/he can construct a life. In autobiography the narrating authors' access to, and knowledge of, the narrated is bounded only by their ability to know themselves (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). The idea of narrative truth offers a partial resolution of this difficulty. In considering the issue of whether the accounts offered by a patient in analysis are recovered (from memory) or created, Spence (1984) adopts a realist ontology – there is a 'real' story but it is inherently inaccessible to both patient and therapist, and the task of therapy is therefore to develop a narrative which is 'true' in the sense of capturing the patient's trouble and allowing him or her to begin the reconstructive process. The autoethnographer might then legitimately choose to eschew multiple narratives in favour of an account which s/he is satisfied contains an ethically-derived narrative truth (Medford, 2006).

The Author concluded that it would be most appropriate for the Storyteller to attempt to render situations as the Protagonist had encountered them at the time (as best as he could recall). This is, of course, an impossible endeavour. As Bartlett (1932) argued, memory is reconstructed not replayed. He suggests that what comes first, in the effort to remember, is an emotionally-charged attitude towards that which we are trying to recall, a proposition most readily observed when smell stimulates the effort to recall: we have the emotion before we can place the memory. Bartlett suggests that “The recall is then a construction made largely on the basis of this attitude, and its general effect is justification of this attitude” (cited in Bruner, 1990: 58). The Storyteller cannot therefore claim to be reliably reporting to the reader what occurred. Bruner (1990) suggests this affective attitude acts as a general thumbprint for the memory to be recalled, and that one’s current affective state will influence this recall. The Storyteller has therefore attempted to get as close to conveying an impression of the emotions as experienced by the Protagonist, by making multiple attempts at recall in different settings and at different times, in order to produce a composite or ‘best fit’ version of events.

An alternative approach would be to offer multiple versions of a situation, but this risks developing an account so multi-layered and shifting that it resembles Anthony Shaffer’s *Sleuth*. Within the cases therefore the Author has largely permitted the Storyteller to adopt what Spence (1986) terms narrative smoothing, presenting accounts with at least some of the messiness and equivocality ironed out. However, these questions of temporality, of what was known or believed then and now, and of multiple and potentially conflicting narrative interpretations of situations are not trivial and need to be addressed. Polkinghorne (1988) suggests that historical accounts change because they are the narratives which can be told by historians today and that will always be changing – but whilst new information may cause us to revise our picture of the world, we paint over the old one, rather than wiping the canvas clean and starting again. In chapter 11 therefore, the Theorist will present a more detailed examination of these issues, exploring problems of recollection and hindsight, and offering alternative interpretations of situations described in the case studies.



## **My 'Objective' Career**

To provide the back drop to the cases presented in the next four chapters I offer a simple chronological listing of my career to date.

My first paid employment was a part-time job as a Grocery Assistant in my local Fine Fare supermarket. I worked eight hours a week, in two shifts – 6 till 10pm on Fridays, 1 till 5pm on Saturdays. I started the job in September 1984, just after I'd gone up into the Sixth Form, and I left it just under 12 months later.

In August 1986 I got my 'A' level results. Needing BBC to get into St Thomas's Medical School, I got BCE and opted not to resit my examinations, but to look for a place on a different course through clearing.

In October 1986 I started a BEng degree in Chemical Engineering at Bradford University.

In late October 1986 I dropped out of university.

From October 1986 to April 1987, I was registered unemployment and in receipt of Supplementary Benefit.

At some point during this time I did a day's work at a nearby factory moving steel rods into a warehouse.

On 6 April 1987 I started my first full-time job as an Administrative Officer at Vinovium House, my local Department of Health & Social Security office in Bishop Auckland.

On 17 October 1988 I started my first job in the chemical industry, as a laboratory technician at the Bonar Polymers chemical plant in Newton Aycliffe. It was here that I first experienced an allergic reaction to the organic chemicals I was handling, which exhibited itself as eczema.

On 27 February 1989 I join ICI, initially as a Research Assistant in the research laboratories of ICI Films, based in the Wilton Centre. The job was Grade 3 on ICI's 'Green Book' terms and conditions.

On 1 August 1989 I started a different job in ICI, this time in the Ethylene Oxide Catalysis section, part of ICI Chemicals & Polymers. My job title was Micro Unit Operator, and I was responsible for running a small scale ethylene oxide 'plant' to test out new catalysts. This was a Grade 5 job.

On 1 August 1990, I moved to ICI Lubricants, as a Research Technician (still grade 5). The Ethylene Oxide team needed to lose one member of staff, and I had volunteered to go. Since February 1989 I had worked in 'dry' laboratories, and the return to a 'wet' environment provoked a return of my eczema, the condition worsening progressively over the following year, eventually resulting in me being referred to a dermatologist by the Occupational Health Dept. His advice was that I could continue to work as a laboratory technician, but the range of environments in which I could safely work would be quite limited. By this time I was unhappy in my career, and ICI were looking to reduce staffing, so I came to a mutual agreement with my department head to take voluntary redundancy.

In September 1991 I started a full-time Diploma in Personnel Management course at Teesside Polytechnic. I was technically still employed by ICI, and the company continued to pay me until 31 December 1991, at which point I was formally made redundant.

In July 1992 I completed my DPM course. I was offered work by British Coal Enterprise (BCE) as an Outplacement Counsellor, on a technically self-employed basis. On 6-10 July I attended a one-week training course in readiness for this role, and for the expected large scale redundancies resulting from the mine closure programme. After the training course, we were essentially told to await the call. I registered as unemployed and received Unemployment Benefit.

I am, candidly, a little hazy about the next few months. I started working for BCE in their Dawdon offices, was briefly sent to work at Easington Colliery, then the pit closure programme was temporarily halted by a backbench Tory rebellion. Over the

next couple of months there was no work from BCE. I registered unemployed again, then got some work doing door-to-door market research surveys for the NHS, and another self-employed post as a Sales Associate with Abbey Life. I signed off the dole, and between these two jobs made enough money for a while until the BCE work started again. It seemed like a long gap, but I suspect it cannot have been more than two months. From about October 1992 until late April 1993, I worked at BCE's Dawdon Offices, then was transferred to Easington Colliery. I earned about £300 per week, which equated to a salary would have been c.£15k but was in practice rather better because the self-employed status meant that I paid much less tax and NI.

In February 1993 I started studying for a Psychology degree with the Open University.

On 26 July 1993, I joined Barnsley District General Hospital NHS Trust as an Assistant Personnel Officer. It was a permanent post, and had a salary of £9300. I commuted daily from Teesside, a round trip of 180 miles.

On 9 May 1994 I joined Cleveland Police as a Senior Personnel Assistant. The salary was c.£14k, and it was 8 miles from home. It was a fixed term contract – the post had been advertised as a six-month contract, but when I received the contract information, the contract end date was actually 31 July. Through various strategies (including being extremely good at the job) I managed to get the contract extended several times.

On 1 May 1995 I joined Leeds College of Health as a Personnel Officer. The salary was c.£12.5k, and it was a fixed term contract to 31 March 1996.

On 1 January 1996 I joined Thorpeton Hospital NHS Trust as a Personnel Manager. The salary was c.£18.5k and it was a permanent contract.

In October 1997 I completed my Psychology degree. In September 1998, I started an MSc in Occupational Psychology at Birkbeck College.

On 1 March 1999 I joined Harrogate Health Care NHS Trust as Human Resource Manager (Employee Relations).

On 6 September 1999 I joined Warnerton University as a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management.

On 1 November 2002 I joined University of Newcastle upon Tyne Business School as a Lecturer in Human Resource Management & Organisational Behaviour.

Note: The names Thorpeton Hospital and Warnerton University are fictional, as these organisations feature prominently in the case study chapters.

## **Chapter 7: Early career – how emotion stimulates stories and stories become scripts**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I want to examine how emotions can stimulate story-telling, how these stories can become scripts. To develop this theme I will examine an extended period of my career, spanning a decade from my first real career decision (choosing options for ‘O’ level). I shall begin by analysing in some detail a pivotal moment during this period which seems to capture many of the key themes in play. This moment was my decision to drop out of university. I will show how I “narratively sleepwalked” onto and off a degree course and how my underlying career narrative led me to pursue a particular path despite abundant evidence that it was not for me.

The focus of this thesis is on situations in which narrative is an emotion-focused coping strategy stimulated by events which are experienced as disruptions to the career project. Very early career might seem an unlikely location for such situations, but I will argue that even prospective career projects are narratively constructed from the outset. This produces a degree of commitment, which in part follows from the simple but appealing argument that we require of ourselves a certain degree of consistency (Becker, 1960). However, the commitment also arises because we make decisions which constrain our subsequent choices.

In the next chapter I will make a claim for the potentially baleful and seductive influence of narrative, drawing upon Gabriel (2004). In this chapter I will begin to develop this proposition by exploring something rather more basic, namely that we can and do construct narratives which are perfectly plausible but just plain wrong. These narratives may sometimes be quite functional – Weick (1995) cites the story of Italian troops in the Alps finding their way home after being lost in the Alps because their captain found a map...which afterwards they discovered was a map of the Pyrenees. The map was ‘wrong’ but served to calm the platoon and give them some sense of how one might plot a route off a mountain and down to human habitation – which was enough to save their lives. Yet a ‘wrong’ narrative may also have a

profound negative impact. Within this chapter, I will show how my misreading of my own character at a key stage of my childhood led me to develop a narrative of my future career which was badly at odds with ‘reality’ and yet served to shape my career decisions for almost a decade.

## Case

### *Dropping out*

*A public phonebox, somewhere in Bradford, near a patch of wasteland. A young man stands inside the phone box, holding the receiver and dialling a number with a slightly trembling finger.*

*John (straining to be breezy): Hiya, it's me. Are you alright?*

*Cathryn: Yeah, I'm fine, how are you?*

*John: I'm really not enjoying it. (voice starts to croak a little) I think I might drop out.*

*Cathryn: No! Oh God John! Is it that bad?*

*John: It's not really awful. I just don't like it.*

*Cathryn: God, John, what're you going to tell Mam and Dad?*

When I started to think about my career story, I initially decided that this would be the obvious starting point – October 1986, when I dropped out of a Chemical Engineering degree at Bradford University after just 3 weeks. However, as soon as I began to write about this, I found myself having to explain how I came to be in Bradford, which took me back two months to August 1986 when I got the disappointing result in ‘A’ level Physics which meant that I didn’t get into Medical School...which in turn required me to explain the fairly complicated process by which I’d come to apply for Medicine a year earlier, and how, even earlier, I had gone through the rather tortuous process of starting, dropping, then re-starting ‘A’ level Physics, which in and of itself necessarily required that I describe the options I’d chosen two years earlier when I picked subjects for ‘O’ level...

This process of personal archaeology has obvious parallels with psychotherapy. In moving backwards through the life story in order to understand the source(s) of later patterns, one might expect to come to a point of origin, not least because one's life has a point of origin. However, it seems to me that it would not be fanciful to continue moving backwards in time - to consider, for example, my parents' lives prior to my birth. Many biographies and autobiographies do so, as do some novels which are biographical in style. Whilst I shall resist this temptation, in a later section I will examine the issue of my social class and where I grew up as they have proved to be significant influences on my career narratives. In the next section, I will retrace the sequence of events which culminated in me dropping out and which had a significant impact on my career, for reasons strongly linked to emotion.

### *Retracing my steps*

In early 1985 I dropped 'A' level Geography and took 'A' level Physics instead, a decision which was to have significant consequences for my career – getting a good grade in Physics when I hated it and had missed quarter of the course proved to be beyond me and meant I failed to get into Medical School. At the time I had just decided to apply to study Medicine. I'd come relatively late to my decision to become a doctor, and thought this might be a weakness to my application – my perception was that Medical Schools expected applicants who had 'always' wanted to become a doctor. This links to the meta-issue of our sensitivity to constructing a plausible and expected narrative. Bruner (1990) notes our sensitivity to 'breaches' in the expected form of canonical accounts and clearly there are expectations about the form of story told on application forms. In my application I was busily constructing a 'false' account: not actually untruthful, but certainly calculated to give an impression which was misleading. Having dropped out of university, changed occupations several times, and frequently left jobs after an inordinately short time in post, this perceived need to create a false impression (or at least hide certain elements) has been a perennial feature of my career, and has stimulated a sort of meta-narrative of justification.

To return to my 'false' account: taking 'A' levels in Chemistry, Maths and Geography gave away the fact that I hadn't been thinking about Medicine when I made my 'A' level choices. I had in fact started the 6<sup>th</sup> Form taking four 'A' levels – Chemistry,

Maths, Geography and Physics – but dropped Physics after a relatively short while. I can't remember how I justified this (though my parents can, see chapter 11), but I can remember quite clearly that I rather liked 6<sup>th</sup> Form culture, and that taking four 'A' levels kept me in the classroom and out of the common room more than I liked (and also got in the way of me being in the school play!) So, I start in September 1984, doing 'A' levels in Chemistry, Geography, Maths and Physics, by October am no longer doing Physics, and yet by February I am once again doing Physics and have now dropped Geography. This is not a sequence which speaks either of good careers advice or sound decision making on my part. It does however indicate my ability to tell a good tale, in that at each step I persuaded myself and others that these were good moves.

In August 1984 I got my 'O' level results. I'd sat nine, and passed them all, getting four As and five Bs. I hadn't really given much thought to returning to study for 'A' levels, I simply assumed that I would. Nor had I given a great deal of thought to what I would study, although I imagined I would take the sciences<sup>10</sup>. As I only actually liked Chemistry, and my 'O' level results indicated that the natural sciences were not my strongest area, this is somewhat surprising – an important point, to which I will return in the Analysis section. The period between receiving my results and going up into the Sixth Form was just two or three weeks, and at some point during that time, I went to see a Careers Adviser to discuss what subjects I should take at 'A' level. I can't remember the conversation in detail, but I do remember that we discussed my discomfort at the idea of dropping all of the subjects at which I'd achieved an A grade, and also that there was no discussion of Medical School – that decision was definitely one taken several months later. I think it was partly this conversation which led to me taking Maths rather than Biology, and adding Geography as a sop to my concerns about dropping all of my 'best' subjects. This represents something of a non-decision: I chose to take an extra 'A' level rather than make a hard choice about which subject to drop.

Earlier that summer I had read a biography of Freud, lent to me by our parish priest. I was very struck by it, and began to entertain ideas about becoming a psychiatrist, a

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<sup>10</sup> Biology, Chemistry and Physics.



train of thought which did not crystallise into a decision to apply to study Medicine for another six months (partly because I didn't realise that I would need to qualify as a doctor first and then specialise). With hindsight, I think that good careers advice would have led to me going to a nearby university to study Psychology, with a view to becoming a Clinical Psychologist.

In the spring of 1982, I was choosing my options for 'O' level. I wanted to study the sciences, plus French and Geography. Our wonderful options system was set up such that one could only take two from Chemistry, French and Geography. I have no idea why, as they don't seem such a bizarre combination. Anyway, outraged at this, I organised a petition, which got a lot of signatures (there were many other restricted combinations, it was not just the map reading Francophile chemists who were up in arms). This was an interesting formative experience, reflecting in some ways the instinct to organise, plus the belief in the benefit of peaceful protest (perhaps more precisely, the belief that a logical argument would win out). Anyway, the petition made no difference - knowing our headmaster, he probably binned it the second I left the office. At the same time my housemaster, Mr Sands, tried to persuade me that I was choosing the wrong subjects. He had been highly impressed by my argumentative stance with our local parish priest (I attended a Roman Catholic comprehensive) who had outraged our RE class by insisting on the literal truth of the Adam and Eve story. He felt I had a strong flair for rhetoric and argumentation and should study humanities. I unwittingly proved his point by arguing my way into being allowed to take the sciences.

I could go back further, but this seems a good place to stop, representing as it does probably my first conscious career choice. Each event, described from this distance, appears minor, yet each had a significant emotional component and important career consequences.

### *What happened next*

After I dropped out and came home, I was not well. I seemed malnourished, and I'd been infected with scabies. I signed on the dole, and picked up my social life where I'd left off just a few weeks earlier. Inevitably I had to explain myself, repeatedly, to family, friends, acquaintances, interview panels. I also had to decide what to do next.

This period of my life was unstructured, and that makes accurate recollection more difficult (in the song 'The Day Before You Came', the narrator describes her usual day in great detail noting that she 'must have done' these things 'because I always do'). For example, talking to my parents recently put a dent in one of my favourite narratives about this time, about how I came back home and decided to study 'A' Level English at night class to 'keep my hand in'. I tell this tale as an example of my love of learning, and commitment to education, but I now discover that there was more of a gap than I remember between my return and starting this class, and also that my dad (who worked as a technician at the college) had practically frogmarched me up there to enrol to study 'something' (anything!) out of a mixture of annoyance at my inactivity and anxiety that I appeared to have lost my way and was just 'bumming around the town'. The 'bumming around' bit does fit with my recollection – the story I have told over the years, about that time between dropping out of university and starting work, is of lying in bed all day, whilst having a good social life on the night, and generally being a worry to my parents. Yet the other day, in telling someone about how I thought excessive chlorine in my local swimming baths had damaged my eyesight at 18, I suddenly remembered that during this time I had gone through a phase of going swimming every day, a recollection markedly at odds with my image of myself as dormouse-cum-party animal.

I can remember going for a number of job interviews after dropping out, but I had forgotten the sheer range of stupid jobs I'd applied for. Most were variations on the old style 'bright lad wanted' and although I felt my 'A' level grades were disappointing, they were strikingly out of place for jobs like these. Being rather naïve, I would put the few weeks at Bradford University on applications, oblivious to the negative impression it might create. As a result, at every interview I was asked the question 'do you think you'll go back to university?' to which I would blithely answer 'yes, probably'. The first time an interview panel didn't ask me that question, I got the job.

My first full-time post was as an Administrative Officer at Vinovium House, the local Department of Health & Social Security (DHSS) office. I hated it. The only thing which made my life at that time bearable was that, just days before, I started going out with the love of my life. I remember one day catching a scent of Opium (her

favourite perfume) whilst going up the stairs at work and practically floating up the next few flights in a state of bliss. That anything managed to pierce that lovestruck haze says something both about how much career matters to me, and how awful I found the place.

The latter is neatly illustrated by my response to discovering within a few weeks of starting that the union was to call a series of one day strikes: I joined immediately, not out of passion for the cause, but because I wanted every day off I could get my hands on! One of the things about the DHSS which has stuck with me to this day was that everyone else said they hated it too, but when I started applying for jobs to get out, my colleagues were thunderstruck. With hindsight, I can see part of their astonishment was that I was so naïvely open about it. And I also realise that people generally complain about work and this cannot be taken as much of an indication of their feelings. However, there were two other aspects which I think are important. The first is that Vinovium House provided probably the most secure employment within a 10 mile radius of the unemployment blackspot I called home. The second is people's ability to settle. I have often wondered what might have happened if I had chanced upon a different first job, one in which I enjoyed the work and got on well with my co-workers. When I got the Personnel Manager post at Thorpeton at the age of 27 it occurred to me that I probably wouldn't have got that post any sooner if I had gone to university and graduated at 21, because I simply wouldn't have pushed so hard or taken so many risks. These thoughts link to the idea of me being somewhat 'driven' in career terms, to which I shall return.

Back to me applying for jobs to get out of Vinovium House. The jobs I applied for fell into two broad categories – classic 'A' level trainee jobs (banking, the Civil Service Executive Officer competition) and lab work. The former because I had the qualifications, the latter because I saw myself as, broadly speaking, a scientist. Having three reasonable 'A' levels in science subjects, I would usually get shortlisted for the lab jobs, but at interview I would encounter puzzled looking middle-aged chemists wanting to know why an office worker wanted to work in a lab<sup>11</sup>. Viewing

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<sup>11</sup> It took 18 months to escape Vinovium House, my lucky break came when I was interviewed by a man who had work in a 'Labour Exchange' after leaving school before starting a technical career in the chemical industry, and who therefore found my career aspirations perfectly understandable.

myself as a 'scientist', I found this infuriating. This view of myself represents the common thread running through this first decade of my career. In the next section I will trace its origins and how it came to have such an influence on my early career.

### **How events produce stories: "John the Scientist"**

My career aspirations were very loosely formed throughout my time at school, in fact with hindsight I can see that this was part of the reason why I finally latched onto Medicine with such enthusiasm. "At last", I thought, "I've worked out what I want to do". However, the fact that I had no clear career in mind didn't mean I had no thoughts about the subject. I thought about a lot of possibilities, in an idle fashion, producing a raft of career 'antenarratives' (Boje, 2001). The term raft is interesting, it invites an analogy with log driving, a technique once used to bring logs downstream. Logs were not lashed together, they formed a loose raft simply because the current pushed them together. The log drivers rode the moving logs, running from one to the other. The current on which my raft rode could be loosely described as 'science and nature'.

In tracing the origins of this, I am conscious of a whole host of influences. Neil Armstrong stepped out onto on the Moon just a few days before my first birthday. The excitement of the Space Race, and the popularity of science fiction shows like Star Trek and Dr Who was a backdrop to my early childhood. Nature too formed a big part of my childhood. I lived right on the edge of town: woods and fields were literally over our back fence and as kids we spent our days exploring them. Days out as a family tended to be to places like a nearby forest, or up into Teesdale. This was interesting, as I suppose it would be to most children, but I also read a lot about nature and science and grew quite knowledgeable. Yet notwithstanding all these influences, I would trace the development of my 'would-be scientist' career narrative to feeling lonely.

When my youngest daughter moved from Reception into Year 1, her two best friends from Reception didn't move with her. She was fine in lessons, but had no one to play with at breaks, and was at a bit of a loss for a while. Walking her home from school one day I asked, as casually as I could manage, who she had played with at lunchtime.

“Oh no-one”, she replied, “I just wandered around on my own”. My heart wrenched, and I was transported back thirty years to lunchtime at primary school. “I just wandered around on my own” was a perfect description of how I spent many a playtime.

My problem arose because, as a child, I greatly disliked the conflict inherent in sports. Not competition per se, but the general level of aggro even between players on the same side. Kids who are rubbish at football get put in goal, and of course because they are rubbish they end up letting in lots of goals and get shouted at for their troubles. You don't have to be an especially sensitive child to judge that this is not much fun and as I *was* rather sensitive, I absolutely hated it. I relished days when the weather made football impossible and we would play games like tag. This is quite important – I *was* a gregarious child, but felt unable to join in with the commonest pastime of a game of footie. At home it was OK, the kids around the doors weren't much into football, and we tended just to 'play out' – on our bikes, climbing trees, exploring the woods, mass games of hide and seek and so on.

When I was 10, we moved across town to a new estate. When we first moved, the estate was still being built and as kids we had great fun going into the unfinished buildings, nicking white tubing to make 'light sabres', and generally exploring the surrounding countryside. I didn't make any close friends during this time: through a quirk of demographics, on an estate with loads of children there were few children of my age – those closest in age to me were almost without exception in the year below and at a different school. Still, this wasn't much of an issue for me until the estate was completed. The builder's compound was grassed over to provide a small playing field and it seemed that almost everyone but me wanted to spend their days playing football or cricket. My friends from school lived further away than my parents would let me go, so for a while my life outside of school was relatively solitary. I spent much of my time raking around the nearby fields, woods and ponds with our dog. It was not that I fled from human contact to the solitude of nature, more that I enjoyed the activities of nature. If there had been a dozen other like-minded kids, I have no doubt we'd have formed a gang but there wasn't and I was often alone.

I don't want to play the violin too much on this one. An observer of my activities over this time would probably be a little puzzled by this description – I was hardly a recluse, and I spent plenty of time with other children. It was more that, at what is seen as a formative age, I had a mistaken sense of myself as a somewhat solitary soul: one of life's lighthouse keepers, as it were. McAdams and Janis (2004) note narrative identity tends to develop over early adulthood, as we lack the cognitive tools to develop this identity until well into adolescence. Elkind (1981) suggests 'personal fables' *can* be crafted by adolescents but they tend to be 'fantastical autobiographical stories about their own potential greatness or uniqueness, stories that embody a high degree of coherence *but may have little relation to the reality of their lives*' (McAdams and Janis, 2004: 163, emphasis added). McAdams and Janis suggest adolescents draw abstract conclusions all too readily:

Quick to embrace totalistic solutions and abstract ideologies, some teenagers may lack the cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity that are required for making narrative sense of what a complex world has to offer. (McAdams and Janis, 2004: 168)

My 'personal fable' emphasised a solitary self, and so when I looked to the future and thought about my life, the careers envisaged linked to my solitary self-image – I imagined myself working alone and in nature.

The 'John the Scientist' narrative was slightly undermined by my experience of the almost total separation between the science which so captured my attention and the science I was forced to study at school. I expected Biology to be The Natural World and Physics to be All Things Astronomical, and was greatly disappointed. Only Chemistry seemed to live up to its promise of being interesting to study. I began to doubt whether the naturalist 'job' I envisaged – somewhere between a nature reserve warden and David Attenborough – actually existed. My 'raft' became less tightly bound, and my yen to be 'a scientist' faded gradually, so gradually that I barely noticed it. I went from 'naturalist', to 'something scientific' and eventually to 'something using science 'A' levels'. Nevertheless, even in its attenuated form this 'scientific' narrative influenced my career choices for an extended period.

The act of developing a narrative account of one's future career can be linked to the notion of a self-concept, an idea widely used with careers research (e.g. Super, 1990; Schein, 1978). The narrative explanation of events acts like the idea of a self-concept, which we then enact. Following the sensemaking approach, events can be seen to trigger an emotional response which cues sensemaking and hence identity construction. It is of course entirely possible the process will generate narratives which are plausible but misleading. Two important points should be stressed, both apparent in the case study and chiming in with different theories within social psychology. The first is that, where events trigger intense negative emotion, the search for meaning will be almost frantic: we look to make sense of the situation in order to 'make the emotions go away'. The second is that, in much less emotional situations, we may nevertheless be provoked to develop and enact a narrative interpretation, which may then frame our understanding on an ongoing basis for an extended period. Weick (1995) notes that sensemaking was influenced by Cognitive Dissonance theory, a theory which was initially challenged by the development of Self-Perception theory. Today, the two theories are seen to be complementary: Self-Perception theory better describes how we are aware of our feeling and attitudes about mild stimuli while Cognitive Dissonance theory better describes how we change feeling and attitudes about powerful stimuli. Note however that sensemaking undertaken in response to a mild stimuli situation (e.g. choosing subjects for GCSE) may lead to a line of action which eventually propels us into a strong stimuli situation (e.g. following a particular degree course that we dislike). Yet our later sensemaking is inevitably enmeshed with our earlier sensemaking. Sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995), and though an accuracy driven response might sometimes be more functional, such a response is unlikely: it would require the individual to re-evaluate all prior assumptions.

We can see then that a narrative identity created in response to a particular emotion episode (my feelings of loneliness and melancholy) was propagated across time despite being in many respects being a woefully inaccurate depiction. The gregarious and articulate boy recognised by his housemaster did not recognise himself, and chose options consistent with his own misapprehension and in pursuance of a loosely plotted but nevertheless coherent career narrative, 'John the Scientist'. I repeated this mistake when choosing my 'A' levels, inadvertently corrected it by choosing

Medicine, then repeated it again in choosing an alternative degree through clearing. When I dropped out, the narrative I told was “wrong course, wrong university, wrong city, wrong house” plus “will be going back to university soon” (omitting the embarrassing but more salient “totally homesick” and the crucial “don’t actually want to go to university”). When I studied ‘A’ level English at night class I got an A despite missing half the lessons, doing little work and reading the books just once: in other words, better by far than I’d previously managed studying the sciences full-time over two years. Yet *still* I didn’t spot the obvious flaw in my John the Scientist narrative. In the end I was saved from a lifetime enacting this damned script by eczema: an allergy to acetone brought my career as a lab technician to a shuddering halt and I was forced to write a new script.

### **How stories become scripts: A driven man**

In the previous section, I showed how events produced an emotion episode which led me to develop an embryonic career narrative which looked towards a scientific career. In this section, I want to explore how the events of me dropping out and the emotion episode associated with that created an ‘engine’ which drove me forward on the ‘wrong tracks’: the tracks laid down by my misguided ‘scientific’ career narrative. I want to attempt to convey something of the anxiety which pervaded my career in the wake of dropping out, and how this drove my sensemaking for an extended period. My fear that I would ‘amount to nothing’ or at least to considerably less than my potential was an ongoing source of anxiety which made me perennially concerned about my career. The two main influences which produced this situation were social class and geographical location.

#### *On discovering I am working class*

You will *never* understand how it feels to live your life with no meaning or control and with nowhere left to go. You are amazed that they exist and they burn so bright whilst you can only wonder why. [...] You’ll never live like common people, you’ll never do what common people do, you’ll never fail like common people, you’ll never watch your life slide out of view, and dance and drink and screw because there’s nothing else to do.

(*Common People*, lyrics by Jarvis Cocker)



*A hall in a student union. The woman on the platform, who looks like a young Germaine Greer, is making an impassioned speech to a sympathetic audience. Her targets are all things Tory, and she manages to cover a lot of ground. At one point she refers to the outrage of 'latch-key kids'. My right-on housemate applauds this remark (as he has all others) before leaning towards me and whispering. 'what are latch-key kids?' I explain they are children whose mothers were out at work and who had to come home to an empty house and let themselves in. Then I add, 'like me, I suppose'.*

I felt a bit of a fraud adding that last comment...it was sort of true, but also a little bit of a pose. I can't remember how old I would have been when my parents started letting my younger sister and I come home to an empty house, where I would make the tea. I think I'd have been about 14. Our walk home along a roadside path thronged with other kids, to a quiet suburban cul de sac in which there were plenty of adults 'around the doors' was hardly the kind of hard life which the speaker had in mind. Nevertheless, I had a dim realisation that what she was railing against (and what he had never heard of) was to some extent part of the warp and weft of my life experience. This brief conversation, and others, meant that university was where I discovered I was working class, and by extension, that I lacked the financial safety net which at the time probably the vast majority of students could fall back on. I don't mean that my parents had no money to support me, I mean simply that whatever I made of my life would have to come from me – I had no connections, no rich relatives. And, I belatedly realised, having dropped out of university I had also lost the chance to get the one thing which might make a difference – an education.

*It's grim up north*

*A young couple walking down a broad street full of shops. The young man sees something and points excitedly at a shop window, "Look!" She looks where he is pointing but can see nothing of interest. "What exactly am I looking at?" He hurries her over to the window where he taps his finger excitedly on a poster. "Oh my God", she says, "a job advert!"*

In 1996, at the age of 27, my wife and I moved to Peterborough and saw something amazing. In all our years in the northeast we had never seen a shop post a Help Wanted sign in its window, probably because in almost the whole period during which we might have noticed such a thing, unemployment was so high that such a sign would have led to a shop more full of applicants than customers. The notion of a North-South divide had always seemed to me to be real, but encountering it in such a practical manner was still something of a shock. It took me back to another conversation in Bradford a decade earlier, an argument over unemployment rates. I had insisted (correctly) that youth unemployment was 21% in my home town, my interlocutor (about whom I remember only that he was almost albino pale and came from Stafford) insisted this couldn't be right, I must have the figures the wrong way round, it must be 12%. Although we were both equally insistent, he remained much calmer, the matter being largely academic to him, whilst it was very personal to me.

My subsequent experiences of unemployment, and my extended observation of this social phenomenon through my time at the DHSS and as an outplacement counsellor for British Coal, gave me a strong belief that the wolf does not live far from the door. I was once told that 'good people' (the speaker meant talented people) will always find work, but I know that is simply not true and a gnawing fear of unemployment or getting stuck in a dead-end job has pervaded my career. It is only relatively recently that the fear has subsided, but as the anxieties detailed in chapters 7 and 8 show clearly, it is never far below the surface.

*Social background as an emotional influence on my career*

Thursday      May 20th

ASCENSION DAY

Started reading Fred Engels' book tonight. My father saw me reading it and said, 'I don't want that Commie rubbish in my house'.

I said, 'It's about the class that you came from yourself.'

My father said, 'I have worked and slaved and fought to join the middle classes,

Adrian, and now I'm here I don't want my son admiring proles and revolutionaries.'

He is deluding himself if he thinks he has joined the middle classes. He still puts HP sauce on his toast.

(From *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*, Sue Townsend)

I've loved that last line from the first time I read it, aged about 16. I rarely read anything twice, so when a line sticks with me, it's because it resonates with something. I am the father, rather than Adrian. When I was a child, if we drove past really flash cars my dad would encourage us to shout 'rich pigs'. This was not social protest, this was fun, and we'd all chortle. Today, my family car is a Mercedes Benz. It is old, and we bought it cheap. Nevertheless, it's a Merc. The other day we were driving past some very nice cars (two Rolls Royces, clearly together). The childhood memory came back to me and with a sense of devilment, I started to think about getting my daughters to wind their windows down and shout 'rich pigs'. Then it occurred to me that this didn't really work when hollered from a Merc, rather than a battered old Ford Cortina.

So, despite working in a profession which is practically a byword for middle class, owning a nice home, and a Merc, there is still a certain working class attitude underneath. This has had an impact on my career, making me resentful of authority and suspicious of 'cosy' middle class values amongst managerial colleagues. Billy Connolly says that despite his wealth, success and lifestyle he still occasionally 'turns into a welder'. I had a chip on my shoulder, and my career aspirations were in part driven by a 'Jack's as good as his Master' attitude; I knew I was at least as smart and capable as the people for whom I worked, but having eschewed the sensible route of university and a graduate career, I had to work doubly hard to prove this and get to the position I 'deserved'. I could portray this in terms of me knuckling down and getting on through hard work and indeed there was a good deal of that. However, the emotional tone was less sanguine and positive – a mix of surliness and paranoia.

### **How scripts become lives**

Bruner (1995: 162) notes that "autobiography, however implicit or explicit, always risks becoming self-sealing in the sense that it may tempt the teller into a 'life' that suits circumstances so comfortably that it even conceals the possibility of choice". In

the context of the case study, it should be noted that the narrative surrounding me dropping out of university had to be told and retold for several years, usually with an instrumental imperative (e.g. for an interview panel) which 'prevented' me from re-examining the events in a more detached manner. My construction of plausible career narratives runs through this whole case study, yet it was not until I wrote this chapter that I realised this construction had started long before I applied to university. Moir (1993) and Coupland (2001) identify the importance of developing plausible accounts of our career choices, in both cases examining the issue through discourse analysis. Whilst agreeing with their basic points, I have framed the matter in terms of narrative, as this provides a better basis for understanding how the local, situated accounts can become writ large in the individual's subsequent career.

As I moved backwards in time through the case study, each jump backwards was to an apparent turning point, where we encounter me weaving a tale in order to rationalise a particular course of action. Moir (1993) conducted interviews in which he invited nursing and engineering students to explain their career choices. He notes that traditional approaches to occupational choice would interpret the answers given in terms of some underlying mental capacity or psychometric trait, but he suggests that what interviewees actually display is their ability to meet the demands of the interviewer's questions and present their choice in a credible manner. Young people are frequently called upon to explain their career choices – in applications for work or study, in interviews, to parents, teachers and friends – and it is therefore unsurprising that they might become accomplished at drawing upon various 'linguistic repertoires' to account for their actions in differing ways to different audiences.

I noted above that I used to tell interview panels, if they asked, that I was likely to go back to university. This is odd in various ways. Firstly, it reveals an interesting naivety on my part, that I didn't realise what a 'kiss of death' this answer would be. Secondly, at the time, I had made no fresh application to university, so at the very least I could have said 'well, if I did it won't be for another two years at the earliest'. Thirdly, I didn't really want to go back. I realise now that it was hard for me to admit that to myself, and this represents something of a *leitmotif* for my career thinking over many years, namely that I frequently make emotional decisions, but the emotional component is masked (most particularly from myself) by what appears a perfectly

rational explanation for the decision. This is very much consistent with the idea of narrative as a response to the emotion triggered by events. Events do not have to be novel to trigger an emotional response, but where they are novel the emotional response is likely to be more intense and possibly more prolonged: more intense because the disruption is greater, more prolonged because it will take longer to develop a plausible narrative which ‘normalizes the breach, restores the expectation, and enables projects to continue’ (Weick et al, 2005: 414).

One implication of this is that minor events occurring at certain points can have major effects on a career, by stimulating the development of a narrative which becomes a canonical form. Such a development will not generally be a mere unfolding. The chaos theory notion of ‘sensitive dependence on initial conditions’ *may* be apposite for career systems with a single point of entry, where career progressions thereafter is dependent more on seniority than performance – the Japanese *nenko joretsu* and French *cadre* systems are often cited as examples. However, it seems much less likely in the context of a boundaryless career, and we might therefore ask how it might be possible for an early, embryonic narrative to become a fully-fledged personal canonical form. We might frame it in these terms: although the plausibility of a career narrative may wax and wane over time, and indeed within the context of the circumstances at any given moment may seem a very poor story indeed, it is unlikely to be completely replaced unless a better narrative can be found. Since the narrative serves as a heuristic, we are less likely to attend to information which conflicts with the narrative.

I suggested that a narrative of ‘John the Scientist’ arose in my early teens and ran through the first ten years of my career, shaping the choices I made. Whilst this was so, it implies a certain inevitability which is overstated. At certain key points, other factors served to keep me on this particular path, and I want to illustrate this with two examples.

*Choosing ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels:* In my year at school the brightest pupils chose the sciences; my ‘A’ level Chemistry class contained every single pupil who had taken and passed nine ‘O’ levels. For me the idea of taking the Humanities, as my housemaster wished, was to some degree ‘unthinkable’; in chapter 8 I described my

qualms that a move back home would represent a withdrawal from competing in the career tournament, and I had a similar feeling when I contemplated not taking the sciences. So, I was kept on the tracks of my 'scientific' narrative by a desire to compete with my peers, and a sense that not to do so would be somehow mildly shameful.

*Lab work as an escape:* I hated my time at Vinovium House, but struggled to get another post. Applying for lab work seemed to offer the best route out, and in a sense this served to repair the disruption to my 'scientific' career narrative caused by me dropping out of a scientific degree course. This was also supported by the fact that one of the shorthand ideas I used to explain my decision to drop out was that I had foolishly chosen Chemical Engineering thinking it would be similar to Applied Chemistry. Applied Chemistry thus became the 'road not travelled' which I told all and sundry would have been the right degree.

Taken together, these two situations served to buttress the 'scientific' narrative such that it was told more often and for a long time, and eventually became a canonical form, acting as a script for my career. For about five years my active career narrative centred around the idea of working in a lab whilst studying on day-release for a degree in Chemistry.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined my decision to drop out of university after just three weeks, the roots of this decision, and its impact upon my career. I have argued that the case suggests several matters of considerable significance to career theory. Emotion is likely to have a disproportionate influence in early career because a) it comes first and can therefore influence the rest of our career, b) at this early stage we have no prior experience which might help make sense of the situation and our emotional response, and c) emotion regulation improves with age (Gross et al, 1997). For all these reasons, we are likely to search avidly for narratives which help us 'cope with the pain'. Yet at the same time, our narrative skills are less well-developed (Elkind, 1981; McAdams and Janis, 2004). Taking these matters together, since we are making an urgent search for narrative explanations for events which are novel to us,

we are more 'at risk' of developing plausible but misleading narratives. Finally, returning to the first point, such narratives can have a prolonged and potentially baleful impact upon our careers, since we may go forward making sense of our career on the basis of this initial narrative, which may not be re-evaluated unless and until some significant shock (cf. Louis, 1980) makes us revise this narrative.

## Chapter 8: Poetry as a cultural resource for making sense of emotion in career

### Introduction

When I read a book I seem to read it with my eyes only, but now and then I come across a passage, perhaps only a phrase, which has a meaning for me, and it becomes part of me.

(From *Of Human Bondage*, W. Somerset Maugham, 1915)

The chapter considers the issue of how we can trust the stories we tell ourselves and others to make sense of our careers and the emotions therein. It seeks to explore issues of plausibility, verisimilitude and truth in our career stories. In the Methodology chapter I touched upon issues of truth and poetic licence, and I now wish to explore these in more depth, by looking at the ways in which we draw upon cultural resources such as poetry to make sense of our emotions. This is relevant in many career situations but especially those where personal and work life intersect. Weick (1995) stressed that sensemaking is ‘driven by plausibility rather than accuracy’, which hints at our susceptibility to being deceived by plausible ‘extracted cues’ (James, 1890) – and as poetry is itself a distillate, it is bristling with potential cues. In our daily lives, we encounter events of which we have to make sense, and we draw upon available cultural resources to do so. Sometimes we draw upon them in a humdrum manner, barely conscious of using phrases such as ‘third time lucky’, or ‘worse things happen at sea’, as a means of accounting for action. In more difficult situations, we may struggle to make sense, yet at the same time we will encounter ‘ready-made’ explanations – poems, lyrics, lines from a film, proverbs etc. These sentiments, artfully crafted by another, and often overlain with a patina of profundity which they may not deserve, represent a powerful resource which may draw us towards a particular interpretation of our situation. This can be seen for a host of cultural artefacts, but this chapter will consider only poetry, a category into which I also place song lyrics, since they represent the most widely accessible form of poetry in modern societies.



I have argued that, on a day to day basis, we are expected to manage our emotions so as to be able to perform acceptably. But taking the longer view, across the timescale of our careers, we need to make sense of our emotions if we are to cope with the ups and downs of working life, and make good career choices and effective career transitions. In this thesis I have conceptualised the impact of emotion on career (and vice versa) as occurring through narrative – through the stories we tell ourselves and others to make sense of the emotional ebb and flow of our working lives. As McAdams (1995) notes, narrative is currently used in the social science as both a method and a construct – as a means to investigate lives, and as construct to describe our lives. Both approaches raise significant issues of verisimilitude for the researcher, but perhaps more importantly, for the individual. How can I have confidence in the stories I tell to make sense of my career, my life?

### **Poetic Truth versus the Barnum Effect**

#### *Poetic Truth*

The notion of poetic truth is strongly associated with Aristotle. His *Poetics* is judged to be something of a rejoinder to Plato's furious antipathy towards poetry (Halliwell, 1986):

It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen...The difference [between the poet and the historian] is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. (Aristotle, *Poetics* IX)

Plato, by contrast, considered that poetry stimulates the release of “emotions better regulated by reason” such that we “become captive to them in ‘real’ life” (Griswold, 1981, 2003). This suggests that people can become captive to emotions which were falsely evoked, or put another way, to emotions which they wrongly perceive as their own. Poetry therefore represented a moral hazard, as it evokes a false and dysfunctional response – poems “maim the thoughts of those who hear them”.

Although a leading proponent of research on organisational stories, Gabriel (2004) is somewhat in sympathy with Plato when he expresses his growing concern with what he perceives as a too willing acceptance of the ‘poetic truth’ of organisational stories. He notes that the traditional defence is that “the truth of the story lies not in its accurate depiction of facts but in its meaning”, but he argues that stories can be vehicles not only to “enlightenment and understanding, but also to dissimulation and lying” (Gabriel, 2004).

This issue of poetic truth has a particularly direct relevance to issues of emotion. We often experience a sense of uncertainty about how we feel. One of the key problems with emotions for researchers, and indeed for us as human beings, is naming. If we can name an emotion, we can talk about it, ask about it, think about it. This raises deceptively simple questions, such as do you and I mean the same thing when we say we are sad? “Am I in love?” is one of life’s burning questions, but more mundane matters also present us with ambiguity and uncertainty. Knowing how we feel can be construed as a search for a name for our emotions. The significance of naming of emotions is highlighted by research in the field of cultural psychology, where researchers have noted the considerable variation in the emotional lexicon of different languages. Wierzbicka (2001) cites as an example the Polish word *przykro*. This is most nearly translated into English as *hurt*, *offended*, *sorry* or *sad*, but Wierzbicka suggests something is lost in translation – she describes *przykro* as a culturally salient Polish emotion:

That is not to say that speakers of English never experience the emotion associated in Polish with the word *przykro*; only that they do not think habitually about their experiences in these terms. (Wierzbicka, 2001: 22)

She suggests that the emotional lexicon available in any given culture is likely to reflect its central concerns and values. It seems intuitively plausible that our language will evolve to provide us with the vocabulary to discuss matters of cultural significance to us. However, an interesting exception to this is *schadenfreude*, a German word for which there is no direct English equivalent, but which describes an emotion (malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others) so instantly recognisable that it has been readily adopted to plug a gap in the emotional lexicon of English.

This raises an interesting question about the direction of effect – do the words available to us shape our perception of emotion, or do we experience emotions and search for words to express it?

Faced with a range of conflicting emotions in our careers, which would push us towards various different courses of action, we attempt to understand our ‘true’ feelings, needs and desires. Such efforts could be greatly supported by career counselling, but as this is not widely available to adults in mid-career (Collin and Watts, 1996), most individuals will be attempting to make sense of this for themselves. In such situations, the individual can be seen to be in search of an answer to questions such as ‘how do I feel?’, ‘what do I want?’, ‘what would make me happiest?’

#### *The Barnum Effect – Poetry and Self-Deception*

Meehl (1956) coined the term ‘the Barnum effect’, after his colleague Donald Paterson had noted that psychometric personality profiles appeared to be so open to interpretation as to offer, as legendary showman PT Barnum claimed his shows did, ‘something for everyone’. Meehl and Paterson were suggesting that one could read almost anything into the data produced by these profiles, but one might go on to suggest that this willingness to read something into anything is a common human trait, and certainly one consistent with the idea of the extracted cue (Weick, 1995; James, 1980). Astrology, and especially the newspaper horoscope, offers a brilliant illustration of the Barnum effect. Since poetry is open to a great deal of interpretation, it is possible for the reader to ‘get something out of’ a poem that was unintended by the poet, and indeed might seem a highly quixotic interpretation to almost any other reader. Poetry and lyrics provide sensemaking resources which might be described as *proto-proverbs* or *personal proverbs*. Stewart Copeland cited a couplet from Bob Dylan’s Subterranean Homesick Blues as his motto for life – ‘Don’t follow leaders/Watch the parking meters’. Don’t follow leaders seems obvious enough, but ‘watch the parking meters’ he interprets as ‘don’t stay in one place too long, know when to move on’. Interestingly, Copeland admitted that he had ‘no idea’ what the rest of the song was about.

Proverbs often come from poetry, with Shakespeare being one of the most notable sources. Shapin (2001) suggests proverbs can be seen as heuristics, “rule-like propositions used to regulate judgement and counsel action in a range of situations”. Citing “the ability of a genuine proverb to distil experience, to say something worthwhile and important in an unusually economical way and, moreover, in a manner that marks it off from the flow of ordinary speech” (Shapin 2001:736) he suggests that proverbs ‘break frame’ (Goffman, 1974) largely but not solely as a result of their use of metaphor: “metaphorical proverbs mark what is being said as special in the same way that poetry does: the juxtaposition of the homespun and familiar with novel situations, the special extension of meaning between one and the other, and the sense that language has ‘gone on holiday’ invites special notice” (Shapin 2001: 738).

In order to illustrate and examine the influence of poetry on emotional sensemaking, I wish now to turn to an example from my own experience. Although a very specific and indeed quirky example, the case has broader implications for understanding career decision making in situations of ambiguity and strong emotion.

## Case

*A large office, set up ready for interviews. A tall, distinguished looking but slightly harassed gentleman enters the room, a little out of breath.*

*Clinical Director: I'm sorry I'm late, some stupid little man in Personnel has got my secretary running around looking for old timesheets.*

*General Manager: Oh dear.*

*Personnel Manager (with trepidation): It wasn't me was it?*

*Clinical Director (aghast): Oh no, Mr Blenkinsopp. You're not a 'little man', you're a person of weight in this organisation.*

‘A person of weight’ is a rather an old fashioned term. It seemed to be meant as a statement of ‘organisational fact’, and could of course be taken as a compliment (medical consultants being notoriously grudging in their acknowledgement of management). It became for me a neat description of how I felt about the ‘position in life’ at which (I felt) I had recently arrived. Within a relatively short while (only a

few months apart), three important things had occurred which informed that sentiment – I'd become a father, a graduate and an established professional. I'd been married, studying for a degree and working in HR for five years, so it's not like any of these developments should have come as a surprise. However, coming together as they did, they served to create a dilemma. I found myself in a position in which my career choices expanded in objective terms (I now had a CV which suited me for a range of attractive job opportunities), something which I had worked towards for a decade. Yet at the same time I was beginning to re-evaluate my career in light of the very breadth of these opportunities, and of the practical and emotional issues of parenthood.

Having reached a point in my career where 'everything' had come together I was, for the first time, faced with real choice as to what to do next – and was at a loss to know what to do. Previously I'd been working feverishly to make the best of apparently unpromising situations, now I was fully qualified, highly experienced, and armed with glowing references. I had a feeling of being lost amongst the surfeit of good choices available, each with its own emotional tone and consequences. I was also beginning to wonder about my career – I estimated that I might be able to make it to Director-level within five years, and for the first time (and greatly to my surprise) the thought occurred to me 'and then what?'

I had been thinking about these issues for some time, without reaching any conclusion, when I found myself attending a Counselling Skills workshop run for all the staff in our department. The focus was on helping people solve personal problems, and the facilitator asked us to think of a problem we might be prepared to discuss with him, in front of the group, as a worked example of the techniques he was describing. I decided that my career dilemma would be appropriate – not too personal and traumatic, but a real problem nevertheless, and I secretly hoped that he might have something useful to offer. He invited me to briefly outline the issue, and got this in response:

*My dilemma is that I think I want to move back up north. I know my wife would move tomorrow, and so I need to be absolutely positive that this is what I want because...she's been really supportive, and I don't want to say 'let's*

*move back home' and then change my mind. I don't mean change my mind instantly, I mean I worry about moving back and thinking that it's better for us and for having a family, and then finding that...well, I know there'll be fewer career opportunities, and I'm facing that, and I think I would be willing to resign myself to that...but what if I can't? What if I'm saying to her in a couple of years time, 'look, there's all these jobs come up in other places and I know I could get them, and it'd be a great career move, and I thought it didn't matter but it does, and I'm wondering what you'd think about me applying for this job in Timbuktu...' Because I know what I'm like, I'm like a kid in sweet shop with job adverts, there was a job advertised a while ago to be HR Manager for an astronomical observatory in the Canary Islands that I fancied applying for – she still reminds me about that! She would want us either to go back for good, or not go back at all...it would be really awful to go back and then change my mind...and the other thing is, I know I'd be rubbish at just putting up with it, do you know what I mean? If I'm fed up with work, it's terrible, I can't just put up with it, I can't decide to treat it just as a job and think about other things in life. I know I'd be thinking how nice it is to be back in the north east, and the kids seeing their grandparents all the time, and them helping out with babysitting and such...but at the same time I'd want my career to flourish, and if it didn't, I'd be miserable.*

And then I took a breath. In the first draft of this case study, I presented a detailed breakdown of the various factors I considered, discussed, reflected upon etc. but gradually realised that it was all there in this outpouring to the poor, unsuspecting facilitator. And that reflects what I experienced at the time – that explaining it to someone made it suddenly clear to me what the issues were.

### *Lyrics and Poetry*

The two events described above bookended a short but significant phase in my career which represents the core of this case study. The first event captured me starting to become reflective about some key issues in my life and career, the second event captured me coming to some sort of resolution about these issues. In between I recall feeling rather lost and awash with emotion. It was during this time that I started to type out lyrics or poetry and stick them up on my office wall, each quote lasting for a

relatively short while before being replaced or added to. It was a highly eclectic mix, but what they had in common was that they had evoked a strong emotional reaction in me.

Thinking about this time when I started to write this chapter, I initially tried to recall which poems and lyrics I had put up and what impact they'd had on me, but as I thought more about it, I began to become more and more interested in trying to understand quite why I had done it. However, before considering that, I'll begin by offering just two examples.

*Men at forty*

*Learn to close softly*

*The doors to rooms they will not be*

*Coming back to*

(From *Men At Forty*, by Donald Justice)

I found this in John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* and as I'd never heard of Donald Justice, for many years I thought he was a fictional character, and that Irving had written the poem. I adapted it to read 'Men at thirty', and stuck it up on my wall, oblivious to the fact that it was merely the first verse of a longer poem, or that Justice had written a quite different poem called *Men at thirty*. What was it about the poem that resonated with me? I can say quite honestly that I didn't really understand it at the time. Writing this as I approach forty, I understand the poem better, but at the time I think I responded largely to its wistful tone, and to the sense that I was about to take a step which would inevitably close some doors, though quite which doors I was unsure and that was my dilemma. The intensity of the relationships I had forged in a short time in that job was quite amazing, and there were dozens of people of whom I'd grown very fond. Yet I knew that, should I leave, there were very few of these relationships would survive my departure, and even those that did would change. I found a lovely line in a book I've been reading to my eldest daughter: "Masklin didn't mind change, change was good. It was things not staying the same that he objected to". The poem seemed to capture my feelings of being torn – wanting the best of all worlds, knowing that this would be impossible, but unable (at that moment) to accept this, and make a decision.

The second fragment comes from a song by Deacon Blue:

*When you're gone I notice all your tiny touches  
And it's then that I see, it's then that I know why  
If the days become the walls you never wanted  
Our years will give us cover from the sky*

(From *Cover from the Sky*, lyrics by Ricky Ross)

I related these lyrics to two different things depending on my frame of mind at the time. Sometimes, they were directed to my feelings of frustration with work, hinting as they do at the importance of taking a longer view. Other times, the lyrics were about my feelings towards my wife, reminding me of how important, how central she was to my life, something I was wont to forget in the midst of worries and frustrations about work, which I knew I allowed to dominate my thoughts more than could be healthy.

## **Analysis**

The linking of life and career is a commonplace within career theory e.g. Super (1980), and it seems wholly appropriate to consider these issues when examining the impact of emotion on career. Mary Young (1996) notes that becoming a parent can have an impact on one's career orientation through what she delightfully terms the *nonwork aha!* – “the realisation that work is not the be-all-and-end-all” (Young, 1996: 214). For me this realisation seemed to come at some delay, and I was initially exercised by the more practical and calculative considerations outlined above. In his development of Schein's work on career anchors, DeLong (1982) noted that some individuals plan and pursue their careers with the prime consideration being their ability to remain within a particular geographical area, typically linked to a preference to spend time with their families. Geographical concerns had never been a significant factor for me, but parenthood changed that completely. My wife and I both had experience of changing junior schools as children, and we had a shared aversion to the idea of moving around whilst our children were of school age. This created a definite time horizon – we would have to be settled somewhere for the long haul by the time this tiny baby was ready to start school. The choice was obvious – stay here, move



back up north, or move somewhere else. Although this appeared to give us four years in which to decide, I felt a greater sense of urgency – it would be sensible to make the move as soon as possible, especially if the decision was to move back up north, to the support of our extended family.

Yet at the same time my career meant so much to me, and I had worked very, very hard to get to my present position. I want to stress that. I don't mean merely that I had worked hard in the jobs that had got me to this post. Although I dropped out of university aged 18, I didn't drop my career aspirations. However, not being a graduate I unsurprisingly encountered a lot of difficulties in developing a 'graduate career'. I had to think almost constantly about it, weighing up various options, taking risks, pursuing my studies part-time etc. The climbing metaphor is popular in career literature, and I think the best metaphor for me would be to say that I'd spent the best part of a decade trying to run up a down escalator. This links neatly to an idea at the back of my mind at this time, namely that to stop running would not merely mean standing still, it would mean going backwards. This is consistent with Ochberg's (1988) observation that managers operate within a prevailing career culture which demands constant advancement. Despite all the positives I associated with a possible move 'back home', I remained plagued by a sense that it was in some sense an admission of defeat, a withdrawal from the career tournament (Rosenbaum, 1984), from a career which showed promise to be quite exceptional, to one which would be merely OK. Just a few months earlier, I had considered applying for a senior post at a prestigious London hospital. I had decided against it, on the grounds that the timing was wrong, but such a post seemed the obvious next career move and I envisaged taking it when things had settled down a little after the new baby arrived. This post became something of a 'what might have been' in my thinking.

There were many other issues in circulation at the time, but this tension between home and career was predominant in my concerns. I was, I think, simply awash with emotion, reflecting on almost every aspect of my life – going round in circles, 'emoting' over career, location, marriage, parenthood, life. TS Eliot suggested:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not

the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.

(From *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, T S Eliot, 1919)

Following that logic, my use of poetry to capture and express emotions that I was feeling yet could not properly name served a purpose in ‘venting’ these emotions. I was feeling so much, more than I could express, more than I could usefully make sense of...stepping back from the situation was difficult, because ‘the situation’ was an amorphous but interconnected set of issues which amounted to a huge, overarching question – ‘what am I to do with my life?’ I was, quite literally, pinning my emotions to the wall, the better to examine them.

Yet at the same time, there was an uncertainty about my feelings, and about whether my response to the poetry was ‘authentic’. I described above my response to a fragment from *Cover from the Sky*. The song was written by a man, to be sung by a woman, and contains a line about the rain washing “mascara from my lashes”. So, there is much in it which might serve to counter the Barnum Effect, to communicate a sense that it is, self-evidently, *not* about a young manager going through a rather premature mid-life crisis of sorts. Yet the emotion evoked by the lyrics cut straight through such sensible appraisals, and the lyric seemed to be speaking very much to my feelings at the time. In *The Hotel New Hampshire* a character receives a birthday card from his sister in which she has inscribed the poem *Men at Thirty*; he writes back demanding to know, “Who is this Donald Justice, and how come everything he says applies to *us*?” The answer is, of course, that it doesn’t – we interpret what the poet says in terms of our situations, which is ‘how come’ it seems to apply to us.

A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfilment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words.

(From *Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, 1963)

Here Frost is talking about the writing of poetry, rather than its appreciation or interpretation, and during this period I was not writing poetry. However, I was engaged in a creative process of sorts, in producing this odd, wall-based *bricolage*. It

was, I readily acknowledge, a much lesser creative act, but it was nevertheless driven by the same urge which Frost describes so well.

Against this backdrop, the use of poetry to capture and name feelings can be seen as akin to the navigational use of depth soundings through which mariners could get their bearings. When lost in coastal waters, they could take repeated soundings and compare them to their navigational charts, to be able to say 'well, according to the charts, with these soundings the only place we could be is here'. I had to try to work out which choice was the one I 'really' wanted and the poetry acted like taking soundings as to 'how do I really feel?'

Lear (1999) makes the following telling point:

On the one hand, poetry promotes intrapsychic conflict; on the other, it keeps us unconscious of that conflict, for the irrational part of our psyche cannot hear reason's corrections. That is why poetry, with its throbbing rhythms and beating of breasts, appeals equally to the nondescript mob in the theatre and to the best among us. But if poetry goes straight to the lower part of the psyche, that is where it must come from. (Lear, 1999: 240)

This is a quite pessimistic view, and a more optimistic reading might identify the possibility of poetry bringing into greater awareness thoughts and feelings which our defence mechanisms might normally suppress.

### **From Poetry to Narrative**

The key theoretical claim of this thesis is that the link between career and emotion operates through narrative. At first glance, poetry (as proverb) and narrative would seem to be poles apart – such poetry captures a moment, a feeling, narrative tells a story across time. Yet each moment experienced is in the past, and the sense we make of it is inherently narrative – that is, it comes from and goes to somewhere (Crites, 1986). The sudden pang of grief as some image or remark reminds us of a loved one lost is both born in that moment and borne on a river of experience rising somewhere

in our past and flowing on to an unknown but repeatedly imagined and re-imagined future.

Developing the idea of poetic fragments as soundings, apparently definitive points plotting out part of an unknown and highly provisional trajectory, it can be seen that each point conjures up an imagined narrative thread, with a different past and future. This point can be illustrated by a last example of my wall postings:

*When routine bites hard, and ambitions are low  
And resentment rides high, but emotions won't grow  
And we're changing our ways, taking different roads  
Then love, love will tear us apart again*

(From *Love Will Tear Us Apart*, lyrics by Ian Curtis)

These lines were not about my feelings about my situation at the time, instead they seemed to mirror some of my anxieties about what the future might hold. This is, therefore, a good example of the power of poetry to act upon our emotions and influence our perception – at the moment I was posting this verse, it must have seemed to me almost ridiculously optimistic to imagine that the course I envisaged (moving back up north, turning my back on career opportunities) could lead to anything other than the bleak outcomes captured in these lyrics. Of course, within moments some other lines might catch my attention...unexpectedly hearing Take Me Home, Country Roads on the car radio on the journey back from work might evoke entirely the opposite feeling.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to explore some of the ways in which culture serves to influence our career narratives. To focus on poetry as the particular aspect might seem an odd choice, although I suggest it is a particular illustration of the notion of an extracted cue (Weick, 1995): poem fragments act as proverbs, providing heuristic devices for sensemaking. However, the focus on poetry also serves to draw attention to the ways in which narratives can be simultaneously highly idiosyncratic and culturally influenced. Narrative therapy has been much taken with the Foucauldian

emphasis on totalizing discourses, consistent with Sarbin's (1995) notion of dramatic rhetoric, but Polkinghorne (2004) suggests that Foucault himself in later work moves towards an emphasis on *technologies of the self*, practices "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988: 18). This is consistent with dramaturgical rhetoric, in which Sarbin (1995) suggests the individual is more authorial. In the case study I described my use of poetic fragments as *bricolage*<sup>12</sup>, and the idea that the individual might story an innovative life narrative which is nevertheless constructed from cultural resources (Rosenwald, 1992) is very much consistent with this terminology, and with Somers (1994) idea of the influence of public narratives on the individual's ontological narratives.

The chapter has drawn attention to the difficulties inherent in dealing with emotion-laden career choices, and suggests that the individual can struggle to understand their own needs and desires in trying to make appropriate choices. Within narrative therapy, Speedy (2005) looks at poetry from the other end of the telescope, showing how clients' poetry (either self-penned or 'co-written' by the therapist using their own words) can serve to open up the 'as yet unsaid' or 'as yet unsayable'. She notes however that "the power of the work evaporates in that instant that other words or phrases seep in" (Speedy, 2005: 295). This draws attention to the risk, explored throughout this chapter, of being willing to take others' words as a description of one's own emotion narrative.

The discussion in this chapter can be summed up and illustrated by a comparison of the ideas of evocation and resonance. Evocation is a calling forth or summoning, and in its earliest usage had magical connotations. Resonance, by contrast, is "the reinforcement or prolongation of sound by reflection, or [especially] by synchronous vibration" (OED). The difference is obvious and crucial – resonance acts upon that

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<sup>12</sup> This term is defined by the OED as "Construction or (esp. literary or artistic) creation from a diverse range of materials or sources. Hence: an object or concept so created; a miscellaneous collection, often (in Art) of found objects", consistent with its use with postmodernist writings. Yet as used in everyday French the term would be better translated into English as 'Do It Yourself'. Bricoler means 'to do DIY jobs, to potter about, to fix things up, to tinker with' (Collins French-English Dictionary). This seems somehow more apt, less 'this is my art' and more 'I'm trying to get this thing to work'.

which is already there, evocation summons up something which was not originally present. Plato clearly believed that poetry was evocative, whereas later writers have tended to perceive it as resonant, as calling forth from within the individual an already latent feeling. Where poetry *resonates* with our emotions, it serves to draw them to our attention, to make them available – as Frost puts it, to give words to the thought of the emotion. Where poetry *evokes*, it stimulates in us emotions which have an appearance of authenticity which may seduce and mislead.

## **Chapter 9: Organisational change as a trigger for emotion-focused coping in career**

The key contribution of this chapter is the development of the idea of narrative coping. The central significance of this idea to the thesis at first escaped me, and it was offered almost as an aside. I considered re-working the chapter to make narrative coping more central, but I realised that this would create a problem for the reader. If, as I suggested in the Methodology chapter, autoethnography can be used as a vehicle for theory development, this theory development needs to be traceable within the autoethnographic work. Otherwise the reader is left puzzled by the autoethnographic material, which would now read as a worked example when it was actually the data from which the theory was developed. I have therefore chosen to leave the chapter as is, developing the narrative coping concept further in the next chapter and linking it to narrative therapy in chapter 11.

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the loss of affective organisational commitment, which is conceptualised in terms of the metaphor of loss of faith in the organisation. The chapter will begin by offering an overview of the notion of commitment to organisations, in order to highlight the extent to which these conceptions are emotional and spiritual in tone. I will then turn to a development of the loss of faith metaphor, drawing upon Barbour's work on autobiographical accounts of 'deconversion' (Barbour, 1994). The chapter then examines, as a case study, my account of a deconversion experience with a particular organisation. Several important conclusions emerge from the analysis. Firstly, the case study supports the idea of narrative as a link between career and emotion, in this case as a coping strategy for dealing with the emotion arising from career-related affective events. Secondly, it supports the idea of loss of faith as an appropriate metaphor for loss of affective commitment. Thirdly, it identifies changes in the individual's perception of the organisation as a potentially significant element in loss of faith, noting that such changes may lead to loss of faith even in the absence of significant changes in the individual or the institution.

## Organisational commitment

Sims (2004) notes the general tendency to reject the reification of organisations as conceptually imprecise but also, by extension, to reject commitment to an organisation as naïve. Yet, he notes, people can and do commit to organisations. Indeed, as he puts it, we may even love organisations. This highlights the extent to which organisational commitment may be usefully conceptualised in emotional and spiritual terms. Spiritual here is being used in the sense of a belief in something greater than oneself. An organisation is always bigger than oneself but that does not necessarily produce any sense that it is greater – we might draw an analogy with baroque architecture, which impresses because of its sheer scale, but does not necessarily produce an emotional or aesthetic response. Harris (2003) suggests that spirituality is difficult to define, and from his extensive reviews of the literature notes that there are themes in the discussion of spirituality, rather than definitions per se. He identifies seven themes, which can be drawn together to offer the following global definition:

An (1) internal (2) belief system having to do with a person's (3) relationship with (4) an ultimate concern, through which a person derives (5) meaningfulness, (6) self-enhancement, and/or (7) self-transcendence.

(Harris, 2003: 11)

Harris found the first four themes in all definitions, plus at least one of the remaining three. An 'ultimate concern' would appear to place spirituality beyond the purview of organisation studies, but this term can be taken to mean importance and centrality, for example, athletes may have a spiritual relationship with their sport (Lawrence, 2005). The present case study examines commitment to a university, arguably an unusual organisation type, and also one for which it is easier to understand an individual believing that the institution represents something greater than oneself. However, similar beliefs can be found in people working in a range of organisations, and I offer management consulting firms as a particular example. Young people joining such firms may believe they are going to 'make a difference' – advising business on how to perform better, to the benefit of business and wider society. They may become somewhat disenchanted to learn that, in many cases, their priority is billable hours and



the solutions they are required to offer are off-the-shelf and unrelated to the actual needs of the business.

Reviewing the literature on organisational commitment, Mowday (1998) identifies two different conceptualisations of organisational commitment, exemplified by the work of O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) and Meyer and Allen (1991). Acknowledging these different approaches, Meyer and Allen (1997) suggest that the competing theoretical frameworks have many areas of overlap, but that the Meyer and Allen framework has been subject to much greater empirical testing. As this framework has also been influential in recent development of occupational commitment (e.g. Blau, 2003), their framework will be preferred for the purposes of this chapter.

Meyer and Allen (1997) suggest there are affective, normative and continuance dimensions to organisational commitment. Affective commitment is the emotional attachment to the organisation, normative commitment the sense of obligation towards the organisation, whilst continuance commitment is based upon the individual's assessment of the cost of leaving. More recent work (e.g. Culpepper, 2000) has confirmed this basic structure, but has identified that continuance commitment appears to be composed of two sub-dimensions, accumulated costs and limited alternatives (cf. 'side-bets', Becker, 1960).

Baruch (1998) argued that we should expect organisational commitment to be on the wane – both in that employees are less likely to commit, and employers are less likely to seek commitment. He suggests that a diminishing sense of mutuality, notably lower expectations of job security, undermines the Perceived Organisational Support (Eisenberger et al, 1990) which is a key antecedent of organisational commitment. It is hard to disagree, certainly in terms of affective commitment – without mutuality, displaying affective commitment to an employer makes us appear rather like one of Harlow's unfortunate monkeys, clinging to a unresponsive and uncaring "cloth mother".

Yet even within employment relationships which *are* built upon notions of mutuality, certain developments within management practice serve to place additional strain upon commitment. Peters and Waterman (1982) were influential in promoting the

idea of the organisational benefits of inculcating employee commitment to core corporate values through culture management. Citing 3M as an exemplar, they comment that “the brainwashed members of an extremist political sect are no more conformist in their central beliefs”. What happens when such organisations decide they need to change the corporate culture? Senior management are seeking to change, often radically, an organisation to which large numbers of existing staff may be highly committed. The commitment of staff to the ‘old’ (current) organisation becomes problematic, yet clearly it is desirable they remain committed. Somehow they need to be persuaded that the organisation which they joined and for which they have worked so hard is now no longer worth their commitment but is busily changing to a new, better organisation which will be. An interesting example was described to me by the HR manager of a components manufacturer which had as its sole customer a major car firm. The car firm had a longstanding commitment to TQM and its heirs, and demanded similar practices from its suppliers. Management at the components manufacturer had gained an extremely impressive level of ‘buy in’ from their workforce to these quality initiatives. When financial problems at the car firm led it to shift the emphasis from quality to cost, this had a major impact upon the components manufacturer. The change did not affect job security or wages, but it did mean that the central emphasis on quality, so carefully inculcated by management, was now being set aside by those same managers. Staff who, despite difficult working conditions and relatively low wages, had taken considerable pride in their work and the organisation, were being forced to accept a ‘never mind the quality, feel the width’ ethos. The HR manager admitted to being taken aback by the level of negative reaction from staff. Turnover and absenteeism increased markedly, and poor morale was widely commented upon. He framed the reaction in terms of ‘disappointment’ with the organisation – staff felt let down because what they had believed to be genuine sentiments turned out (they perceived) to be just rhetoric (‘management talk a good fight, but when it comes down to it, it’s all about cost’). An alternative interpretation centres on the beliefs and values of staff. If, as he perceived, the company had been successful in inculcating core values and beliefs, then attempting to change these values was an unwitting attempt at conversion.

## Loss of faith

The analogy with loss of faith can be developed by examining the work of Barbour (1994) on autobiographical accounts of loss of faith. He discerned four basic characteristics to each account – doubt or denial of the truth of a system of beliefs, moral criticism encompassing an entire way of life, emotional upheaval, and finally rejection of the community to which s/he belonged. At least three of the four characteristics were to be found in every account he examined.

Barbour argues that loss of faith and conversion are essentially identical processes, underlining this by coining the term *deconversion* to describe loss of faith. In one sense, every conversion is a deconversion, and vice versa – you leave one set of beliefs for another. Choosing to work with a general conceptualisation, he defines deconversion simply as loss of faith, and suggests it involves “intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and disaffiliation from a community” (Barbour, 1994: 2). The conversion of St. Paul remains perhaps the best known conversion story, and indeed gives rise to phrases such as ‘a Road to Damascus moment’ and Damascene conversion. Barbour argues that the Pauline conversion was in fact highly atypical, and has served to create a popular view of conversion which is highly distorted. “Like most conversions, deconversions usually take a long time and are punctuated by crucial recognitions and decisions that structure the plot” (Barbour, 1994: 3).

If conversion and deconversion are essentially identical processes, this would suggest a degree of symmetry to our experiences of these processes. Yet in an organisational context, conversion seems intuitively to be the more rapid process. Schein (1978) notes that recruitment and selection takes place in a ‘climate of mutual selling’; each party seeks to present its best side, and we are therefore presented with an idealised version of the organisation. If we accept this version by joining the organisation, we may set out with a degree of enthusiasm and positive regard for, and so enact faith in, the organisation i.e. we start off ‘believing’ in it. If we begin to lose faith, the process is likely to be slower. William James referred to conversion as ‘a process of struggling away from sin’, and Barbour uses this highly evocative idea of ‘struggling away from’ something in his analysis of accounts of deconversion. This way of

thinking about both conversion and deconversion is illuminating because of its inherent ‘directionality’: it suggests, perhaps surprisingly, that in both processes the experience is dominated by what one is moving away from rather than what one is moving towards.

## Case

What follows is an autoethnographic account of a particular deconversion experience. I highlighted in chapter 6 the importance of C. Wright Mills distinction between troubles and issues, and my ‘trouble’ here is that I am inclined to commit to organisations rapidly and with enthusiasm, which almost invariably leads to disappointment when the organisation fails to match up to my idealised image of it. This means I have to cope with my emotional reactions and a desire to move on – even when career considerations would appear to be better served by remaining. So conscious am I of this pattern in my career, I have actively sought to cultivate a more Laodicean approach to employment, though with little success. Although this is *my* trouble, I also judge it to be an ‘issue’, in the sense that it is a trouble widely experienced, and one which has practical implications for individuals and organisations. The case study site was a UK university during a period of organisational restructuring, but that is not what the case is about. Instead, it is an exploration of how the projections and attributions I made towards this organisation (to which I had such significant affective commitment) shifted and changed in response to key events occurring over a relatively short period, and how my perception of what was going on changed my perception of the organisation and thus impacted upon my faith in it.

*A canteen on a university campus, it's summertime and almost deserted. A man has just paid for his meal, and stands with his tray trying to decide whether to join a colleague, already seated, whom he knows only to nod to.*

*John: Can I join you?*

*Brian: Yes, yes, of course, please do*

*John: How's things in your neck of the woods?*

*Brian: Not too bad, really. We were quite surprised at Greg not getting the undergrad job, but, you know, he stays as our head of department and we know where we stand with him, he's OK to work for. He doesn't seem too bothered about it himself. What about you lot? That was a bit of a shock wasn't it, about Hannah?*

*John: (laughs, though not heartily) Yeah, just a bit. (pause) It's unbelievable really. I mean, she's the only academic in the whole place with an international reputation, and they're basically saying she's not good enough. I was trying to explain it to my wife, I said it was like Hartlepool United signing Michael Owen, then letting him go on a free transfer because he wasn't up to their standards!*

*(Brian laughs, but only politely, he is clearly anxious about the situation and wants to talk seriously about it.)*

*Brian: She was very well thought of in our department. I mean we knew about her research reputation, but also she was really really good with Simon Tallis, with his PhD – he'd got quite stuck with it, and she really helped him out. It wasn't her responsibility at all, she didn't have to do anything. We really appreciated that.*

*John: (a little absently, unsure how to respond) Yes. (pause) So what do you think will happen next? Have you heard the rumours about who'll get the jobs?*

*Brian: Yes, it seems unbelievable. I mean, you think, 'well no, they can't do that, HR wouldn't let them get away with it' but you can just tell that they will. They know they're not allowed to do it, but they're doing it anyway, the attitude seems to be 'who's going to stop us?'. They're almost like gangsters. That's the only word for it, gangsterish. And you think, well if they dare do this to people of such weight, what will they do when they get down to dealing with the rank and file?*

This brief exchange captures me at a pivotal moment in my loss of faith in this organisation, or at least a key moment in my career narrative. There are two key elements which can be identified in the conversation – shock and disbelief at what had occurred, and anxiety, starting to build into outright fear, as to what might happen next. What had occurred was ostensibly a fairly typical restructuring exercise, which altered the management structure of the organisation. I will sketch out the nature of the restructuring in due course, for now it is simply important to note that the actions

taken, the perceived intent behind them, and the failure of key figures in the organisation to prevent it, all served to damage my faith in the university.

Within the framework of this chapter, it is not possible or necessary to provide a full account of the restructuring process and its impact on staff. I will therefore confine myself to analysing four key events which illustrate the four elements of the deconversion process outlined by Barbour.

*Doubt or denial of the truth of a system of beliefs*

In order to lose faith, you must once have been a believer. In reflecting upon my experience at Warnerton, it seems clear that my initial commitment to the organisation was to some degree conflated with my commitment to my new occupation. This is an important consideration, as *affective* commitment to an *occupation* might in some instances be a key factor in an individual's *continuance* commitment to an *organisation*. Certainly, the aftermath of my loss of faith in Warnerton was to some extent a reconfirming of my occupational commitment – I knew that I wanted to continue in this occupation, just no longer at Warnerton. However, for the first three years at Warnerton, despite the usual ups and downs of working life, my occupational and organisational commitment were not in conflict, and I envisaged being able to develop my chosen career in that environment for the foreseeable future. I was rather impressed by the institution, felt it was one of the best of its type, had a strong sense that it was moving forward, that exciting new developments were in train. I was proud to be associated with Warnerton.

A brief example may serve to illustrate the level of my commitment. After I'd been at Warnerton almost three years, a new Dean was appointed. After a short while in post, he called a staff meeting and set out his plans for restructuring and developing the School. These plans were warmly received. The previous structure, put in place three years earlier, had never been popular, and the new structure and much of the rhetoric which accompanied it was exactly what staff wanted to hear. It testifies to my strong commitment to the School at this time that, at the end of the presentation, I was the first to speak. I made a joke that I had been running a book on what the new structure would be, that what he had just outlined was the most popular choice, and that I thought he would find that he was 'pushing at a lot of open doors'. With the benefit

of hindsight, this seems toe-curlingly sycophantic, but the odd thing was that at the time, it wasn't – it was more akin to an Amen from the congregation. I was excited at what he had outlined, and in my enthusiasm for the ideas, I felt an urge to communicate this, to praise him for what I imagined he was trying to do.

Talking to colleagues after this meeting, it seemed clear that most staff envisaged a fairly straightforward transition. The old structure had four senior managers reporting directly to the Dean, the new structure only three, and we thought we knew who would slot into the three new posts, and who would be left sans post and, we assumed, be made redundant. The new post of Research Director seemed tailor-made for one of the existing senior staff. Over the previous few years there had been a strong rhetoric supporting the development of research within the School. This had been restated by the new Dean and (it seemed) cemented by his decision to create a post of Research Director. Professor Hannah Eton was easily the most eminent researcher in the School, and her previous experience also seemed to fit her for the role – staff seemed to take it for granted that the post would be hers.

It came as a huge shock to staff when she did not get the post, and there were also several 'aftershocks'. Firstly, the way in which the decision and its aftermath were handled seemed almost vindictive. Secondly, it appeared to signal an abrupt change in direction – research, it seemed, was not a priority. It seemed clear that the School did not want her, and also that it did not want her 'sort'. This was a particular jolt to me, as she had been very supportive of my fledging research activity, and I perceived her as someone on whom I might seek to model myself career-wise, on the not unreasonable grounds that she was a very eminent academic.

This brought my occupational and organisational commitment into conflict, for the first time. This section is concerned with 'doubt or denial of the truth of a system of beliefs', but what initially occurred was not so much about doubt or denial, as discovery – I was discovering that the Warnerton system of beliefs was not as I had imagined. Though doubt and denial did follow in time, at this stage I clearly hadn't lost faith in Warnerton, as I sent a long and *very* carefully worded e-mail to the Dean expressing my shock and concern about the failure to appoint Professor Eton. In some ways, it was a brave thing to do, although with hindsight I can see that there was

little risk to me – he probably never read it, and if he did, it would have come across as a loyal member of staff supporting his former line manager. I was far too junior for my protests to require a response, of any type.

I was very nervous about sending the e-mail, and couched it very carefully in terms of seeking some assurance from him that he was certain this was the right move. It was certainly a long way short of the ‘Have they gone completely mad?’ which was my initial reaction to the news. Notwithstanding that my phrasing was borne out of nervousness, it did reflect in some way what I was looking for – reassurance that, somehow, these changes would all be for the best. I was trying to tell myself this story, and I needed narrative resources to draw upon.

*Moral criticism encompassing an entire way of life*

In the end, only one of the four senior staff got one of the new posts. After the initial shock at this, most staff assumed this meant the Dean was looking to appoint external candidates. There was some cynicism about the likelihood of getting better applicants than those already rejected for the post, but having rejected those staff and thus placed them at risk of redundancy, it seemed inconceivable that the School could legally ‘get away with’ appointing less experienced individuals from within the existing ranks of staff. Yet slowly rumours began to circulate that the posts were earmarked for certain existing members of staff. There was a sense of a new regime being put in place, but more, that in one sense that regime was already in place, and we were merely awaiting its public announcement. This contributed to the tension of the situation – quite some time before the formal appointments we already thought we knew who would be in post, and those people did nothing to dispel that impression, as they began subtly and not so subtly to ‘throw their weight around’. Staff perceived as strongly associated with the assumed ‘victors’ also began to evince a certain amount of ‘strutting’. Within political parties, one can occasionally observe shifts in the balance of power which are rapid and have the startling effect of greatly increasing the influence of some, and reducing that of others, whilst the formal allocation of roles remains initially unaltered.

The new regime was highly managerialist, and this produced an interesting and deeply uncomfortable tension. Having seen my commitment to the organisation take



a huge blow, I nevertheless realised that these new senior figures were people who would expect considerable commitment, of the ‘if you’re not with us, you’re against us’ variety. An example of this occurred within a short while of the restructure. I was involved in allocating dissertation supervisors, and had sent round a call for volunteers. After getting agreement from a number of staff, I was informed that the workload allowance for this activity had been reduced – staff were now expected to supervise six students in the same time in which they’d previously supervised three. I sent round an apologetic e-mail, telling people of the change, and giving them a chance to change their minds. I only got a few replies, all saying they were still happy to do it, but I also got a phone call from the PA of Patrick Hey, a member of the Executive, stating that he wanted to see me about this e-mail. When I arrived in his office, another member of senior staff was present. Patrick wanted to know why I had sent the second e-mail, and after listening impatiently to my explanation, explained to me that I was wrong (to assume that more students being supervised in the same time was more work for staff) then told me that I had to write another e-mail, retracting my comments, which I should run past him before I sent it.

There are several important elements to this anecdote. The first is that I only sent the e-mail to colleagues within my own department, which meant that one of them had brought it to the attention of the Executive. The second is that the episode was handled, I think intentionally, in a manner reminiscent of being sent to the Headmaster’s office. The third is that I was required to submit not merely to a managerial imperative (e.g. ‘resource constraints dictate we handle dissertation supervision this way’) but also to an academic imperative. It seems clear that they were annoyed at my temerity in tacitly questioning their authority, through my action in giving my colleagues a chance to withdraw from supervision commitments agreed under the previous rules. But their explicit argument was couched in academic terms – research, they assured me, showed that the new approach they were adopting was more effective. The argument was unconvincing – it seemed to be post-hoc rationalisation, an academic justification for a purely managerial decision.

The overall effect of this, and other experiences, was to reinforce my sense of this as an Orwellian regime. Compliance was not enough, it was expected that you should

accept the logic for what they were doing, accept that they were right. The Taliban had swept into power just as I was becoming an agnostic.

My efforts at storying now reflected my assessment that this would be a difficult a time, but that I would have little choice but to remain and endure. In career terms, the story I told myself was a curious mix of ‘batten down the hatches’ whilst looking feverishly for other jobs. The former arose from a sense that, CV-wise, I was not in a position to make a good move just yet, and so I would have to keep my head down, work hard on the research front, and endure.

### *Emotional upheaval*

Fear was the strongest emotion during this time. It was scary. Not on a day to day basis, perhaps, although the ‘goings on’ during these few months were numerous, and gradually a sense of ‘what fresh atrocity?’ began to pervade my perception of the organisation. Some time after I left Warnerton, I e-mailed an ex-colleague my congratulations on her successful job hunt, with the subject line ‘Another one finds the tunnel’. The idea of leaving as escape is fairly standard workplace humour, but in this instance the analogy with a POW camp was very apt, since it captured my sense of making feverish efforts at escape, whilst still having to maintain a façade of normality for the benefit of the guards.

I noted above that it was significant that a member of my department had brought my actions to the attention of the Executive. Adapting the POW analogy, to one of ‘life under occupation’, it was unnerving enough to know that relatively minor acts could cause problems for you, but worse to realise that it had become necessary to be quite guarded even in dealing with your peers. It is interesting that this fear (paranoia) continued during the period when I was serving my notice and for quite some after I’d left. During the period of my notice, I joked with a colleague that it felt like a film scene in which a fugitive is heading for the border, knowing that once across he’ll be safe. One of the fears I entertained during this time was the thought that ‘they’ might contact Ridleyville and try to put them off employing me. I didn’t seriously think this was likely, but it gave me a chill every time the thought crossed my mind.

An obvious question is why – why should fear be a reaction, what was I afraid of? It was largely related to my sense that I was unable to escape this situation, that certain key figures held my career in their hands. There was also a degree of almost ontological insecurity – what was happening seemed unbelievable, and the anxiety inherent in that can be seen in the conversation with Brian, in which we cautiously test out with each other an interpretation of the situation. We were searching for a sort of morbid reassurance – we want to be wrong, but if it's true, we want to be sure. Finally, there was what I am tempted to describe as a fear of my own thoughts. I felt that I might betray myself, might perhaps blurt out my true feelings in some meeting in response to some passing remark, that I might at any point be called upon to be appropriately on message and would fail miserably.

It is worth noting the sharpness of the change in my feelings towards Warnerton and my job. In the previous three years, there hadn't been a single day in which I experienced the feeling of not wanting to go to work. I might occasionally have been anxious about a particular meeting, felt under-prepared for a teaching session, sighed to myself at the thought of teaching HRM to undergraduate Mathematics students, but this at no point translated to any broader feeling of being fed-up with work. Now, I practically dreaded it. Good days were when nothing bad happened and I forgot for a while what was going on, but something always seemed to intrude and lead me back to ruminating on the events. Against that backdrop, my aspiration was somehow to achieve an emotionally neutral position, a cocoon to inhabit whilst working assiduously on my escape plan.

An example of the kind of event which served to keep me in a state of emotional upheaval was an e-mail I received from Mark Cullen, a member of staff widely expected to get one of the top posts in the new structure. The e-mail, which was rather aggressive in tone, berated me for not consulting him before implementing a small change in arrangements on a programme for which I was responsible. The e-mail was copied to a number of staff, including the Dean. The most perplexing thing about the e-mail was that, to the best of my recollection, the change had been his suggestion. I say to the best of my recollection – actually I knew perfectly well that it had been his suggestion, but I can vividly remember staring at the screen and slowly running the conversation through my mind. Had I misunderstood? Did he mean

something else? I have a pretty good memory, so in general I feel reasonably confident sticking to my guns if I have a clear recollection of something. Yet in this case, the vehemence of the e-mail caused me to doubt myself – surely no-one would send an e-mail like that unless they were very sure of their facts?

It was difficult to know how to respond. My initial desire, borne of anger, was simply fire back the reply ‘That’s what you told me to do!’ but I perceived that risked provoking retaliation. I felt the power lay entirely on his side, and there was no longer any member of senior staff whom I would trust to intervene on my behalf if he chose to get nasty. Part of the problem was that I was unsure of the intent behind the e-mail. Perhaps he had simply forgotten our conversation, which would make his annoyance intelligible, though not his decision to copy the e-mail to numerous staff, which I interpreted as a somewhat bullying tactic. Perhaps the e-mail was quite intentionally intimidating. Although it had an aggressive, emotional tone, my perception was that (once sent) that would be the end of the matter for Mark – he had vented his spleen, put me in my place, and would likely think no more about it. This was part of why I found the situation so difficult – it seemed intolerable that he should be able to do this (to me), and much as I perceived it as risky to respond, the thought of not responding annoyed me. It was something of a double-bind, being nervous of the consequences of responding, but angry at the thought of letting it pass. I also had a sense the significance of my action – I felt that whatever I did would set the tone for future exchanges.

My response was to reply, crafting a carefully worded e-mail which said ‘but it was your idea’ in the most tactful manner I could manage. I copied it to most of the staff to whom the original e-mail had been copied, removing only the Dean. I decided that to copy my quiet protest to the Dean would raise the stakes – Mark might feel he needed to re-assert his position, which might prevent him from being able to accept that he had made a mistake. His reaction to my reply suggested I had softened the message more than I realised, since he agreed it was a *mutual* misunderstanding. I was satisfied however – I had responded, thus releasing me from the minor double-bind, and I hoped I had identified myself as someone who would respond to such behaviour (and thus make its recurrence less likely).

In one sense this was a purely interpersonal exchange, albeit within an organisational context. Although I did interpret the situation partly in those terms, I also perceived it as illustrating how the organisation was changing – as with the example in the previous section, I interpreted it as typical of how management would operate in future. The overall effect was an erosion of everyday certainties. I now perceived it would be very difficult to ‘just keep your head down’, that the organisation had become more unpredictable, more capricious, likely to respond in a hostile manner to apparently innocuous actions. This was hard to accept, and is akin to Alford’s (2001) observation that among the losses experienced by some whistle-blowers (job, house, family) the most profound is the destruction of belief in a basically just world and one’s fellow human beings. I had not reached that level of pessimism, but I was beginning to share Brian’s view of Warnerton as ‘gangsterish’.

#### *Rejection of the community to which one belonged*

Another university, Ridleyville, had advertised a similar post to my own, but on a fixed term contract, a little while prior to the first shockwaves of the restructuring. I had given a great deal of thought to making an application. I finally decided against it, judging that my situation at Warnerton was good (a judgement based in large part on the value of my relationship with Professor Eton), and the possible attractions of Ridleyville were not enough to persuade me to go back to working on a fixed-term contract. The deadline passed, and a while later, after finding out about yet another ‘fresh atrocity’ I can clearly remember going back to my office with a feeling of desperation, deeply regretting not having applied for the Ridleyville post. I sat down at my PC, looked at the Ridleyville website and found to my great excitement that they were re-advertising the post, this time on a permanent contract. My emotions in contemplating the post were now of a completely different order to those of few months earlier, when I had weighed up the pros and cons of an application. Then it was a matter of whether to jump ship, now I was looking for a lifeboat.

This sense of ‘desperate hope’ grew over the weeks which followed. I very much wanted the post, but was realistic about my prospects of obtaining it. I felt that my best chance of getting it had gone – fewer people would have applied for it as a fixed term contract, and now that it was a permanent contract I expected competition from academics with much more developed research trajectories. As time went on, and the

implications of the restructuring began to sink in with each fresh event ('you'll never believe what they've done now') my efforts to play the application (to myself and others) as a tactical move to 'road test my CV' became less and less convincing, and I knew that I desperately wanted the job, wanted to get out.

## **Analysis**

### *What changed?*

The experience of deconversion can suggest a change in the individual, or in the 'institution'. The latter is reflected in the phrase, 'I never left the Church, the Church left me', used in a variety of contexts, for example by Anglicans who converted to Roman Catholicism in the wake of the Church of England's decision to allow women to become priests. In terms of my own experience, there were a number of aspects to the change. Firstly, I now think that what I perceived as a new regime was in some ways a reassertion of a more typical Warnerton culture. There was a subtly anti-intellectual culture at Warnerton. The career benefits to the individual of being research active were not entirely clear, and the attitude towards such staff was ambivalent. Research could be seen as distraction from the 'core business' of teaching, and research which was 'very academic' risked being viewed as a rather 'la-di-da' – and thus not an appropriate activity for Business School academics. Why did I not identify this at the time? Why were so many staff registering for a PhD at the time I started? I think that answer is that during much of this period the apparently dominant coalition within the School were people who seemed to value research. With hindsight, I suspect that these people were, to use Norman Lamont's famous phrase, 'in office, but not in power' – certainly all had left or were leaving by the time of my departure. Secondly, during much of my time at Warnerton, the environmental cues to which I attended allowed me to operate much of the time with a relatively benign 'version' of the organisation. Most of the colleagues with whom I needed to interact were very 'un-Warnerton', and the nature of my work (and my fairly junior position) allowed me to avoid (indeed, fail to notice) much of the conflict and politicking which was, I now realise, always fairly commonplace. The restructuring merely brought this to my attention. Several of these colleagues left over time, and some of the key individuals who had tended to act as a buffer between senior management and rank and file staff were as anxious as the rest of us, probably more

so, meaning that this ‘protective layer’ was stripped away. For a while, senior staff seemed to get involved in relatively mundane operational matters. It is possible, indeed likely, that this was largely about them getting their bearings with their new roles, but it brought me for the first time into close contact with them and their agendas. Where ignorance was bliss, ‘tis painful to become wise.

In *The Admiral on the Wheel*, James Thurber writes about the fantastic things he sees when his glasses are broken and he has to deal with the world with his unaided ‘two-fifths vision’. What Thurber captures so brilliantly is that we don’t merely see a blur and guess at what it might be – we ‘see’ something specific, and act accordingly. I can remember braking hard to avoid killing a Black Labrador which turned out to be a black bin liner blowing across the road. But to this day I can tell you exactly what the dog looked like, down to the colour of its collar (it was Royal Stewart tartan). The ‘Near-Sighted Mr Magoo’ cartoon series parodied this phenomenon in a manner which reveals something about sensemaking and enactment which is hugely important to this chapter. The delight of the cartoons comes from the fact that although, due to his near-sightedness, Magoo is in a state of continual misapprehension of the world, he never realises this and never ‘pays’ for his misapprehension.<sup>13</sup> Weick (1995) notes that we produce part of the environment which we face, and although we (the audience) can see that Magoo is mistaken in everything he sees, the cartoonists have artfully created a world which acts back to his enactment in a manner consistent with his misapprehension.

The relevance of this analogy to the Warnerton case study is that, with hindsight, I can see that Warnerton didn’t change as much as I perceived at the time. Since all sensemaking is inherently retrospective (Weick, 1995), invoking hindsight is somewhat problematic. There is however a ‘common sense’ notion of hindsight, which is the idea that, from a standpoint distant in time and (implicitly) less infused with feeling, we can come to a ‘settled’ interpretation of a situation. During my time at Warnerton, there were inevitably occasions when I viewed the organisation in somewhat negative terms, but I ‘rallied’ from such interpretations much in the manner I described above in my response to the failure to appoint Hannah Eton as

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in *Grizzly Golfer*, Magoo mistakes a bear for his nephew Waldo, and forces the bear to play a round of golf with him. Instead of being savaged to death for his error, Magoo has a fine time.

Research Director. Yet each successive experience made it more difficult to return to my (preferred) version of Warnerton – an organisation of my own sensemaking, which had all of the positive characteristics of Warnerton and few of its negative characteristics. Sensemaking is based upon extracted cues, my contacts with the organisation provided certain cues and was ‘enactive of a sensible environment’ (Weick, 1995). So, it was not a case that ‘I left the Church’, nor that ‘the Church left me’. More than certain affective events were sufficiently disruptive to my projects to cause me to ask “what’s the story here?” (Weick et al, 2005) and thus stimulate intentional sensemaking, resulting in the plausible narrative of an organisation which was changing radically and for the worse.

### *Loss of faith?*

The various events described above illustrate the gradual process through which I lost faith in Warnerton, and capture the arc of my affective experience over that time, shock giving way to fear, then to fear and anger, and finally to a sort of trailing paranoia as I attempted to make my exit. Each stage is also associated with considerable efforts to re-establish a plausible, functional career narrative, an endeavour which ultimately fails and results in my loss of faith and subsequent exit. Work and career seem obvious locations within which secular deconversion might occur. For many of us, our career represents a key element in our personal narrative (McAdams, 1993) and significant disruption to our career narrative is therefore a matter of substance, arousing strong emotion and requiring explicit sensemaking in order to restore an acceptable narrative.

The chapter has framed organisational commitment in terms of faith, reflecting the everyday ways in which work can be experienced and understood as an emotional and spiritual matter. Far from trivialising the loss of faith metaphor, its application within a workplace acknowledges the significance of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of work and career. Barbour (1994) suggests that secular deconversion narratives, as articulated here, will become increasingly prevalent:

Deconversion is a metaphor for our times that expresses modernity’s search for authenticity, which so often takes the form of a flight from authority, from



inherited paradigms of thought, and from various forms of pressure to conform. (Barbour, 1994: 210).

A crucial question is whether individuals, having developed a career story based on faith in an organisation, are capable of re-storying this to a career narrative of instrumentality. Talking recently to someone about his decision to apply for an apparently sideways move to a different organisation, he commented:

Of course you know everywhere else is just the same, they'll take advantage of you. But at least if you go somewhere new, you go into it with your eyes open...there's a sense that, well, *they* haven't used and abused me – yet!

Clearly, this individual had no expectations that his prospective new employer would be materially different to his current employer. Yet as Lazarus (2006) notes, the history of a relationship forms the background to understanding any emotional response. The speaker felt that his current employer had taken advantage of his strong commitment to the organisation. It appears he was unable to 'get past this' and chose to exit the organisation, despite the apparent cost in terms of career i.e. a purely economic decision would have been to wait until he could make a promotional move. A different, but no less negative outcome, is described by Atkinson (2002). She surveyed and interviewed workers in a major retail bank in 1993 and 2000. Despite widespread negative reactions in 1993 to changes in the organisation perceived as a major psychological contract violation, she found many of these same workers were still in post in 2000, their psychological contract expectations largely unchanged, and their perceptions if anything more negative than in 1993. One respondent described his career options as 'retire, quit or die' – a highly embittered response. In both cases, the loss of affective commitment for the organisation seems to have permanently damaged the employment relationship. Since in most cases, it will be difficult for the individual to shift the nature of the employment relationship to one in which the employee 'exploits' the employer, the employee is likely to perceive the choice as one between exit or accepting continued 'exploitation'.

## **Narrative coping**

London (1997) draws upon the idea of emotion-focused versus problem-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) in examining how individuals cope with career barriers. In some career situations a problem may be appraised as unchangeable because the change required is seen as too drastic. Alternatively, the change may be seen as possible but not immediately available e.g. the individual decides to leave, but only when s/he has found another job to go to. In either case, the individual will be forced to engage in emotion-focused coping over an extended period. Providing oneself with palliative career stories may be an effective technique for emotion-focused coping, though it is worth noting that this may not always be the most functional response. Finding ways to make sense of an unhappy situation may be dysfunctional if it serves to remove the impetus for the individual to take a potentially more functional action e.g. leave. On the other hand, it is clearly functional to be able to endure a situation which is difficult but may produce beneficial career outcomes in the longer term. As London (1997) notes, the ideal is “realistic appraisal and constructive coping”. I suggest that, to a perhaps surprising extent, we deal with the here and now through locating it in a narrative of past, present and future. We put up with the hassles of now in pursuance of a ‘project’ (Giddens, 1991; Crites, 1986).

For each of the events described above, my career story was in a state of flux. To borrow a filmic metaphor, I was looking at the ‘rushes’ (reviewing how the Warnerton story was unfolding) on a daily basis and editing and re-editing in an effort to produce a functional career story. I was attempting to provide myself with a plausible story to make bearable what I perceived as my likely medium-term future i.e. working for Warnerton under greatly changed circumstances. After the first shock, my actions in e-mailing the Dean illustrate what might be termed a ‘Say it ain’t so, Joe!’ response – I wanted to believe that the organisation had not gone quietly mad, that there were good reasons for their actions and that in the long term the outcome would be positive. The second event offers an example of me engaging with the changing organisation, with my doubts now much greater and hope much reduced. The third event illustrates both the emotional difficulties involved, and my doubts about the wisdom or practicality of attempting to work within the system. Resistance seemed futile, but collaboration was no guarantee of protection either.

The final event illustrates a failure of ‘narrative coping’. By this time, the palliative career stories I told myself and others were no longer plausible. I had lost faith in Warnerton as an organisation worth believing in, but I had also come to doubt whether it was an organisation within which I could ‘safely’ remain by ‘keeping my head down’. That I was able to exit Warnerton so promptly, and for a better post, is one element of this case study which seems intuitively to be atypical. The issue of how people handle loss of affective commitment whilst continuance commitment remains is therefore only partially answered by this case study, and exposes the limits to autoethnographic research – the researcher cannot go beyond that which s/he has experienced. However, previous research examining how mid-career managers coped with career mistakes (Blenkinsopp and Zdunczyk, 2005) suggests that where emotion-focused coping is the only realistic avenue, individuals can be extremely creative in developing career stories which serve to make their current situation more bearable.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented an illustration of the proposed theoretical framework for understanding how emotion and career might interact, illustrated with reference to the example of a loss of organisational commitment. I showed how my initial attachment to the organisation had a strong (positive) emotional component, which led me to develop a career narrative based on an expectation of long-term involvement. This was disrupted by the events of the restructure, and provoked a strong negative emotional reaction. In the final section, I explored the idea of narrative as a coping response to this emotion. This chapter has shown how a narrative re-framing of a career situation can be viewed as an emotion-focused coping strategy. This is presented as a particular example of the general theoretical framework proposed in chapter 4, but in the remaining chapters I will examine this proposition in more detail. Narrative coping emerges as the key theoretical insight of this thesis. In the next chapter, I examine another example of narrative coping in response to a difficult work and career situation, and show how this coping strategy can be dysfunctional if it leads to perpetuation of the very situations with which the individual is attempting to cope.

# Chapter 10: Career, emotion and narrative coping in difficult working relationships

## Introduction

In the last chapter I proposed that sensemaking may lead to ‘narrative coping’ as a response to difficult and emotion-laden career situations. In the present chapter, I will demonstrate how in some circumstances such coping narratives can actually serve to perpetuate the difficulties they are intended to salve, looking at situations of ‘stuckness’. Within organisations individuals may often find themselves in situations in which they perceive themselves to be somewhat ‘stuck’. Such situations will vary greatly in their duration and their salience to the individual: in some cases it may be a minor delay on a peripheral matter; in other cases the situation may be perceived as ‘permanent’ and a matter of central importance. In the context of career, we can discern two types of ‘stuckness’. The first occurs when the perception of stuckness arises directly from the career itself – that is, where individuals perceive they have become ‘stuck’ in their career. An obvious example would be the plateaued manager (FERENCE et al, 1977), someone who has progressed to a certain level and realises that s/he will not progress beyond it. A second type of career-related stuckness arises where individuals perceive themselves to be stuck in an aversive situation, which they choose to endure in calculation of longer-term career benefits. Both types have potential to engender negative emotion, placing considerable demands on the individual’s coping resources, in particular because the perceived inability to escape the situation means that problem-focused coping strategies will be unavailable. The second type is the focus of the present chapter, and the aversive situation examined is that of a difficult working relationship with one’s line manager.

Weick et al (2005) emphasise sensemaking as a response to disruptions, and the situations of ‘stuckness’ described above represent very obvious disruptions. However, by their very nature they inhibit our ability to develop a new ‘story’: autobiographical narratives do not draw merely upon the past, they require some imagined, hoped for future to be sustained (CRITES, 1986). Goldie (2003) argues a successful narrative about persons must have three characteristics: it should be

coherent, meaningful and have emotional import. He suggests the inability to develop a successful narrative about events in one's life can cause an inability to achieve 'emotional closure'. He has in mind especially traumatic events, but it can be similarly problematic in more mundane but still personally salient situations to find oneself unable to decide what the 'story' is and move forward on that basis. This may be true even when the 'story' is an unhappy one – a negative certainty may sometimes be easier to cope with than uncertainty. Although we may not seriously believe that an aversive work situation will go on indefinitely, we may still struggle to construct a plausible narrative which one could imagine enacting so as to bring the situation to a close. Nevertheless, we will be likely to engage in ongoing efforts to construct such narratives.

Much of this narrative work may be confined to what Goldie (2003) terms narrative thinking. He suggests that although narrative is usually thought of as 'something that involves written, or spoken, or signed, language', it can be readily widened to include thought. A narrative can be merely thought through, without any 'communicative event'. Like any form of narrative, narrative thinking is composed with an implicit audience in mind, never more so than when the narrative is autobiographical. In some cases, it can be thought of a dress rehearsal: a performance to a sympathetic audience of one, through which the narrative is shaped and honed for some future audience. Narrative thinking is crucial to understanding situations of the type examined in this chapter, since they typically produce an injunction upon open communication with the other parties to the relationship, and leave the individual locked in an inner dialogue, in which various possibilities are narrated, but not towards action. This has the potential to produce what a reviewer of the article based on this chapter described as a "one sided narrative" – an inward looking, obsessive narrative largely unchecked by an external view. The nature of such narratives have important parallels with the double bind concept.

### **The double bind**

The double bind concept is at once simple and complex. In everyday usage, the term is broadly analogous with Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* – a no-win situation categorised by a combination of logic and paradox. The term was coined by Bateson, Jackson,

Haley and Weakland (1956) from their studies of schizophrenia, which they suggested may have roots in ‘pathogenic’ patterns of communication. They identify several ‘ingredients’ necessary for a double bind situation:

1. *Two or more persons.* Of these, we designate one, for the purposes of our definition, as the “victim”
2. *Repeated experience.* We assume that the double bind is a recurrent theme in the experience of the victim [such that] the double bind structure comes to be a habitual expectation.
3. *A primary negative injunction.* This may have either of two forms: (a) “Do not do so and so, or I will punish you,” or (b) “If you do not do so and so, I will punish you”.
4. *A secondary injunction, conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, and like the first enforced by punishments or signals which threaten survival.* This is commonly communicated...by nonverbal means.
5. *A tertiary negative injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping the field.* ...it seems that in some cases the escape from the field is made impossible by certain devices which are not purely negative, e.g., capricious promises of love, and the like.

(Bateson et al, 1956: 253)

Wagner (1978) suggests there is a general organisational double bind arising out of the tension between the rational model of organisation and the needs of individual organisational members<sup>14</sup>. Following Thompson (1967), he suggests that organisations impose ‘norms of rationality’: members operate within individualised ‘spheres of action’ which constrain individuals to a rational set of behaviours when seeking solutions to “career-related problems” and the demands placed on them by the organisation’s internal social system (Thompson, 1967: 106). Individuals can eschew

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<sup>14</sup> Many of the points made by Wagner are consistent with both longstanding and recent critiques of organisations and indeed capitalism. I have chosen this particular treatment because Wagner very specifically frames the matter in terms of the double bind and, implicitly, career.

these norms, but at a cost:

Individuals who deviate from constraints imposed by their spheres of action are buffered from other organisational members in order to protect the rational operation of the organisation. This buffer is in the form of a power and sphere reduction... Individuals who might otherwise opt for non- or counter-rational norms must either pursue their own norms and experience an eventual reduction in their spheres of action or follow the organisation's norms and deal with internal dissonance. (Wagner, 1978: 788)

Wagner draws upon the idea of the double bind, but for simplicity categorises the multiple *levels* of communication into just two *modes* – analogic and digital:

Analogic thought and communication are intuitive, concerned with the emotional aspects of the individual and his or her relationships with other people... Digital thought and communication are composed of words and their 'naming' relationship to objects and events. (Wagner, 1978: 790)

These two modes bear some similarity to Bruner's more widely known distinction between narrative and paradigmatic ways of knowing (Bruner, 1986). The digital mode is more precise and less equivocal, and allows for logical analysis. The analogue mode has greater capacity to capture and express feelings, but allows for greater error and misunderstanding. Wagner suggests that translation from one mode to the other "is tenuous, because of the differing natures of each". The digital mode is dominant in organisations, and the organisation's primary negative injunction is thus:

You will behave predictably by digitalising your interpersonal interactions. Failure to do so will result in a reduction of your sphere of action, thus reducing your power, authority, responsibility, status and credibility as a member. (Wagner, 1978: 791)

He suggests that the secondary negative injunction arises from within the individual, and proposes that there will be individual differences in the extent to which the primary negative injunction elicits a response which creates a double bind situation.

To develop this argument, he draws upon the typology of organisational members proposed by Presthus (1962). Despite being over 40 years old, this work is more relevant than ever because of the increasing emphasis on normative techniques for management control (Barley and Kunda, 1992). Presthus suggests individuals fall into three types in terms of their response to organisational insistence on compliance with the prevailing rational norms – ambivalents, indifferents and upward mobiles. *Ambivalents* publicly reject the organisation's norms, and experience a reduction in their spheres of actions as a result. *Indifferents* also reject organisational norms, but do so by withdrawal, dealing with the internal dissonance by actively enacting their own norms, values and beliefs outside of work. *Upward mobiles* positively identify with the organisation and its norms, and are rewarded for this. Wagner suggests that only upward mobiles might be expected to find themselves in double bind situations: ambivalents and indifferents reject the primary negative injunction, either by non-compliance or by a minimalist and instrumental response.

So, how do upward mobiles perceive a secondary negative injunction? Wagner suggests that this comes from their efforts at identity construction. Weick (1969) noted that organisational members strive “to make themselves both more like and unlike their associates”. The tension is obvious – upward mobiles need to be seen to fit in, but also need to stand out in order to progress their careers:

Upward mobiles may be caught in a paradox. An upward mobile must accept arational norms if she or he is to have a feeling of self-identity, but the individual's commitment to rational organisational norms prohibits this.  
(Wagner, 1978: 792)

The secondary negative injunction thus comes from within, and can be stated thus:

I must think and act analogically in order to fully understand myself and my relationship with other people. (Wagner, 1978: 792)

The key point to stress is that upward mobiles are careerists – they have a sharp eye for what it takes to get on, and yet are double bound by conflicting messages.



It would be misleading to treat Wagner's conceptualisation as a double bind per se. Instead, it can be seen as a description of the paradoxical nature of organisational communication which provides the context in which specific, localised double bind situations can arise. This chapter examines an example of one such situation.

## Case

*An office in a hospital building. A young man sits slumped in a chair next to a desk, still wearing his coat, an unzipped blue windcheater. With his hands in the coat pockets he pulls it around himself like a blanket. He looks forlorn and yet annoyed. At the desk sits the woman whose office it obviously is. She looks at him with concern.*

*Fiona: So then, what's the matter?*

*John: I've just been told off by Catherine.*

*Fiona (laughing): Told off?!*

*John (nods, looking gloomy): Uh-huh.*

*Fiona (realising he's not joking): What did she tell you off about?*

*John: Oh, various things. (In an offhand manner, he gives a few examples.)*

*Fiona: Oh well, I mean, well it's not exactly serious stuff.*

*John: No, not really.*

*There is a long pause. Fiona looks at him expectantly, waiting for him to explain.*

*John: You know, the thing that really gets me is, she never bloody tells you anything positive, do you know what I mean? We dealt with that case on Ward G, and it was awful, really serious stuff and really awful, and pretty much all of our colleagues know we had a hard time with it, even though they don't know the details, and they've been really supportive...and Jane [Fiona's manager] was really good with you about it, at least once she 'got' what it was like...and I got nothing from Catherine, no 'well done' or 'thanks' not even a 'how are you holding up?' Nothing during, nothing after.*

*Fiona (pursing her lips in sympathy): Mmmm, well Jane wasn't a lot of help until she started to understand what a big case it was.*

*John (ignoring this): When I came here, the salary they offered me was less than they advertised, because I was quite inexperienced and Roger said they'd give me the support to get up to speed, and then they'd review it. Then of course, he didn't get the job, and Catherine came in, and I wasn't about to say to her 'guess what, I'm dead inexperienced but quite cheap, now about this development plan your predecessor promised me...'. So, except for a bit of help from Elspeth early on, I just got on and did the job, working all hours like a bloody idiot. Do you know Sean [the other Personnel Manager] earns over a third more than I do?*

*Fiona (surprised): No, really?*

*John (warming to his theme): Did I tell you what she said when I told her I'd been worried that she might let me go when she first arrived, because I didn't have much experience and it had been a risk Roger had agreed to take, not her?*

*Fiona (surprised): No! What did she say?*

*John (dryly): She said if I didn't hear anything from her, I should assume I was doing a good job.*

*Fiona (puzzled): Oh. Well, that's a good thing isn't it?*

*John: Well, that's what I thought at the time. It was only later I realised she didn't mean 'if there's a problem I'll let you know', she meant, 'you won't get any feedback at all unless there's a problem'!*

*Fiona: Oh dear. Oh, that's not on. How can she manage people like that – she's the HR Director for God's sake!*

*John: Quite. She would understand this if she was advising another manager. It's like a blind spot, we [the staff who reported to Catherine] all seem to have this problem with her. I think that's what makes it so difficult – I feel like I should talk to her about it, tell her how I feel, but I think she'd just be bemused. [Pause] And that would make it even worse. I know if I did tell her, I'd either get angry or upset – and either way, I think I'd probably end up in tears! [Fiona laughs] In fact, that's how I picture it, I start getting it off my chest and end up sobbing incoherently in her office, while she looks embarrassed and moves papers around the desk waiting for me to compose myself.*

This was the first time I gave Fiona a full rendition of the number 'How do you solve a problem like Catherine?', but it wasn't to be the last, nor was she the only person to have to listen repeatedly to this 'song' (thank heaven for patient colleagues). Perhaps

I should have committed it to plain verse – if I had, it would have run something like this:

*I must tell her about it, but if she doesn't  
React the right way it'll be even worse  
And I can't face it getting any worse  
And when I think about it I don't think  
She would react the right way and so I  
Definitely won't tell her and to be  
Fair to her, if I'm not going to tell  
Her then I can't be mad at her for not  
Doing anything to help me but having  
Said all that, I am mad at her, damn it!  
  
And getting madder by the day.*

The 'it' which I wanted/didn't want/must/couldn't tell her was a complex of issues, which in essence boiled down to a perceived lack of emotional support.

My working relationship with Catherine did not begin under ideal circumstances. I'd been appointed by her predecessor, Roger, and arrived to find he was leaving and Catherine was about to start. Roger had appointed me despite my inexperience, judging that I had the right attributes to develop into the role. He expected to have to live with that decision, but Catherine had no such obligations and as HR Director I imagined she would be horrified to discover Roger had lumbered her with a Personnel Manager so inexperienced, especially since the hospital was embarking on a major change programme at the behest of the new Chief Executive. When she announced, shortly after arrival, that she had been instructed to make budget cuts to an amount which was almost identical to my salary costs, I feared the worst. I therefore spent the first six months or so at Thorpeton attempting to mask my inexperience from Catherine, by adopting the risky strategy of not approaching her for support, relying instead upon my own limited knowledge and experience, and what I could discreetly glean from colleagues through 'casual' conversation, to deal with the numerous HR issues which came my way, many of which were entirely new to me. I also threw

myself into the work, perhaps unconsciously attempting to make myself invaluable and invulnerable through garnering plaudits from the general managers.

To capture something of 'the work' into which I threw myself, it is important to describe the organisational context during this time. Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) argue that the influence of an organisation on the mood and emotion of staff is indirect: emotion is stimulated directly by specific events, but the organisation provides the context within which these events can occur. The context here was an organisation going through very rapid organisational change, in which the newly expanded HR function was heavily involved in a huge range of activities. The culture of Thorpeton was one in which managers perceived that change was both necessary and possible, and that they were its primary agents. There were some very impressive managers (Catherine included) with clear ideas about what was required and how that might be achieved, and a positive view about the role of the HR function in these plans. It was therefore a very rewarding environment in which to be a Personnel Manager, but a rather intimidating environment in which to be an *inexperienced* Personnel Manager.

One outcome of increased capacity in the HR function was that demand grew to meet supply. Managers who had previously 'soldiered on' with certain staffing problems (typically performance issues) began to realise there was now an effective source of support. This created a peculiarly frenzied environment for the HR staff, who found themselves being asked to help address issues which had been left to 'fester' for years. The emotional strain was significant. To take one example, dealing with poor performance on the part of a ward sister who has been 'getting away with it' for years produces a shock to the system. The individual will, of course, be shocked but so will her staff, peers, union officials, staff in other clinical areas etc. Whilst the new approach appeared to be generally welcomed (even by the unions) it nevertheless required considerable effort in each and every case. Because of the novelty of the situation, managers often required support which went far beyond mere HR advice. They were unused to dealing with their staff in these ways, to the emotion-laden conflict situations in which they now found themselves. They turned to HR for support, but of course the HR staff themselves were not removed from these conflict situations. So attempting to deliver the HR agenda engendered a wealth of emotion,

and although by no means all of it was negative, it presented a challenge to coping. Professions which are replete with such challenges, in health and social care, have well developed support systems for dealing with this. Looking back I can see I had a host of colleagues who informally provided me with this kind of ‘sounding board’, some of whom were rather skilled in doing so. Nevertheless, I felt needed such support from Catherine – it was she who ‘sent me into bat’ and so I felt it was she who should have provided the necessary support. My failure to get this support was a cause of considerable anger through much of my time at Thorpeton.

Despite these considerable challenges, my initial strategy of ‘work hard and avoid Catherine’ worked reasonably well, and although I ended up putting in excessive hours to cope with the self-imposed additional workload, I was very productive and very happy in my work. Catherine’s style was to make relatively infrequent contacts with her staff, and so my strategy of avoidance was not noticeable. I went down well with the general managers, who reported good things back to Catherine, so for her part she was (she later told me) very happy with the situation. It was only as I grew in confidence and became more willing to approach her on various issues that I started to notice her somewhat awkward management style. My perception is that she found managing staff rather difficult. Yet as she was blessed with a senior team composed of able and self-directed staff, this did not create many difficulties in terms of delivering a service. Where it did create difficulties was in terms of the emotional needs of her staff.

A colleague captured it well, comparing Catherine to her predecessor Roger, who had been rather good at providing emotional support – “Roger would sit you down, make you a cup of tea and listen to your troubles, although he wouldn’t actually *do* anything”. By contrast Catherine generally provided good advice and support on the ‘task’ side, but seemed unable to respond to, or indeed understand, her staff’s need for emotional support. Nevertheless, I coped reasonably well with the day to day emotional strain, and since in any event I was attempting to minimise my contact with Catherine, I could hardly protest at lack of support! The situation was changed radically by one episode, a prolonged disciplinary investigation into allegations of patient abuse. This distressing case stretched my coping resources to their limits and

in the process revealed the full extent of the gap between the need for emotional support and Catherine's ability (or willingness) to provide it.

*A large nursing office, just off a busy ward. A man and a woman sit in two comfy chairs, they look tired and unhappy. It is late afternoon, they have been conducting investigative interviews all day. The latest interviewee has just left, and they sit in silence. Suddenly the man turns to the woman and says, "I'm going to have to stop now". "Me too", she replies and then, after a pause, "Why do you want to stop?" "Because I feel like if we keep on going, someone is going to come through that door and say something like, 'You know, when she snapped that old lady's arm over her knee, I nearly said something'". She nods. They both seem close to tears. "It is a bit grim, isn't it?" she says.*

The investigation was a difficult period: uncovering what had occurred was distressing and the work involved extensive, adding to an already heavy workload. The investigation was carried out by myself and a clinical manager (Fiona) – over thirty staff were interviewed, some more than once, along with about half a dozen patients and visitors. The case took about six months to be resolved. Considerable effort was made to ensure the managers likely to hear the case were 'uncontaminated' by prior knowledge of it. This was very appropriate in a procedural sense, but it made the situation problematic for Fiona and I: those who might have provided us with support (in my case Catherine) kept themselves at arm's length. This meant we got no emotional support during the case, but worse, we got none afterwards either as these key people never really understood why the case was so traumatic and hence why we were so badly affected by it.

In the aftermath of the case, I experienced difficulties in coping with work, which I viewed (thought not in any thought-through manner) as something like mild post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet I was uneasy about this: I felt the case had not been 'bad enough' to have got me in such a state, but was unable to deny that, for whatever reason, it did appear to have 'got to me'. This was a very personal response and one which was, in Wagner's terms, difficult to 'digitise' – and therefore very difficult to raise with Catherine. The 'telling off' conversation with Catherine which I described

to Fiona took place a few weeks after the case had been completed. It marked a low point in our relationship, and I grew increasingly bitter. She was well within her 'managerial rights' to raise the issues, they were not trivial, and I learned from these mistakes. But I felt strongly that she had not earned the 'moral right' to raise them. The mistakes I'd made were not in any simple way caused by the emotional difficulties of the case, but they were errors I wouldn't have made a few months earlier. I was struggling to cope, and not getting support from the person who was supposed to support me. The conversation cemented in my mind the view that she didn't have a clue how I felt, how difficult the job was, how traumatic the case had been. I therefore reasoned (wrongly, I now believe) that it would be pointless for me to try to explain these things. It became a major issue for me – friends, family and colleagues could see the case was taking its toll, but my line manager apparently could not. I had found myself in a double bind situation.

## **Discussion**

### *Analysing the double bind*

Before examining the case in more detail, I want to set out the primary, secondary and tertiary negative injunctions of this double bind as I perceived them:

*Primary: You will deliver on the organisation's HR agenda, flawlessly and comprehensively, or you will lose your job.*

*Secondary: You will behave as if the primary injunction is reasonable and you will not require any support from me, because none of this ought to be especially difficult for someone in your position to cope with.*

*Tertiary: You cannot leave, except at considerable cost to your career.*

None of these injunctions were communicated in anything like this explicit fashion. Each injunction can be seen as a synthesis of numerous messages, many subtle nuances of communication, including my potentially idiosyncratic interpretation of the nature of my role, the organisational culture, the experience of my colleagues, the expectations of managers etc. This is characteristic of a double bind – the individual

receives conflicting messages, yet is unable to comment upon the contradictions. Kafka describes the individual as being ‘inundated by paradoxical communications, coupled with taboos against “metacommunicating” about these paradoxes’ (Kafka, 1971: 234).

*The primary negative injunction:* Having worked for several years on temporary contracts, often at some distance from home, I was somewhat more alive to job insecurity than my colleagues, and perhaps therefore primed to interpret situations in these terms – hence my over-reaction to the Catherine’s news that she had to make budget cuts. My anxiety was not lessened when, within my first few months at Thorpeton, a number of managers were ‘moved on’ as a result of their failure to perform. I didn’t know the ‘back story’ to their departures, but I got a strong impression that the claim they had failed to perform was not exactly clear cut. I therefore had a nagging sense that I had joined an organisation impatient with anything less than excellent performance. I knew I had much to learn, and was worried that I would not get time to learn it. This anxiety led to my quixotic response of attempting to achieve flawless performance whilst avoiding making contact with the person most able to support me in doing so.

*The secondary negative injunction:* The salience of the secondary injunction arose as a result of the primary injunction. The ‘injunction’ to work without requiring any support from Catherine could have been of limited importance, but the organisational context described above meant that attempting to achieve flawless performance necessarily meant engaging actively with situations which stimulated considerable emotion, both positive and negative. In *Carry On Up the Khyber*, an officer retreats from fierce hand to hand fighting back into the besieged consulate building, where the consul remonstrates with him for having a dishevelled uniform. Catherine’s attitude felt similar – it appeared she simply did not ‘get’ the emotional dimension to some of the difficult situations with which her staff were dealing. Her apparent failure to appreciate this led me to question the legitimacy of her expectations – ‘how can she demand performance when she refuses to provide support?’ Of course, the double bind situation meant I was unable to communicate this to her.



*The tertiary negative injunction:* It was career considerations which served to ‘make’ me remain in that setting, and therefore in that situation. My career ambitions led me to take the calculated risk of accepting a job for which I was apparently not yet ready *and* which required a move half way across the country. Once in post, it was career considerations which prevented me from ‘escaping the field’. I knew that getting the Thorpeton post had been something of a fluke – my level of experience at that stage barely fitted me for the posts held by the Personnel Officers I managed. So, I could have left but only by taking a step down. And, by extension, staying down for longer – I knew it would take several years in a junior post to gain the sort of experience I was likely to gain in a matter of months at Thorpeton. As time passed, and exit to a similar post became a realistic option, career considerations still served to keep me at Thorpeton, since the experience I was rapidly gaining was unusually broad (due to the pace of change) and I could therefore envisage biding my time and making a promotional move. This is a significant issue: these double bind situations persist partly because the individual tacitly accepts the prevailing social norm that views career as important. We might describe this as a ‘meta-injunction’, or what Somers (1994) terms a meta-narrative (one of ‘the “masternarratives” in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history’) akin to Ochberg’s notion that our career culture is one which demands ‘relentless forward movement’ (Ochberg, 1988). In the case study I appear to direct my ire towards Catherine, but throughout this time I was at least as frustrated and angry with myself: the rational, calculating careerist self who demanded that the emotional, hurt and needy self remain in situ and ‘suffer’ in expectation of future career progression.

#### *Narrative thinking in a double bind situation*

I noted in the case study that I talked to selected colleagues about my difficulties with Catherine, but these conversations represented just a small part of my ‘talk’ on this matter: in between such conversations, I ruminated endlessly, trying to find ways to resolve the situation. In part these ruminations were about weighing up the pros and cons of taking action, mainly in the form of grasping the nettle and talking to Catherine. However, I also expended considerable mental effort in attempting to develop narratives that would make the situation more bearable. Inevitably, I also ruminated somewhat less constructively, re-playing certain events and conversations,

or imagining dramatic speeches to Catherine as I carried out my fantasy of ‘escaping the field’ by resigning on the spot.

The narratives developed through this thought process took three forms: narratives which exculpated Catherine in some way, perhaps by stressing the unusual nature of the situation and my failure to raise my concerns with her; narratives which emphasised the temporary nature of the situation, stressing that it would ‘soon’ be over and that the experience during this time would prove to have been worthwhile; and finally, narratives which re-told my ‘problem with Catherine’ story. The first two narrative forms can be seen as efforts to overcome the double bind, the latter merely served to reinforce it. I was conscious of the surprising vehemence with which I returned to these negative narratives: the positive narratives were fragile and took effort to construct, whereas the tiniest setback in my relationship with Catherine would revive a full-blooded ‘double bind narrative’. I had aspirations to move on, to find some accommodation with the situation, but even the tiniest aversive event seemed to return me to unhelpful rumination. The key note of this extended emotional episode (Frijda, 1993), sounded repeatedly over the coming months, was my anger at what I perceived as Catherine’s failure to give me the support I needed during and after a case which would have been hugely difficult even for a seasoned Personnel Manager, and which had knocked this relative greenhorn sideways. I would go back over the way in which we had been left to deal with it, the various decisions taken by more senior staff which revealed a lack of understanding of the unusually difficult and distressing nature of the case, the yawning silence which had followed its completion. Over a prolonged period, despite experiencing the usual fluctuations in mood and emotion, I returned at ever-decreasing intervals to the double bind and the anger and distress associated with it, like a piece of classical music returns to its main theme.

*What’s so emotional about a double bind?*

Considering the intense emotions it aroused at the time, it was surprisingly difficult, in writing this chapter, to recapture my narrative thinking in a manner which accords with Goldie’s three characteristics of a successful narrative. I initially treated this as merely a writing problem, but I now believe the difficulty may reflect something intrinsic to these situations. I touched upon it when I referred to feeling that the case

was not 'bad enough' to leave me so upset. What it reflects, I think, is the banality of the narrative thinking in such situations. Bruner (1995) describes autobiography as 'a narrator here and now telling about a protagonist of the same name, there and then' (Bruner, 1995: 167). Yet the narrator, now removed from the situation, gains ironic distance, that is to say one's current perspective as narrator differs from one's perspective then as a protagonist (Goldie, 2003). The nature of a double bind is such that, after its resolution, it can be difficult even for the once-bound individual to understand quite how it managed to produce such intense emotions.

In the situation described in the case, I saw two options: to speak to Catherine, or to exit. Both were perceived as high risk. My judgement that, in career terms, the time to move on had not yet arrived made exit a risky option. Yet if I spoke to Catherine and she reacted in the 'wrong' way it would make the situation even less bearable, and in all likelihood force me to exit sooner than intended. At first glance, this seems like a settled position – I have resigned myself both to staying for now, and to not telling her. But of course, in practice I oscillated wildly between the two options, depending on events: sometimes my relationship with Catherine reached such a low point that I seriously considered resigning on the spot! I knew that at some point leaving Thorpeton would become a good move, but for the moment, remaining there was my least worst move and yet this rational assessment did not help me deal with the emotions involved in facing the situation on a daily basis.

An insight into why situations in which the individual is caught up in affect-laden career rumination can be so draining is offered by Baumeister, Faber and Wallace (1999). They suggest that the self is 'built upon a very limited psychological resource that is used in a wide range of volitional activities, including choice, active (instead of passive) responding, and self-control' (Baumeister et al, 1999: 52) and note that this resource is used 'in a wide assortment of self-control operations including affect regulation, thought control, task persistence, physical stamina and impulse control' (Baumeister et al, 1999: 52). Where an individual draws upon this resource in ongoing acts of emotional regulation, this provides a drain on this limited resource. The model also suggests that situations can have an impact which may persist for some time after the situation appears to be resolved (for example, the conclusion of the disciplinary case). The subtitle of the Baumeister et al chapter is 'recovery after

the coping process', and they suggest that coping (with stress and trauma) is a process like to cause ego depletion. It is important for individuals and organisations to recognise this – the individual may feel that s/he has 'got over' a particular situation, and be right to do so, but will need to recognise that s/he will nevertheless require some time to 'replenish' the psychological resource. Stuck in a double bind situation and ruminating constantly upon it, I never gave myself time and space to replenish my resources. Although my constant rumination on the situation was initially born out of an attempt at narrative coping, it served to perpetuate the situation by focusing my attention on the double bind. Nolen-Hoeksema (1991) suggests that rumination is a particularly poor coping strategy, associated with depression, and that distraction is generally a more effective strategy.

### *Escaping the double bind*

My narrative thinking about my working life at Thorpeton eventually became so dominated by the perceived double bind situation that it became a personal 'canonical form' (Bruner, 1986) for my career narrative, such that all events were interpreted in those terms and were fitted into this 'story', regardless of their goodness of fit. It would have taken a considerable shift in the 'real' situation to produce events sufficiently ill-fitting to force a revision or abandonment of this narrative, and of course such a shift was unlikely because I interpreted almost everything Catherine did in terms of this narrative. This meant even positive actions on her part made little difference: they were 'too little too late', or a reminder of previous events – 'she's supporting me 100% on this, but where was she when I really needed her?'. A good example of this was a major error I made, after being wrong footed by a union official as a result of getting too emotionally engaged with a case. This error incurred the wrath of Thorpeton's Chairman, and it must have been tempting for Catherine to step back and leave me to deal with him. Instead she provided a much needed buffer and offered sound advice for me to reach a form of détente with him. Yet, at the time, what I focused on was the fact that the *emotional* support was as lacking as ever!

Career considerations kept me in post at Thorpeton for two more years, and I struggled throughout this time. Resolution finally occurred through exit, and was helped by an exit interview with Catherine in which I said what I'd always wanted to say and she, to her great credit, listened. Complete closure on the situation was

greatly aided by my experience with the next HR Director for whom I worked. With Catherine, my shorthand description of our relationship was ‘I respect her greatly, but I find her hard to work for’, with Stephanie I couldn’t even say that I respected her, and that produced a near-instantaneous re-evaluation of my relationship with Catherine.

## **Conclusion**

The case study has presented an example of the narrative link between emotion and career, and also a clear illustration of the argument that autoethnography can offer insights into objective and subjective dimensions of career simultaneously. At first glance the story is an ontological narrative (Somers, 1994) – ‘young man has difficult relationship with his manager’ – but the story can only be understood in the context of public narratives about career, relationships in organisations, about the kind of people who become nurses and how they should act towards their patients, relationships between people of different ages and genders etc. Wagner’s organisational reframing of the double bind concept allows a glimpse of just one aspect of these public narratives, and how they constrain the individual’s freedom to narrate and act.

Crucial to this constraint is what I have termed the meta-injunction created by the public narrative of career generally and managerial careers in particular (Marshall, 2000; Ochberg, 1988). The coping narratives aim at allowing the individual to endure aversive work situations in furtherance of career, but in doing so they ‘arrest reflection rather than generating accounts that make innovative action possible’ (Rosenwald, 1992: 273). They serve to divert attention from basic questions such as whether the career outcomes are actually worth enduring the ‘slings and arrows’, or obtaining a sense of perspective on the situation which might drain it of its emotion tone. The coping narrative keeps career ‘up front and central’, whereas in many situations distraction (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) or the development of a ‘non-career’ narrative, akin to the ‘subsisting’ career logic (Gunz, 1989), might be more functional. Such ‘good advice’ however fails to acknowledge the disciplinary power of the public narratives of career or the centrality of career to identity for many people. Barton et al (2007) suggest that depression is triggered by identity disruption where a ‘core self-representation or dominant goal’ (most frequently career-related) is challenged.

Progress requires the individual to re-evaluate goal priority and engagement. For example, someone for whom career success is their primary source of identity yet whose career has stalled has career as their most can be seen to be stuck in the pursuit of a valued but presently unattainable goal. S/he needs to re-frame the situation such that less valued but attainable goals are given greater prominence. Yet even when career difficulties have lead to such a negative outcome, individuals still find it very difficult to re-story their life narrative to put career 'in its place'.

## Chapter 11: Discussion

The butterfly, the cabbage-white,  
(His honest idiocy of flight)  
Will never now, it is too late,  
Master the art of flying straight,  
Yet has – who knows so well as I? –  
A just sense of how not to fly:  
He lurches here and here by guess  
And God and hope and hopelessness.  
Even the acrobatic swift  
Has not his flying-crooked gift.

*(Flying Crooked, by Robert Graves)*

I am conscious of my tendency within this thesis to a certain tentativeness, a reluctance to nail the arguments down. Partly this arises from the methodology – it would seem presumptuous to say the least to propose general laws on the basis of a single case. Partly it is my own reaction against the excessive confidence with which academic findings are usually presented. And lastly it reflects a certain excitement over these ideas – a feeling that I have indeed, ‘found something’, but I want to develop the work further and for the present would rather talk in terms of hunches, propositions, likelihoods. In chapter 1, I commented upon the tension between narrative and paradigmatic modes of thought which is inherent in the writing of an autoethnographic thesis. Having developed my ideas through the preceding chapters, in the present chapter it is appropriate for me to be a good deal less coy, and state my case. It is not however appropriate to claim certainties, and I will therefore try to balance the narrative and the paradigmatic in what follows.

### **What have I done?**

By the end of chapter 4, I had reviewed the literature and developed a general theoretical framework which sets out the proposed linkages between emotion and career. This framework was to be refined through the development of the

autoethnographic cases and for a long time I imagined that this framework would be the major theoretical contribution of this thesis. In the event, the cases led me to develop the concept of narrative coping which is, at one level, merely a specific application of the overall framework. However, because the framework itself is novel, and this application is the only one to have been thoroughly worked through, I find myself in the unusual position of proposing as my major contribution a theoretical development of a framework which was itself developed in the course of my PhD research journey.

This produces a problem for the current chapter – not a theoretical problem, but a literary one. It is hard to write the chapter in a manner which leads to a satisfying theoretical denouement. I have structured the chapter as follows. I begin by examining the extensive methodological issues raised by the use of autoethnography. I raised a number of these issues in earlier chapters, but it will be easier to develop this discussion now that the reader has engaged with the autoethnographic material in the preceding chapters. After this methodological discussion, I turn to a consideration of what is NOT to be found in this thesis. In doing so, I seek to acknowledge the specificity of any truth claims made. I then turn to a discussion of the major theoretical yield of this thesis, the idea of narrative coping as a response to emotion in career, before examining how this idea might be link to the emerging field of narrative therapy.

### **Methodological Issues**

In this section I will review the methodological issues which have emerged through the writing of the autoethnographic cases, looking at issues related to recollection, the accuracy and validity of accounts, and the ethical issues involved in writing about individuals involved in the author's life story.

#### *Problems of recollection*

My parents' recollection of how I came to apply to study Medicine is rather different from that outlined in chapter 7. They recalled that a major driver in my search for a degree subject had been a concern with employment on graduation. I told my mother I'd discovered graduates in Medicine had a 100% employment record. That a semi-



conscious fear of unemployment should be in mind at the time is unsurprising, and its influence can be seen in my hurried choice to do Chemical Engineering, a degree which also seemed to offer a fairly cast-iron guarantee of work after graduation. This gives an interesting insight into my thinking, quite at odds with my own narrative of reading a biography of Freud (lent to me by our parish priest, no less) and becoming intrigued by the idea of becoming a psychiatrist. My version is much better suited to the conventions of autobiography, but which version is correct?

In the new career narrative, a working class child of Thatcherism, growing up in the region she most despoiled, has issues of unemployment writ large in his thinking. I am initially in search of a degree programme offering good employment prospects, and what I find in Medicine is the fulfilment of that need in (even better) an occupation which I have previously contemplated as holding some interest for me. In response to my perceptions of the expectations of the Medical School admissions process, I begin the process of constructing a narrative identity around ‘medicine as my vocation’, for example by changing my ‘A’ level subjects to avoid the (correct) impression that applying for Medicine was a recent decision. University applications were a major topic of conversation during the Sixth Form, and I now remember what a good story applying for Medicine represented – it had a certain ‘wow’ factor, which meant I got to talk about it a lot, and thus practise my ‘going to be a doctor’ narrative. At some point the narrative becomes detached from its origins, and I become enchanted by the notion that I have found my vocation...so much so that, in all the years since, my career narratives have been tinged by an unspoken wistfulness, a sense that, whatever I achieve, I will never become what I was ‘supposed’ to become.

How much do such corrections to my recollection matter? Commenting on the use of autobiography in research, Bruner states:

It does not matter whether the account conforms to what others might say who were witnesses, nor are we in pursuit of such ontologically obscure issues as whether the account is “self-deceptive” or “true”. Our interest, rather, is only in what the person thought he did, what he thought he was doing it for, what kind of plights he thought he was in, and so on. (Bruner, 1990: 119)

Following this logic, it would not matter whether the events in the cases occurred exactly as the Storyteller described them, but crucially important that the account honestly reflects the Protagonist's perception and analysis of the situation at the time. But there's the rub – there is no particular reason to assume that the Protagonist's recall of this is any more accurate than his recall of the facts. The Theorist has argued that the 'facts' of these situations gave rise to narratives, which persisted and shaped the Protagonist's perception of subsequent events. Equally significant for the current discussion is the way in which these narratives, the work of the Storyteller, shaped the Protagonist's perception of *past* events – to the extent that certain significant events were lost to his recollection.

### *Problems of truthfulness*

This different perspective on the events seems to be about factual accuracy but as the last comment indicates, it is also about accurate recollection of emotion and perceptions. Wiersma (1988) suggests personal narratives can sometimes be “like Freud's screen memories, distorted and overdetermined communications laid on top of a more complex narrative” (McAdams, 1988: 10). In such cases, the narrative may be offered in good faith, with the distortions and inaccuracies unintended. Yet where a work is autobiographical, the author is implicitly making claims of accuracy which are greater than those made by authors presenting the accounts of others – Lejuene (1989) calls this the 'autobiographical pact'. Anthony Burgess suggested we 'forgive' Marco Polo for relating as fact events that clearly cannot be true, because he is reporting what others told him, but are less forgiving of Benvenuto Cellini who describes unbelievable events he claims to have witnessed personally. Although it is legitimate, and indeed necessary, to apply a degree of editing to any account, working with one's own experience as data means that the researcher is acutely aware of the complexities and subtleties of the situation.

Autoethnographers face particular difficulties in attempting to distinguish between their perceptions then and now, their narratives then and now. Their difficulty is that they are able to recognise their own changing perspectives on these stories, and this can lead them to engage in an excess of caveats and nuances within the writing, intended to avoid misleading the reader, but which may serve simply to confuse. Medford (2006) contrasts the idea of Truth and truthfulness, viewing the achievement

of Truth (“the objective account of reality”) as impossible but that of truthfulness as a hallmark of good autoethnographic work. Where the work is edited, abbreviated or modified, as it inevitably must be, there is an ethical imperative to maintain truthfulness, and she coins the term mindful slippage to describe “the difference between what we know (or what we cannot remember) and what we write” (Medford, 2006: 853).

### *Issues of validity*

I will address the issue of validity in a pragmatic manner – my concern is to what extent it is possible to draw conclusions or even merely inferences from autoethnographic work. In chapter 5 I suggested that, if viewed as a vehicle for theory development, autoethnography had a great deal to offer which mitigates its inevitable weaknesses in terms of validity. Yet validity remains an issue for autoethnography, and the autoethnographer may have few means through which to buttress his or her truth claims. Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest autoethnography can be judged partly in terms of its evocativeness; it is valid if it evokes in the reader an emotional and empathic response, and in organisational research one might also add, if it evokes a sense of recognition – work is one of the commonest experiences in any culture, and so an autoethnographic piece might be expected to be recognisable. This is an interesting and extremely useful proposition, as it potentially allows the researcher to offer an account of rather complex situations and test its validity in part by the simple act of presenting the description to others. Cronbach, almost the last word in positivistic validity, notes:

Validity is subjective rather than objective: the plausibility of the conclusion is what counts. And plausibility, to twist a cliché, is in the ear of the beholder.

(Cronbach, 1982: I.08)

As Coffey (1999) notes, autoethnography risks self-indulgence, and this testing of an account’s verisimilitude may act as a rein on such tendencies.

### *Ethical Issues in writing the Other*

Medford argues that good autoethnographers are “ethical, critical, reflexive, and thoughtful when making decisions in their writing” (Medford, 2006: 857). She

suggests that one of the crucial issues concerns how others are depicted in ‘our’ autoethnographic accounts. The question ‘who owns the career?’ is often discussed in career theory, and in autoethnography there is some debate about ‘who owns the story?’ It is fashionable to describe stories as having been ‘co-authored’ with participants, though participants rarely get an authorial credit. In the cases some details (including all names) have been deliberately altered, to preserve anonymity. Yet the fact that the author is the main protagonist means that the location and the other protagonists could be identified with a little detective work – by contrast, the locations of the research site in some classic ethnographies remain a matter of speculation to this day. I am conscious that some of the characters in the cases are portrayed in an unflattering light, and I have sought to be fair to them through an emphasis that this is my perspective and a willingness to articulate alternative interpretations.

### **Absences**

All theses will have absences and omissions – the choices made during the PhD process are a key part of the researcher’s learning. However an autoethnographic thesis, by being so selective in its data gathering, may exhibit this to an extraordinary degree. In this section, I want to consider four areas in which what is absent is potentially as interesting as what is present – characters, untold stories, emotions and interpretations. Stake (2000) notes that each case must be considered in terms of its differences from, and similarities to, other cases. It is therefore important to tease out whether the identified absences arise solely from choices made in the construction of the thesis, or whether they reflect something particular to me and my career, and how we might relate these absences to expectations of other individuals and their careers. The latter point will be of particular importance in considering avenues for future research, which is the main focus of the final chapter.

### *Characters*

In an autoethnographic thesis, it is hardly surprising that the author is the major character present throughout. Nevertheless, it is striking how few other characters make an appearance, with even fewer having speaking parts. In chapter 5 I discussed the possibility of ‘triangulating’ my accounts with those of the others in the episodes

described. I noted that the sensitivity of the subject matter in the last two cases rather precluded this. Yet it seems as though, having decided not to seek to hear their voices in the present, I have also decided not to include their voices in the past. Why might this be?

Ego seems an obvious explanation – a friend to whom I explained my thesis some time ago laughed and commented ‘Only a Leo could write a thesis about himself’. Following the idea that the great trends of social change were played out on the stage of individual’s careers, perhaps I am simply reluctant to allow anyone else to share the stage with me? Let me take Catherine as an example. Why do I not allow her to speak, to give her a voice with which to say the things which so incensed me? I think that part of the explanation is that, to some extent, there is little for her to say or do – the ‘action’ is not in the events (or absence of events) but in the protagonist’s sensemaking. This sensemaking is often based upon a subtle and perhaps rather overblown analysis of certain acts or omissions. It is appropriate therefore that when introducing the ‘problem’ with Catherine I present not my conversation with her, but my subsequent conversation with Fiona about it. This is consistent with Weick’s (1995) argument that all sensemaking is social, but this sensemaking may sometimes be social in narrowly Meadian terms; that is, there is potential for an inner dialogue in which the social aspect comes from a generalised other or through the individual having an imagined dialogue with a specific individual.

There may also be a psychodynamic aspect to this absence – I am sufficiently self-aware to identify a tendency to use perceived obstacles, problems or slights as a source of motivation. Thus the Storyteller may at times have positioned other people as characters in a narrative whose unconscious function was to fuel and direct the Protagonist’s drive towards career progression. Whilst writing this thesis I developed, from a few fragments of information, a narrative in which my likelihood of completing the PhD had been slighted and for which the act of completion was the only acceptable riposte. The real-life versions of the characters involved would probably care little either way – the imagined satisfaction of ‘showing them’ would in reality have been hollow BUT the *actual* affront (on the Protagonist’s part) at the mere idea that they might doubt his ability or drive was very real and thus the Storyteller can be seen to provide an important motivational stimulus.

Finally, I think the absence of true characters does somewhat reflect an ongoing perception of my career as a relatively solitary pursuit – I have been more novelist than filmmaker. This is not to deny the role of significant others, but to recognise the extent to which it has been my grand obsession. This may make my career story unusual in two ways. Firstly, I show (at least in early career) a bizarre combination of vaulting ambition and a tendency to act in ways which unwittingly torpedoed my efforts to develop a career. Secondly, I have rarely had any career management support, so must take full responsibility for all choices. For example, I have never been promoted internally, my career moves have all been applications for specific jobs.

Whether this ‘career as solitary pursuit’ makes my career a poor choice for a research site is an ineffable question, but in the next chapter I explore some of the ways in which one might explore this in ‘testing out’ the proposed theoretical framework.

### *Untold Stories*

In his discussion of the life history narrative of a craftsman (Fred), Mishler (1992) notes that as the account is retrospective, it will be shaped by the teller’s current view of his achieved identity. This leads him to categorise career choices as “off-line” or “on-line” depending on whether or not they can be seen to deviate from Fred’s achieved identity. This can lead to significant revisions to a career narrative; extended periods of one’s career can be re-framed as “off-line” in light of current concerns. This can be particularly striking where the “on-line” element of the narrative is very short – such narratives can bear the hallmarks of a conversion narrative, with the narrator presenting all that went before as error. Commenting on his decision to label Fred’s description of a proposed career move as “off-line”, Mishler notes:

My labelling of these intended changes as a detour is tentative. It reflects the anchoring of my analysis in his present achieved identity, the vantage point from which he has reconstructed his “past”. His “future” is “off-line” in the same way as his earlier job in [a very different occupation]...were I to interview Fred in five years, his “new” identity would be the point of

departure, and the structure of his narrative might be quite different, with choices redefined and realigned. (Mishler, 1992: 33)

This approach provides a methodological insight into the situated nature of elicited narrative and a theoretical insight into the permanently provisional nature of career narratives. This is illustrated by the narratives in the cases, which are to some extent composites or compromises – my ‘best fit’ version of events. This reflects a process of selection of a narrative account from the various possible accounts, which I will illustrate with reference to an omitted element of the story previously told of how and why I changed ‘A’ levels.

I was the only person in my ‘A’ level Geography class who’d got an A at ‘O’ level, but when the exam results came out at the end of the first term, I’d got a distinctly average mark. Worse, Terry Grace came top of the class. Worst of all, I didn’t know how I’d done so badly – I thought the exam was OK and that I’d done well. I was embarrassed/annoyed at having to deal with Terry Grace being top of the class, and worried this result showed I wasn’t quite up to ‘A’ level – perhaps I had ‘topped out’ at ‘O’ level? This additional information suggests a quite different account of how I came to drop Geography and take Physics again. Instead of the decision coming from a careful evaluation, it comes from a mix of embarrassment and anxiety, for which the story that dropping Geography would make good sense for my university application becomes a rationalisation rather than a reason. This identifies something important about the narrative connection between career and emotion – whilst the narration may be emotionally driven, the narrative itself is expected to be a rational explanation. Even where the narrative has an emotional tone, for example admitting dislike of something, the individual may feel it necessary to rationalise. There may therefore be several narratives, all valid in their own terms, for career choices made.

Perhaps I need to revisit my assertion that only one career narrative is in play at any given time? What I had in mind in claiming this was the notion that each narrative assumes a certain subsequent line of action (Weick, 1995). A professional snooker player may line up several shots before actually choosing to play one, but we do not suggest he is lining up several shots simultaneously – he is not, he is lining up several shots in turn, perhaps lining up some several times, eventually opting to play one of

them. This offers a better description of how we work with multiple career narratives – at any given moment we are working with a single narrative, but we are aware of alternatives and we may ‘try them out for size’ without necessarily adopting them. Goldie (2002) gives the example of our ability to explore the emotion of jealousy by imagining scenarios in which the object of our affections behaves in a manner which would arouse jealousy. We are familiar with the way in which such narratives can arouse emotion, even when we consider them to be fairly implausible; yet having been so aroused, we can also be unable to reassure ourselves entirely of their implausibility. The latter is a crucial component in the emotional arousal – no matter how fantastic our imaginings, they need a germ of plausibility. In career, the various narratives we can ‘think through’ (Goldie, 2003a) are likely to meet this criteria; our narratives of future career success live cheek by jowl with our narratives of possible failure.

### *Emotions*

I have noted at various points that negative emotion is likely to be of greatest significance in a career, and that is reflected in the cases. There are few positive emotions described, and a relatively narrow range of negative emotions. In this section, I will consider the reasons for the absent emotions and explore to what extent this absence reduces the verisimilitude of the cases. I will start by returning to one of the cases. In chapter 7, I acknowledged that my perception of myself as lonely/solitary during a key phase of my childhood would not have been recognisable to most observers. Yet an emotion, or an aspect of one’s emotional life, does not have to be temporally dominant in order to be experienced as its *leitmotiv* (cf. “Apart from that, Mrs Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?”!) The crucial point is that only those emotions caused by disruptions to the career narrative will produce the career-related narrative coping, and individuals may therefore experience a broad range of emotions, whilst only reflecting (ruminating) upon a relatively narrow range.

The narrow range of emotions presented have all been negative and the absence of positive emotions in this thesis reflects their neglect in psychology generally.

Commenting on this neglect, Fredrickson (1998) develops a cogent argument for treating positive and negative emotions as quite separate phenomena. She suggests, following Frijda (1988), that whilst negative emotions are associated specific action



tendencies, positive emotions are associated with thought-action tendencies. Positive emotions tend to broaden the scope of cognition (i.e. the range of ideas generated) and action (i.e. the range of actions/choices considered). This in turns serves to build an individual's physical, intellectual and social resources – in essence, because whilst in positive emotion state s/he will play and explore more.

It is arguable that these propositions about the nature and role of positive emotions have a poor fit with the proposed theoretical framework. If so, this is consistent with the general neglect noted of positive emotions noted above. I might argue that given how little we know about the impact of emotion on career, a model of the impact of negative emotions still offers a significant contribution. However, focusing specifically on the thesis, it seems also to suggest that what I have described as a general theoretical framework may after all be quite specific. If it is solely about negative emotion in career, then it is in effect a model of narrative coping and the distinction I proposed earlier between the general framework and the specific example is moot. The issue of the role of positive emotions in career will therefore not be considered further in this thesis, but it represents a substantial area for future research, drawing upon the “broaden and build” model of the role of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998 and 2005).

### *Interpretations*

Given the emphasis on a narrow range of fairly negative emotions in the episodes described, it is perhaps unsurprising that in relating these episodes I describe the disruptions to my career project in negative terms, as obstacles to progress. There are several important issues to explore here. Firstly, whether this emphasis on obstacles is an accurate depiction of my career. Secondly, whether such emphasis is likely to be found in other careers. Thirdly, whether alternative interpretations of these episodes might provide a deeper understanding of their role in career. In examining these issues, I will draw upon the previously introduced treatment of the Author as Protagonist, Storyteller and Theorist. The reason for doing so is that each self faces different choices in terms of interpretation. At one level, we might imagine that the range of interpretations available is successively wider. The protagonist is ‘submerged in projects’ (Weick et al, 2006), the storyteller is observing disruption to these projects and attempting to story alternative narratives, whilst the theorist can

stand back and view the action and storytelling over an extended period and for multiple disruptions. However, we can invert this by suggesting the protagonist starts with the greatest range of available interpretations, a range which is narrowed by his subsequent actions. His actions produce the new conditions from which the Storyteller attempts to construct plausible narratives, and this progressive narrowing of the range of actions and stories provide a misleadingly compelling meta-narrative for the Theorist to unearth. If the Protagonist comes to have a different recollection, this forces the Storyteller to revisit his narratives and the Theorist to revisit his interpretation of these narratives.

If the Protagonist encountered certain events as obstacles, the Storyteller can tell the story that way...but with the benefit of hindsight, he may be able to tell a different story about how the event also proved to be a turning point, a learning experience, the high water mark of a difficult period etc., a warning sign ignored etc. Which story should the Theorist prefer, in attempting to understand the impact of emotion on career? Since the thesis is about how people cope with emotion, the account preferred should logically be that perceived by the protagonist at the time. That being so, if I assume that the episodes described in the cases are 'accurately' recalled, the next question must be, are they representative of my career? Have all the critical incidents of emotion in career been related to obstacles? The case in chapter 8 would appear at first glance to about something other than obstacles, indeed the issue appears to be a *lack* of obstacles – my situation for once allowing for considerable choice in terms of career. However, it is clear that the Protagonist perceived it as a problem. In the case both Protagonist and Storyteller are aware of the irony of viewing the possibility of choice as problematic when hitherto the pattern had been one of struggling to make the best of very limited options. However, as the case makes clear, there was a genuine problem to be grappled with. The choices available were mutually exclusive and one can see that in each choice a different dimension of the problem represents an obstacle e.g. career ambitions to parenthood, parenthood to career ambitions, geographical location to both etc.

An alternative example of a critical incident not linked to an obstacle would be me taking the place at Bradford University. After the upset of failing to get into Medical School and the obstacle my 'A' level grades represented for that career route, I was

pleasantly surprised to discover that my grades were nevertheless sufficient to get me onto perfectly good courses at perfectly good institutions. This positive emotion was built upon through the narrative of a potential new career, which at that moment compared favourably to its alternative, a glum narrative of ‘failed’ ‘A’ levels leading to another year at school re-taking them. Yet even here, one can see that the major driver is actually the negative emotion arising from the initial obstacle, which leads me to snatch at an alternative career narrative which offers a more positive emotional tone. Obstacles therefore seem to be a key factor in my career, perhaps reflecting the sort of pugnacity Jeanette Winterson attributed to her mother:

My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn't matter what. She was in the white corner and that was that.

(From *Oranges are not the only fruit*, by Jeanette Winterson)

Having argued that an emphasis on obstacles does accurately reflect my career, as experienced by the Protagonist at the time, what of hindsight? I can, with hindsight, take of the ‘obstacles’ as being ‘character-building’ – leading to learning and to a greater resilience. Yet are these issues important for the present thesis? They link back to my basic proposition that the impact of emotion on career comes from the challenge it produces for coping, but as they were experienced as obstacles, viewing these events differently with hindsight does not have significant implications for the theoretical model proposed.

What might have significant implications is the question of whether the emphasis on obstacles is typical of careers generally. Following the idea that emotion is a response to events which cause disruption to our ongoing projects (Weick et al, 2005) we might suggest there are only two types of event – obstacles and the unexpected removal of obstacles. The latter logically requires the former for its emotional impact – steady, uninterrupted progress would be associated with a very neutral emotional tone. Viewed in this way, the emphasis on obstacles is appropriate – it is an accurate description of how individuals encounter these critical events at the time. However, this leaves open the question of whether there are differences in what people perceive as obstacles, and how these obstacles become viewed with hindsight – are they challenges to be overcome versus the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? This

links back to the discussion of the potential “broaden and build” role of positive emotions. In chapter 12 I will consider the question of to what extent personal differences might influence the impact of emotion in career.

### - **Narrative coping - the theoretical framework reframed**

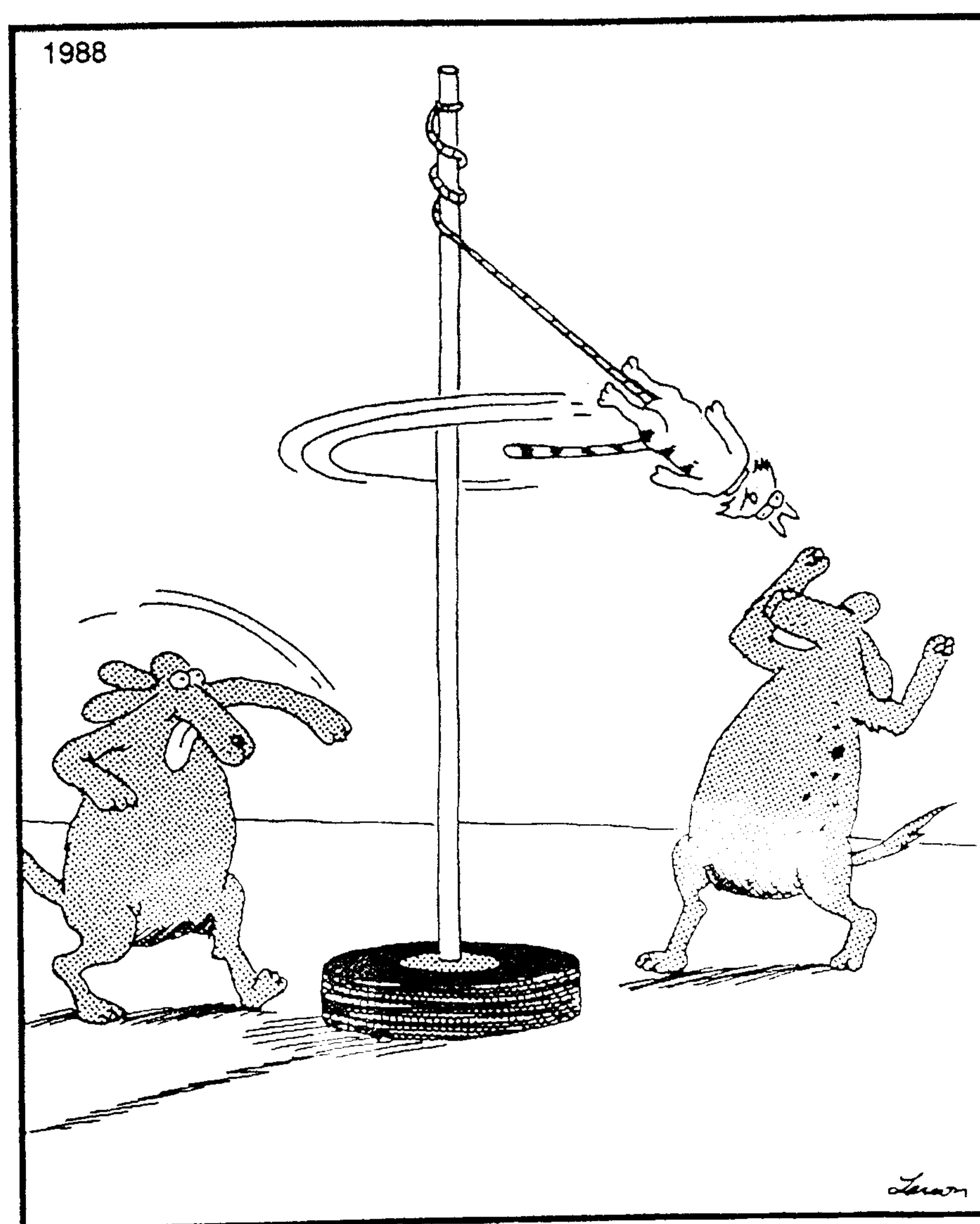
In this section, I want to draw together the ideas which emerge from the four cases and link them back to the propositions developed in the literature review. The first case showed how career development could be seen to be shaped by the interaction of emotion and personal and public narratives; our career narratives are a response to emotion, but these narratives are drawn from wider culturally available resources. The second case developed this argument, showing how even the smallest aspect of culture could influence sensemaking. The third case suggested emotion-stimulated storying in career could best be construed as a coping strategy, which I termed narrative coping. The final case study showed how this coping strategy could only be understood in the context of ‘public narratives’ – the prevailing discourses – and how coping narratives might have consequences in terms of the ongoing framing of the career situation. To develop these propositions, and link them to the central concept of narrative coping, I need elaborate the general framework drawing on themes which emerge from the cases. The three aspects are the nature of events in these situations, the types of narratives which are generated and the form of enactment which can occur.

#### *Events*

Weick et al (2005) define an event as something which leads to the question, ‘what’s the story here?’ This seems an appropriate definition, but it may give a false impression of the frequency and ‘size’ of events, suggesting as it does something which stops you in your tracks. One might assume that for career this would mean events such as being passed over for promotion, or going through a work-role transition. What this thesis has emphasised is the counter-intuitive notion that events in career occur almost continuously, because “things happen to people in work settings and people often react emotionally to these events” (Weiss and Cropanzo, 1996: 11). And, by extension, people must therefore cope with these events and emotions. I have suggested that in large part these events need not be directly career-

related – the challenge for individuals is the daily hassles of work. As I have framed this within the thesis, the emphasis has been on an assumption that workplace events which are experienced as aversive will be perceived as a challenge to a career-related requirement to bide their time in a post. Two clarifications to the role of events should be noted. First, some aversive events will be directly career-related, for example a poor appraisal report. Secondly, consistent with the iterative nature of appraisal and coping (Lazarus, 1999), some events are experienced as aversive *because* of the career dimension. I have in mind events which might barely count as negative, but are experienced as aversive because the individuals knows that they are likely to recur for as long as s/he remains in post or pursues this career – the dripping tap effect, as it were.

One of the key reasons why affective events at work can elicit such emotion, and the possibility of extended emotion episodes (Frijda, 1993) is their repetitive and unavoidable quality. Larson (1990) notes that his Far Side cartoon, “Tethercat”, provoked howls of outrage from animal lovers, though it depicts a scene no more violent than those in animated cartoons such as Tom and Jerry.



Tethercat

Speculating on why it received such a reaction, he notes that in animated cartoons the animal is invariably shown a few seconds later to be basically unharmed:

In a single panel cartoon, however, no resolution is possible. The dogs play “tethercat” forever. You put the cartoon down, come back to it a few hours later, and, yep – those dogs are *still* playing “tethercat”. (Larson 1990: 158)

This ongoing lack of resolution is a feature of an aversive work situation. The organisational conditions which produce affective events can seem, for all intents and purpose, permanent e.g. a difficult boss, an inequitable pay system, or a rude and aggressive clientele. This clarifies both why coping will be engaged, and why this coping will be predominantly emotion-focused rather than problem-focused. It may also explain why, perhaps surprisingly, occupational events are identified as the major trigger for depression (Barton et al, 2007). In the aftermath of more traumatic life events, people are encouraged to develop a narrative in which things will get gradually get better, no matter how hard it may be to imagine this, such that every day is progress towards a time when they will feel less bereft or traumatised. In a work situation experienced as aversive, such a narrative can be hard to develop – each day endured is just that, another day endured. Even though the events are less aversive, their presently inescapable quality stimulates emotion and forces us to engage in considerable coping. In the case of depression, eventually our perception of the situation becomes less like that of the upset cartoon reader, and more like that of the poor tethered cat.

### *Narrative*

The position of narrative in the theoretical framework is as the outcome of the sensemaking process stimulated by emotion, and it is thus concerned with re-storying in order to cope with emotion. However, I have suggested the career narrative can also be viewed as the career project, a project which is constantly disrupted by workplace events. One difficulty with this framing is that it seems to describe an individual constantly re-storying. The emphasis on ongoing disruptions and constant re-storying might serve to present an image of the individual career actor so utterly caught up in ongoing revision of their ‘current’ career narrative that one might ask ‘when does this person find time to have a career?’ It is important to stress firstly that

there is no expectation that such re-storying occurs quite so frequently, and secondly that I am including within this notion of re-storying such fragments of narrative as, for example, “And if he says no this time, I’m going to apply for that job”, or “Hmmm, I think I’m going to like working for her”.

There is a further clarification required with regard to narratives, which arises from the discussion in chapter 7, concerning the ongoing influence of my “John the Scientist” narrative. I have suggested throughout the thesis that narratives are volatile, regularly re-written in response to affective events. Yet I have also at times suggested that narratives have a certain durable quality, coming over time to act as scripts for our careers. The two claims are not irreconcilable, but it is important to set out how this might work. Firstly, I should stress that re-writes of a career narrative will rarely be radical, and they are likely to get progressively less radical over the course of our careers. They will, in general, be a nuanced re-framing of a situation. An individual could contemplate a range of future career narratives ranging from sticking with what they have through to giving it all up and buying a small farm in Wales. However, the range of narratives that shape the individual’s career thinking is likely to be rather narrower, not least because they are conscious of the benefits of working from their career to date (and the experiences, qualifications, and skills they have acquired). People can and do make major career changes, and there is frequently a great deal of chopping and changing in early career (Feldman and Whitcomb, 2005) but once a career is ‘launched’ most careers are more evolutionary. Secondly, the influence of career scripts (Barley, 1989) and public narratives (Somers, 1994) serve to constrain the range of narratives deemed plausible by the individual. As with Goldie’s example of jealousy narratives, we can envisage a range of possibilities, but we are likely to be engaged only by those which seem to fall within the range of genuine plausibility (a highly subjective assessment, of course). Thirdly, we should recall that sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Narratives may be surprisingly resistant to correction by apparently conflicting information.

Rather than conceptualising career narratives themselves as both volatile and enduring, we might think in terms of an intermediate construct between career narratives and career scripts. We could call these personal career scripts (after Barley), or personal meta-narratives (after Somers), but I would prefer to described

them as personal canonical forms (after Bruner). In other words, whilst our career narratives are repeatedly re-written in response to affective events, over time we may develop underlying plot structures and themes which are particular to our own careers. This may be enabling, for example, we might see a particular situation unfolding in a manner similar to earlier experiences, and choose to act so as to avoid this. However, it may equally be constraining – just as Propp (1928) showed how apparently dissimilar folk tales could be seen as basically the same story, we might find ourselves enacting narratives which are typical for us, regardless of whether they are functional in our lives. This concept serves to refine and strengthen the proposed sequence that events produces stories, stories become scripts, and scripts become lives.

### *“Enactment”*

Just as the term ‘event’ risks being read as meaning significant occurrence, so enactment might seem to place an overstated emphasis on action. Weick (1995) makes clear that enactment does not necessarily equate to action, but I put the term in quotes because in the context of the cycle shown in Figure 3 it might seem to be rather action orientated. Enactment is in part about constructing ‘our environment’, through processes of bracketing and attending. As Weick (1995) notes, in enactment we work with a realist ontology – our sensemaking leads us to bracket certain cues for closer attention, and this process leads us to a particular interpretation of the situation, an interpretation which we subsequently ‘enact’ by treating it as a social fact. What we do in response to these social facts will vary widely.

I have suggested that in many cases our career narratives are about an absence of action, but we might see a degree of partial but unintended enactment. That is to say, our revised narrative leads us to frame the situation differently and therefore behave differently, even though we do not set out to enact the line of action implicit in our career narrative. An obvious example would be the subtle shifts in feelings and behaviour which can occur when we decide that we will be leaving a post. Long before we have taken any practical steps to exit (e.g. applying for other jobs) we find having taken the decision means that we relax, and are less bothered by the aversive situation which has influenced the decision to quit. These forms of enactment affect



the appraising process, serving to make us more or less attentive to subsequent related events.

### *Rumination*

In chapter 10 I suggested that coping narratives may lead to perpetuating narratives. This suggests a possible refinement to the model, in which the individual can become stuck in a process of rumination, ‘missing out’ enactment and events to cycle endlessly through emotion-sensemaking-narrative. This is likely to be highly dysfunctional coping strategy (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). However, we need to be careful not to exaggerate this potential for short-circuiting the process. More typical might be situations in which a pessimistic narrative is confirmed by events which stimulate further negative emotion...etc. Alternatively, we might think of terms of imagined enactment or events:

*Once upon a time at home I sat beside the telephone*

*Waiting for someone to pull me through*

*When at last it didn't ring I knew it wasn't you.*

(From, “A New England” by Billy Bragg)

In this scenario, the observer might question the idea that this involves enactment or events, but the writer clearly perceives both – enactment in the waiting for a call, its failure to come an ‘event’, which stimulates emotion, sensemaking and narrative.

### **Narrative Coping and Narrative Therapy**

This issue of whether narrative coping is functional links closely to the interaction of career and mental health. Krumboltz (1993) and Schultheiss (2006) both note that career and personal life are treated very separately in the literature and in counselling practice. This separation is problematic because it neglects the possibility that one might impact upon the other. Given this, it seems appropriate to examine how the notion of narrative coping might be usefully linked to the emerging clinical technique of narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1990). Polkinghorne describes narrative

therapy thus:

The primary focus of narrative therapy is on the interpretations or meanings people attribute to the happenings and events in their lives. The interpretative understanding that people have of events can limit or expand their possible actions. Narrative therapists assist clients to come to more expansive and inclusive interpretations of themselves and situations.

(Polkinghorne, 2004: 55)

Despite its apparently obvious link with the thesis, narrative therapy has a subtly different theoretical orientation to many approaches to narrative. McAdams and Janis note that “the narrative therapy movement, and the upsurge of narrative research in the social sciences have developed on parallel tracks over the past two decades” (McAdams and Janis, 2004: 168). Whilst positive about the potential benefits of narrative therapy, Polkinghorne (2004) also suggests that the approach has developed quite separately, and is sceptical of what he perceives as its post-hoc orientation to postmodernism. From within the field, Amundson argues that narrative therapy should “concentrate on what is useful, work backwards from what people want to achieve, and ‘widen the circle’” (Amundson, 2001: 175).

Hollway (2001) suggests that the underlying theoretical assumptions of narrative therapy leaves the agency of subjects unaccounted for, an issue she suggests is common to all social constructionist theories (cf. Burr, 2003). Polkinghorne (2004) disagrees – focusing on what narrative therapists do, rather than the theoretical orientation they claim, he suggests that narrative therapy is at some distance from postmodernist ideas of the ‘death of the subject’, working as it does with what he terms a ‘re-authoring subject’. Reflecting this claim, McAdams and Janis suggest narrative therapy has an inherently emancipatory agenda, seeking to free individuals from “culturally dominant narratives within which individuals may feel trapped” (McAdams and Janis, 2004: 167) by allowing them to generate new and more functional stories. Whereas discussion of narrative within this thesis has tended to focus on narrative thinking and related interactions, within narrative therapy there is also an emphasis on the written word – it is a writing cure as well as a talking cure. Speedy (2005) describes her use of poetry in this context, which links to the

examination in Chapter 8 of how poetic fragments influenced my sensemaking during an uncertain period in my life and career.

It will be readily apparent that narrative therapy is potentially well aligned with notions of narrative identity (McAdams, 1997; Somers, 1994), and McAdams and Janis suggest (perhaps revealing middle class North American assumptions) that “in modern life, counselling and therapy provide some of the prime opportunities for the telling and transformation of life stories” (McAdams and Janis, 2004: 167). They note that although narrative researchers and narrative therapists both lay stress on the power of culture in making life stories, narrative researchers are more sceptical about individuals’ capacity to re-author their life stories in a manner which permits escape from prevailing culture influences, encoded in the canonical forms of narrative (Bruner, 1990).

Linking this to the coping literature, we can see that narrative therapy can influence the processes of primary and secondary appraising, by helping people re-frame the situational demands, their perceived coping resources, their future expectations and even their type of ego-involvement (Lazarus, 1991). It can be supportive of problem-focused coping, for example an individual may have a narrative of helplessness when in fact s/he is far from helpless and could readily take action. However, in some cases the re-storying will represent an emotion-focused coping strategy e.g. maintaining positive and beneficial self-illusions in the face of ill-health. In the context of this thesis, the primary focus of narrative coping will be the re-authoring of career narratives to ameliorate the negative emotion presently being experienced, based on a calculation that *persist* rather than *desist* (Marshall, 2000) is the strategy which will produce the most beneficial career outcomes.

Within narrative therapy, there are significant ethical issues concerning historical truth and narrative truth (Spence, 1984). Crossley (2000) acknowledges that there are significant problem with what is ‘true’, but suggests that certain life experiences are hard to disregard. Is it legitimate for therapists to support people to re-author their life stories to produce positive, constructive narratives if these narratives omit significant

‘real’ events? Crossley argues that:

A personal story that neglects or denies the events of one’s life in order to make it more pleasing or coherent is ‘counter to the therapeutic commitment to truth’  
(Crossley, 2000: 62)

Although career may deeply engage our emotions, we are unlikely to be involved in formal narrative therapy as a means to deal with these emotions and the situations which triggered them. In the case study above I portrayed myself engaging in narrative coping, and in the absence of a therapeutic intervention or significant opportunities for dialogue, I was at liberty to develop coping narratives which were fairly high on positive self-illusion (Taylor, 1989). Rosenwald notes:

Dialogue *may* enforce steadier standards of rationality than are faced by a solitary actor and *may* confront the narrator with the listener’s scepticism.  
(Rosenwald, 1992: 278)

The conversation with Brian represented an opportunity for dialogue, but such opportunities became progressively curtailed as I perceived a degree of risk to such openness. The question arises then whether narratives such as I developed should be viewed as ‘coping’ or whether they are dysfunctional. They seem to have the quality of what Wiersma (1988) terms a ‘press release’ – a too neat story, giving a certain line on events. Rosenwald (1992) suggests that ‘better stories’ come from greater work, involving a dialectical process – the dialectic of telling and living a life. These better stories are both more comprehensive and more coherent – they engage with complexity (details, ambiguities, the influence of earlier stories) and yet locate it within an account which acknowledges and integrate this complexity:

Life is lived within the shadow of the latest version of the narrator’s story; in living, the narrator tries both to live up to what has been expressed in the story and to build in whatever is felt to be missing.

(McAdams and Janis, 2004: 170)

In one sense, these ‘better stories’ represent (on a large scale) a problem-focused coping strategy – they arise from and produce consequences, which Rosenwald (1992) terms *new living action*. This is an “alternation of telling and living” which makes innovative action possible. He suggests that a living action:

can be judged restrictive if...it arrests reflection rather than generating accounts that make innovative action possible. (Rosenwald, 1992: 273)

By contrast, my narratives in the cases represent very much a short-term emotion-focused coping strategy to deal with the immediate negative emotions, and these narratives do not necessarily lead on to the more problem-focused coping implied in the idea of developing and living ‘better stories’. The judgement of whether these narratives are functional must therefore rest on whether they lead in time to new living action, or whether they leave the teller stuck in their current situation.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have refined the notion of narrative coping, drawing on insights gained through the cases, whilst at the same time drawing attention to potential weaknesses in the theoretical framework which arise from the very specificity of the ‘data’. I noted the methodological issues and the resultant absences in the thesis. In the final chapter I will begin by addressing these issues, describing how the proposed model might be tested through empirical work, before turning to a consideration of the implications of the model and avenues for future research and application.

## Chapter 12: The Next Chapter

In the last chapter I stated that an autoethnographic approach to organisational research could offer considerable potential for theory development. This might seem a surprising claim, but in the natural sciences data available to researchers often represents a unique case (see the example of palaeontology, cited in chapter 5). The detailed process of recollection, reflection and analysis by the researcher on his or her own life experiences produces an extraordinary richness of data. The insights gained through this process thus offer considerable potential for theory development, working with what Weick (1989) termed the ‘disciplined imagination’. Inevitably, this process also generates questions as to whether this experience is typical, questions which can be explored through further non-autoethnographic research. Although this might seem to strengthen the arguments for autoethnography, it must be acknowledged that this is a very different rationale to that typically cited for such research (e.g. Ellis and Bochner, 2000). However, I would argue it is in keeping with the symbolic interactionist roots of autoethnography – when I suggest it offers potential for theory development I have in mind something akin to the development of what Blumer termed sensitising concepts:

A sensitizing concept...gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. (Blumer, 1954: 7)

Autoethnography gives the researcher directions ‘along which to look’, and I want to turn now to a consideration of the directions the present thesis seems to direct the researchers’ gaze. Recognising the difficulty of making generalisations from autoethnographic research, in this final chapter I discuss the numerous ways in which the propositions developed in this thesis would need to be ‘tested out’ in greater detail, before examining possible lines of research which arise from the cases.

## Next steps in testing out the theoretical model

The use of a single case inevitably leaves numerous questions unanswered about what is unique and what might be typical. The notion of typicality needs careful handling; this thesis is resolutely idiographic and I am not seeking to switch to a nomothetic approach at this last stage. Nevertheless, without making a claim that one might generalise from a particular set of findings, it is possible to claim that the findings of a case study might illuminate our understanding of other cases. To do so, we need to be alive to the ways in which the case originally studied might be similar or different to other cases (Stake, 2000). In this section then, I will outline some of the key areas in which further research is required to provide some indication of the extent to which the process suggested in this thesis will be commonly observed.

### *What kind of events trigger emotion in career?*

It would be useful to explore what kinds of events appear particularly problematic. Narrative interviews using critical incident technique might represent a useful approach, although Blenkinsopp and Zdunczyk (2005) express some concerns that this might serve to elicit only those events viewed with hindsight as critical. Diary studies and experience sampling (Bolger et al, 2003) might be more appropriate, allowing researchers to capture those daily events experienced as aversive.

### *Is narrative coping a typical response?*

We might also want to consider whether narrative coping is as typical a response as I have claimed; perhaps there are differences in whether people tend to adopt problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping strategies in dealing with career-related difficulties (London, 1997). Given the argument that human experience is unavoidably narrative in form (Crites, 1971; Sarbin, 1986) we might suggest that some form of narrative coping is unavoidable, but this may occur through a framing of the event (or career) as not significant. Narratives which frame the career as relatively unimportant would serve to influence primary appraising, such that events are not perceived to have particular goal relevance (Lazarus, 1999). I have suggested the need for coping in career can be understood in terms of a 'meta-injunction' to pursue a career, but inevitably, each of the cases related to situations in which there were significant career issues at stakes at that time. By eliciting career narratives

from a range of people, including people who explicitly downplay the significance of career, it would be possible to get a clearer understanding of the range of circumstances in which individuals will endure ongoing aversive situations in calculation of career benefits.

*When is problem-focused coping preferred?*

Since hindsight is often the only way of knowing when action would have preferable, I am not posing the question ‘when is problem-focused coping *preferable*?’ What is of interest is when it is preferred, that is, in what situations do individuals not follow the emotion-focused coping route I suggest is commonest, but instead choose to take action. Exit represents an obvious example of problem-focused coping in career. Logically, people who have chosen to exit their current post in response to negative emotional situations will also, at other points in time, have chosen not to exit a post despite such situations. By interviewing these individuals, we might be able to gain a better understanding of what distinguishes situations which prompt action from those which elicit emotion-focused coping. Two obvious possibilities would need to be explored. Firstly, is it largely a matter of degree? For example, “then was bad, but now is worse”. Secondly, is the decision linked to career considerations? For example, “I am leaving now because I can, without detriment to my career”. Such research would be a first step, but would need further development – exit is only one form of problem-focused coping, and a drastic one in career terms, we would need to explore the many alternatives.

*What sort of situations lead to perpetuating narratives?*

Chapter 10 drew a link between narratives which cope and narratives which perpetuate, and this also seems an area worthy of further exploration. Coping narratives based on what Gunz (1989) terms a subsisting career logic (as opposed to searching or building career logics) may be less likely to lead to perpetuation: the individual effectively rejects the ‘meta-injunction’ to actively pursue their career and so becomes free of the constraints which lock us into the double bind situations described in this chapter. Even if s/he chooses out of convenience to remain in situ, the emotional tone of the situation is very different: linking back to Wagner and Presthus, such narratives effectively re-position the upward mobile as an ambivalent, or more likely, an indifferent (Presthus, 1962). Note that although this narrative



coping strategy avoids a double bind, its impact on the individual may not be wholly benign; s/he has withdrawn from the field, and in the long run may lose out in career terms. The strategy also has implications for organisations – although it might appear to be merely the individual's reframing of the situation, it will have implications for his or her behaviour, most notably in terms of willingness to engage in organisational citizenship behaviours (Organ and Konovsky, 1989).

This question would prove challenging to research. Logically it would only be possible to do interviews after the event – people will only be able to recognise a 'perpetuating narrative' after they have moved on. And some people may remain in a perpetuating narrative for a very long time – Drummond and Chell (2001) describes a lawyer whose career (objective and subjective) has been in decline for decades, but who appears unable to contemplate any alternative. One possible avenue for research would be to explore the suggestion that coping narratives might lead to perpetuating narratives which in turn lead to depression, and this line of research is discussed in more detail below.

#### *Individual differences*

There are numerous ways in which individuals might differ in their response to emotion in career. Some of these can be seen as characteristics or traits, other are more to do with personal situation or context.

*Personality:* There are numerous personality variables which might be expected to impact on how people perceive, express and deal with emotion, generally and in career. To take just one example, there is evidence for a general disposition, Positive Affectivity and Negative Affectivity (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), akin to the old idea of people seeing the glass as half full or half empty. Given that people in a negative affective state assess situations more critically and accurately (Clore, Gasper and Garvin, 2001), we might expect that 'glass is half empty' people will struggle more to narrate a positive narrative, especially if the narrative requires a fairly optimistic reading of a situation (or likely future).

*Career Stage:* The developmentalist notion of career stages (e.g. Super 1990, 1992) has been widely applied, and would seem to be of relevance to the impact of emotion

on career. Super proposes five broad stages of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement. At each stage, we can see that the career activities involved will have a bearing upon the affective events experienced. For example, in the exploration stage we often encounter events which are wholly novel to us, which may make them interesting and exciting, or intimidating and scary, and quite likely both. Similar events encountered at a later stage may elicit quite different emotions, for example we may react with boredom at the prospect of doing something ‘for the umpteenth time’. Since these stages are also linked to adult development, they may also influence the type of ego involvement which Lazarus (1999) suggests is an influence on the particular emotions which get expressed in a given situation.

*Career History:* I suggested in chapter 7 that people in early career might struggle with aversive situations because they lack the experience of such situations which might provide the perspective required for effective coping (Blenkinsopp and Zdunczyk, 2005). Louis (1980) suggests experienced newcomers to an organisation engage differently with the transition process – they know how to do their job, so their transition is focused solely on dealing with a new environment. Given that Baumeister et al (1999) note that coping draws upon a limited resource, we can see that anything which reduces the extent of coping required ought to make it easier. However, experienced newcomers may also be less likely to engage in emotion-focused coping, on two counts. Firstly, having greater confidence in their skills and value, they might feel more able to engage in problem-focused coping. Secondly, if they are experienced in their job, but experience their new organisational setting as aversive, they may feel more confident to judge that exit is the appropriate response.

*Personal Support:* People vary considerably in their ‘support networks’ (friends, family, and partner). To take just one example, Bellas found men gained a career benefit from being married, something she suggested occurred in part because women “reproduce [the workforce] on a daily basis by providing household services and emotional support that renew and ready its members for another day’s work” (Bellas, 1992: 609). We might hope that this gender imbalance is nowadays slightly less one-sided (Bellas based her work on a 1984 survey), but in any event we can see that the impact of emotion on career is likely to be tempered by the availability of support from significant others.

*Gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability:* Given the significant impact these matters have on life and career, it seems rather cavalier to lump them together within one section. I do so however because they are all areas on which the cases are largely silent. Much of career theory is built on research into white, middle-class males in Anglo countries, and researchers have been encouraged to consider the possibility that existing theories do not fit women (Gallos, 1989; Marshall, 1989) and ethnic minorities (Thomas and Alderfer, 1989). It is possible that the proposed theoretical framework may be most applicable to individuals whose careers are relatively unfettered by institutional discrimination. Noting Somers's (1994) criticism that researchers tend to adopt notions such as ethnicity and class as categorical, and treat them as variables, we might wish to explore potential differences in narrative terms, to understand individuals' narrative identity in terms of how they attempt to position themselves in career with reference to, for example, 'their disability'.

#### *Occupational differences*

Some careers may unfold with a certain degree of relentlessness, in particular careers in which the biggest challenge is gaining entry in the first place – the French Civil Service is often cited as an example of this. In such careers, there may be limited demand for coping. It is the career equivalent of a long-haul flight, a journey whose major challenge is waiting to get there. By contrast, other careers may require ongoing vigilance and choice – the individual must be attentive to opportunities, and also to his or her own skills and knowledge, looking ahead to see what might be required, paying attention to how a career is shaping up. These different career types may be quite differently affected by emotion. In the former, the career benefits may be significant and yet relatively distant in time, and the key challenge is to maintain a positive view of the work, much as Grey (1994) described junior accountants having to endure an apprenticeship of 'bean counting' to get into the more interesting, lucrative and prestigious work. The only alternative is to leave, a major career decision with potentially negative consequences. In the second type, emotion appears likely to loom larger, being a constant element of the career. We might suggest that both occupational patterns have to deal with negative workplace events, but only the second pattern also has to deal with ongoing emotion arising directly from career concerns. Note that I am setting up these two patterns as ideal types, in practice we might expect them to fall along a continuum and also might expect variation over time

e.g. I can remember that at the DHSS career concerns would be a topic of general discussion just once a year as the promotion boards came round. The idea of a continuum would make it difficult to categorise, however we might reasonably identify occupations which seem at opposite ends of the continuum, in order to explore how individuals in these different occupations deal with emotion in career.

### *Organisational differences*

Gunz (1989) suggests organisational career logics vary greatly, and Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) suggest the organisational context has an impact on emotion by making events more or less likely. It seems likely then that organisational context will be an important influence on emotion in career, and indeed the accounts in two of the four cases stress organisational context as a significant factor. Following Herriot (2001), we might suggest that the contexts which will cause greatest difficulty will be those in which there is a significant level of normative control. Such settings inhibit the individual's ability to withdraw psychologically. In sensemaking terms, they are likely to experience considerable behavioural commitment; if they experience aversive events they are likely to engage in considerable sensemaking to develop coping narratives which 'deal with' the combination of negative experience and a perceived inability to challenge this. UK universities may offer an interesting site for researching the impact of such organisational influences, given considerable variation in the extent to which they are normative and managerialist in their approach to staff.

### *Situational differences*

For the careerist, aversive workplace events can be like paper cuts – minor wounds which hurt out of all proportion to the actual injury. Yet even careerists will vary in the ways in which their life as a whole serves shapes their perspective on the career. We might draw a link to Young's (1996) idea of the 'non-work aha!' – moments of epiphany which serve to 'put career in its place'. Some people's life situation and experience will provide them both with a buffer (see Personal Support above) and a different perspectival logic on career which may serve to reduce the effect of negative events through influencing the appraising process. One might investigate this in the first instance on the basis of looking at individuals in the same work situation and using crude dichotomies of personal situation e.g. married with children versus single without children. We might expect to see differences in how these

individuals frame their experiences, with the work situation itself being a key influence. For example, job insecurity might be a source of *more* negative emotion for those with significant domestic responsibilities, but they might be more sanguine about the day to day hassles.

### *Cultural differences*

Careers researchers have only recently begun to pay attention to the influence of culture (van Esbroeck, Herr and Savickas, 2005). The differences in terms of emotion in career may be particularly pronounced. There are cultural difference in display rules for emotion (Matsumoto, 1990), culturally different emotion narrative and words (Wierzbicka, 2001), and variations in worker-supervisor relationships (Hofstede, 1993). There may be considerable differences in prevailing values and expectations on career. The widely researched cultural variation on individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1993; Triandis, 1995) might be expected to have a significant influence – the present thesis has undoubtedly emphasised an individualist orientation. There are differences in ideas on meritocracy, which will have a significant influence on how careers develop (Dany, 2003). Finally, the extent to which career is viewed as a source of identity may vary between cultures.

Cross-cultural research is hugely problematic, and for career there are particular issues relating to the influence of structural factors such as the labour market and employment law. Tayeb (2001) notes that researchers sometimes mistakenly attribute differences between groups to culture, when the differences may arise from more structural factors such as legal and economic systems. One example might be the ‘hire at will’ doctrine which underpins US employment law and influences the psychological contract (Schalk and Rousseau, 2001). Generally lower holiday entitlements in the US, compared to Europe, may also influence how work is viewed, and issues of work-life balance can also be noted for Japan, where exceptionally long hours (both formal and in after-work socialising) are seen as the norm. Nevertheless, we might seek to make cross-cultural comparisons of how individuals cope with emotion in their career, looking perhaps at multi-cultural work teams as an obvious site for investigation.

## **Avenues for future research**

Having outlined ways in which the proposed model needs to be more widely tested, I want to turn to a consideration of the directions for future research which arise from the propositions developed in the thesis.

### *Narrative coping and depression*

Chapter 10 explored the relevance to careers of Wagner's organisational reframing of the double bind concept. It indicated how narrative as an emotion-focused coping strategy might become dysfunctional through encouraging excessive rumination on a situation. I noted that occupational events are identified as the biggest single trigger for depression (Barton et al, 2007) and that rumination is viewed as an ineffective coping strategy for depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Taken together, these raise the possibility that in some situations, and for some individuals, narrative coping which creates a perpetuating narrative might lead in time to depression. Where adverse occupational events are the precipitating cause of an episode of depression, such episodes can be difficult to treat if the individual has over-invested in a dominant career-related self-representation. Presenting a highly elaborated, longitudinal description of such situations would provide a basis for understanding how such damaging situations arise, how they might be avoided, and what interventions might serve to address them. The obvious research design would be the clinical case study, cited by Lazarus and Cohen-Charash (2001) as a model for investigating emotions in organisational life. This approach is similar in some respects to autoethnography in terms of its detailed examination of individual life histories.

### *Re-storying as emancipation*

McAdams and Janis (2004) note that we lack the cognitive tools to develop a life narrative until well into adolescence, and it seems reasonable to suggest that adults will show differences in the development of these cognitive skills. Influences such as education and life experience will also serve to influence individuals' narrative skill, and the various aspects of narrative identity such as class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality will also influence the forms of narrative available to the individual (Somers, 1994). Finally, Bruner (1990) notes that each culture has its own canonical forms of narrative. We can see then that for personal, social and cultural reasons

individuals may vary hugely in their capacity to re-author their life and career narratives. An important avenue for future research will be to examine these variations in capacity to explore their implications, asking questions such as, are those for whom the potential re-storying is greatly constrained more or less likely to engage in problem-focused coping? If narrative constraints are accompanied by more embodied constraints, might this lead to learned helplessness?

#### *Impact on the objective career*

I suggested the impact of emotion will be directly on the subjective career, with the impact on the objective arising indirectly as a result of the career narrative(s) developed and the actions taken as a result. That said, it ought to be possible to propose measurable links between emotion and objective career. Such studies already exist, albeit in different guises, for example research into the impact of induction crisis on turnover. In the methodology, I discussed at length the difficulties in simultaneously tracing emotion and career. However, having developed a theoretical framework of how emotion and career interact, it is possible to propose certain patterns which might be expected.

In developing this section, I found myself unavoidably thinking in terms of research designs involving independent, dependent and moderating variables – an approach at some considerable distance from the epistemological stance of this thesis! It is useful to outline one design as an illustration of some of the issues. If, as I have suggested, the major response to emotion in career can be construed as coping, then we might view coping style as a key variable. In order to test that proposition, we would need to be able to measure coping style and operationalize career outcomes. We would need to control for other variables such as occupation, education, organisation etc. An ideal sample might be something like engineering graduates joining the graduate training scheme of a major organisation – similar in age, education, occupation, organisation and all starting their careers at the same point.

Such a research design is tantalising. The “Ways of Coping Checklist” originating with Folkman and Lazarus (1980) has been used and developed for over two decades, indeed Lazarus (1999) acknowledges that its appeal to researchers has been positively unhelpful, causing the development of cottage industries of research relying upon this

instrument. And in the proposed sample, one might readily operationalize career outcomes in terms such as 'length of time to first promotion' or 'highest position achieved'. However, this design also raises significant questions about the appropriateness of such assumptions. Examining the objective career might allow us to consider variables such as lifetime earnings or hierarchical progression, and even for the subjective career we might work with measures e.g. job satisfaction. However, this neglects whole aspects of career which might be perceived as significant, and more significantly, it brackets the wider issues of how career fits within the individual's life.

To judge the consequences properly, we need to return to the objective/subjective distinction, and look at the impact of emotion on the individual's career in the round. Indeed, we might want to look wider still – to understand the career in context of the individual's life. We might envisage individuals who have a successful objective career and who also perceive their subjective career positively in terms of the sense of meaning and identity it provides for them...but whose health is poor as a result of work-related issues (poor diet, sleep patterns, a degree of stress) and whose personal life is almost non-existent.

The question remains as to whether the simplistic research design proposed might nevertheless generate something of value. Used not as an empirical test, but in the spirit of Blumer's sensitising concepts, this and other apparently positivist designs might be used to build up a clear picture of the link between emotion and career, complementing the narrative approaches extolled in this thesis.

#### *Impact on the career script*

Barley's (1989) concept of career scripts suggests that individuals' actions in pursuing their careers can serve to influence the institutional forms of career. I suggested that this leads logically to the possibility that emotion in career could eventually come to influence the typical form of that career, but noted the difficulty of exploring this notion empirically. A possible way to explore this would be by examining newly created occupations or careers. The NHS modernisation programme offers an interesting example of this. Multi-disciplinary working and a reduction in demarcation has been strongly emphasised through this programme, and has led to the



creation of posts which can be filled by professionals from a range of clinical backgrounds. There is considerable uncertainty inherent in such roles. The sheer numbers of clinical professionals, plus the fact that in the UK the overwhelming majority are employed by a single organisation, means that clinical career pathways were historically well beaten – more highway than pathway. Opting to move into roles for which there are no precedents and thus no role models might seem a risky one. A change in government policy might switch the career advantage back to professionals who chose to stay squarely within the usual roles, much as Currie et al (2006) suggest managers sometimes see their original profession as a safer bet in uncertain times. We can treat government policy in this area as an attempt to create new career scripts. Several things might be observed. Firstly, people in these roles will experience a good deal of career-related emotion as a result of the uncertainty. Secondly, in the absence of a well-established career script, this emotion will stimulate considerable sensemaking – the search for plausible narratives will take longer than usual. Thirdly, whilst all sensemaking is collective (Weick et al, 2005) this sensemaking will be very noticeably so – people in these new roles will share meanings with each other in an effort to make sense of the situation, and in doing so will create a shared meaning. Fourthly, the shared meaning produced by this process will serve to enact a new and elaborated career script, potentially very rapidly, as the novelty of the career pathways will mean that institutions are more sensitive to the upward flow of information.

We can envisage that these new healthcare careers will vary considerably across clinical settings. In some settings, cross-disciplinary working has long been the norm and the new roles may simply formalise existing practice. In others they will be more of a radical change, resulting in greater anxiety, conflict and role ambiguity. These different situations might allow us to trace empirically the ways in which emotion in career might serve to shape career scripts.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has developed a theoretical framework for studying the impact of emotion on career, following Kidd's lament that emotion is 'an absent presence in career theory' (Kidd, 1998). In the proposed framework, career is treated as a narrative

construction (Bujold, 2004) and viewed as a significant component of an individual's identity (McAdams, 1995). Events which disrupt the career narrative will be experienced as disruptive to identity and to the achievement of the individual's goals, and will therefore stimulate emotion which in turns leads to sensemaking aimed at repairing the disruption (Weick et al, 2005). This sensemaking produces a revised career narrative, which the individual subsequently enacts. This proposition has been explored through the use of autoethnographic cases, and the use of this methodology is one of the major contributions of this thesis.

The cases have allowed for theory development, but autoethnographic research does not lend itself to simple conclusions. It suggests and evokes, pointing towards possible avenues for further exploration. Psychiatrists write up individual cases for their peers, with the assumption that these cases can be used as a guide for treatment. And it is arguable that, though very different in style, the classic HBS case studies of the 'doings' of Chief Executives are similarly idiographic in form. Autoethnographic case studies can similarly offer provide important insights, and this thesis offers the basis for a sustained programme of research investigating the influence of emotion on career. The present chapter has mapped out directions for future research, firstly to test the framework and then to apply it to a range of research questions.

The central theme of the thesis has been narrative coping. Narrative appears fundamental to our humanity – we are, to put it crudely, suckers for a good story. It is both wonderful and treacherous, and therein lies the power of narrative to heal or to harm. There are profound philosophical problems with truth, with what can be known, and poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques question the whole notion. Nevertheless, as we live our lives we deal with practical issues of truth and apply certain tests of veracity. We need to be alive to the seductive potential of others' narratives, but as this thesis has shown we are equally likely to be seduced by the power of our own narratives. The challenge for individuals is to write "better stories" (Rosenwald, 1992) which allow for innovation in story and action, moving (in however limited a fashion) beyond the constraints imposed by public narratives.

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