Understanding transitions in professional practice and learning: towards new questions for research

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Structured abstract

The purpose of this article is to critically examine, within the context of professional practice and learning, diverse theoretical approaches that are currently prominent in researching transitions and to propose future directions for research. Much research to date on professional transitions has focused on predicting them and then preparing individual practitioners to navigate transitions as sites of struggle.

The article begins by describing work contexts integral with professional transitions: regulation, governance and accountability; new work structures; and knowledge development. The discussion then examines transitions research in developmental psychology, lifecourse sociology, and career studies. These perspectives are compared critically in terms of questions and approaches, contributions to understanding professional transitions, and limitations.

The implications for educators are a series of critical questions about research and education directed to support transitions in professional learning and work. Future directions and questions for research in professional transitions are suggested in the final section, along with implications for supporting professional learning in these transitions. The article is not intended to be comprehensive, but to identify issues for the reader's consideration in thinking about various forms of transition being experienced by professions and professionals. The discussion theory-based, exploratory, and indicative rather than definitive.

Professions arguably are experiencing a heightened state of transition these days as they respond to major changes in policies and policy ideals, regulatory regimes, restructured work arrangements, new technologies and shifting public demands (Evetts 2009). Individual practitioners within the collective professions, too, are called to manage difficult transitions throughout their careers beginning with the shift from initial professional education to the workplace. Professionals frequently must cope with transitions to new levels of responsibility, implementation of new protocols for practice, and migration to new work sites and cultures.

Who is interested in understanding these professional transitions, and why? The answer varies depending on one's discipline and investments. In the field of psychology, for instance, concern has centred on the personal struggle, dissonance, and challenges to self-concept that transitions are assumed to pose. Research in these areas informs counseling practices intended to help people develop personal coping strategies. In organization and management studies, transition has sparked an industry of 'change management' interested in improving planning strategies and managing workers' transitions (e.g. Bridges 2004). For policy-makers and regulatory agencies, concern often centres upon ensuring quality and reliability of professional decision-making throughout transition periods (e.g. Kilminster et al. 2010). Educators, on the other hand, tend to focus upon

understanding and supporting learning processes of individuals and groups in transition through some sort of educational interventions.

The problem is that much research to date on professional transitions has focused on predicting them and then preparing individual practitioners to navigate transitions as sites of struggle (e.g. Boshuizen et al 2004). More generally, as Ecclestone (2009) has pointed out, research on adults' learning related to transitions in life and work has tended to frame the transition process itself as anxious and negative. The issues for educators then focus on equipping and assisting individuals, through workplace learning and other educative processes, to 'manage' transitions successfully. Broader system structures and transitions are thus omitted from the analysis, as are professionals' practices and cultures as collective activity. Transition itself becomes flattened and universalised, disabling generative possibilities that might be available in diverse transitional spaces.

This article contends that further research is needed to understand better just what comprises the process and outcomes of transitions in different situations of contemporary professional work. However, and this is the principal argument, research of professional transitions first needs some reframing. 'Professional' in this discussion refers, following Evetts (2011:5), to 'the knowledge-based category of service occupations which usually follow a period of tertiary education and vocational training and experience', with particular focus on what Evetts characterizes as Anglo-American systems of professional practice. Theoretical traditions ranging from developmental psychology to social capital have been employed in studies of transitions, each of which offers fruitful constructs and considerations, but each framing 'transition' in ways that can perpetuate particular assumptions about the nature of practice, knowing and change. In the case of professional transitions, these assumptions can obscure both the forces affecting professional work and the complex dynamics that help to bring forth new states of being and action. However without discarding existing transition theories and their insights, we might, it is argued here, be more critical about their limitations and contributions. At the same time, we might turn to emerging research approaches in professional practice to uncover additional questions and framings that suggest new directions of research in professional transitions.

Towards these ends, this discussion examines diverse perspectives that have been employed to research adult transitions. A vast amount of literature is available examining transitions from different disciplinary perspectives, and this study necessarily limited the perspectives to those most evident in much contemporary research on work and learning[1]. The aim is not to construct a comprehensive meta-review of transitions literature, but to critically compare the analytic approaches of three fields that have become prominent in work-learning research: developmental psychology, lifecourse sociology, and career studies. The method used here is to critically examine the questions and approaches that have emerged in these traditions, and consider, against a context of the sociology of

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[1] One reviewer of this article helpfully suggested that it would be useful to also examine literature/knowledges from other disciplines such as science and philosophy, asking: Do these disciplines provide other metaphors? And what are the implications for educational practice?

professions, their contributions to understand transitions of professions and professionals. The first section below provides this context. It outlines, from a sociological perspective, various key transitions affecting the professions broadly within the context of capitalist relations of a global economy. The second section turns to transition research focusing on individuals, examining psychological, lifecourse, and school-to-work traditions. These traditions are examined in terms of their analytical strategies and explanatory insights. The third section looks across these different perspectives critically, considering both their utility as well as the problems inherent in certain discourses that they perpetuate. The concluding section proposes new questions for researching transitions in professional learning and work derived from the preceding discussion, and suggests implications for supporting professional learning in these transitions. Overall the discussion is theory-based, exploratory, and suggestive rather than definitive. That is, the point here is not to present an explanatory classification or model of transitions, but to open questions through a critical comparison of theoretical approaches that appear to be influential in contemporary research of transitions in work and learning.

A sociological starting point
A key starting point for examining transitions in professionals' work and learning should be the sociology of work. The psychology of learning processes in work cannot be fully understood separately from an analysis of the systemic material relations of the capitalist economy. These economic relations have been changing, argues Sennett (2006), in a 'new capitalism' marked by unprecedented intensification of workload and work pace, and shifts in work relations to increasing emphasis on customer service and networked structures of entrepreneurial, competitive individuals. Intensified contingency and mobility of work in new capitalism is eroding links between workers and employers, and demanding worker adaptation. Sennett focuses concern on low levels of loyalty and informal trust produced through new capitalism's preference for short term labour and serial projects. This not only creates 'institutional deficits' (Sennet 2006: 64) and institutional paranoia, but also workers' anxiety and needs for high tolerance of ambiguity and self-reliance: they are left to their own devices to respond to targets. Time, argues Sennett, is central to this regime, with its accelerations and compressions. Order is imposed according to 'impatient capital' which demands short term results and immediate change. This is a rationalized time that cuts deeply into subjectivities and human lives, a point of concern that is stressed by others analyzing the effects of new capitalism on professional workers (Colley, Henriksson, Niemeyer and Seddon in press).

Within this broader picture, we can identify at least three main types of transitions affecting professional work in particular: transitions in (1) regulation, governance and accountability; (2) new work structures; and (3) knowledge development. In terms of the first area of regulation, Evetts (2009) argues that the work of contemporary professionals in many countries has been reconfigured by a transition from regulation centred in the 'occupation' to control by 'organisation' in conditions of new public managerialism. That is, control of work has shifted from the internal professional community as a collective, self-regulating body towards external performance measures and managerial planning. New regulatory agencies have emerged to set and assess standards for professional practice, sometimes with little involvement of professional bodies, and sometimes with

proliferating agencies governing different aspects of the same profession (Dixon-Woods et al. 2011). At the same time, the ascending role of the market in regulating professional work, through discourses of client 'choice' and demands for customer-orientation in the provision of services, complicates professionals' accountability and often compromises their knowledge authority (Brint, 2001; Dent and Whitehead, 2002). In short, public trust has shifted away from confidence in professionals themselves as guarantors of society's significant knowledge and servants of the public good to external assessment of professionals' productivity and observable outputs. Critical concern has noted professionals' increased performativity in such conditions, where professionalism becomes focused on performing ideals of the 'good professional' based on accelerated production, efficiency and deportment rather than ethics of care and justice (Colley et al in press). Furthermore, argues Adler et al. (2008), the rather romantic understanding of 'community' that has underpinned professional work and identities is becoming profoundly reconfigured through these regulatory forces of market, managerialism and organisational hierarchies, which are hastening the 'proletarianisation' of professions. All of these transitions conflict with and undermine values of autonomy, trust, and discretionary decision-making that historically have been central to professionalism (Freidson 2001; Evetts, 2002).

The second key issue concerns transitions in professional work structures. In recent years, interprofessional work requiring collaboration among diverse areas of expertise has emerged through new structures of multi-agency service, such as in child protection, as well as policy, such as for health services promoting interprofessional care. Practitioners are increasingly required to work with others who bring diverse forms of expert knowledge to the collaborative practice. This shift in work organisation challenges the boundaries of the professions as expert domains, but boundaries may at the same time be recreated in new ways as practitioners are positioned to represent their specific area of expertise in the collaborative work (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Y., and Ludvigsen 2009). Co-production is also increasing as a policy initiative for reform of professional work, requiring that public services are designed and delivered with service users and community members as equal partners with professionals (Lee and Dunston 2009). This transition to co-productive work arrangements has been described as revolutionary and transformational for professional work (Boyle and Harris 2011). It poses challenges in blurred boundaries of authority and accountability in decision-making, and reconfigures the nature and client relations of professional work (Needham 2007). Besides inter-professional and co-productive work, major transitions in professionals' work arrangements have emerged through new demands of transnational and contingent, project-oriented work. Some describe this in terms of 'projectification' (Ekstedt 2007), which demands new capacities among professionals in patching together diverse knowledges and negotiating work infrastructures and governance quickly (Johri 2011). A large literature base that cannot be examined in this short article has developed to examine practices in these contemporary complex work arrangements such as boundary spanning, co-configuration, knotworking, portfolio work etc., and related issues in professional identities, migration, and performativity.

Related to both regulation and work structures, a third important area of transition concerns the ways knowledge is developed and circulated in professional communities. As Green (2009:4) explains, part of the tension for professionals is the continuing distinction between 'practice-as-knowledge', and 'knowledge per se' which still tends to be understood in terms of scientific rationality. In professionals' knowing practice, for Green (2009), three principles are entwined: phronesis (understood as practical wisdom, or embodied rationality), praxis (in its Freirian sense of action-full-of-thought and thought-full-of-action), and aporia (the 'perplexities and impossibilities' of professional practice). The basis for professional work today lies, as in previous times, in the capacity to perform work in ways that are informed, guided by, and validated against shared knowledge and established conventions for practice. These knowledge conventions are increasingly contested and subjected to transformations (Fenwick, Nerland and Jensen 2012). A wide range of knowledge resources influence changes in professional practice: disciplinary traditions, emerging evidence-based protocols, new policy priorities, newly identified cultural and indigenous knowledge, and transnational virtual knowledge sources. This proliferating knowledge creates a manifold of partly conflicting evidence that lives and circulates in complex networks. Resources for professional learning are potentially richer than ever. However knowledge increasingly is marked with insecurity, and the task of validating and integrating different knowledges to address specific professional challenges is more demanding. At the same time, this development invites professionals to take on new responsibilities for knowledge, and opens new opportunities for engagement.

These three major transitions in professionals' work conditions – regulation, governance and accountability; new work structures; and knowledge development – have reconfigured a range of dynamics directly affecting professional learning and identity. While the transitions of professions and professional work, and the larger systemic relations within which these transitions are embedded, tend to be discussed most in sociological discussions of professional work, there are a host of related research traditions interested in exploring the effects of such transitions on people's lives and learning. From an educational perspective, these traditions are well worth examining for both their insights and limitations in ways to study and support professional transitions, and it is to these that the discussion now turns.

Prominent research traditions examining adult transitions

There are a vast array of theoretical perspectives and models purporting to explain human adult transitions. This section focuses on three general fields whose perspectives have become particularly prominent in research focused on transitions related to work: (1) developmental psychology, (2) lifecourse sociology, and (3) career studies. The discussion is not intended to be comprehensive but rather to contrast a sample of views. First, these suggest the origins of widely accepted assumptions and metaphors of transition. Second, they illuminate how particular formulations of the nature and processes of transition can lead to fundamentally different educative aims and approaches. Third, and of genuine interest to this discussion, each of these approaches offer fruitful insights for considering professional transition that ought not to be

dismissed just because they lack general consensus or have been countered by perspectives working from different premises. However like all theoretical orientations each of these has its own obsessions and blind spots. The following discussion is intended to serve as a brief overview of these well known perspectives, their contributions to educational researchers interested in professional transitions, and their limitations.

Developmental psychology
In the field of developmental psychology, models of transition have proliferated to explain individuals' responses to different types of change in their lives and in the environment (e.g. Adams et al. 1977; Schlossberg 1981). Early theorists of life stages such as Erikson (1959) contributed two main insights to the understandings of transitions. First, that human's experiences of transition are natural, universal, and inherent to the human condition: they are not irregularities, nor are they always or even often caused by external forces. Equilibrium is not a natural state of life, and only the deluded would continually seek it. Second, stage theorists showed that transitional periods are fundamentally about learning.

These days it is widely recognized that complex varieties of human life cannot be universalized as a standard path with a predictable series of stages and passages, or that all transitions can be assumed to become 'resolved' in some positive or negative way. Nonetheless, whether or not one agrees with Eriksson that the transitional space is characterized by conflict between positive and negative forces, or that the outcome is some sort of resolution, an important insight is afforded by highlighting the transitional space as dynamic, complex, and knowledge generating.

More recently, an important branch of study in developmental psychology has examined transitions in terms of 'life tasks', self-concept ideals, and coping strategies (Cantor et al. 1987). This has influenced conceptions of career as a sequence of developmental tasks related to career stages such as organisational entry, promotion, and late career (Super and Hall 1978). An individual's current life task is the set of tasks that a person sees herself working on and devoting energy to solving during a specified period of life (e.g. achievement life tasks, interpersonal life tasks etc). New life tasks are appraised, in terms of stress, reward, and expectations, as threatening or comfortable. That is, new life tasks can pose a self-concept discrepancy between actual and ideal selves. To manage the perceived anxiety of these transitions, people are envisioned as employing emotional and cognitive coping strategies. Cognitive strategies have been described as coherent patterns of appraisal, planning, retrospection and effort that translate an individual's goals and beliefs about himself or herself into effective action (Showers and Cantor, 1985). Emotional strategies include optimism and something the psychologists have called 'defensive pessimism', where individuals prepare for the worst (Cantor et al. 1987). Somewhat surprisingly given the upsurge in social science focus on context and culture, research continues in this individualist vein to attempt to identify the effects and supports of these personal strategies. For example, Brissette et al. (2002) writes about how the kinds of optimism that best manage difficult transitions are linked with social support obtained through strong networks.

Undeniably these are useful insights for educators to consider, regardless of the extent to which we might prefer to consider human activity as unfolding within a totality of intersecting factors. Nonetheless, the focus on the psyche of the single individual in relation to his or her experiences is a limited analysis. Also open to challenge is the possibility of reliably measuring, from among an individual's hundreds of memories and learning, which ones have been triggered in which contexts to construct a particular interpretation and map a strategy. Individual's emotional responses and notions of self within different transitions clearly are influenced by their particular cultural knowledge and cultural expectations, the mediation of their interactions by others' expectations, language, and positions, the forms of activity in which they are engaged (and the tools and technology), their positionings and representations, and so forth.

It is fair to assert that educators in work and learning, too, have largely shifted away from developmental psychological approaches to focus more outwardly on this sociocultural diversity and contingency that affect human transitions (Boud and Hager 2012), and to eschew the notion of a single normative self-concept in a general turn to accept that individuals perform and identify with diverse images of self. Nonetheless, it is important not to lose sight of these internal dynamics of transition, partly because this internal world is where many people dwell and make sense of their transitions to themselves, and partly because these psychological tropes of developmental stages, resolution, positive self concept, and coping strategies have become deeply rooted in folk metaphors that continue to influence educational conceptions of transition.

Lifecourse studies

An alternate approach to investigating adult transitions has arisen in lifecourse studies (e.g. Clausen 1986), which continue to focus on the ways that individuals encounter and work through transitions but with close attention to sociocultural context and diversity. While sometimes multidisciplinary involving scholars in psychology, sociology and health to study issues of, say, well-being in the life course, lifecourse studies tend to be situated as a form of sociological research that investigates the interactions between the economic, social, physical, behavioral, cultural, and other environments that mediate, or modify, individual functioning. It may involve in- depth life histories such as those featured in a recent large UK project *Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency* (www.learninglives.org) which studied learning biographies of 150 adults, or longitudinal studies of particular cohorts such as Andres and Wyn's (2010) research which followed secondary school graduates of the 1980s for 15-22 years, into and throughout their professional careers.

Lifecourse studies draw upon various theoretical constructs that are useful in considering professional transitions, including narrative and biographical learning (Tedder and Biesta 2009). Another common approach to lifecourse study works with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural and social capital (the material and symbolic resources for social advancement, such as knowledge, skills, recognition, important contacts etc, available to individuals through their particular social relations) that are argued to underpin

individual's life chances, life choices, and success in negotiating transitions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Additionally, life course transition theorists have drawn upon 'reflexive modernisation' theorists such as Giddens (1991) to show how continuously changing knowledge in late modernity, and the consequent continuous revision of social relations and activity, has created levels of uncertainty and doubt that are "*existentially troubling* for ordinary individuals" (Giddens 1991, 21; emphasis in original). Lifecourse studies have traced what happens when people's learning and identities, as well as their social networks and knowledge, become a 'reflexive project' that must be continuously reconstructed. Some have focused on the interrelationships among learning, identity and agency in the lifecourse, examining how an individual's identity as a learner, and capacity to exercise control over their live, impacts upon their learning dispositions, practices and achievements (Biesta, Field, Hodkinson, Macleod, Goodson 2011). These understandings point to the role of learning in transition, and to factors that restrict mobility or open new possibilities for individuals. They also highlight different ways that educators can understand and support adults' learning.

Clearly, particularly for educators, there are important concepts in lifecourse studies from which explorations of professional transitions can usefully borrow. Not only do professionals' identities and learning obviously draw from and help construct particular forms of social and cultural capital, but their personal opportunities and responses in transitions arguably are bound up with their habitus. Lifecourse studies focus upon the significance and impact of all sorts of learning experiences within the social and economic contexts of people's unfolding lives, and can suggest how different practices of learning may affect different professionals' capacity to exert control over their lives. Specific constructs used in lifecourse studies are potentially very useful in studying professional transitions. For example, these often focus on identifying particular 'triggers' of transition such as events, particular forms of transition (ranging from structured to incidental, such as critical illness), and individuals' different forms of response, including the discernability of turning points. Field (2006) shows important connections between people's learning and decisions in transition and the ways they themselves characterise these transitions as 'getting stuck' or 'becoming unstuck', or sometimes working through a creative space of 'liminality' that is between and beyond recogniseable positions and processes. Learning can be experienced by adults as both a 'blocker' and an 'enabler' of forward movement in managing transition (Field 2006). Transition can be experienced as periods of fluctuation as well as points of stabilisation. The messiness of conceptualising individual transitions and associated dynamics learning thus comes into focus in some lifecourse studies, as well as the importance of analysing the shapes of the transitional space and time.

Lifecourse studies, however, are limited to the extent that even though they account for contexts, their focus remains firmly upon a trajectory of linear chronological change located in the individual and the individual's lifepath. The mess of intersecting and mutually influential transitions, such as those identified through sociological perspectives of professional work, are in danger of becoming bracketed out altogether except as refracted through the feelings and experiences of particular individuals. Furthermore the concern with events, which is how individuals tend to construct their life story, can

flatten the complexity of social relations, reducing nuances of multi-faceted processes to single events as they appear to one single participant. The main potential limitation, however, occurs when conceptions of the individual lifecourse, and agency as located within that individual, obscures the complex dynamics entangling and producing subjectivities. Lifecourse research approaches, in focusing upon individual's recollections within their own construction of a life story in which they are the central protagonist, are not in a position to critically deconstruct the cultural discourses and infrastructures constituting those narratives. Nor is such research able to examine certain systemic influences on and outcomes of their actions that individuals tend to disregard in their everyday practices and overlook or delete from their experience narratives. This criticism should not dismiss as inherently limited the useful insights and approaches offered through the tradition of lifecourse studies. It suggests however that there is need for further theorisation to avoid humanist tendencies that assume a self-determined, agentic subject and to apprehend important dynamics that are missed in such excesses, at least in examinations of professional transitions. This issue will be returned to further on.

Career passages

Career studies offer a final perspective relevant to professional transitions that is worth mentioning. Within career studies, a notable body of research has developed around the transitions accompanying significant passages from one career stage to another, particularly from 'school' to 'work', but also from 'practitioner' to 'leader'. Most of these studies, argues Sawchuk (2010), centre upon the individual moving from one institution or sphere of activities to another, largely driven by the assumption that these passages are difficult and stressful. Outcomes can be problematic particularly in professional education where the transition from preparatory training, often in universities, to workplace settings is generally accepted to constitute a major gap with consequent struggles in readjustment and drops in competency. A myriad of supervised work-based placement programmes for novice professionals have been designed to bridge this perceived gap. For instance, in medical education circles there is real concern about junior doctors' transitions from their university training to their first posts in hospitals, with studies measuring the increased errors (Kilminster et al. 2010). In fact when we examine the literature on professional education across the professions, the most prominent issue by far seems to be the 'school to work' transition, with myriad associated educative prescriptions for better induction, mentoring, preparation for transition, and so forth.

Another example of educative insertion into career passages can be seen in the change management literature, which has become a small industry serving organisations. The premise of much of this is that individuals experiencing the change of organisational reform need educative assistance to navigate the planned change[2]. Bridges's work (2004) is one example from the management consulting literature that teaches workers strategies for managing the passage. Drawing somewhat from development psychology but

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[2] Another reviewer reminds us of the growing popularity of coaching practices and coaching literature that similarly aims to manage professional subjectivities and boost productivity.

embedded in the human resource premises underpinning career studies (whereby learning is directed at increasing the productivity of worker resources to enhance overall organisational performance and competitiveness), Bridges' three-stage model of managing transitions demonstrates many of the assumptions of this approach. He proposes that workers first experience 'ending, letting go' where they need to be assisted to deal with their losses and prepare to 'move on' to the second 'neutral zone' stage, where they need help in 'realigning and repatterning' to turn their confusion to innovation. In the third stage of 'new beginning', the educative help focuses on developing new identities and discovering new senses of purpose for work. Models such as this highlight the manipulative exploitation that can be produced through linking learning directly to an economistic focus, particularly when a focus on individuals in transition assumes them to be separate from and compliant with abstract systems.

The first problem with this passages approach is its assumption that spaces and places (school and university, small unit and large work organisation) remain static and stable while the individual travels between them. As Massey (2005: 59) and other critical human geographers have pointed out, this conception misses entirely the continuous dynamics through which space is open, relational, and multiple, socially produced and productive of social relations: 'unfinished and always becoming'. To represent the different spaces through which professionals move and work as fixed and static is to attempt to order and tame all of this relations. Furthermore, as Sawchuk and Taylor (2010) have pointed out, a school-to-work conception presents a normalised and homogenised linear pathway that flattens out the multiple, complex and non-linear pathways that individuals actually trace as they negotiate the labyrinths of transition. The focus becomes captured by inter-institutional transitions, which ignores or downplays the many intra-institutional transitions experienced by individuals, to say nothing of the multiple, uneven circuits of learning and work navigated by many professionals mediated by a variety of institutions, social groups, regulatory agencies, etc. The volume edited by Sawchuk and Taylor (2010) offers empirical cases showing how workers experience multiple transitions throughout working life, into as well as out of various conditions, including transitions in knowledge, dis/ability, and status – all of which can be understood only in relation to systemic shifts. Sawchuk and Taylor also criticise educational approaches inserting themselves into career transitions, arguing persuasively that these presume that young as well as established workers are in permanent state of deficit, without the necessary capacities to effectively live and work in the present and future economy. Underpinning these perspectives are models of learning and work that reproduce assumptions about the social distribution of knowledge and the legitimacy of this distribution and associated rewards. Overall, Sawchuk and Taylor (2010:14) challenge these default social spheres and social variables that have configured educational approaches to work-related transitions, and 'to extend our appreciation beyond the "supply side" of the labour market to illuminate how the capacity of educational or training institutions, as well as we employers, workplaces and industry effectively shape learning/work transitions as a whole'.

This critical analysis of the systemic interplays among the various educative, professional, organisational and personal forces and interests at play in transitions offers

an important insight to help move us beyond an undue focus on individuals and their lifecourse trajectories and emotional experiences of transition.

But overall the career passages approach, while potentially problematic, does help to identify particular sites and periods of struggle encountered by professionals in their occupational movements. In a sort of double-edged way, it also is a useful reminder of the continuing power of cultural narratives that reproduce conceptions of static institutions being traversed by individuals, with all the attendant expectations and responsibilities of the putative hapless, error-ridden individuals.

Critical considerations and possibilities
Looking across these three major approaches of developmental psychology, lifecourse studies, and career passages, certain shared assumptions as well as diverse emphases appear in their conceptions of adult transitions. Obviously within each approach there will be variation, critiques and counter-positions. The point of this summary is to highlight certain prevailing threads generated within these approaches that continue to influence the ways professional transitions are understood and addressed, both by employing organizations and educational institutions, as well as by practitioners themselves.

One theme concerns the response to transition itself in human life and practice. One prominent position, as we have seen, views transition as a *problem to be resolved* or managed. Another position imagines transition as *inevitable and continuous*. Field's lifecourse analyses, for example, are based on Bauman's (2004) argument that the world is in a state of constant flux such that transitions occur throughout life in myriad different contexts to which individuals belong only fleetingly. However even within this potentially generative ontology of liquidity in modern life, Bauman (2004:93) focuses on transition as problem: fluidity, he argues, erodes self-assuredness and shared meanings, and increases anxiety.

A second prominent theme is the notion of journey or pathway. With the focus on the individual professional transitioning across space and time, the systemic elements in which that person's activities and identities are entangled tend to be perceived as stable and static. The tendency then is to conceptualise a more or less linear developmental trajectory for professionals, in relation to institutionalized pathways or normative patterns of life and career. Transitions then become turning points on this journey, or milestones, critical events, even rites of passage. The problem with this 'journey' conception has been widely discussed in careers studies, where the contemporary emphasis tends to be placed on multiple pathways, disjunctures, and the temporary transactional relations between individuals and organizations (Baruch, 2004). New models have emerged to address the multiplicity and unpredictability of the unfolding work life, such as the 'protean' career as a mindset rather than a journey (Briscoe & Hall, 2006), or the 'kaleidoscope' career constituted through unrelated internal and external changes influencing the individual (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). These conceptions attempt to interrupt the idealised view of a path moving *forward* to *somewhere*, with all its assumptions of accumulated development and individuals traveling across static or

invisible spaces, to articulate some of the multiplicity experienced by practitioners in transition. Yet even so, argue Sawchuk and Taylor (2010), the mainstream study and representation of adult transitions still reflects an inherent economism, with a trajectory leading from the immature child to to the independent employable adult.

Related to the theme of journey is the metaphor of 'becoming' which is commonly used in describing professionals' transitions and learning (e.g. Scanlon 2011). The problem here, as poststructuralist theorists such as Davies (2000) have argued, is the suggestion of a unified subject *becoming* transformed, as though the 'subject' is an entity congealed into a single identity, rather than an opening in the everyday flux of practices, discourses and symbols. And according to what norms of professionalism is this becoming process supported e.g. through continuing education and assessed? What are professionals to 'become', and in whose gaze? Becoming is animated by moral imperatives that colour transitional spaces. Colley and her colleagues (2007) have shown, however, that professionals are often caught in transitions structured by conflicting responsibilities to various stakeholders: sometimes they must choose from various 'unbecoming' actions in order to fulfil core ethical codes for their profession.

Among most perspectives of transition, across the diverse positions, interests and purposes presented throughout this discussion, is a preoccupation with 'successful' transitions – usually with an eye to assisting individuals to successfully prepare for or manage their transition experience through counselling, education or other intervention. Ecclestone (2009:23) points out risks in this success focus, with an argument that is pertinent to professionals' transitions, of 'pathologising transitions by depicting them as unsettling, disruptive, daunting, anxiety inducing and risky but also creating normative assumptions about how best to manage them'. When education then focuses on learning to manage transitions, the complexity of transition becomes narrowed and its challenges flattened. Furthermore, the lifelong learning approach to transition often offers an adaptive perspective, reinforcing as given the systemic transitions characterising Sennett's (2006) new capitalism. Also reinforced is the continuing tendency to focus on the individual practitioner in transition, ignoring a range of social forces and materials implicated in bringing forth transition. In recent analyses of professional practice, the focus has shifted from studying the lone professional subject to examining the larger collective. This has been referred to as a 'practice turn', emphasising the embodied activity and configurations of practice in which professional work and learning are imbricated (Gherardi 2006, Hager, Lee and Reich 2012, Schatzki 2001). Some emphasize the sociocultural and historical dynamics of transformation in practice (Daniels et al. 2009; Guile 2012). Others highlight the importance of materiality, often overlooked in everyday work and life, showing how both social and material relations are entangled in bringing forth professionals' practices as well as capacities, tools, environments and knowledge (Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk 2011, Feldman and Orlikowski 2011.) A fuller discussion of these theories exceeds the scope of the present article, and in any case is widely available elsewhere[3]. Taken together, these critical considerations suggest that

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[3] See for example the following special issues: "Reconceptualising professional learning", *Journal of Education and Work* 2012, Vol. 26 No.1; "The critical power of the practice lens", *Management Learning* 2009 Vol. 40 No.2; "Re-turn to practice", *Organization Studies* 2009 Vol. 30 No.12

research in professional transitions is itself shifting in some quarters to acknowledge greater complexity. Nonetheless in the main there continue to persist limiting discourses, assumptions and metaphors that must be interrupted and opened if we are ever to escape the stereotype of an embattled anxiety-ridden individual struggling to overcome the 'problem' of transition.

Conclusions: New questions for researching professional transitions

As evident in the literature cited here, professional transitions in role, work structure, practices, knowledge, technology and migration attract concern in policy and educational responses. These range from alarm at perceptions of increased error during transitional periods, or desire to provide appropriate education and mentoring support during professionals' transitions, to mobilising individuals' transition. In formulating directions for future research to inform educational practice related to these transitions, useful insights are clearly evident in both the precepts as well as the critiques of traditional and more recent lines of research.

This discussion began by first asserting that professional transitions need to be understood within the broader fundamental shifts in the arrangements and conditions of work. Many commentators such as Sennett (2006) have argued that these include increased work intensification, acceleration, mobility, contingency and flexibilisation. Within these conditions, sociologists have shown sweeping systemic transitions across professional fields that include regulation, governance and accountability; new work structures; and knowledge development.

Second, we have seen that productive directions for future research might begin by refusing singular, universal notions of pathway and identity that creeps into certain constructions of transition, and look more closely at the effects of biography, social differences, economies, different narratives of cultural locations and so forth as these help to constitute accounts of transition. And how are transitions mediated by different agencies, policies, and expectations? Assumptions of risk and anxiety in transition also can be interrupted to focus instead upon individual and cultural constructions of difficulty in different contexts, and the dialectics of order and disorder in these constructions. We also might ask, how can we conceptualise transitions in ways that disrupt linearity, universality, and 'development' from deficiency to proficiency, to appreciate transition as multiple, complex, non-linear pathways? What metaphors for professional transition can move beyond the limitations of an individual on a forward 'journey'? Clearly space is not a static background for these journeys but an active and fluid participant. We might ask, what is the geography of different professional transitions, and how do different material forces and regions help configure transitions? We might interrupt assumptions of forward movement in these spaces with other representations of mobility and change (e.g. oscillating, expanding, returning, stitching, etcetera). 'Becoming' might be understood more richly in terms of emerging ecologies rather than congealing subjectivities.

Third, it is important to consider critically just what are the purposes and consequences of educational and pedagogical intervention in professionals' transitions, and the

justifications for these purposes. We have seen that education tends to be simply accepted as good for transition, even though it has often been directed by purposes of *adapting* practitioners to accept systemic change, *ameliorating* perceived risk and anxiety in ways that Ecclestone (2009) charges are infantilising, or *assisting* them to experience 'successful' transition. These aims all draw from normative configurations of transition that seek to predict and order, often without enabling people to critically assess the material desires and cultural discourses binding them to these norms.

A different focus in education can be developed through new research in professional transitions pursuing some of the questions summarized above. A full development of this vision must wait for another discussion. However in the meantime, we might imagine education that helps *attune* professionals to the multiple and complex nature of transitions – the shape of their personal transitional experience(s) in terms of the assemblages of practice, regulations, work arrangements, knowledge cultures and so forth in which their experience is unfolding. Practitioners can learn methods for tracing these assemblages and their own entanglements within them, and for assessing the materiality of their practice and its transitions. Practitioners also might find it useful to question normative assumptions constituting discourses of transition. They might critically examine the dynamics, including their learning practices, that restrict or enhance their mobility in transition and their capacity to imagine and enact productive alternatives. Rather than being assisted to make a successful transition, they might discuss critically what accounts of 'success' in transition are circulating and exercising power, working with what discourses, and with what effects on their practice and learning. Finally, educational research itself would do well to examine whether distinctly different forms of transition are experienced across different professional groups, activities and regions, and how practices of learning influence transitions among professions and professional workers. As this argument has contended throughout, we need to begin by interrupting current assumptions that continue to pervade educational approaches to professional transitions, and reframe the questions that we ask about this increasingly important site of practice.

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