The Ghost of the Stable Path: stories of work-life change at the 'end of career'

Dr Jesse Potter – Canterbury Christ Church University

Abstract:

Accounts of structural changes to the nature of work, employment, and the economy are numerous. Many of these accounts frame the transition from industrial to post-industrial regimes as destabilizing, bringing about a fundamental transformation to work, the economy, and labour markets. These changes are often juxtaposed against the backdrop of permanence. This article argues that while these accounts are romanticized and over-simplistic, 'traditional' notions of stability and linear progress remain the rhetorical benchmark for work and career. Drawing on narrative interviews with individuals who have undergone significant career change, the article examines the subjective, intimate, and interpersonal aspects of careers that are unstable, or in transition. These insights highlight how emphasis on structural changes to work and career can overshadow the discursive prevalence of more traditional or linear notions; that the *expectation* of progress, promotion, and linearity – often associated with 'traditional' work, or organizational/industrial career trajectories – remains hegemonic.

Key words: Career, Career Change, Identity, Narrative, Normal Career, Transition

Dr Jesse Potter
School of Psychology, Politics and Sociology
North Holmes Road
Canterbury, CT1 1QU
jesse.potter@canterbury.ac.uk

Introduction

This article explores changes to the way that 'career' is structured and enacted. An accumulation of research within the sociology of work, employment, and economic life has explored these changes; including extensive commentary on the 'new economy' (see for example Sennett, 1998; Sennett, 2006), the 'end of work' (Rifkin, 2004; see also Granter, 2009), as well as the divergence from what Ulrich Beck conceptualized as the 'normal career' (2001). While this article will highlight some of those arguments, it is not the author's intention to re-litigate their merit. Rather, the focus is on how the absence or unavailability of 'normal career' –

whether real or imagined – has been experienced by a number of men and women who have themselves changed careers. Their stories are revealing of the way that 'non-traditional' careers are negotiated and experienced. Crucially, that negotiation begins to reveal the tenacity of 'normal career' as an idealized arena through which working-lives are enacted and made sense of.

The relevant literature contests the stability and linearity of the traditional career path, arguing that many careers no longer fit the job-for-life model. Rather, it is argued that the trajectory of careers has become fragmented and unpredictable (Chudzikowski, 2012; Inkson et al., 2012). This is evident in the literature on the 'boundaryless' career. Typified by those working in the media and creative industries, 'boundaryless' work is not contracted to any single organisation or company, but takes place across and between (Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010; Rodrigues, Guest and Budjanovcanin, 2015). The notion of 'boundarylessness' suggests changes to work-life trajectories that are conceivably more encompassing. At stake is the consequence of trajectories that fail to offer the socio-economic and cultural accoutrements of the 'normal career' – namely progressive, linear, hierarchical, and predictable (station to station) movement through the ordered phases of a working-life (Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Cohen and Mallon, 1999).

These trends resonate in the broader 'new economy' and 'end of work' literatures; suggesting that unemployment, as well as the qualities of flexibility, impermanence, detachment, and self-reliance have taken precedent in the face of institutional and organizational change (see for example Granter, 2009; Rifkin, 2004). Sennett's work (1998; 2006) is of particular note as he highlights how the unavailability of the long-term employment relationship has had intrapersonal effects on working men and women. The constellation of these arguments suggests a structural (or institutional) dis-embedding of career trajectories from the linear and progressive model (the 'normal career'). While understanding structural changes – such as those to the labour market (see for example Beaston, 1995; McIvor, 2013) economy (see for example Sennett, 2006; Sundararajan 2016), and career trajectories (see for example Inkson et al., 2012) – is crucial to making sense of contemporary work and career, we also need to pay attention to the expectations of progress and linearity that remain associated with being 'successful', having a 'normal career', or having a 'good job'. On this account McIvor's work (2013) is of note,

detailing the shifting experience of work in post-war Britain through the narratives of a diversity of workers.

This article highlights a number of narrative accounts, focusing on a sample of women and men who have, for a range of institutional, organizational, and personal reasons undergone substantial changes to their careers. Some of these men and women had achieved the upper-end of promotion, some exited roles they found limiting and disaffecting, others did so for personal reasons (Potter, 2015). As such, the article aims to interrogate how fragmented trajectories have been enacted, experienced, and negotiated. It explores the impact that those fragmented trajectories have on our sense of self, as well as our relationship with those around us (Potter, 2018). The analysis suggests that despite 'real world' consequences of the (un)availability of stable and prolonged career trajectories, it is the lingering pull or expectation of their symbolic value that proves challenging. As such, the 'ghost of the stable path' looms large, particularly for those whose work-life transitions take place on the margins of the career norm.

Furthermore, it is argued that one of the hidden costs of non-traditional – or non-linear – career paths is the persistence of expectation; the discursive 'need' for work-life trajectories to resemble more stable, linear, and progressive variants. That expectation persists despite, in the first instance, the absence of work and career trajectories of a similar structural hue and, in the second, regardless of the extent to which stability or permanence ever existed in the first place (Strangleman, 2007). In this way, the post-war period has seen profound changes to the nature and structure of work and the labour market (McIvor, 2013), yet despite those changes notions of 'work' seemingly remain entrenched within a discourse of stability and permanence. Authors such as Strangleman understand this phenomenon as being due to what he calls a 'nostalgia for permanence' (2007), while Dries argues that what is understood as 'normal career' persists through a process of reification (2011). The following similarly understands the 'stable path' as a (discursive) lived experience (Potter, 2015); one which is imprinted upon the structure and institution of work and career, and one which is vaunted in its idealized form.

The article contributes to extant theory in three primary ways: First, the negotiation of 'stable path' narratives (re)articulates the opacity of boundaries between 'work' and 'non-work'. As such, the article engages and contributes to those theoretical renderings of 'work-life

boundaries' as being permeable, fluid, and negotiable (see for example Pederson and Lewis, 2012). Next, the proceeding cases highlight the extent to which 'stable path' narratives become a rigid, rational, and 'cold' intervening factor in intimate and interpersonal relationships. In this way the article – drawing on Illouz's seminal concept (2007) – takes forward the notion that 'normal career', as a rational and prescriptive orientation towards working-life, becomes a mitigating circumstance within which (some) partnerships are negotiated and carried out (Potter, 2018). Finally, the article extends and forwards critical theorisations of 'career'. As such, the following accounts support *and challenge* notions of career as flexible and impermanent. In the context of that impermanence it is argued that ideas of the 'normal career' – as a locus of biography and identity formation – remain entrenched in some work-life narratives.

After a brief discussion of methodology and literature the article explores two primary empirical veins. While the prescience of the stable path manifests in a number of ways, analysis will focus on two examples. In the first instance narrative material is presented reflecting the degree to which the 'stable path', even as a rhetorical construct, remains the cornerstone of a coherent self. Within this empirical vein many interviewees grappled with the loss of narrative stability. In the second instance interviewees' accounts reflect the extent to which the spectre of career normativity intersects both the intimate and interpersonal. In this reading the 'stable path' acts as a barometer against which relationships are measured, and through which they are negotiated. As such the intimate and interpersonal become a sounding board; reflecting the pervasiveness – though often in absentia – of stability, linearity, and progress within work-life narratives.

Methodology

Based on narrative interview data the analysis that follows is exploratory; representing a selection from 30 in-depth interviews with middle-income professionals. Conducted between 2010 and 2013 and set principally in London and the Southeast of England, the research from which this paper has been drawn explored the way that individuals narrate substantial changes to their working-lives; focusing on how issues such as personal identity and self-understanding are negotiated within fluid work-life biographies. The core research questions at the heart of that inquiry centred around (career) change as a biographical medium – how identities are

negotiated within work-life transitions; the characteristics of (career) change itself; and the possibility for shared resources (collective narratives) within projects deemed 'personal'.

The original sample from which this article has been drawn included a diverse mix of middle-income professionals: from social workers to teachers to accountants to editors. While the impetus for their changes was many, these individuals – on the whole – understood career change as a social and personal medium through which 'greater' issues of value(s), meaning, and identity were at stake. Their narratives make a suggestion – albeit, given the nature of the sample, a limited one – about the potential or possibility of non-linear career paths; that the 'work' of (career) change becomes integral to the way that (some) working-lives are enacted and understood. Moreover, given the relative uncertainty of the contemporary productive moment those accounts make a broader suggestion about narratives of work; that the notions of stability, progress, and linear forward movement are inadequate at accounting for the experience of the contemporary worker (Potter, 2015).

The sample highlights those narratives where the rhetorical tension of the 'stable path' was most acute. While all interviewees articulated components of this tension – describing the invariable uncertainty of productive transitions – the proceeding cases have been chosen for their explicit engagement with the rhetoric of 'stability', 'linearity', and 'progress'. For these individuals the possibility of stable path trajectories invaded multiple areas of their working-lives. While there are limitations to this approach, a narrative format provides an appreciation of the experiential, interpersonal, and cultural aspects of the changing career form. Moreover, interviewees' stories provide an insight into the work (or process) of identity formation within the context of absence, loss, and crisis (Lawler, 2014).

A narrative methodology also helped to dislodge the experiential characteristics of persistent career (Hamel et al., 1994). The use of narrative cases opens up an in-depth exploration of interaction. This reduces the detachment accompanying the 'positive approach' (Burawoy, 2009) and demonstrates how the holistic and expressive attributes of real-life occurrences (Yin, 2018) are rooted in speech acts 'selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience' (Riessman and Quinney, 2005: 395). The accounts at the centre of this article attempt to connect episodes of work-life ambiguity. They highlight the way these

individuals interpreted their experience, and what those interpretations suggest about the constellation of biography, history, and society (Riessman, 2003).

Interviewees' narratives were understood as interpretations of the career change process; that in articulating their experiences of career change these individuals were coming to terms with what they meant for their lives. This resonates with analytical understandings of narrative (analysis) in that lived experience is perceived and understood – by researchers and respondents – "in terms of continuity and process" (Bryman 2016: 590). In other words, it is not possible to view the events and incidences of an individual's life as isolated or unconnected. Those events *must* therefore be interpreted in relation and juxtaposition to what came before and after. Crucial to this analysis within the research was connecting the events and significant moments of my interviewees' shifts: How, for example, the end of an intimate relationship led to a one-way ticket to New York, which led to leaving dentistry, moving to London, joining a band, which then led to studying film score composition and ultimately composing film scores (with a host of other significant events and moments in between). In this way, narrative analysis helps us to see "the connections in people's accounts of past, present and future events and states of affairs", as well as their sense of "place within those events and states of affairs" (Bryman 2016: 590). The omnipresence of the 'stable path' lingered in the background of these connections.

The events and incidents within interviewees' stories were made sense of in relation to what came before and after. In this way, the narrating of these events and incidents is understood as a means of bridging diverse arenas of working-life. The use of a narrative interview format 'assumes' that individuals actively make those connections (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Furthermore, narrative data is the result of 'co-production'; where the participant and researcher produce meaning in collaboration. As such the data presented in this article is not intended to yield generalizable claims, but to begin exploring the conceptual and empirical boundaries of the problem.

The nature of these work-life changes was such that interviewees, despite their position in terms of social and economic capital, experienced measures of anxiety and uncertainty. For these very reasons their transitional narratives are ideally suited to explore the discursive persistence of the 'stable path'. Notwithstanding the practical implications of remunerative

uncertainty that their work-life transitions entailed, it was the threat to narrative identity that loomed large in their accounts.

The 'stable path' as the stable self

Dries argues that understandings of what might be referred to as 'normal' or 'successful' career – characterised by progressive upward movement in status, pay, or promotion (Gunz and Heslin, 2005; Heslin, 2005; Inkson et al, 2014) – are subject to reification (2011). The notion of 'career' is in this way 'reality-defining' (Dries 2011: 378). This suggests that collective understandings of career persist, and do so despite the well-reported emergence of fragmented, non-linear, and 'boundaryless' career trajectories. Anthony couched his transition in the language of 'freedom' and 'autonomy'. Moving from financial services to academia, he saw the change as an opportunity to free himself from the cutthroat culture of high finance, as well as the limitations of a progressive career trajectory. Offsetting those opportunities was the uncertainty of diverting from a working-life Anthony described as 'familiar' and 'stable':

J: So how did it feel when you left? ('the City')

A: Well for the first time there was a sense of, 'I don't know where it's all going to end'. And even now I find that very good...just a sense of not being tied down. Yet sometimes I find academic work daunting, there's almost an existential angst. But there's also a great freedom to be able to write something that's actually yours.

J: That sense of freedom also sounds like a form of anxiety.

A: There are moments when it is.

J: Tell me about those moments.

A: Yeah, when I start to have fleeting glimpses of, 'just go to Singapore and get my old job back', you know, I could just do that. It's a moment when you look for something to pin yourself and hold onto…it's sort of, 'I need something, oh my god, where's this all going, I don't know, I don't know'…therefore the first thing that comes into mind is, 'steady, steady, I need to hold onto something.' And the

first thing you hold onto is the thing you've just done. It's not cause you want to go back, but it's just that, well, this is something solid.

J: Can you say a bit more about what you mean by 'solid'?

A: Well you've done it, and it's familiar, and it's stable, and it's a job, and it pays. And all of a sudden it's like, 'should I really care about this?' 'Why should I be so,' that's the feeling that goes with it, 'why don't I just do it and not give a shit'. And then I think, well, 'I'd have to start at seven o'clock'…you know, I used to get up at 5:52, my alarm used to go off at 5:52 every single day, and I wanted to smash that fucking alarm, I'll tell you, you have no idea, or I'd wake up one minute before it went off. But then you start saying, 'well, it wouldn't be that bad cause I'd get up and go straight in,' and then, 'why do I care, just do it', and then we could go travelling every weekend, whatever, whatever. So you think about, you try and make excuses for the bad things

Anthony's description of duelling narratives – returning to 'the City' and the freedom of academic work – articulates the spectre (or haunting) of the 'stable path'. Within this dynamic both the real and perceived certainties of 'normal' career loomed large. Interviewees' grappled with the implications of this conspicuous absence; attempting to rearticulate their narratives in the imposing shadow of social expectations for how a career should be enacted, or a 'successful' working-life lived. These shadows of work-life normativity were structural – in terms of the practical and logistical aspects of 'career' – as well as ontological; with career instability facilitating self-doubt and uncertainty.

As we can see in the above passage the aftermath of career normativity was prominent. While Anthony experienced a 'loss' – of pay, security, trajectory – key to this analysis is the discursive power of the 'stable path' and its impact on Anthony's narrative. Anthony articulated that power; describing it as a pressure or 'need' to 'hold onto…something solid'. That pressure, according to Beck (2000) and Bauman (2005), is the product of a 'disembedding' – one that has moved individuals away from traditional career trajectories. The emergence of a reflexive self is argued to have filled this institutional void (Giddens, 1991), echoing a social context where institutions fail to provide identity, assurance, and trajectory. Anthony and other interviewees

carried the burden of this failure, struggling to divorce themselves from the (institutional) ideals of modernity. A paradox emerged as Anthony was haunted by a career context which he loathed; one which had him, as he tells us, making 'excuses for the bad things'.

Losing the 'stable path' made Anthony's ambivalence run deep. We see this reflected in a number of instances in the preceding passage, but most prominently in his rhetorical threat to go back to Singapore – 'I could just do that'. Uncertainty, as such, was the inevitable aftershock of the 'stable path'. For Sennett, uncertainty becomes a quality of character, one that he argues is cynically embedded "into the fabric of a vigorous capitalism" (1998: 30). Singapore thus represents a known entity, not just a regular pay check or sense of direction, but a foundation for ontological stability; a 'place' in which Anthony knew that he had 'done it'. As such, the residue of 'normal career' saturated his experience; his attempt to navigate through the remnants of an institutional framework strained by the shifting ground beneath his feet. In place of the 'familiar' and 'stable' Anthony must reshape his career narrative, a process framed by, as he described it, the 'need to hold onto something'. At stake was more than just the trajectory of Anthony's career, but the reliability of his narrative as a source of self-understanding.

In *The Corrosion of Character* Sennett presents an intimate snap shot of personal narratives undermined by the depravities of 'flexible capitalism' (1998). Sennett argues that his interviewees' experience of short-termism had them grasping for narrative stalwarts such as 'success', 'trust', and 'commitment'; that the 'new economy' had a corroding effect on the way that these individuals understood themselves (Sennett, 1998). My interviewees similarly felt the undermining effects of significant career change in terms that were biographical and intrapersonal. Whereas Sennett's protagonists struggled with the shifting markers of 'success' under flexible 'new economy' conditions (1998), mine grappled with the rhetorical burden of expectation in a cultural context in which 'success' remained rooted – at least rhetorically – in temporally linear forms (Dries, 2011). As such, less important here are the institutional factors behind, to borrow again from Sennett, 'not knowing what comes next' (1998: 30). Instead, it was the remnants of what has come before, socially and culturally, that had interviewees grasping for 'something solid'.

Similarly, John described his move away from a successful surveyorship as an 'inner journey'. Marking that journey were not only the practical implications of diverging from the 'career path', but ontological consequences as well:

> I think the hardest thing for me was giving up an identity that I knew, that created a me that I could say, this is what I do, this is who I am […] And I remember the night I wrote my resignation letter, when I decided, when I realised that, you know, the blinders had come off and I couldn't go back, I had to resign. And it was one of those November nights in the Highlands where the wind was howling and the rain was going. And I went down to the post-box by the little Phoenix shop to post the letter. And I was unable to do it. And I ran back and I was literally rocking with pain and fear. And it was a classic dark night of the soul because if I resigned I was cutting the cord to my identity, to my security, to my financial security, to being able to look after my wife and children. And I can still to this day hear the envelope hitting the bottom of the letter box. And I realised that was the moment that I'd, I'd cut, and I was actually terrified.

John interpreted who he was as being inextricably embedded in the various attributes that comprised his career. John's work identity, as such, can be understood as a culmination of values and characteristics – remuneration, security, the ability to be a 'provider' – that he associated with his career as a surveyor (Walsh and Gordon, 2008). John's difficulty was thus not surprising. Within the decision to leave his job he would have to forfeit – 'an identity that I knew, that created a me that I could say, this is what I do, this is who I am'. Richard Sennett helps us to frame this sentiment, suggesting that 'the notion of transforming oneself supposes the power to leave behind the life one has known' (2003: 35). Yet complicating that process is the extent to which self-understanding is marked by idealized expectations for how a working-life should be lived; that the tenets of progress, linearity, and material advancement are indelibly linked with popular (and persistent) notions of 'career success' (Dries, 2011), and a 'nostalgia' for career renderings rooted in an idealized past (Strangleman, 2007). As such, the conspicuous spectre of career normativity in John's case gnawed at his decision to, as he described it, cut 'the cord'.

An alternative reading is that we can understand John's 'cutting the cord' as a departure from the institutional norms of modernity; that his decision to change careers reflected an act of agency in the face of increasing institutional uncertainty (Chudzikowski, 2012). At the same time, John's decision to leave his career as a surveyor enacted a core assumption at the heart of the modern order; the autonomous and self-reflective self representing the culmination of modernity's cultural trajectory (Heelas, 1996). The agency that is a requirement of what John described as an 'inner journey' can be considered a fundamental by-product of modernity, 'the idea that it is possible to change for the better' (Heelas, 1996: 169). As such, John's cutting 'the cord' is evidence of having 'lost faith in the ability of conventional institutions to provide meaningful identities' (Heelas, 1996: 144) – as John puts it, 'the blinders had come off'.

The acuteness of John's experience reflects the power of narrative conventions to inform and frame identity. 'Cutting the cord' represented a more radical departure from, as John tells us, 'an identity I knew'. A push/pull dynamic takes place as John stepped away from career in a context where social meaning is argued to be increasingly found elsewhere (Casey, 1995), but one in which the discursive salience of career 'success' remains steadfast and potent (Potter, 2015; Dries, 2011). The narrative implications of the 'stable path' are in this way considerable as both a means of socialisation and identity. John's narrative, despite his not being able to 'go back', was littered with the discursive remnants of a more stable and linear form.

The 'stable path' as the stable relationship
Interviewees found the greatest challenge of changing careers not the practical upheaval of dramatically different productive arenas, nor even the requisite skills adaptation of new jobs, but how non-linearity impacted the way they understood themselves, as well as the way they interacted with the individuals around them. If we understand career as biographical then we can understand changing careers as being experienced relationally, or interpersonally. Career, in this way, becomes a sounding board through which our selves and our relationships are reflected back (Potter, 2015). This intersection blurs the already blurred lines between our productive and personal (or 'non-work') lives (Finchman, 2008; Pederson and Lewis, 2012; Pettinger, 2005). In the face of significant upheaval, and in the shadow of narrative signposts suggestive of 'normal career', interviewees reconciled their productive lives through mediums both intimate and personal. We can see this in the following interview excerpt. Michael – who

left his teaching job to pursue work as a sustainable builder – struggled with his role as a father in the absence of a more predictable ('productive') path:

> I sometimes think with my son I'm, I mean, he's been going through a rough patch, and I sometimes think, well, I don't know whether I help him much by being so, you know, not having a steady career. And he's trying to sort out what he's going to do with his life when he leaves college, and he's quite worried about it. And I sometimes think, well, if I was a little bit more sort of straightforward and had a straightforward job it might give him a bit more security. And he loves the building work that I do, but at the same time he's looking for some stability, and some guidance. And if I was a sort of straightforward kind of dad who knew what he was doing, I might be more helpful to him, I don't know.

The passage makes interesting commentary on idealized notions of fatherhood, and as such reflects the power of the 'stable path' as a discursive medium through which 'non-work' social and cultural arenas are formed and take place. Michael perceived his commitment to sustainability as being in conflict with his role as a father. While this provides a powerful commentary on 'fatherhood' – fathers as idealised representations of masculinity, as breadwinners, as stable, as oriented towards 'career' (Seidler, 2003) – it also suggests that the pursuit of a lifestyle that is sustainable, and the enactment of 'straightforward kind of dad', stand in opposition. The career norm, in this way, becomes a potent social and cultural medium; impacting our sense of self, our notions of appropriate ('normal') familial roles, as well as our identities as gendered subjects. Michael's case also highlights the extent to which the 'stable path' is far from gender neutral, but prescribes hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity, gender roles which are unsurprisingly indelibly linked to idealized expectations for who we are – or 'should be' – as productive actors (Padavic and Reskin, 2002). In this way, 'straightforward Dad' (as a productive identity) makes sense within a normative capitalist ideology that upholds social structures which are intrinsically patriarchal (Seidler, 1994).

While Michael's commitment to sustainability can be interpreted as a break from the patriarchal position of 'breadwinner', his son's perceived desire for paternal guidance in many ways returned him – at least rhetorically – to a more masculinised role (Seidler, 2003). As such, Michael's diversion from the 'stable path' was in effect a forfeiture of his role (and 'rights') as a

father, eliciting a double-bind in which Michael's narrative was destabilised within the context of multiple and competing (social) arenas. There are deeper connotations here for how work and career frame familial roles and structures, and tend to do so within highly gendered parameters (Crompton, 2006; Hochschild, 2012). In that fatherhood, in its traditional conceptualization, informs the composition of 'male identities' (Seidler, 2003) – 'having' a family the archetype of (masculine) respectability and authority – then Michael's suggestion of falling short had the effect of undermining not just who he identifies himself to be as a father, but also his sense of himself as a man (Seidler, 2003). For the purpose of this article it is suffice to show how the uncertainty of non-linear trajectories are expressed and articulated, and how those articulations can be intimate and interpersonal.

Michael's experience is testimony to the way in which notions of the 'stable' or progressing career pervade a variety of social arenas, many of them evidently 'non-productive' in nature. Returning to Dries' argument, this is possible – in part – because social, historical, and ideological factors have affixed 'real' meaning(s) to the notion of 'career success' (2011; see also Evetts, 1992). For example, one legacy of the industrial career model is that hierarchical advancement – not just within a single organization, but across multiple organizational contexts – remains associated with a 'successful career', and does so despite significant changes to the institutional arrangements which fostered this model initially (Heslin, 2005; Inkson et al, 2014). These socio-historical connotations hung over the way that Michael understood and articulated himself, suggesting their lingering pervasiveness as idealized markers of social status and identity.

We see a similar negotiation with Samita, as she struggled with her partner's unfulfilled expectations in the face of her decision to pursue a career in art:

> Peter came home and I think I said to him, 'I want to do this' (go to art school), and I'm pretty sure he must have hit the roof, or if not hit the roof then, I mean, there were quite a few hitting the roof kind of occasions. It was like, 'How are you going to do this'? And I was just so bloody minded at that point I just thought, I'm going to figure it out, if it means taking out a massive bank loan, if it means working weekends and mornings and evenings and being in debt and struggling, I want to go, I just thought, I want to go. And the other thing I thought was, well what am I

staying here for? I'm not in a relationship that's working because we both want two very different things; he wants the Samita that he had before and I am just not that person, and he feels like I've reneged on some contract, and I cannot get him to understand that that's not the case. It's like we were two different people.

While we may be tempted to understand the preceding passage as typical of domestic family negotiations, the 'contract' that Samita refers to portends to social arrangements that exceed the domestic sphere. Valcour and Tolbert (2003) argue that the 'dual-earner household' remains the model family type (see also Cha, 2010), and Samita and Peter's struggle suggests that violating that model has interpersonal ramifications. In this way, the conflict between Samita and Peter is a barometer of their choices, and whether or not those choices resonate with or run against what is 'normal' for 'dual-earners' on the 'career path'. Similarly, we see here the social ascription of the 'stable path' articulated interpersonally, emerging in the way Samita and Peter negotiate their relationship. Understandably Samita and Peter did not experience their roles as dual-earner as being social; as the outcome of historical and cultural ideals enacted within their relational dynamics. Instead, they interpreted those ideals as personal; as reflective of their relationship and feelings for one another. Non-linearity, in this way, becomes a tacit but tangible feature of intimate and interpersonal negotiations; the undercurrents of the career norm moving through multiple areas of social and personal life (Potter, 2015).

In the above interview excerpt it was Peter who informed Samita that she has strayed from the (socially) acceptable path. In turn, his disapproval signalled that she had violated a (social) contract. It is an unequivocal statement; one which makes clear Samita's deviation from the more normative career-path she previously occupied. For Peter it was an alteration of, as Samita described it, the 'supposed agreement' between the two of them. Implicit within that agreement were widely held assumptions integral to ideals of success, progress, and achievement: [Samita again] 'that a lot of people aspire to, that you, that there's two professional incomes that come in, and eventually you get a bigger house, you get better cars, you get better furnishings, you have children, and you're on that, you're on that *path* to having that kind of a life'. This imagery, especially as it relates to career, is not specific to Samita and Peter's relationships. At the heart of (Western) work-life narratives, being 'on that *path*, to having that kind of life' holds socio-cultural resonance (Dries, 2011). It reflects an aspirational culture of 'becoming', affixing into logical assemblages mainstream articulations of lifestyle,

status, identity, marriage, and 'career' (Berger et al., 1977) – constructed expectations that then get expressed between Samita and Peter. As such the 'stable path' – at its essence a social agreement – manifests as a 'problem' of intimate consequence (Hochschild, 2012); an understanding between Samita and Peter expressed as conflict – 'a supposed agreement that we had'.

This was similarly the case with Oliver, who understood the end of his career as a dentist, and the end of his relationship with his long-term partner, as invariably intertwined:

> So I worked as a dentist for a while, and sometime later, I think maybe triggered by the end of an eight and a half year relationship with a long term girlfriend, I decided that that wasn't, I mean, I finally had the guts to say, no, this is time to do something. I mean, maybe because in the long-term relationship you feel a bit tied down, and need to not think too much about yourself, and get a stable job, for the sake of the whole life together. And, so yeah, when that ended I thought, well, I'll try to start a new life.

For Oliver, the disruption within his relationship manifested within the trajectory of his career, the 'whole life together' – as he articulated it – contingent upon the successive progress and forward movement associated with the normal career form. The strength of this entanglement is notable as the notional margins of career – as a cumulative and progressing work-life project – come to encompass the normative codes of conduct within coupling. A teleological imperative pervades both; the notion of step-by-step progressing coupledom (Roseneil, 2006) running parallel with the mantra of 'upwards and onwards' at the discursive heart of the successful career. So Oliver tells us that he 'finally had the guts', but whether this is a reference to leaving dentistry or separating from his long-term partner is unclear.

Oliver's story, in this way, illustrates how the attributes of the 'stable path' are communicated interpersonally. For Oliver, dentistry brought 'financial independence' and 'lower level of commitments'. But as he attempted to juxtapose dentistry with his 'long-term relationship' Oliver connected it to being 'tied down', and that he should 'not think too much about myself'. The positive economic capital of a dentist's salary brought (financial) freedom, but that freedom became difficult to reconcile within the (emotional) commitment of long-term

partnership. As such, when Oliver tells us that he had 'finally had the guts' it appears more calculating and logical than it does emancipatory (or even emotional); a reasoned and rational expression of feeling, one seemingly reflective of what Illouz describes as 'disenchanted…modern love' (2010: 22).

We can see in this instance how the spectre of career normativity manifested similarly to Samita and Peter's 'agreement', as Oliver struggled to keep the personal and productive apart. At the heart of this entanglement is a fundamental precept; one which suggests that our emotional capacities are framed – if not determined – by the hegemonic nature of the (capitalist) economic system within which those emotions are expressed and experienced (Illouz, 2007). 'Disenchanting love', as Illouz refers to it, reflects a state of emotion in which the expression – or articulation – of love becomes constrained by structure and culture (2010). The 'stable path' thus becomes a (social, cultural, and personal) conduit through which other ('non-work') manifestations of work-life normativity – in this case 'normal' coupledom – are maintained and negotiated (Potter, 2018). As such, the qualities of each reinforce and uphold the other; the complimentary narratives of partnership and productivity running parallel. This is possible because forward movement that is progressive, measureable, and resilient is a core value of 'successful' capitalist narratives (Dries, 2011; Heslin, 2005; Inkson et al, 2014), and because institutionalized heterosexuality is a central organizing structure at the heart of capitalist societies (Ingraham, 1994). The durability of 'stable path' narratives rely on these types of intersections; where expectations for competing and complimenting work-life arenas come into contact.

Conclusion

While these examples are empirically finite, they emphasise how the absence of linear career trajectories – whether in rhetoric or 'reality', or whether by choice or chance – is impactful on a range of 'non-productive' arenas. Not only do we see here the intimate contours of the way some individuals reconcile fragmented trajectories, but we become aware of how notions of progress and linearity inform the way we understand ourselves, as well as our interactions with the individuals around us. The 'ghost' can thus be understood in two ways: First, in that the stable and progressive career is a nostalgic construct; and has never been as prominent nor available as has been popularly imagined (Strangleman, 2007). And second in that notions of

work-life normativity are prominent, persistent, and hegemonic, and as such have the effect of haunting, or looming in the narrative background of some men and women.

The meaning that we might draw from the preceding instances is multiple and varied. The extent to which specific renderings of 'career' persist is fruitful terrain; forwarding core inquiries into, for example, the blurred boundaries between 'work' and 'non-work' – or 'work' and life. Along these lines, Pettinger explores how a 'public' and 'private' demarcation is not as robust as is suggested. As such, this 'blurring of boundaries' problematizes renderings of work and non-work that are fixed and impenetrable (Pettinger, 2005: 55). Similarly, the 'stable path' permeates a range of arenas through which work-life narratives are enacted and articulated, and as such further unsettles the dichotomization of 'work' and 'life' (Finchman, 2008). John's 'cutting the cord' metaphor succinctly articulates this unsettling; an anatomical reference with biographical resonance which illustrates how his identity as a surveyor becomes inseparable from the way he understands himself as a father and husband.

'Stable path' narratives also extend the notion of 'cold intimacies'. Illouz argues that 'disenchanting love' is the product of emotions that are rationalized, and romance that is interest driven (Illouz, 2010). 'Stable path' narratives reflect this disenchantment as the imperative towards 'progress' colours even the most intimate arenas of social life (Potter, 2018). The experience (or process) of love has in this way become linear (Illouz, 2010), and this linearity slots succinctly along straight-line narratives of work and career. Samita, Oliver, and Michael's accounts reflect this greater rationalizing of work-life orientations as the discursive imperative of staying on 'that path' proves an intervening factor in their most intimate interpersonal relations – Michael's struggle to enact 'straightforward kind of dad', and Oliver's having 'the guts' to leave his partner and career just two examples of these configurations. In these examples Michael and Oliver rationalize intimacy; subsuming or considering their relationships as appendages within an implicit pull away from progress and stability.

Finally, the data explored here develops critical theorisations of 'career'. For John and Anthony it was the uncertainty of, as John says, 'cutting the cord'. Here the 'stable path' embodies the power of normative orientations towards working-life; and John and Anthony grapple with what is means to wilfully depart from those prescriptions. This highlights how the certainty associated with 'stable path' narratives impact the ability to articulate a stable self. Dries

suggestion of reification (2011) again proves useful; with John and Anthony struggling to disentangle 'career' as an idea, from career that is lived and negotiated. 'Career' as concept – or ideal – is again brought into relief as the resilience of linearity transects the malleability of the contemporary (career) form.

In *The Culture of the New Capitalism* Sennett claims that young workers with some higher education will on average change jobs at least eleven times over the course of their working life (2006). These numbers will undoubtedly have been inflated given the depth and breadth of the recent (so called 'great') recession. The preceding accounts suggest that a more holistic rendering of those changes might begin to reframe the way we understand not only what it means to have a 'career', but also form part of a deeper interrogation of the enactment and negotiation of *change* as an essential feature of the way working-lives are experienced and understood.

Finally, the preceding accounts suggest that workers, in particular younger workers, face a problem of narrative; that the complex and non-linear state of (many) contemporary work-life trajectories enmesh poorly with the biographical anchors of 'normal career'. As such young workers, in addition to the qualities of flexibility and adaptability, will need to adopt what might be termed 'narrative resilience'; negotiating the inevitable rhetorical 'failures' of the waxing and waning non-linear career path. In this way, the various markers of non-linearity – Hodkinson et al. refer to them as 'turning points' (1996: 4) – can be reframed. This reframing might chip-away at normative renderings of 'career success'; displacing the paradigm of 'upwards and onwards' with one more sustainable, and (possibly) in closer alignment with the diversity of social, cultural, and personal mediums that constitute 'career'. This may, in turn, begin to dispel the tenacity of linear career as an idealized model through which men and women continue to pursue their productive and personal lives. Further research is needed to ascertain how these 'turning points' come to be framed. What are the cultural and institutional mediums in which these connotations persist? How might younger workers, faced with non-linearity, articulate norms of 'success'? How might women and men negotiate non-linearity differently? If 'change' has become integral to the way that (many) contemporary careers are enacted then it becomes important to address the continuing presence or absence of a 'ghost of the stable path'.

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Jesse Potter is a Lecturer in Sociology at Canterbury Christ Church University. His research interests include issues to do with work identity; work and intimacy; career transitions; narrative methodology; and the impact of structural/institutional changes on work-life narratives

(particularly narratives of redundancy). His current research explores the transitional narratives of women and men made redundant in the wake of the so called 'Great Recession'. He is the author of *Crisis at Work: identity and the end of career* (Palgrave Macmillan).