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Conference Theme "Discourses we live by" (How) Do they benefit the world we live in?

How to play the game of exchange in a changing career landscape?

An exploration of peoples̕ career struggles expressed in a Swedish newspaper advice column

Introduction

This paper present an ongoing study in which focus is to explore what kind of career related issues ordinary people are struggling with, and for which they are searching for career advice support in a̕ questions and answers column̕ in one of the largest newspaper in Sweden. During some years in the beginning of 2000s such ̕questions and answers column̕ expanded in the newspaper and clearly people in working life seems to be troubled with many types of career issues. This is remarkable, and needs to be further explored. This study see advice columns in daily newspapers as expressions of peoples communicative actions, in which people´s thinking of careers is done out loud (Moscovici, 1973). In addition, these columns - in which people disclose their troubles with career issues they experience in daily life – are also seen as extracts of people´s biography, as they clearly expose some parts of their life history in these texts (cf. Westin, 1973). Of course, there are no complete stories told of a person´s complete life history in these columns. However, they reveal some important parts of their life history when they try to explain what is troubling them. In this sense, they strive to regain the feeling of being ̕organisers̕ of their own life course (Alheit, 2009). As stated by Alheit (2009) planning is the dominant attitude we have to our biography. The extracts of biographies found in the daily newspapers columns are therefore seen as formulated with the intentions from people to find out how to plan their further steps in their careers issues. Moreover, peoples´ biographies are here considered to be affected by societal changes from what Alheit describes as a structural perspective (Alheit, 2009). Such structural perspective has been explored (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012) in order to disclose the dominant discourses that guide the societal debates and policy-strategies regarding peoples careers and the need for career guidance.

Background

The past decades, tremendous changes have occurred in the world of work. Globalization trends and the gradual transition towards a knowledge-based economy have created uncertainty among all parties involved, when career contexts are changing, and career has become less predictable for people when they try to navigate in this new world of work. Previous research (Bergmo-

Prvulovic, 2013) has shown that a group of adults affected by work-related changes hold both stable and dynamic social representations of career, where the stable representations are clearly anchored in earlier working life conditions. Such thinking systems are challenged in the new world of work. Furthermore, the dynamic social representations among the examined group disclose thoughts of career as being a game of exchange (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2013). However, the outcome of the exchange seems to be less certain. An exploration (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012) of what kind of underlying perspectives that communicate certain views on career in policy documents on a structural level, revealed that such documents are dominated by economic perspectives on career. Altogether, this study therefore takes its point of departure from the common results of several studies (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b) in which the meaning of career is explored in the changing world of working life. The discourses of career – as they is communicated in societal debates, and on structural levels, communicate and characterize careers in new ways than the commonly shared everyday knowledge of career, often referred to as the traditional view of career where career is characterized as advancement, "climbing the ladder" (Savickas, 2008). New ways of communicating career emphasize the individual to be solely responsible for shaping his/her own career. Flexibility, mobility, adaptation and employability are examples of new ways of characterizing careers, where people need to continuously educate themselves, readjust their plans, adapt to outer conditions over and over again (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012). The dominating discourse on career we live by in contemporary society (as communicated on structural level in policy documents on guidance) is characterized as a "lifelong, recurrent, self-managed adaptation of life path in response to market forces" (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014). The neoliberal framing of career contexts might risk careers to become subordinated to market forces (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012), since the underlying neo-liberal perspective pursues an agenda towards a single overriding goal, that functions as an enterprise association that mobilize resources in the striving towards a dominant value within which other values will be subordinated (Plant, 2009). Senders behind such ideational messages in European policy documents are authorities and politically governed agencies, who legitimize certain visions and perspectives, based upon the needs and logics of business and organizations. In that sense, this discourse communicate *career as a strategy*, as a means to achieving organizational gals. However, this is in sharp contrast with people´s everyday knowledge of career. Their views on career have both a personal and a social meaning. On the one hand, career is seen as an individual project and self-realization, on the other hand they see career as social/hierarchical climbing. Moreover, they see career as a game of exchange, where they think of career in terms of expected efforts and expected outcomes, internal and external rewards, for instance. They also express career as an uncertain outcome (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2013). The professional community of career guidance, in turn, have difficulties in how to clearly express what meaning they give to career. They have formed a professionally view of career as something other than the "common view". They focus exclusively on the individual, and implicitly the see career as personal growth, and life development (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015a, 2015b). In conclusion, career is a bridging object that involves several parties, however the phenomena of career is communicated by different communities and groups, and anchored in conflicting logics. As noted by (Billig, 1987), discourses do not have the same status, and therefore some discourses dominate over others. The discourse dominating on structural level in contemporary society, is clearly related with

the changing world of work, based upon the needs and logics of business and organizations, in how to find strategies to cope with changes in a global and competitive world.

Purpose

The aim of this study is to explore what kind of career struggles people express and search support for in a career advice column in a Swedish Daily Newspaper. Furthermore, the aim is to disclose what kind of social representations on career that seems to guide people´s thinking in their questions. In addition, the aim is to analyze how these career struggles and social representations relate to commonly held discourses on career phenomena in contemporary working life.

Theoretical perspectives

When people speak about career, they seem to have a common view of what career is (Collin, 2007). At the same time, there are also multiple meanings of career that can vary among groups, actors and disciplines. However, in order to understand ordinary people´s daily `taken for granted` thinking on careers, this study takes its standpoint in the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1984, 2001), in order to understand people´s everyday knowledge of career. Social representations are by Moscovici (1973) defined as

> …a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual group history (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii)

Based upon this definition, and further reasonings of Moscovici (Moscovici, 1988, 2008), Bergmo-Prvulovic (2015), outlines *career as social representation* (2015, pp. 52-57). She argues that career phenomena clearly consist of socialized expressions that organize ways for people to communicate about career with support from images, language, symbols and codes. These in turn, represent, symbolize and identify actions and situations that are common among people and also among groups of people (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015, p. 53). In social representation theory, the significance of communicative processes are emphasized as being crucial to the creation of people´s common sense knowledge about a certain phenomenon (Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 2001). Thus, it is through communication that social representations of career come into being, irrespective of whether communication occurs through conversations, through the acts of people or through mass media. According to Moscovici (1984) it is through communication that "thinking is done out loud" (Moscovici, 1984, p. 21). In this regard, each forming of a discourse can be seen as being preceded by a social representation of a certain phenomenon. Discourses as ways of speaking about something both begins in, and contribute to the shaping of a social representation.

Methodology

Data collection

Career questions published in the Swedish Daily News (DN), during the years between 2011 and 2015 were identified and downloaded after a searching procedure in the Retriever

database. The searching procedure applied the searching terms "Dagens Nyheter" (Daily News) AND "Karriärrådgivaren" (The Career Counsellor", in order to locate the questions asked in the newspapers column. The initial search resulted in 111 hits, and the delimitation was set between January 2011 and August 2015. The searching procedure was made on the 17 of August, 2015. Numbers of hits for each year are presented in Table 1, below:

Table 1. Results of the searching procedure

Year	Numbers of hits
2015	26
2014	44
2013	17
2012	5
2011	17
Summa	111

The 111 columns were downloaded and read, in order to scrutinize if they were relevant for the purpose. Some of the texts were excluded as they were not referring to the column. Altogether 99 published question columns were included in the material for analysis.

Analysis of data

The analysis of data is based upon qualitative content analysis with an initial inductive approach (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The formulated questions are regarded as extracts of biographical expressions (Westin, 1973), based upon the reasoning of peoples´ dominating attitude towards their biographies as the need for planning (Alheit, 2009). Each text was read, in order to get an overall picture of the data collected. Thereafter, the expressions, regarded as the meaning units, were condensed, coded and sorted into sub-categories, categories. The categories with same/similar content were brought together and resulted in the naming of altogether 9 overall themes. The analytical process seeks to reveal conceptual expressions that guide and bound peoples thoughts in the career dilemmas they are struggling with. The disclosed career struggles are thereafter interpreted and discussed related to the commonly held discourses, and dominating discourses, we live by in our contemporary, global society.

Preliminary results

The analysis resulted in some preliminary overall themes, categories and sub-categories that clearly express different kinds of career related issues that people are struggling with in their daily lives. These are presented below, with the themes as structuring headings.

Need for recognition, acknowledgement and appreciation

It is evident that people in their daily lives are troubled with feelings of not being recognized. They express needs for acknowledgement and appreciation. Several extracts of biographies disclose such themes, and many are clearly concerned with feelings of being betrayed by the company. For instance, one support-seeking person (141214) express how the workplace over the years has promised both competence development, higher salary and more responsibility, without fulfilling their promises. The person is about to lose all trust for the work-place and is

preparing to seek new jobs. Yet another example (140831), express frustration in that she is not recognized in the same way as her male colleagues, even though she delivers better results than they do. Another extract (141214) disclose a story from a person who had been promised advancement, but instead the boss hired a best friend and the support-seeking person now struggle with feelings of being betrayed and degraded. Another story (130929) comes from a woman (?) who is working as assistant, but clearly is the one who do all the work behind the boss. She is the shadow behind, and make sure the boss manage her job. The woman says that nobody knows that she is the one behind all the successful work, and that she now is struggling with whether she shall move on, and finally receive recognition for the work she does, or whether she shall stay. The stories goes on, with similar themes. Another example (131110) express feelings of not being fairly treated after having delivered a well done work, without any appreciation or recognition. One story (140126) from an employee disclose how the new boss provides no support, and the support-seeking person begin to wither. There are also stories from people who feel they have more to give, but they are given no possibilities to show or use their competence. For instance, one extract of biography (111016) clearly disclose how a woman struggles to do herself justice, but have become unsure about her own capability. Other stories are concerned with people who feel they have been incorrectly evaluated, or incorrectly valued. One story (140608) express worry about how a result from a recruitment test was interpreted in a way the support-seeking person do not recognize as true. Several stories (110914, 150816, 150412) are concerned with disappointments when they do not receive neither higher salary nor recognition for a work with more responsibility. These stories are concerned with the issue of responsibilities, as well as the story (140119) in which a confusion concerning responsibilities between the support-seeking person and the boss is disclosed.

Advancement – how to advance and move further?

Several (how many?) extracts of biographies disclose questions concerned with peoples' ambitions and aspirations to advance. Some examples clearly express the aspirations towards higher positions. Other express desires to move further, to leave the present job. One example (111023) disclose a person´s desire to leave the present job, but the support-seeking person is unsure of if there are any possibilities for him because of his age of being over 50 years old, and how he shall act in order to come into question in such competitiveness. Another example (111106) comes from a teacher, who is tired of the lack of career possibilities and the low wage. In addition, the main part of the work consists of administration and the support-seeking person feels confused in how to move to another branch where pedagogical issues are of importance. Another example (111113) provides a story from a leader who would like to move to another branch, but continue as a boss. Several stories disclose feelings of being trapped. There are also examples of women who are highly educated, and try to advance into leader positions (150311). One example (140413) describe a person who has ambitions and clearly wants to advance, but struggle with feelings of not being noticed, recognized or confirmed. The person is about to loose the guts and considers to resign. Yet another example (140302) comes from an immigrant woman, who is highly educated with academic merits and who struggles with feelings of being hindered on several levels. She describes herself as a strong woman, with potential and she feels she have so much to give. She clearly express ambitions and aspirations to become a boss, but do not understand why she can´t advance.

Transitions to new positions

Several examples of questions are concerned with peoples' feelings and troubles they experience in their transitional state towards new positions. Several examples reveal stories from people who have accepted a higher position and the pressure from superiors to increase profitability, solve group problems where others before them have failed. For instance (150426) express how

a persons is troubled with feelings of being unsure of how to succeed, if the job is a "mission impossible". Another example (140316) disclose how a person who is in a transitional state towards a position with responsibility for leading a group, where the group question the persons capability of doing so. The group is testing the persons' capacity of leading.

Handling mentorship

Some questions are concerned with how to handle mentorship. The questions come from both sides – that is, both from those who act as mentors, and those who are given a mentor at the workplace. For instance, those who act as mentors (140824, 140330) are frustrated since the mentorship takes too much of their time. The stories from those who have been given a mentor (131117, 110907) disclose an uncertainty in how to behave, and also disclose feelings of not being in a need of a mentor, while another story (150201) express worries from a mother who is concerned for her daughter, who clearly need support and help on her work, in how to handle stress, demands, criticism, and relationships.

Handling of/understanding the labor market

Several extracts of biographies are concerned with issues of how to handle and understand the conditions on the labour market. For instance, one story (140601) disclose worries about not being attractive on the labout market, and worries about how to keep one´s competence and how to ensure one´s employability. The position the person holds at present, seems to contain risks for stagnation. Another story (111204) is also concerned with how to be prepared for change, for recession and the increased pressure on the labour market. The importance of how one appear in the eyes of the judgers, are concerns highlighted also in other stories (141012), where the working culture is too competitive and the support seeking person wants to leave, but is afraid to be regarded as one that fails. Another example touches the same theme (141116), but with focus on the desire to not work full time, as the commuting is exhausting, despite flexible working conditions. Other questions are concerned with how to entrance the labour market (141026), how to behave when seeking a new job (140914), and also how to handle the new methods of seeking jobs through social media (120108).

Individual shortcomings

There are some extracts of biographies that disclose people´s feelings of inadequacy. The stories consists of not being good enough, and also about how to cope with already made mistakes.

Leaders' behavior – employees experiences of mistreatment

Several extracts of biographies are concerned with people´s feelings of being mistreated by their bosses. For instance, (150510) there are stories about how the boss, in front of other colleagues and co-workers, humiliates the person. Such incident have occurred both in a meeting, and while the person has conducted an information presentation for customers. This behavior from the boss, causes feelings of insecurity. Another example (150419) is how the support-seeking person is troubled by the actions of both co-workers and the boss, towards a colleague. The text illustrate how the boss traduce the colleague. The support-seeking person is feeling very bad because the boss is legitimizing the behavior. In addition, the boss has revealed facts that should have been classified as confidential. Yet another example (141102) describes how the boss is being unpredictable and intimidating, and communicate double messages. When the support-seeking person and colleagues try to ask for clarifications, the boss gets angry and accuse them for questioning her.

Leaders' behavior – employees experiences of controlling managers

Other extracts of biographies concerned with managers behaviors, especially disclose their troubles with bosses who are being controlling, and demanding.

Leaders' needs for support in handling daily situations

There are also questions from leaders seeking support with how to handle different situations. For instance, one extract of biography (140518) disclose a worried boss, who is concerned about two female employees who are at risk of burnout. The boss has spoken with them, but they continue to work with the same behavior, quite in contrast to the male co-workers. Another story (140420) is concerned with the opposite situation, that is, with how to engage the employees. Other extracts (140928) are concerned with how to handle a situation where an employee have dissatisfied customers. The boss is worried for the risk that the company will have a bad reputation and to be held accountable for the situation. The concern for be held accountable for others failures is also disclosed in another extract (131124)

Interpretation of the results

In this section, the disclosing procedure of what kind of social representations on career that seems to guide people´s thinking in their questions, are presented. Clearly, career struggles are guided with social representations referring to the social meaning of career, concerned with *career as hierarchical/social climbing*. This is evident particularly clear in theme 1 and 2, but also in theme 3 and 7. Key words and expressions mentioned in such extracts of biographies are for instance advancement, higher positions, and expressions relating to external rewards and outcomes. In addition, these themes mentioned (1,2, 3 and 7) alongside with the 5th theme "Handling/understanding the labour market" are guided also by the social representation of *career as an uncertain outcome*. All themes (1-9) relate, more or less, to the social representation of career as a game of exchange, between expected efforts and expected outcomes, and rewards. These involves both personal and social meanings (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2013). However, people are clearly struggling with the social meanings in search for transparent outcomes, recognition and appreciation. Other themes reveal career struggles of a relational character, and therefore falls under the thinking of career as exchange between the parts involved. In addition, questions asked in the advice column are predominately concerned with people´s career struggles on the job they are on, or the job they are moving to. This means, career is here clearly localized in organizational contexts.

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Discussion

How do these career struggles relate to commonly held discourses on career phenomena in contemporary working life?

First, the express an everyday knowledge of career, referring to "traditional views" on career (cf. Savickas, 2008), and such views are anchored in past working life conditions and now challenged in the new world of work.

Second, they struggle against the dominating discourse regarding career as solely a strategy for achieving organizational goals. They rather search for how to understand the social meaning of career, they search for a relational perspective on how career is seen as a mutual relationship between employer and employee, that is, how career is a game of exchange. Clearly, it takes two to tango.

Preliminary results reveal that people in contemporary working life are struggling with career issues because of their anchoring in previous working life conditions and therefore they clash with both the experienced new conditions and with new ways of speaking about career

phenomena. Clearly, people are searching for career support and advice because they are trying to navigate in an ongoing changing career landscape where they try to identify and understand the new rules of the game between themselves as employees and their employers as well as between employers and their employees. It is evident that both employers and employees have difficulties in understanding the rules of the game. The expansion of questions and the increasing need for advice and support during the years 2011-2015 clearly indicate an uncertainty among ordinary people in how to play the game of career exchange in a changing career landscape, where stable and observable conditions have been replaced by flexibility and blurred outcomes.

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