**Career development –a longitudinal study into career value change**

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**Summary**

Career theorists have long suggested that age and life stages have an impact upon our career values. However there is substantial disagreement over how this actually manifests itself. Some suggest these differences are generational with external factors playing an important role (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). In contrast developmental theories of careers focus on what happens in distinct career stages. These theories provide some structure to careers through the lifespan suggesting that early careerists will focus on exploration, mid careerists are concerned with advancement and the late careerists concentrate on passing their skills to others. Savickas (2002) calls for more longitudinal research in the field of careers to examine in depth what happens to individuals as they progress through these stages rather than taking the more popular cross sectional approach to research. This paper describes the development of a study that aims to examine career values through the lifespan using the career anchor model as a measure of career values.

**Introduction**

Many theorists have speculated on how the career changes over time and with the collection of work experience (e.g. Super, 1957; Levinson, 1978; Schein, 1978; Greenhaus, 1987). These theorists have proposed a variety of models that show how the career develops and changes across the lifespan. Each developmental theory suggests a number of stages to the career. There is reasonable level of agreement between the main lifespan theorists that there are three main phases of a career, these are:

1. Early Career – this is generally seen to be an exploratory phase where individuals are just entering their career, finding out about themselves and about their organisation.
2. Mid Career – normally the individuals will have established themselves in a career by this stage and will be concerned with advancement and development.
3. Late Career – the period leading up to retirement for most individuals, this often involves taking on a mentoring role, passing on one’s skills to others.

The main contributor to the developmental theories of careers has been Donald Super (e.g. 1939, 1980). His work has spanned 50 years during which his developmental theories were continually revised and updated (Herr, 1997). The main development of his perspective was a movement towards the consideration of non-work elements that contribute to the career experience, this he called his life span, life space approach (Blustein, 1997).

The developmental theories began with very rigid views about the ages and biological basis of the stages described (Blustein, 1997). This led to criticism of this approach. Arthur et al (1999) explain that, as a result, developmental theories have become more cyclical than linear, with people experiencing stages more than once and at different times in their lives. Super himself stated that the stages were not biologically determined. Instead they were affected by lifestyle factors meaning that stage and age are not necessarily directly related (Super, 1990).

However, Super himself admits that what he has created is not a testable theory but a loosely unified set of theories dealing with specific aspects of career development (Super, 1984 in Herr, 1997). As a result the developmental approach can be useful in describing the experience of individuals at various points in their working lives but it is difficult to see how it can be utilised to improve career choice, planning and development. Savickas (2002) recommends that careers researchers focus on developmental perspectives first and careers, in the traditional fitting the person to the job sense, second. Savickas (2002) believes that the developmental perspective can be used to underpin other models of career development and that knowledge of them is essential for any perspective on careers.

Some researchers have focused on generational differences in career values suggesting that they are shaped by our experiences (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). For example, Loughlin and Barling (2001) suggest that for younger workers the concept of work life balance is more important because many of them have seen their families suffer from work related stress and now recognise the impact this can have. Research evidence also suggests older workers have stronger work values than younger workers evidenced, for example, by taking greater pride in their work (Susman, 1973) or by placing a higher emphasis on work (Cherrington et al 1979). Cross sectional research indicates that values may contribute to career success being manifested differently at different ages with materialistic definitions of success becoming less important with age (Sturges, 1999).

In light of the increasing diversity in the working population and the ageing workforce as discussed above these differences in work values across the ages are likely to become increasingly prevalent. Some authors suggest that as the workplace now consists of four different generations this is leading to clashes between them over how work should be conducted (Zemke et al 2000). Much of this has arisen from speculation, as there is limited research into how the generations actually differ. Guardo (1982) speculates about the way in which differences in generational experiences have led to stark differences in the values held by different generations. Hodge and Bender (1974) showed that a combination of generational and individual factors as well as social climate could lead to value change in adult life. It could be argued that with the event of an ageing workforce research into how and why career values change across the life span is particularly important now. The findings of such research are needed to ensure smooth transition into the multigenerational workforce of the future.

Recent research (Steele, 2009) used the career anchor model as a basis for examining differences in career values. Two aspects of this research are relevant here. Firstly as a result of Schein’s (1996) predictions that the career anchors held by individuals are likely to change due to changes in the work environment the prevalence of each career anchor in a variety of studies between 1985 and 2009 was considered. This cross sectional research was carried out to begin to look at generational shifts in career values using career anchors as a measure. Examination of this data shows the lifestyle anchor increasing in prevalence as the primary anchor from 1.9% in Schein’s 1985 sample to 10.5% (Igbaria and Greenhaus, 1991) to 23% (Yarnall, 1998) to 53% (Marshall and Bonner, 2003) and 38% in this study. This increase is in line both with Schein’s predictions but also with the trends discussed in the research literature that suggest lifestyle factors are becoming more important to individuals when considering their career. General Management was the least frequently occurring primary anchor in the most recent study which compared to previous work suggests its prevalence seems to be decreasing from 27% in Schein’s (1985) study to 26% (Igbaria and Greenhaus, 1991) to 6% (Yarnall, 1998) to 14% (Marshall and Bonner, 2003) to just 2% in Steele (2009). This suggests that maybe the traditional career path into management is changing. Heslin (2005) reports that a study of MBA graduates indicated that two thirds did not follow the prototypical career path of managerial promotion. Similarly a recent survey of senior executives in Fortune 1000 companies found that 60% stated they had no desire to hold the CEO’s position.

It has to be noted when making comparisons between these studies that the samples used within each study are not matched. This places significant limitations on the interpretability of these findings and whether or not it can be said that real increases or decreases in prevalence have occurred and suggests a strong need for a longitudinal approach to this research.

The second component of Steele, Francis-Smythe & Arnold’s research (in prepn) that is of relevance here is their work on the stability of career anchors. Using the career orientations inventory (COI) as a measure of career anchors a test-retest approach to stability was explored over a two week and 12 month period. When participants were contacted after 12 months they were asked to report any significant changes that had occurred in their life and their career. 15 participants reported such changes. With just a two week gap reliability coefficients ranged from 0.68-0.90 after 12 months the range was between 0.43-0.70. However, when the 15 participants who had reported a change were removed from the analysis these rose to 0.68-0.73. Freeman (1962) argues that this would show not a defect in the instrument but an indication that the constructs being measured do and have changed. Closer inspection of the COI scores for the 15 individuals who reported a significant change shows that each of them has a change of five points or more on at least one of the career anchor subscales between testing periods. This was not replicated for individuals who had not reported a change. This suggests that when individuals reported a change that was significant to them there had also been a shift in their career anchor scores, as measured by the COI.

Steele, Francis-Smythe & Arnold’s (in prepn) research indicates a need to consider a longitudinal approach to career anchors research. Schein’s (1978) original research leading to the development of the model followed a sample of 44 alumni over a ten year period. During this time Schein conducted a number of interviews with participants to explore their career choices. This approach generated a rich data source from which to examine the development of patterns in career decisions. This resulted in the career anchor model. Savickas (2002) states that longitudinal research designs are rare in the field of careers and proposes that this type of research should be encouraged in the future. This is an example of where a qualitative research design could add significant depth to our knowledge of career anchors and career values more generally.

In summary a longitudinal approach to career anchors research in the future would greatly contribute to our knowledge of the model and to our knowledge of value change more generally. The dynamic nature of work that exists and the increasingly diverse nature of our workforce means that knowledge of how external factors impact upon individuals’ needs and values could provide valuable information to organisations to improve both individual satisfaction and organisational performance.

**The Proposed Research**

The authors propose to continue their work using the career anchor model to examine the factors that contribute to changes in an individual’s career anchor(s). A mixed methods, longitudinal approach is proposed partially replicating the approach taken by Schein (1978). Participants will be interviewed annually over a ten year period using Schein’s (1978) career anchor interview schedule. This examines career decisions, changes and general thoughts about one’s career. The COI will also be used to measure their career anchors annually along with a measure of objective and subjective career success. Four groups of participants will be recruited to look at changes in different stages of the lifespan. The first group will be tracked from age 20 to 30, the second from age 30 to 40, the third from 40 to 50 and the fourth from age 50 to 60. The data analysis will be conducted separately for each group to ensure a longitudinal rather than a cross sectional approach. Qualitative analysis is proposed to examine career stories and any themes in development that occur for each group. This will be combined with quantitative analysis using measures of career anchors and career success. This proposal is in the early stages of conception and the authors are in the process of considering funding options and industry participation. Given the size and nature of this proposed continuation of existing research the authors are seeking comments and feedback to help them take this forward. More information will be available in time for the conference.

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