

*‘I’ve finally got my expression’: the anchoring role of identity in changing from an organisation-based career to a protean career path*

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# “I’ve finally got my expression”: the anchoring role of identity in changing from an organisation-based career to a protean career path

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the role of identity in changing from a traditional, organisation-based career to a protean career path. Biographical narrative interviews were conducted with 12 prime-aged U.K. participants. Data were analysed using narrative and thematic analysis. Findings highlight the anchoring role of identity in transitioning to a career driven by values, and demonstrating adaptability in an unpredictable work environment. Findings are used to propose a definition of identity relevant to protean career changers, and to suggest that clear identity should be considered *the* core characteristic necessary for thriving in transitions to protean career paths. Career practitioners are advised to prioritise identity exploration with clients seeking to transition from an organisation-based career to pursue a self-directed, values-driven career path.

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## Introduction

Globalisation, technological advances, knowledge work and economic uncertainty are shaping modern careers (Hirschi, 2018). Career paths are becoming more dynamic and idiosyncratic, as the risk and responsibility for personal development shifts from organisation to individual (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic represents further change and uncertainty for career paths (Hite & McDonald, 2020). In this climate of job insecurity, individuals can benefit from crafting a career path based on their own values, rather than those of an organisation. Thus, the protean career construct – driven by personal values and self-direction, and requiring the metacompetencies of identity and adaptability (Hall, 2002) – is increasingly important. With this study, we contribute to vocational literature by exploring the role of identity in the transition from an organisation-based career to a protean path.

## Theoretical framework

### *Twenty-first century careers*

The “traditional” career path of the twentieth century was – at least in theory – characterised by linear, vertical progression up an organisational hierarchy, and the pursuit of objective success in the form of promotion and salary (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009, p. 1547). For traditional careers, the

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implicit psychological contract between employers and employees has been described as long-term and relational (Rousseau, 1989). But the psychological contract between employees and employers is evolving (Savickas, 2013). Technology, globalisation, the knowledge society and changing organisational structures have all contributed to the prevalence of shorter, more transactional psychological contracts between employers and organisations (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). Increasingly, careers are non-linear and individualised (Hirschi, 2018), and driven by the individual rather than the organisation (Hirschi, 2018; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Thus, modern careers are more a “project of the self” (Grey, 1994, p. 479) than a concept linked to a specific place or way of working (Hirschi, 2018).

Capturing this phenomenon, the U.S.-originated protean career construct (Hall, 1976, 1996, 2002) takes its name from the shapeshifting Greek god Proteus. In contrast to the traditional career, the protean career is characterised by personal values, self-direction (Briscoe & Hall, 2006), and subjective success: the “feeling of pride and personal accomplishment” arising from the achievement of personal goals (Hall, 1996, p. 8). In theory, the protean careerist requires two metacompetencies, identity and adaptability (Hall, 2002). A metacompetency has been defined as a competency powerful enough to impact the development of other competencies (Hall, 2002). In protean literature, the term identity – synonymous with self-concept – refers to both self-awareness and continual personal development (Gubler et al., 2014; Hall, 2002). Meanwhile, adaptability – defined in protean literature as “the capacity to adapt or change” (Morrison & Hall, 2002, p. 205) – is critical for anyone carving a self-directed career path in the modern climate of uncertainty and change (Hirschi, 2012, 2018; Savickas, 1997).

Despite calls for more research (e.g. Baruch & Vardi, 2016), there is still relatively little empirical or conceptual elaboration on the original protean career theory. Syntheses of international empirical research reveal that most studies use quantitative methods to measure protean career orientation; its antecedents; and outcomes such as career satisfaction, success, and self-management (Gubler et al., 2014; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Yet such positivist research is narrow in scope; and, by focusing on protean career orientation as a psychological construct, neglects the processual unfolding of a protean career path (Gubler et al., 2014). There is a small body of qualitative research on the protean career, including several studies highlighting the relevance of the construct to leaders within organisations, especially women, in Europe and Australia (e.g. Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007; McDonald et al., 2005; Wolf, 2019). However, more explorative, qualitative literature is needed to broaden knowledge about the key components of the protean career, and the complexity of their interactions within a protean career path (Gubler et al., 2014).

### *Identity: a protean metacompetency*

There is a need to elaborate on the metacompetency of identity, used in protean literature primarily to mean clear self-concept (Gubler et al., 2014). This entails awareness of one’s “needs and motivation, abilities, values, interests” (Hall, 2002, p. 172). Identity in protean literature is also characterised by continual development (Gubler et al., 2014). Hall and Mirvis (1996) described the protean career developing continually in shortened versions of Super’s (1980) lifespan cycles of growth, exploration, establishment, and mastery, known as protean learning cycles. Successful completion of a protean learning cycle results in subjective success, and identity development (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Hall & Mirvis, 1996). The mercurial Protean metaphor, and the construct’s emphasis on identity development and adaptability, imply that the careerist can shapeshift effortlessly into different roles (Inkson, 2006). Such adaptation is valuable in an unpredictable economic environment, which requires constant rebalancing between identity and adaptability (Gubler et al., 2014). Yet, it may be distressing for the protean careerist to change identities continually (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). Thus, the lack of qualitative empirical research on protean career paths raises the question of how the two protean metacompetencies, identity and adaptability, play out in reality (Gubler et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it has been suggested that the influence of the metacompetencies has been downplayed in the protean career construct. Briscoe and Hall’s (2006) definition of the protean career, primarily characterised as values-driven and self-directed, has been critiqued as incomplete; and Gubler

et al. (2014) proposed that the metacompetencies should be integrated into the definition of the protean career. This aligns with wider vocational literature, which highlights the importance of identity in crafting a personally satisfying career path (Hirschi, 2012). However, despite proposals for elaboration of protean theory, no previous research has elucidated the role of identity in transitions to protean career paths.

### ***Identity and career changes***

Identity has enjoyed sustained academic attention in the context of career changes (defined as any major change in work role or context; Ibarra, 2007). For Ibarra (2007, p. 1), identity provides an answer to the question, “who am I?”. An individual has multiple, dynamic identities, which emerge in different contexts; with some core identities, like work identity, more deeply ingrained (Ibarra, 2007). Career changes necessitate an identity transition, defined as disengagement from a core identity, and exploration and integration of a new identity (Ibarra, 2007). Given the importance of work identity, this experience can be psychologically challenging, presenting an unconscious paradox between maintaining a coherent, stable self-concept, and being open to change (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Petriglieri, 2011). In order to overcome this challenge, individuals may engage in identity work: activities that “create, present, and sustain personal identities ... congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348). Identity work for career changers involves experimentation with “provisional selves” as they test, discard, and select new work identities (Ibarra, 1999, p. 764).

Previous empirical research on transitions from organisation-driven careers to more self-directed career paths has focused on the lived experience of individuals in the U.K. and U.S.A. (Ahn et al., 2017; Ebaugh, 1988; Mallon & Cohen, 2001). However, the role of identity in transitions to individualised careers requires further research, because such a change removes the influence of the organisation’s social structure on identity (Ibarra, 2007; Petriglieri et al., 2019). To our knowledge, the explicit inclusion of the protean career construct is a novel contribution to career change research.

### ***The present study***

With this study, we aimed to contribute to three research gaps. Firstly, as most empirical studies on protean careers adopt quantitative methods to link protean career orientation with antecedents and outcomes, there is a need for more exploratory qualitative research elucidating the complexities of an unfolding protean career path. Secondly, there is a need to critique and elaborate on the protean career construct, and its component parts (values, self-direction and the metacompetencies of identity and adaptability). In particular, there is value in elucidating the role of identity in the protean career, and its interactions with the other elements of the construct. Thirdly, there is a need to understand the role of identity in the specific context of transitions from organisation-based careers to protean paths. Adopting a qualitative approach to capture the nuance and complexity of such a change, we asked the research question, “what is the role of identity in the transition from organisation-based careers to protean career paths?”

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

We recruited 12 U.K.-based participants via purposive sampling and snowballing, using social media, our network of contacts, and posters distributed on local public noticeboards. We asked participants to provide their informed consent via a signed form and pseudonymised them to ensure anonymity, in accordance with the ethical approval given to the study by the University of Westminster, London<sup>1</sup>. Participants self-selected on the basis of being (1) of a prime work age, between 25 and 55 years old (OECD, 2017); (2) having transitioned from an organisation-based career to a self-

directed, value-driven career model (but had not retired or semi-retired); and (3) having confirmed that they identified with a description of the protean career:

driven by the person, not the organisation; based upon individually defined goals; encompassing the whole life space; as well as being driven by psychological success rather than objective success such as pay, rank or power. (Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p. 6)

With the sample size, we did not intend to represent every person moving from an organisation-based career to a protean career model. Instead, our intention was to gain an in-depth understanding of the career development process through these participants' stories (Chase, 2005).

### **Data collection**

We conducted semi-structured interviews, lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. This method provided a consistent format to enable us to detect patterns during analysis, while allowing participants to share their experiences openly. We designed the interview protocol using a biographical narrative approach (Rosenthal, 2004). Narratives are a reflection of identities, and can reveal how individuals construe meaning and identity from significant life transitions, including career changes (McAdams, 1997; Singer, 2004). The interview protocol consisted of a single narrative question:

Could you tell me about your career to date, starting as far back as you like? That could be your school days or whenever you first started to think about your career. You have as much time as you would like, and you can talk about anything in your life that is important to you personally

This protocol gave participants the freedom to tell their stories with minimal interference; however, where relevant, we drew on prompts, additional questions, and active listening cues to help participants continue their narrative. We transcribed interview recordings verbatim as a preliminary stage of analysis, and stored in a password-locked folder.

### **Data analysis**

We conducted data analysis in two stages, similar to previous analysis of career narratives (Cooper & Mackenzie-Davey, 2011). Firstly, we analysed each individual's narrative independently: guided by Polkinghorne's (1988) narrative structure of beginning, middle and end; and focusing on identity development and the recent transition out of an organisational setting to a protean career path. We then discussed the analysis of each narrative and the evidence this provided about the role of identity. Secondly, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted by the first author using N-Vivo 11 qualitative research software, and audited by the second author. The data was analysed inductively, using line-by-line coding (Patton, 1990). Coggle mind-mapping software was used to cluster and re-cluster codes allowing themes and sub-themes to be generated. Subsequently, we took a more deductive approach to highlight the significance of themes to the research question (Boyatzis, 1998) and according to the conceptual framework of the protean career. In order to further ensure trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005), the first author kept field notes and a reflexivity diary during the interviews and initial analysis. During each stage of analysis, we both reflected on our personal biases and assumptions, and challenged each other on these, before agreeing on the study's findings.

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request. They are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

## **Findings**

### **Narrative analysis**

Following their early careers, all participants had reached a stage where they were ready to evolve or expand their work identity. For some, identity exploration was a natural next step in their

organisational career as they expanded into new, related roles. For others, this was a more sudden, emotional turning point: they described suddenly feeling out of alignment with their organisational identities, resulting in a strong urge to change career. Charlotte explained, “It was really dramatic at the time, it felt quite hard to do, but – it was like a, I don’t know, like a need, I just needed to change”.

Several participants whose narratives were rich and reflexive described proactive identity exploration before and during their career changes, involving reflection and experimentation in different roles, organisations, and industries. Hazel shared an example of this: “I started, started to try and imagine life outside, what would it be like ... silly things like, what clothes would I wear? Where would I get my coffee? Started to dream, kind of ...”

Identity exploration did not always unfold in a smooth and linear path, and nor was it always successful. Participants engaged in various unsuccessful attempts to develop their career identity; and several participants reflected on how difficult this time was. Recalling her experience, Anisha shared that “casting adrift your previous identity with nothing to move on to, with the whole world saying you’re mad was the hardest way, hardest time”.

Depending on the ending of their narrative, participants’ accounts were interpreted as falling into two groups. For Group 1 participants, despite challenges and setbacks, a clear sense of identity in the protean career was evident by the time of interview. They described feeling grounded by a strong sense of who they were and what they wanted from their career, in terms of values, if not necessarily specific goals. Their narratives ended with a sense of subjective success:

I’ve finally, I’ve got my expression, I’ve found my sense of mission in life ... . And I’ve actually got to the place where I love work ... I’ve got an idea of where I’m going and how to fulfil my mission, and I’m a happy guy. (Nick)

Participants in Group 2 did not report a clear sense of identity by the time of interview. They were still at the stage of exploring and experimenting with “possible selves” (Ibarra, 2007, p. 1) in their new career. Oliver, who was torn between two different career paths, reflected on this period:

It brings up loads of good questions, about who you are and what you are ... makes you really, ask a lot of questions, and wonder how you should be spending the time. And I think, that’s something I’m not, haven’t quite figured out yet. (Oliver)

## ***Thematic analysis***

While narrative analysis focused on the role of identity in participants’ career stories, thematic analysis was used to explore other elements of the protean career framework. The three themes reflect the other core components of adaptability, values, and self-direction. Key differences between Groups 1 and 2 identified in narrative analysis are highlighted.

### ***Adaptability***

All participants saw adaptability as an integral part of a protean career. No participant felt that they had reached their final career model: all fully expected to continue adapting and evolving, with a number referring to their career as a “journey” and a “path”. At the time of interview, all participants had displayed sufficient adaptability to make some objective success of their protean career path (even if this was not felt subjectively by all). For example, participants described success in setting up business ventures, embarking on academic study, and volunteering. Adaptability, however, was not consistently or easily displayed during the career change. On a practical level, there was fear about business ventures not working out; the financial issues of losing a steady income; and the challenges of working alone. On an emotional level, anxiety and loneliness were common. Faye reflected on this adjustment period, remembering: “at home ... I found it difficult just to know what to do ... I found it really difficult like first 6 months or so, just getting used to the new life”.

There was a key difference between the two narrative groups in terms of their appetite for adaptability in the future. Participants in Group 1, who had achieved a clear identity in their new career model, accepted – and even welcomed – the need for adaptability in the future. This clear self-

concept seemed to act as an anchor for Group 1 participants in facing the uncertainty of the future. No participant felt that they had reached their final career model: instead, they described feeling comfortable with, and even welcoming, this uncertainty.

You've got to just stay with it and see where it goes. The whole flow thing ... you've no idea, just stay open. You know you don't know how it's going to turn out, so don't pretend you do know. (Anisha)

Participants in Group 2, who were still experimenting with their protean identity, expressed more anxiety about the uncertainty of the future. This was interpreted as being the result of their still-developing self-concept, creating more anxiety about the adaptability required by their new career path.

People keep saying, what are you going to do with this, what are you going to do? And the honest answer is, I mean I'm not totally clueless, I mean I have a plan, but I still at this – at this point I feel quite a long way off ... (Adele)

### Values

A clear sense of identity was interpreted as being critical for changing to a protean career. Group 1 participants managed to integrate their values confidently, combining personal and societal values and knowing which to prioritise.

I'm not compelled by the idea of turning this into Interflora ... I love that it's at the kitchen table ... making millions is definitely not my, it's, it's not my goal. There's a bit of me ... that really likes stability ... I have a pay-check, I know I can ... pay my bit of the mortgage ... But the other bit of me is very much likes to see where the wind takes me. (Charlotte)

In contrast, Group 2 participants seemed to struggle to reconcile their different values, which was interpreted as being linked to their less clear self-concept, which were still made up of disparate elements which were not yet integrated. For example, Oliver felt that a career pursuing his creative passions conflicted with his sense of altruism, which he had expressed more during his career in healthcare.

I feel like I'm not necessarily of particular value in what I'm doing at the moment ... to like, broader society ... I think my, part of my personal values would be, not to just be an entirely selfish individual ... Personally I feel like it's what I want to be doing ... but at the same time I do wonder about ... how I'm going to satisfy that, by actually contributing, and not just, existing for myself. (Oliver)

### Self-direction

Unlike the other protean components of values and adaptability, no clear difference was detected in how the two different identity groups perceived their level of self-direction. All participants' sense of personal agency increased with their transition to a protean career path. Although some described having some degree of autonomy in their organisational work, most indicated that they did not feel in control of their career; Hazel described "sleepwalking" through her twenties. In contrast, most participants felt that their protean career was more self-directed. For example, Helen shared: "I'm now driven by my own experience, and my own encounters, and my own, what I feel is important, rather than being driven by an organisation".

Yet participants' sense of self-direction in their protean career paths was not absolute, even for those with a clear sense of identity in their new career. Most participants attributed their career change at least partly to intangible forces like chance, serendipity, and God; and to influences from the social context.

### Discussion

In this study, we sought to explore the role of identity in the transition from organisation-based careers to protean career paths. To our knowledge, this study is the first to provide qualitative

analysis from self-identifying protean careerists on this topic. Our analysis supports existing theory in suggesting that clear identity is critical for the protean careerist (Hall, 2002). We also make two new contributions to protean literature. Firstly, we propose a definition of identity specific to protean career changers. Secondly, we suggest that a clear identity plays an anchoring role in this type of career change, and that identity supports the expression of personal values and adaptability in the new protean career path. Below, we discuss findings in relation to relevant literature before presenting limitations, and implications for practice and future research.

### ***Definition of identity in protean career changes***

Our first contribution to vocational literature is to propose a definition of identity pertinent for protean career changes, integrating the study's findings with elements of identity definitions from Ibarra (2007) and Hall (2002). For protean career changers, we propose the following definition of identity:

Knowing who I am, and what's important to me in life; living life [including work] the way that works for me; and being open to ongoing change and development.

Protean career change identity is characterised by a sense of satisfaction, fulfilment, and subjective success, regardless of uncertainty about the future. This protean career change identity is more holistic than just being a work identity: it is overarching, and manifests in different contexts. Consistent with previous literature, our interpretation of the results indicates that a clear self-concept can be developed by identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987) and by experimentation with provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999, 2007). Indeed, protean identity continues over the lifespan in protean learning cycles lasting three to five years (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Hall & Mirvis, 1996). We discuss this definition of identity further below, and we propose it for use by career counsellors and in future studies on transitions to protean career paths.

### ***The anchoring role of identity in changing to a protean career path***

For self-directed careers, a clear self-concept is critical to compensate for the structure and social context provided by an organisation-based career (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Our results highlight the anchoring role of identity for individuals changing from an organisation-based career to a protean career path. More specifically, our results demonstrate how identity supports the expression of personal values and adaptability in their new careers. Notably, identity was not interpreted as influencing the expression or perception of the fourth component of the protean career, self-direction.

Group 1 participants, who had developed a clear self-concept by the time of interview, were interpreted as having more clarity over the values that were important to them, and confidence in how to integrate them in their new career paths. Meanwhile, those in Group 2, who were still exploring their protean identity, described less clarity on which values to prioritise, and how to integrate conflicting values. Previous vocational literature describes the dynamic and reciprocal link between identity and awareness of values (Hall, 2002; Hirschi, 2012). Our interpretation of these findings highlights a nuance in this dynamic relationship: in the specific context of changing from an organisation-based career to a protean path, a clear identity enables the expression, integration, and prioritisation of personal values. For example, identity can help the individual decide whether to prioritise a personal or social goal in their new career path.

Adaptability did not come effortlessly or consistently to any career changer interviewed. Participants described both practical and emotional challenges of adapting to their new career paths – evoking the complexity, and the dark side, of significant career changes (Ahn et al., 2017; Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Ebaugh, 1988). According to protean theory, the metacompetencies of identity and adaptability influence each other continually in a dynamic interplay (Gubler et al., 2014; Hall,

2002). Our findings suggest a nuance to this interplay in the context of this type of career change. A clear sense of identity in the protean career was interpreted as providing an internal anchoring force, enabling the individual to display adaptability more easily. For individuals in Group 1, clarity over the question “who am I?” supported them to remain curious and confident in the face of an uncertain future – thus, demonstrating adaptability. Meanwhile, Group 2, who were interpreted as having a less clear self-concept, expressed more anxiety and less adaptability about an uncertain future, as they also grappled with what to do in the present. We propose that this is because a clear identity acts as an anchor in an unpredictable environment, offering stability to the individual, even as this self-concept is still open to continual development (Gubler et al., 2014).

Our analysis of these findings suggests that a clear identity is more than *a* competency necessary for aspiring protean careerists (Hall, 2002). We propose that identity is *the* primary component required to thrive in the transition from an organisation-based career path to a protean one, by supporting the expression of values and adaptability. Thus, we echo the call to integrate identity as a primary component of the protean career definition, proposed by Gubler et al. (2014), rather than simply a required competency.

### ***Limitations of the study***

The research design entails four limitations for this study's findings. Firstly, the relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of these results. Secondly, the data collected is cross-sectional: results are based on the career stories constructed and narrated by participants retrospectively. Thus, we were not able to explore career dynamics in action, as longitudinal research would enable. Thirdly, as with all qualitative research, our role as researchers and interpreters of data adds potential for bias and subjectivity in the results (Morrow, 2005). Fourthly, results are limited by participant characteristics. All participants were U.K.-based, and we surmise that the relevance of these findings may be limited to Western cultures, where the subjective success and self-direction associated with individualised careers are more likely to be valued over job stability (Hofstede, 2001). All participants were educated to at least undergraduate degree level, and reported the benefit of financial support from family members or inheritance. Thus, these findings may not be relevant to people lacking education or financial resources. Finally, findings may be influenced by self-nomination bias: interview data from people less likely to participate (for example, people who felt their career change had not been successful) may have generated different results.

### ***Implications for practice and future research***

The results of our study have valuable implications for career practitioners and future academic research. For career practitioners, these findings indicate that a clear identity is a key component in changing from an organisation-based career to a protean career path. A clear self-concept anchors the individual in a climate of uncertainty, supporting the expression of personal values and adaptability. Thus, coaching or counselling interventions for individuals seeking values-driven career paths should prioritise identity work, aiming to build identity resources (Hirschi, 2012) via exploration and experimentation. Furthermore, it is important to consider the role of identity in career transitions alongside the continually evolving nature of identity in self-directed, values-driven careers (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Hall & Mirvis, 1996). We, therefore, suggest that individuals wishing to create and maintain meaningful, personally satisfying careers may need to seek repeated interventions over their lifetime, as their identity continues to develop in protean learning cycles.

For future academic research, we build on suggestions by Gubler et al. (2014) and echo the call to integrate identity as a core element of the protean career construct, rather than treating it as a meta-competency. For future empirical research, longitudinal qualitative studies would be valuable to further understand the development of protean career paths, and to address the temporal dynamics of the process of changing from an organisation-based career to a protean one. Future research

should also seek to explore the lived experience of protean career paths in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, the finding that several protean careerists did not perceive their career as being self-directed calls into question the construct's emphasis on self-direction, and is worthy of future research.

## Conclusion

In the unpredictable work climate of the twenty-first century, individuals need to understand the characteristics and activities that will serve them in crafting their own personally meaningful career paths. By analysing qualitative data from protean career changers, we offer a small contribution to this important topic. We sought to explore the role of identity for individuals who had changed from organisation-based careers to protean career paths. Findings indicate that a clear sense of identity plays an anchoring role in this type of transition. Identity enables career changers to thrive by providing a secure foundation, enabling the expression of personal values and adaptability. We advise career practitioners to focus on identity work with clients pursuing such a career transition, adopting the definition of protean career change identity proposed in this study's discussion as a tool to support this work.

## Note

1. University of Westminster Psychology Ethics Committee - Decision ID ETH1617-1127.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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