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**Structuring the Void:
Making Meaning of Careers during Times of Uncertainty**

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Conceptual Motivation

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, both academic (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003; Grant, in press) and popular literature (Jensen, 2005; Richards, 1995) has focused on the meanings people attach to their work. The attention to finding meaning in work may in part reflect reactions to recent reports that employees are increasingly disengaged from their work (Jensen, 2005; Sennett, 1998). Additionally, events such as the attacks of 9/11 have brought existential concerns to the fore for many people, including what value one's work, as an important part of one's life, contributes to society at-large (Wrzesniewski, 2002). Such concerns lie at the heart of many career transitions (Ibarra, 2003), and more broadly, the meaning of one's work is likely to be salient in times of change.

The meaning of work is typically defined as comprising the answer to the questions, "What do I do at work?" and "Why is it important?" (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). For work to be meaningful, the answers to these questions must approach congruence with one's identity. "Meaningful work" may be defined as work that is perceived as being purposeful or significant, by the person doing it (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). The meanings people attach to their work are varied, ranging from seeing work as a means to a paycheck to finding deep personal fulfillment through the work itself (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). These orientations toward work are situated in individuals, rather than jobs; within any job or occupation, we find people who imbue the work with different meanings (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Even people engaged in "dirty work" may attach positive meaning to the work, which underscores the universality of the quest to make meaning (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Although the meaning of work may differ between individuals, the process by which people make meaning is social in nature, and requires that people engage in the world around them to make meaning of their work (Weick, 1995).

Yet, for as much as scholars know about the meaning of work at a particular point in time, the temporal nature of the meaning of work has been relatively ignored.¹ The meaning people make of their work at a particular point in time is retrospective and grounded in what has happened before (Weick, 1995). Thus, it is important to consider the meaning of work as being situated in a stream of events, including work history and future goals, and as dynamic, changing over time. Elements of people's pasts may be relevant to the meanings they make of their work at a given point in time, such as parental expectations, ambitions formed in college and earliest work experiences. However, scholars often fail to take into consideration the scope of a people's working life – in other words, their career paths – when analyzing the meaning that people make of work (for exceptions, see Laskawy, 2004; Craig, 2005; Walton & Mallon, 2005). Similarly, scholars have not given sufficient attention to how the meaning of work evolves over time, which mirrors a similar trend in identification research (Pratt et al., 2006).

The limitation inherent in taking a narrow, static perspective on meaning making is that the meaning that people make of their work at any one point in time will likely differ from the meaning they make of the career as a whole. As people gain work experience and, in doing so, meet with successes, disappointments and diversions, they must adapt to and account for these events in how they make meaning of their careers. Thus, meanings of work are nested within meanings of careers, offering a useful lens to understand meanings over time. Since finding meaning is generally thought to be linked to, if not a necessary condition for, psychological and physical health, it is important to gain a robust view of the meaning people make of a central life domain (Baumeister, 1991; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Within the careers literature, turning attention toward issues of meaning responds to the call for increased subjectivist research, which allows the career-holder, rather than the researcher, to interpret his or her own career (Gunz & Heslin, 2005). However, apart from the exceptions noted earlier, the question of how people make meaning of their careers over time has been largely unexplored.

¹ Exceptions include the literatures on career development over the course of the life span (e.g., Super, 1980) and life span development (e.g., Elder, 1985).

Examining the meaning people make of their careers is a particularly timely endeavor, since it is widely acknowledged that the bonds between employers and employees are weakening, especially among white-collar workers who, until the mid-1990s, enjoyed a relatively higher degree of security and stability than they do now (Sennett, 1998; Andresky Fraser, 2001). Since these employees can no longer rely as much on organizations to structure their careers, they must take on a more individuated career path, in which transitions between organizations and even occupations become more common (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).² While attachment to organizations provides a stable source of income and other tangible benefits, the “old” career also provided a meaning frame, which employees are increasingly being challenged to create for themselves (Sennett, 1998).

Research Question

In the proposed dissertation, I will answer the question, how do people make meaning of their careers during times of uncertainty? The focus on uncertainty is not meant to detract from the importance of gaining a broad-based view of the meaning of careers. Rather, uncertainty prompts meaning making because it is a condition under which our established meanings fail (Weick, 1995). Uncertainty in one’s career might take the form of a significant change in the industry or organization in which one’s job is located. For example, layoffs, outsourcing, or a merger all represent occasions that have that potential to affect a whole workforce simultaneously. Events in one’s personal life – such as a death, illness or the layoff of a spouse – may also create uncertainty. Uncertainty occurs when there is no readily available interpretation that can be made by relying on past events (Weick, 1995). Thus, a meaning making process is initiated, the result of which has implications for people’s engagement with their work.

To make sense of any given event or situation, people rely on cues taken from the world around them (Weick, 1995). Past research on career transitions has looked at the variety of cues people rely on to find reemployment. These cues may emanate from sources ranging from social networks and personal support systems to previous positions and educational trajectories (Granovetter, 1995; Rosenbaum, 1979;

² Indeed, even those who have relative job security may find the notion of remaining with one employer undesirable, as is the case with Laskawy’s (2004) study of 28-34 year-olds who leave stable jobs because they reject their parents’ notion of career as taking place within one organization.

Ibarra, 2003). My research focuses on a career transition where people have to make meaning without the benefit of many cues that help guide what to do next. This is the case for people facing a job market that simply does not include the kinds of jobs that they held in their previous positions. Such a scenario echoes the plight of a number of displaced workers in today's economy who are struggling to cope with a change of a magnitude they did not see coming (e.g., Sennett, 1998).

Research Site

In my dissertation, I will study research and development scientists who are going through a period of uncertainty in their careers. The scientists in my sample all worked for Bell Labs, the prestigious research organization housed at AT&T and now Lucent. Over the last several years, Bell Labs has been plagued by major layoffs to the point where the organization is currently just over a third of its size 10 years ago. The perception of former employees is that Bell Labs was an institution that may never again be replicated (Gehani, 2003), described as "being at a university with no classes to teach and no papers to grade" (Berman, 2003). However, on top of having to adjust to a new organization, scientists who leave the organization, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, will likely find that their occupation has shifted as well. Funding for basic research, which is geared toward the advancement of science rather than an immediate product application, has dried up (Berman, 2003).³ The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) predicts that work in scientific research and development, as well as in pure science disciplines, like physics and chemistry, will grow more slowly than the average occupation.

Since everyone in the sample went through a major career transition during a period of uncertainty for the industry, the organization and their occupation, meaning making will likely have occurred among most participants. Thus, the narrative of the career history is focused on a critical transition point where the ability to achieve coherence is difficult. I expect to find variation in how people construct these stories and in their management of the transition more generally. In fact, the ability of people to construct convincing stories for themselves and others may affect the ease with which they find

³ Even the extant Bell Labs has limited its focus to applied research in the telecommunications industry, and cut the research budget from its mid-1990s level of \$350 million to \$115 million (Berman, 2003).

reemployment (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005). Thus, investigating the content of the narratives that ex-Bell Labs scientists tell about their careers, post-transition, will likely correlate with differences in outcomes that affect the scientists, their families, and their future employers.

Proposed Methodology

I will use a combination of interviews and surveys of research scientists to study the content and outcomes of career meaning making (Sieber, 1979). Participants will all have worked for some period of time at the same organization, which allows for comparison across a common point in their career histories, regardless of when in their careers this employment occurred. I will sample across age cohorts and gender, oversampling where necessary to gain a representative perspective.⁴ My sample will grow primarily from referrals from other participants, as in a snowball sampling technique. After one network iteration, I have a database of 50 prospective participants.

Interviews will be semi-structured, with a protocol that will be tailored to each participant as the interview unfolds, to mimic a conversation. I will take an inductive approach in this research, looking for major themes to emerge in the first few rounds of interviews, and then adjusting the interview protocol accordingly once I have determined the major theoretical components (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I will generate a survey to test the themes that emerge from the interviews, focusing in particular on the outcomes of career meaning making.

By investigating the meaning people make of their careers during times of uncertainty, this dissertation stands to make contributions to a number of domains. First, I hope to contribute to research on the meaning of work by considering how meaning is situated in a career path, and may shift over time, particularly in the context of a transition period. Second, this research will shed light on the content of career narratives in the absence of strong markers, which is particularly relevant in a time when careers are thought to be highly individuated. Third, I expect that this research will help to provide an additional lens with which to understand how external shocks due to the changing nature of work lead to differential outcomes for people, both professionally and personally.

⁴ I expect particularly to over-sample women, who have historically been underrepresented in the physical sciences.

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