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**REALIST
BIOGRAPHY
AND
EUROPEAN
POLICY**

*An Innovative
Approach
to European
Policy Studies*

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Realist Biography and European Policy

An Innovative Approach
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edited by

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8. Linking Structural and Agential Powers: A Realist Approach to Biographies, Careers and Reflexivity

Markieta Domecka & Adam Mrozowicki

Introduction

The discussion on the consequences of accelerated changes in the sphere of work for career patterns belongs to the central topics of the contemporary sociology of work. It is suggested that secure, coherent and linear occupational careers might be less and less available option in societies of “late”, “radicalized”, or “fluid” modernity (Bauman, 1999; Sennett, 2006). Existing research on occupational careers has been focused on testing these theoretical assertions (Gold and Fraser, 2002, Blockerhurst 2003; Fenton and Dermont, 2005). The goal of this article is different. It draws on the ongoing debate on agency-structure relations (Archer, 2003; Mouzelis, 1995) to reconstruct the mechanisms shaping the evolution of contemporary careers. According to the classical formulations of Chicago School sociologists, career refers to a person’s course through life and especially through that portion of her/his life in which s/he works (Hughes, 1997: 389). Exploring career patterns, we make use of the notion of “realist biography” as a theoretical concept linking structural influences and agential powers of reflexivity. The concept of realist biography assumes that life stories are both influenced by actual life events and influence human practices and processes in the real world; and offer a privileged way to the analysis of the mechanism of reflexivity that mediates between social structures and human agency (Turk, Mrozowicki, *this volume*). As a theoretical concept, realist biography makes it possible to analyse both the effects of the mechanisms related to structurally defined opportunities and constraints and the mechanism of reflexivity that enables individuals to deal with structural powers in the light of individually and collectively constructed life projects.

The main feature of this chapter, setting it apart from the earlier studies, is the theoretical framework, which combines theoretical inspirations coming from critical social realism (Archer, 2003) with the tradition of biographical

research (Schütze, 2008a; 2008b) and the Chicago School analysis of careers (Becker and Carper, 1956). Both the biographical method, as advanced by Schütze (1983), and critical realism, in particular its variety proposed by Archer (2007), share common roots in philosophical pragmatism, common interests in life histories, and similar analytical concepts, in particular biographical work and reflexivity exercised through the inner dialogue with oneself ("internal conversation", see Archer, 2003). For Archer (2007: 98), "a full understanding of how actors reflexively make their way through the world, dealing as they must with at least some of its social properties and powers, requires an exploration of their life and work histories." This theoretical assertion offers a link with the tradition of biographical research, which has not been fully utilised in the existing studies (Turk, 2007).

The body of the chapter demonstrates how the concept of realist biography can improve our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the structural and subjective dynamics of careers in a rapidly changing social and economic reality. We explore the case of Poland as an example of a country in which neoliberal restructuring at work proceeded in an accelerated pace in the 1990s leading to profound changes in structural mechanisms influencing career patterns. Based on the analysis of 290 biographical interviews with manual workers and managers in Poland, the empirical research reconstructs the impact of these changes on career patterns in two distinct social milieus. We present four types of careers: "construction", "anchor", "patchwork" and "dead end" and discuss the mechanisms underlying their emergence and people's mobility among them. In the final part of the chapter, theoretical and policy implications stemming from realist research on occupational careers are discussed.

Careers, agents and structures: a place for reflexivity

The concept of career provides a link between the level of structurally given opportunities and constraints and the level of individual choices, concerns and strategies of action. In accordance with Chicago School traditions (Barley, 1989; Hughes, 1997), the objective components of careers indicate the changes in one's participation in various organisations, a stream of more or less identifiable positions, offices, statuses, and situations (Strauss, 1977 [1959]). Their subjective components are in turn connected with "one's self, identity and transformation" (Becker and Carper, 1956: 289). The interrelated subjective and objective aspects of careers reflect the interwoven relationship between individual action and social structures. On the one hand, every career, like every biography, reveals the "limiting effect of socio-structural relations" (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984: 219). On the other hand, subjective career assumes biographical work,

i.e. interpretative efforts “carried in the service of actor’s biography, including its review, maintenance, repair and alternation” (Strauss, 1993: 98). The Chicago School understanding of careers is close to the critical realist approach by Archer, which emphasises the subjective and the reflexive. Archer (2003: 5) claims that in order to explain what people do we need to refer not only to existing structural conditions, but also to people’s subjective and reflexive formulation of their personal projects.

Biographies offer an access to the causal mechanism of reflexivity which underlies human practices in the world as it mediates between social structures and human agency. As remarked by Archer (2007: 37), “reflexivity needs not to be consigned to the free-form construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of life narratives; it can be examined as the causally powerful relationship between deliberation and action in people’s social lives”. Confronted with structural powers, agents have the capacity to suspend them through their circumventory actions and adaptive ingenuity, thus, the agents are conditioned but not determined (Archer, 2007: 10). A similar assertion can be found in the field of biographical sociology by Fritz Schütze (2005; 2008a; 2008b). According to Schütze, social reality is not only experienced and bestowed with meaning by individuals, but “it is produced, is supported and kept in force, is endured with pain and suffered, is protested at and turned over or even destroyed as well as it is gradually changed by individual actors with their personal life histories and involved biographical development” (Schütze, 2008b: 2). Importantly, the analysis of people’s careers as revealed in autobiographical narrations is not only a way to understand actions and to shed light on the working of structure, but it also demonstrates how the two levels are interconnected; how they get synchronized and how they get out of tune, depending on how people interpret their lives; what kind of opportunities and obstacles they see; what they define as their main concerns; what kind of decisions they take in their professional lives and how far they go in realising their plans.

Following Strauss (1993) we can say that the kinds of thought process and self-references, which are implied by the theory of reflexivity by Archer, assume an actor “working” on his or her biographical experiences. This process of biographical work can be translated substantively into descriptive language such as an actor “thought over”, “struggled with”, “fought out with himself”, and “finally got a new slant on himself” (Strauss, 1993: 98). Such descriptive phrases imply self-interactive work as well as work with others. Some of this work is likely to involve personal and/or collective indecision, anguish, and suffering (cf. Riemann and Schütze, 1991). It is this type of work which is done by autobiographical recollection and reflection about alternative interpretations of one’s life course. These are self-critical attempts of understanding one’s own misconceptions of oneself and self-erected impediments as well as the impediments

superimposed by others and by structural conditions. Thus, both biographical work and reflexivity denote an inner activity of mind constituted by conversation with significant others and oneself (cf. Schütze, 2008a; Archer, 2007).

The realist analysis of careers makes it possible to overcome the shortcomings of the alternative, structuralist and voluntaristic, approaches to career studies. On the one hand, structuralist research suggests that the possibility to define careers as reflexively planned projects is strongly dependent on the resources an individual can mobilize to cope with structurally-driven transitions (Fenton and Dermott, 2006; Li et al., 2002). On the other hand, the dominant discourses of career-making, including those to be found in the publications on occupational counselling (see for instance CBS Compendium, 2011), tend to be voluntaristic and solely focused on issues such as “career management skills”, personal preferences, flexibility and creativity. The structuralist approaches say little about *how* structurally available career options are individually interpreted and weighted against people’s main concerns. The voluntaristic discourse of occupational counselling underplays, in turn, the role of *real* and intersecting social inequalities, including those of class, gender, ethnicity and age, which set the initial conditions for the development of an individual career. By contrast to the structuralist and voluntaristic stances, the realist approach to careers explores them as the outcome of the interaction of two types of powers: the personal emergent powers of reflexivity and the structural (and cultural) emergent powers endowing individuals with resources which they might use to advance their careers. We maintain that this assertion can shed new light on the discussions on career patterns in the context of the global restructuring at work.

Careers and restructuring at work: the case of post-socialist transformation

The neoliberal turn, which has been taking place in the sphere of work since the late 1970s in the advanced Western capitalist economies and since the 1990s also in Eastern Europe, has renewed the discussion on careers. Institutional changes, which aimed at achieving new kinds of comparative advantages by labour market deregulation and flexibilisation, were accompanied by new discourses stressing the need for occupational mobility, versatility, entrepreneurship and continuous improvements of individual skills. The idea of a “new career” reflecting on the one hand the increasing fragmentation of career patterns, and on the other hand focusing on individual planning, reflexivity, and self-perception has been extensively discussed (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Gold and Fraser, 2002). The “new” forms would include “boundaryless career”, as the opposite of “organizational career” unfolding in a single employment setting (Arthur and Rousseau,

1996) and portfolio career (Gold and Fraser, 2002) defined in opposition to organizationally “bounded” patterns. Still, the scope of the new careers does not seem to be extensive in Europe. According to the recent European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS, 2011), 80% of the interviewed employees in the EU27 were employed on indefinite contracts and around 40% of respondents have been there for 10 years or more in 2010. Simultaneously, 14% of the EU27 employees had temporary contracts in 2011 (*Eurostat* data); the latter figure in Poland reaching the top EU level of 27%.

Systemic change in Poland (and other Eastern European countries) provides a particularly good context to analyse the interplay of structures and agency in shaping career patterns. Capitalist transformation has affected both objective and subjective aspects of careers, since the value of previously accumulated resources had to be reassessed and new types of capitals accumulated¹ (Eyal et al., 2000; Mach, 2005). At the beginning of transformation, new career possibilities were created by re-establishing the dominant value of cultural capital and economic capital, i.e. two capitals described by Bourdieu (1984) as decisive for the shape of capitalist social structure. However, the value of educational credentials proved to be less certain in the second decade after the end of state socialism. Excess supply of university graduates, whose number in Poland increased 5 times over 20 years, the expansion of temporary employment as a result of labour market deregulation and the mass migration abroad of around 2 million Poles after the EU enlargement were only some of structural processes which affected career patterns in the mid of 2000s. Their most important effect seems to be growing uncertainty about what kind of investments in which kind of resources can pay off in terms of “good jobs”, the latter being identified with high wages, lack of stress and stable employment (Szafraniec, 2011). According to Archer (2012: 1-2), the absence of clear social guidelines about what to do in novel situations is an increasingly generic feature of late modern societies, which creates an “imperative to engage in reflexive deliberations.” The most recent global economic and financial crisis has only increased this fundamental uncertainty about the value of resources confirming the causal powers of distant, macro- and mega-level social processes and structures vis-a-vis individual life projects.

In this chapter, we maintain that the analysis of occupational careers in Poland can help us to understand more *generic* types of coping with rapid changes in the sphere of work that are likely to be present also in other developed capitalist

¹ The link between the properties of career patterns and individual resources is explored by adapting Bourdieu's concept of capitals. Following Bourdieu (1986), we distinguish four kinds of capitals: (1) economic capital (overall material assets), (2) cultural capital, in the form of educational credentials and practical competences, (3) social capital made up of social networks and mutual obligations, and (4) symbolic capital, i.e. all forms of capitals “unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence” due to a privileged position of its possessors in power relations (Bourdieu, 1984: 137).

societies. In order to explore the role played by reflexivity and resources at one's disposal in shaping career patterns, we focus on two contrastive milieus, workers and management people, which differ from each other in terms of their social class positions. Objective cleavages between workers and managers and owners, viewed from the structuralist perspective, have been crystallised during the course of transformation constituting a divide between its "winners" and "losers", which reflected clear differences in terms of educational attainments, occupational ranks and incomes (Słomczyński et al., 2007). However, did such objective differentiation of "life chances" of workers and managers translate into sharp differences in the career patterns typical of them, as noted in the career studies carried out in the UK (e.g. Fenton and Dermott, 2006)? Or does reflexivity have an autonomous role in shaping career patters, which would then cut across the existing class and structural divisions?

Empirical research into career patterns of workers and business people in Poland

In order to explore the role of "internal conversation" in shaping career patters, we decided that it is the biographical method (Schütze, 1983; 1984) that will allow us not only to reconstruct the objective patterns of careers followed after the post-socialist transformation, but also to understand individual motives, interpretations, and meanings standing behind them. The biographical approach was combined with grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which enabled us to elaborate upon the types of career patterns and link them with existing theoretical ideas in strict interrelation with empirical analysis during the course of research. In practice, we used the assumptions and practical procedures of Schütze's biographical method (Schütze, 1983) in the process of data collection and transcription, and the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) for data analysis. In the years 2001-2004, in the south-western region of Poland, in Silesia, 290 biographical narrative interviews were conducted with manual workers, managers and entrepreneurs, in manufacturing, construction and services. Each interview included a complete life history, from the childhood up to the present moment, additional questions of clarifications and theoretical questions inspired by the first analytical steps. In both milieus, the sample was diversified along the dimensions such as age, gender, positions in organizational hierarchy, and types of work organizations².

² In workers' milieus the interviewees were hired employees occupying the lowest positions in organizational hierarchy and performing manual or routinized semi-manual tasks in industry, construction and services. Within business people's milieus, we interviewed entrepreneurs, presidents and managers of private production and service companies, as well as financial institutions.

The empirical data consists of 166 interviews with workers and 124 interviews with business people. We adopted a theoretical sampling strategy wherein the choice of subsequent cases was made on the basis of categories that emerged during the analysis of previous interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The theoretical sampling was guided by the process of data analysis, which consisted of two interwoven procedures. First, it involved open coding, done line-by-line “close reading” aimed at fracturing biographical data and conceptualizing observed regularities in the form of categories and their properties. Next, selective coding was conducted, during which the relationships between the career types and other categories that emerged were established (cf. Glaser, 1978: 56-72).

Selective data coding, focused on the ways of linking the subjective and objective dimensions of occupational careers in workers’ life stories, made it possible to distinguish four main career patterns: anchor, bricolage, dead-end and patchwork. Their differentiation was made possible by crossing two continua of categories (see Figure 8.1). First, at the level of the objective shape of careers, the problem of career fragmentation was addressed. Exploring the patterns of occupational mobility in both milieus after the system change, a continuum was established of single-track careers, characterised by continuous employment in one company, and multi-track careers, involving intensified occupational mobility and/or simultaneous engagement in different occupational activities. Second, the

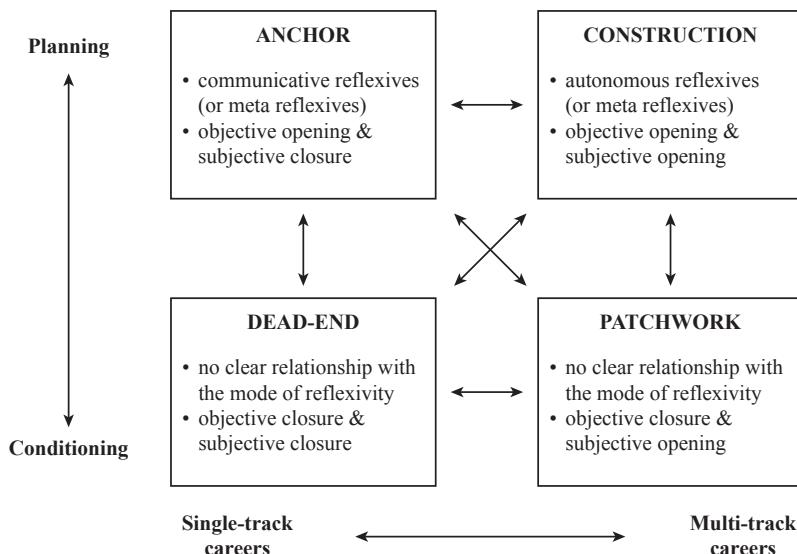


Figure 8.1 Career patterns in workers’ and business milieus and the types of reflexivity
Source: Own research.

subjective aspects of career were located on the continuum of “planning” (intentional action schemes) and “conditioning” (conditioned action schemes), which was borrowed from the biographical sociology of Schütze (2005 [1984]: 306). “Planning” indicates a subjective perception of occupational life as an endeavour which can be controlled either at individual level (“work on resources”) or by the collective means (coordinated actions). “Conditioning”, in contrast, denotes a subjective definition of career in terms of limited control and overwhelming structural determination, which make individuals resemble “passive agents”, i.e. those “to whom things simply happen” (Archer, 2007: 6).

Planning can be pursued in two forms reflecting two main types of reflexives distinguished by Archer (2007). In the case of communicative reflexives, internal conversation, through which career planning takes place, requires “completion and confirmation by others before resulting in the courses of action” (Archer, 2007: 93). Since this kind of reflexivity is founded on the actively endorsed continuity of action context, communicative reflexives tend to be grouped in the anchor type of career. By contrast, “autonomous reflexives” are those, who actively endorse contextual discontinuity and develop self-contained internal conversations (Archer, 2007: 93), which lead them to occupational mobility among various work contexts. Their natural locus is the construction type of career, based on the voluntary occupational mobility across different jobs and work organisations. The distorted link between internal conversations and actions is apparent in the single-track “dead end” careers and a multi-track “patchwork” careers. Those in the “conditioned” career types can also be (or become) “fractured reflexives”, whose internal conversation does not provide them with instrumental guidance about what to do in practice (Archer, 2003: 299). However, the “fractured” self still can be mended if some effort of biographical work is undertaken and new resources are accumulated. The dominant mode of reflexivity is one of central factors determining which type of career will be chosen as a preferred means to overcome involuntary patchwork and dead-end³.

As we applied in our study the strategy of theoretical sampling we cannot make any claims about representativeness in statistical terms. At the same time, our sample was big enough (290 life histories) to reach theoretical saturation

³ In our study we did not find any cases of meta-reflexives, the fourth type distinguished by Archer (2007: 93; 2012), referring to those, who are “critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society”. One of the reasons might be that workers and business people were involved first of all in advancing their pragmatic concerns and therefore did not dedicate themselves fully to non-pragmatic vocational ideals, as meta-reflexives tend to do. Nevertheless, it is difficult to say if the absence of meta-reflexives in our research is connected with the fact they are dramatically under-represented in business field and among workers or if it is simply an outcome of our sampling strategy. It also should be stressed that our goal was not to verify Archer’s theory, but to make use of “theoretical codes” derived from it to understand the development of career patterns emerged from the analysis of biographical data.

and to allow us to formulate hypotheses about tendencies connected with the social distribution of the career types. By the concept of theoretical saturation we understand the stage of qualitative research where the continuation of sampling does not lead to the generation of any new conceptual insights. Instead of discovering new phenomena, the categories developed during the earlier stages of inquiry, appear again and again. Comparing at this stage the two social milieus, workers and managers we saw clear similarities and differences between them. The construction career type was more typical of business people as it is closely related to the level of resources possessed and the dominating discourse in this milieu. Typically, managers and owners felt a need to portray their experiences as the outcome of their strategic thinking and a matter of their own achievement even in the situations when there was a certain level of conditioning or contingency. Therefore, there was a tendency to perceive one's career as construction even if objectively it was closer to the patchwork pattern.

Another difference between the two milieus is the perception of the anchor career. As for workers it is often the most desirable career pattern, assuring financial stability and social continuity, in case of managers anchor, symbolizing the lack of mobility and perhaps also the lack of ambition, requires additional justification. This may explain why we have encountered so many argumentative segments in the interviews with business people whose careers resembled the anchor pattern. Managers and owners had a much stronger tendency than workers to picture their anchor careers as constructions. Dead-end careers differentiated strongly workers and business people. Being the outcome of "unhappy micro events" dead-end theoretically could happen to everybody. However, as for business people it symbolized only a temporary difficulty, which could be overcome on the basis of possessed economic, social and cultural capital, for workers dead-end was often becoming a long-term pattern which could not be changed on the basis of one's limited means. The similarity between the two milieus lies in the patchwork pattern being equally present in workers' and managers' biographies. This is the result of deep social change bringing previously unknown precariousness into the sphere of work and introducing discontinuities in all people's lives, which again can be bridged more successfully if one has a high level of biographical, social, economic and cultural resources at their disposal.

In line with biographical approach (Rosenthal, 2004), anchor, construction, dead-end, and patchwork conceptualize the types of relationships between the overall structure of told occupational biographies (*told story*) and objectively followed career paths (*lived life*). They may be considered also as independent patterns, with the possibility of "entering" and "leaving" them in different stages of occupational lives. Although the statistically non-representative character of our research sample makes it impossible to discuss the statistical distribution of the types, the differences between workers and business people in terms of

the occurrence of the *dominant* career patterns in the narratives collected do not seem to be accidental. Anticipating the results presented further, it should also be emphasised that the fact that career types were observed, albeit in different forms and to a different extent, in both milieus offers strong empirical support for the theoretical argument about the central and autonomous role of reflexivity in shaping individual careers.

Anchor careers

Anchor careers are intentionally shaped single-track patterns, based on long-standing employment in a particular work organisation. This type of career is related to laboriously worked-out occupational statuses. People become “attached to positions by virtue of having done particularly well at them” (Strauss, 1975: 89), and this attachment leads them rather to self-limitation of aspirations than to the search for new career paths. Anchor careers are typical of communicative reflexives, whose ultimate concerns are inter-personal relations in their social milieus (Archer, 2003: 349). Their ability to keep their occupational position is linked to two kinds of capital. Firstly, seniority increases social capital, built around the networks of contacts and recognition at workplace. Secondly, cultural capital, in the form of practical knowledge acquired through work experiences, is constantly adapted to new organizational requirements.

Although in both milieus studied anchor careers are based on a very different level of objectively possessed resources, similar properties of this pattern in the case of workers and business people reflect a shared mode of reflexivity founded on single-track occupational experiences. In workers’ milieus, the pattern expresses attempts to protect working-class identities against new economic threats and the devaluation of educational credentials, through reference to craftsmanship and emotional we-community. In the collected data, it was most typical of middle-aged, blue-collar workers considering themselves as “craftsmen”:

Leszek: “This factory is my whole life. I was connected with this factory throughout my whole life. I lived in a workers’ hostel, I got hitched with a girl from the factory because she worked on injection moulding machines, and I worked in this big locksmith’s department. (...) [Nowadays] they left only those, who’re worth something, because those, you know, dimwits who cannot do anything and knock off trash, were kicked out” (a turner in machine industry, M, 49) [W-14]⁴

⁴ Labels contain: job description, gender, age and the code number of an interview

The life story of Leszek, a turner in his late forties, was shaped by the reality of a large, state-owned company he has been employed for the most of his career. An anchor career interlinks social capital (networks) and practical cultural capital (craft) with a specific organisational context. Since the latter is threatened, reflexive choices need to be taken to preserve individual occupational position. Profound social changes contribute to a situation in which the continuity of action context is not just involuntary given, but needs to be also agentially co-determined (Archer, 2003: 187) precluding any mechanical relationship between contexts and practices. The agential co-determination has its price. Under conditions of economic restructuring motivated by the minimisation of labour costs, maintaining an anchored career usually means accepting the reduction of economic benefits for the sake of employment security and non-instrumental social bonds since, as stated by one of the interviewees, “life isn’t only about making money” [W-77].

While anchor-careers in workers’ milieus are highly appreciated, they are much more problematic in a business milieu, where long-term employment in one firm is perceived as *per se* contradictory to “successful career-making” discourse. A lack of professional mobility requires some justification and frequently these are the emotional ties with a company and a strong embeddedness in a place which play such a justifying role. An anchor career, when followed by managers, is not accompanied by the “we-perspective” typical of workers. Instead, the justification of long-term anchoring in one firm proceeds on an individual level. On the one hand, objective advancement within an organization and extensive professional knowledge bonded with work performed are emphasized. On the other hand, the self-limitation of aspirations is stressed as a way to “do what one feels” and means to achieve a balance between workloads and family life. An example is Paulina, a branch director of a bank:

Paulina: “It’s absolutely sufficient for me to be a branch director, because I know how hard the work of the regional director is, who has to move around all branches. At this moment, it would collide too much with my family life. I’m ready for some sacrifices, but not to the extent [which would make me] to neglect my family. I’ve got a small child” (a branch director of a bank, F, 28) [B-111]

A pattern of self-limitation can also be found among entrepreneurs, who followed the path of establishing a small, family-owned business, step-by-step developed from the beginning of 90s or even from the state-socialist time. This becomes clear in an argument made by a female owner of a small, family-run sport shop, who juxtaposes “stunning careers” to “small regional success” [B-90], based on the ability to remain in business even in the time of economic

recession. The presence of anchor careers in both milieus studied contradicts the liberal discourse, which emphasises endless flexibility and occupational mobility. Anchoring is not a result of personal failures or lack of marketable resources. Instead it expresses reflexive attempts to maintain continuity in occupational life; a conscious choice for the social or balanced life priorities.

Dead-end careers

Dead-end careers denote the pattern of “immobilisation” in a subjectively rejected work environment. At the objective level, these are single-track patterns, which assume limited job mobility in the period after the system change. At the level of subjective interpretations, they describe a durable or progressive loss of capacities to shape one’s occupational career in a subjectively desirable manner. Instead, people “get stuck” in an organisational environment, which guarantees neither the economic nor social advantages expected. Dead-end illustrates also a broken career pattern where one stays out of employment against their will being unable to change the situation on the basis of one’s own means only. No clear relationship between this career type and the mode of reflexivity was observed. Dead-end careers were encountered in the biographies of communicative reflexives, whose social milieus underwent disintegration during the course of systemic change, and autonomous reflexives, who at a certain stage of their occupational life encountered unsurpassable organisational obstacles that blocked their advancement within and between work organisations. In both milieus, dead-end careers reflected a more or less advanced distress of the mechanism of internal conversation and, in this sense, were also present in the narratives of “fractured reflexives” (Archer, 2003: 300). Long-term dead-end career results in a passive attitude of “taking things as they come”, “working from day-to-day” and withdrawing to these spheres of life, which offer more stability and fulfilment (e.g. family life and friend circles).

Dead-end careers have sometimes been considered the most common career patterns in low-skilled, peripheral factions of workers’ milieus (Thomas, 1989: 359). This is confirmed by the occurrence of the dead-end type in our sample, which was more common in the workers’ milieu than in the case of business people. In case of older and middle-aged generations of workers, dead-end careers were accompanied by the development of “collective trajectories” (Schütze, 1992a: 192), characterised by the loss of autonomy in occupational life as a result of the restructuring and closure of old, ex-socialist manufacturing plants. Simultaneously, there is a new wave of dead-end careers in the youngest generation of workers, whose educational investments proved to be insufficient or

misfit for changing labour market demands. An example is Weronika, employed as a low skilled worker in a printing shop:

Weronika: “I decided to go to secondary school of economics, because in 2000...when I’d finished school, this field was a very...topical issue, you could’ve earned a lot of money (...) I intended to go for university studies, but I’ve...there was such a difficult financial situation, so I didn’t. (...) In our region it’s very difficult to find work, so I came to O-city (...) I began to work as a picker [in a print shop], at one of the machines, it’s about picking up piles of paper from this machine...Well, this is very hard work [...] When I started school, I thought I’d work somewhere in an office, I didn’t even think that I’d end up in O-city and I’d work as a picker” (an unskilled printing worker, F, 24) [W-86]

In the life stories of managers and owners, the dead-end phases of occupational biographies are considered rather as challenges to be overcome than impassable barriers. If constraints are encountered, they tend to be reinterpreted as impediments of idealized market situation. A “fossilized organization” [B-5] and “dis-motivating” environment [B-9] are likely to be identified with work experiences in state-socialist firms. In other cases, the personalization of dead-end phases appears, which emphasizes uncontrollable events on the biographical level, such as illness or family problems. Rarely, dead-end is interpreted as a consequence of the general principles of the system’s functioning, with the notable exception of some small entrepreneurs such as Bogusław:

Bogusław: “I didn’t develop the firm, so I’m an individual providing different kinds of services connected with electronics, working on my own (...). When it turns out that there are big undertakings, then I employ some people, but now there is less and less of these big undertakings. So, everything is getting blurred and I asses these occupational perspectives as very bad, it’s a weak point that I can’t move (...) I can’t force myself now (...) to apply somewhere, although I know that maybe they wouldn’t employ me, because I’m already, let’s say, too old” (a self-employed, M, 50) [B-85]

A theme of “missed opportunities”, typical of a dead-end pattern, is repeatedly interwoven with Bogusław’s narration about his business activity. Anchored as a specialist in a state-owned firm during socialism, he decides to enter the business field too late, when the opportunities for “small entrepreneurship” are already much more limited. In the course of time, the profitability of his small

service company gradually decreases and Bogusław finds himself trapped – on the one hand unable to develop his firm, due to the lack of significant economic capital and high competitiveness in the field, and on the other, reluctant and afraid of applying for a job in an organization. Although the dead-end in this case, as much as in other business people's narrations, is rather temporal than definite, its durability depends *both* on macroeconomic situation and reflexive abilities to mobilize already possessed resources.

Construction careers

While anchor careers reflect intentional attempts to preserve occupational stability and contextual continuity, which the concerns of communicative reflexives are founded on, construction careers are most typical of autonomous reflexives. Self-contained internal conversation becomes a generative mechanism fostering upward and inter-organisational mobility. Construction means moving among post, specialisations and organisations, experiencing various turning points and opening of new possibilities. There is a general framework assuming a long-term accumulation of all kinds of capital based on the capacity of risk-taking and resourcefulness. At the same time, even though structural conditions of "constructing" tend to be downplayed and replaced by the idea of self-determined planning, promoted by the liberal market discourse, the ways in which a construction career is actualized clearly depends on available resources, including economic capital (financial predictability), social capital (professionally useful social networks), and (marketable) educational credentials, of which a higher amount increases the freedom of experimenting with new career possibilities.

In the workers' milieu, in which the overall level of objectively possessed resources is generally lower than in the case of business people, construction careers rely mostly on reshaping and converting of the "resources at hand", which makes this career pattern resemble rather a "bricolage" than strictly planned design (cf. Baker and Nelson, 2005). Construction in one sphere of occupational life is often combined with anchoring in another as the "hybridised construction" of Maciej demonstrates:

Maciej: "Although I work here, I also have a private business (...) Through some contacts, there was a bus for sale in the factory (...) And I started a business. In the afternoons, after coming back from work in the factory, sometimes till the morning, I was lying under [the bus], so in the morning it could go. (...) I worked for a year, I earned a bit, I didn't spend it, but I bought another bus, a better one. (...) It was working, working, and earned again. And

I bought another one.” (a machine operator in household appliances factory, M, 45) [W-12]

Maciej combines anchor-pattern with construction career connected with establishing a small transportation firm. Hybridization maximizes economic profits by mobilizing available resources without losing advantages offered by permanent employment. The postponed consumption and hard work make it possible for Maciej to maintain a small company. The motive of sacrifice for future gains can also be observed in the case of young workers, who invest in the university weekend education. Construction careers constitute an active and innovative response to structural limitations. If structural constraints discourage a primary life project, which is often connected with a stable job in one company, the constructing logic and autonomous reflexivity lead people to “actively use their reflexivity to devise ‘second’ or ‘third’ best projects for themselves” (cf. Archer, 2007: 19).

The logic of construction was the most common pattern in the narratives of business people. It was often linked to the feeling of empowerment after the systemic change, which can be described as “the effect of spread wings”. The beginning of the 1990s is idealized as the time when it was possible to start one’s own business “from scratch” or become a member of higher management despite a scarcity of cultural capital. However, in the process of gradual structural closure, the role of initial economic assets and educational credentials has increased greatly. It explains why construction becomes a dominating pattern among the possessors of relatively higher amounts of all assets in business milieus, the members of higher and medium level management and the owners of big and medium private enterprises. An illustration can be found in the narrative of Eryk:

Eryk: “Speaking about professional career, I’m really, really God’s chosen one, because even when I was working in that socialist firm, even when I was the head of the team they didn’t dare to come to me and persuade me to join the Party (...) Later on, the whole American adventure, extremely nice, and later the whole managerial career, after coming back from the States, it’s a really fantastic experience...So, I’m a very happy man ((laughing)) but, but a bit busy... (...) I assess it... what happened... exactly in this way, as amazingly positive... with a deep conviction that I had a direct influence on it, that it’s been created by me, worked out” (president of a printing house, M, 55) [B-80]

The career of Eryk, president of a printing house, entails a far-reaching contextual discontinuity, involving geographical mobility (a managerial career in the US) and occupational progression through many companies. Just like in other

cases of autonomous reflexives, there is a strong belief that everyone must take personal responsibility for themselves. According to the rhetoric of success, the interrelated processes of self, biography, and career construction result in a deep conviction that one is at the same time “Gods’ chosen one” and “the master of his own destiny”. Another common motto, typical of construction careers in business milieu, is “I’m myself the helm, the ship and the sailor” [B-27, B-34, B-50]. A successful creation, not only of one’s own career but also of new organizational rules, reinforces the feeling of the virtually unlimited possibilities of occupational development, which significantly differs from the hybridized construction-careers in workers’ milieus.

Patchwork careers

Patchwork describes a multi-track career pattern which is more conditioned than intentionally planned. The pattern symbolises a torn career, made up of miscellaneous elements arranged at random without a clear larger design (cf. Alheit, 1995: 167). It consists of many semi-intentional or unintentional job changes interwoven with periods of unemployment and desperate job seeking. Expressing the chaotic aspects of social reality, patchwork is ruled rather by the logic of coincidence and necessity than the logic of purposeful planning of occupational life. It was most typical of autonomous reflexives, whose occupational projects were broken by market competition, insufficient resources and unhappy “micro events” at the level of individual and family life. However, it also emerged from the narratives of communicative reflexives, in particular workers, whose anchor careers were interrupted by uncontrollable organisational changes. Finally, patchwork was also encountered in narratives of “fractured reflexives” whose biographical problems and occupational problems overlapped magnifying distress and disorientation.

Patchwork is often, albeit not always, connected with “precarious”, instable work (Standing, 2011) which represents the “dark” side of labour market flexibility. Both in the case of workers and business people, whom we interviewed, it tended to be presented as an “integral and unavoidable” element of modern economy: “we live in such times” [W-79], it is said with resignation, “this is how the reality looks like nowadays” [B-100]. In worker milieus, access to anchor-careers became limited in the course of capitalist transformation, especially for lower skilled, older workers, made redundant after restructuring of state-owned firms, and young employees entering a labour market defined by high unemployment and forced flexibility. An example of a young precarious worker experiencing a patchwork career is Aleksander:

Aleksander: “At the first job, my contract expired, they didn’t want to prolong it, because I still worked as an apprentice (...) The second job, as I said, in this storehouse, [arranged] by an acquaintance of my father (...) He didn’t pay for social security, which was crap, so I gave up this job. Afterwards there’s a transportation firm. I worked there for a long time. I mean long, I’d worked for less than two years after I got there. And I had to go on the dole, ‘cause the firm was closed. Then, a petrol station (...) And after military service, I sat firmly on these chairs for the unemployed and now I work here [in a supermarket] (*Question about the value of work*) I’ve learnt that I’ve never worked only for work...I did it for myself, because I liked it, I wanted to have money out of it.” (a shop assistant in a supermarket, M, 27) [W-28]

Aleksander, a young shop assistant, could not acquire meaningful occupational identity and valuable professional skills throughout his occupational career, which involved various and unrelated low-skilled jobs. Alexander’s emphasis on “agency” contradicts the forced occupational mobility provoked by the low-regulated labour market. Both in the workers’ milieu and business people’s milieus the patchwork pattern is accompanied by the feeling of a “lone struggle” expressed as a conviction that “one has to manage on his own” [B-100], without relying on other people and institutions. Work intensification combined with readiness to take any available job (“I’m not afraid of any work” [W-3]) becomes the main strategy to preserve the minimal level of economic stability.

In the business milieu, patchwork careers were typical of small and medium firm owners, who were not able to accumulate significant economic resources in the starting phase of economic transformation and who later were facing increasing market competition and bureaucratic obstacles in their business development. Multifaceted defensive strategies used for saving one’s firm from bankruptcy are illustrated in the narrative of Miroslaw:

Miroslaw: “One needs to stay somehow on the market. Now [2003], there’s a crash (...) and one cannot foresee what will happen. Me too, I changed the profile of my business many times. I had some commerce, a tax consulting company, I had pawnshops, second-hand shops, electronics commerce, construction business, many things, catering. Now, we’re looking for some solution to maintain what we already got, to have some money at hand” (an owner of a construction company, M, 45) [B-34]

During the years of his activity in the business field Mirosław has frequently changed not only the profile of his business, but also its organization and style of management, coming from partnership to individual ownership. None of those changes, though, was a result of careful long term planning. It was rather a response to the changing context, like falling demand, low profitability and a lack of consensus among the partners. Importantly, Mirosław – following himself the patchwork pattern – perpetuates it by the practice of flexible employment, according to season and current economic situation. This indicates a possible link between the career patterns followed by entrepreneurs and the workers they employ. Torn occupational biographies in the business milieu are translated into workers' fragmented careers, and in both milieus the normalization of patchwork pattern perpetuates the inconsistency of institutional rules, which at the same time promote self-directedness and increase structural constraints on autonomous actions in the sphere of work.

Conclusions

In this chapter we proposed a realist approach to the study of careers, which linked some assumptions of the traditions of the Chicago School and the realist social theory of Margaret Archer. The notion of “realist biography” allowed us to explore the occupational experiences as the result of both the individual placement in the distribution of resources and the agential attempts to reflexively deal with structural powers. It is worth emphasizing that the emerged career types transcend the boundaries of milieus traditionally considered as different social classes: individuals occupying the lowest and highest positions in organizational hierarchies. This similarity of career patterns despite persistent class inequalities cannot be explained without accepting the proposition that careers are shaped by similar modes of reflexivity, which cannot be reduced to mere reactions to the objective structural conditions of people's actions. Simultaneously, as remarked by Adams (2006: 524), it is necessary to understand “what comes ‘after’ the moment of reflexive awareness, in which choices are resourced or otherwise”. This suggestion is confirmed by our study. Even though movements between career patterns are possible, not all of them are equally feasible for workers and business people. It was often not due to the lack of reflexivity, but limited material resources that careers were “blocked” or “torn”. Nevertheless, as individuals attempt to change their unfavourable occupational situation, reflexivity becomes the core mechanism of “getting out” from conditioned career patterns. Resources are necessary means to advance individual careers, but their efficiency depends on the mode of reflexivity developed during the course of earlier life events and career stages.

The realist approach to the analysis of careers, as elaborated in this chapter, makes it possible to transcend one-sided approaches which emphasise the far-reaching structural determination of occupational trajectories (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1984) or, contrastingly, create an illusion of open opportunities which only need to be seized through the development of adequate “career management skills” (see for instance CBS Compendium, 2011). The approach proposed in this chapter puts an equal emphasis on the causal role of social structures and individual reflexivity in shaping career patterns. In this respect, some of our empirical observations suggest that career patterns are not only influenced, but they might also (cumulatively) influence structural and organisational conditions. On the one hand, the “desirable” models of occupational lives in late capitalist societies, such as the multi-track construction patterns, are mapped onto persons demanding re-adaptation of their careers. On the other hand, however, these models encounter the limits of possessed resources and personal attempts to reflexively shape occupational identities in line with earlier biographical commitments and future-oriented life projects. In consequence, career choices not only conform to the new logic of “boundaryless careers”, but they can also contribute to the emergence (and, more likely, reproduction) of organisational rules which support the continuity of anchor careers, especially for the “core”, highly valued and better skilled employees.

The research presented in this chapter can also have some pertinent policy implications. Two possible areas, in which the realist approach to career analysis can be practically used, include occupational counselling and related active labour market policies. The relevance of the biographical method for occupational counselling has been already stressed in the existing research (see Betts, Griffiths, Schütze, Straus, *no date*), which suggested that the identification of biographical resources accumulated in earlier career stages is central for the counselling practice. Based on our approach, it can be added that the analysis of the types of reflexivity needs also to be undertaken as a part of career advisory work. For instance, anchor careers might be especially desirable for “communicative reflexives” who value reliable social networks, good relations with their colleagues and well-defined area of occupational skills and expectations, which all favour more contextual continuity than change. By contrast, construction careers are often the most desirable patterns among those practicing an “autonomous” type of reflexivity. Although the construction career might seem to be very desirable, the biographical costs of advancing it are often underestimated until the point when one’s personal and family situation becomes “impossible to deal with” and some alternatives need to be sought. In the course of biographical work a certain level of awareness is achieved of high biographical costs⁵

⁵ For more insights about biographical costs of corporate careers see Kaźmierska et al (2012) and biographical costs of mobility see Spanò et al in this volume.

paid as a result of one's career pattern. This is a point where career counselling may be crucial for finding more balanced and self-preserving solutions. In case of "conditioned" patterns, occupational advisory work should be focused on stimulating biographical work aimed at strengthening action capacities and personal autonomy of individuals experiencing career fragmentation (patchwork) and dead-end situations, which all quite often require quite radical biographical decisions. The question should be asked which of two career types (anchor or construction) would match best the concerns of the individuals involved given the mode of their reflexivity.

However, in contradistinction to voluntarism putting the whole responsibility for occupational development on individuals, the realist approach also suggests that efficient coping with patchwork and dead-end careers requires a great deal of institutional work aimed at the creation of more secure and enriching jobs. As argued by the recent report by European Foundation for Improvement of Working and Living Conditions, "the policy agenda should promote sustainable work over the entire length of careers: in other words, the ability or all involved in paid employment to maintain their engagement in paid work over their professional career" (EWCS, 2011: 9). Similar conclusions follow from the International Labour Organisation analysis, which suggest the need to develop "an approach that recognizes the importance of placing jobs at the top of the policy agenda and the need for coherence among macroeconomic, employment and social policies." (ILO, 2012: xi). The realist analysis of careers makes it possible to combine such macro-level recommendations with those centred on and sensitive to individual concerns, which might be very different from the currently dominant discourse of disembedded, endlessly flexible and boundaryless careers. It can be helpful to detect what kind of institutional arrangements are needed to fit into the needs of communicative, autonomous and meta-reflexives. In this respect, the analysis in this chapter can be considered just a tentative contribution to such a larger project aimed at (re)linking the macro-policy agenda in Europe (and elsewhere) to the differentiated concerns of the workers.

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