

INVOLUNTARY CAREER CHANGES. POSSIBLE MEANING AND COMBINATION OF RESOURCES FOR COPING

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Abstract

In a world of increasingly unstable, precarious, and uncertain work, involuntary career changes are multiplying (Masdonati et al., 2022; Pignault, 2022). Professional and personal career paths must be constantly adapted, re-imagined, and re-invented. When faced with these changes or discontinuities, individuals need to find responses that meet the expectations of the professional world and are acceptable to themselves. On the one hand, the aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of the meaning that involuntary career changes can ultimately take in a career and life path; on the other hand, to better identify the resources mobilised and combined (Csillik, 2017; Hobfoll, 2002) to cope with these events and attribute meaning to them. Ten career stories (Guichard, 2007; Savickas, 2005) were collected from individuals aged between 24 and 58 who had experienced involuntary career changes. These narratives, fully transcribed, were analysed using thematic content analysis and Iramuteq software. The results highlight the mobilisation of resources at different levels: social, psychological, and institutional. Several combinations of resources make it possible to cope with involuntary career changes, as well as trigger self-reflection. Reflective activity enables people to explore one's aspirations for the future and attribute or construct meaning to their experience and these career changes. These main categories are presented and discussed.

Keywords: *Career change, life story, meaning, resources, thematic analysis.*

1. Introduction

Research about career transition is not new. However, a number of authors have shown how changes in the political, economic, and educational contexts (Fouad & Bynner, 2008) make this research even more interesting and important, as the issues involved concern an ever-increasing proportion of the population. In particular, it appears that employment is becoming more precarious (Kalleberg, 2018) and that increasingly uncertain career paths are marked by more frequent transitions of different kinds and forms (Sverke et al., 2002; Masdonati & Zittoun, 2012; Pignault, 2022).

One of the dimensions that enables us to understand better the experience of transition is the notion of intentionality. Transitions are distinguished according to their more or less constrained nature, whether they are voluntary or involuntary, anticipated or not. The various studies thus make it possible to differentiate between desired reconversions, or 'intentional career breaks' (e.g., Murtagh et al., 2011; Wise & Millward, 2005), and transitions and reorientations that are undergone, in particular, following redundancies (Masdonati et al., 2022).

Transition is finally about a process of constructing coherence, continuity, and meaning (Masdonati & Zittoun, 2012). In this context, the transition could be seen as an opportunity to (re)make sense of a situation or to move towards situations that make sense (Tsuda-McCaie & Kotera, 2023).

The aim of this study is to contribute to an understanding of the process of reflection and construction of meaning during a transition. In this context, it seems essential to examine the resources needed to meet this challenge.

2. Method

Ten life stories focusing on career stories were collected from individuals aged between 24 and 58, seven men and three women, who had experienced involuntary career changes (mainly through unemployment). All signed an informed consent form.

In a biographical approach (Guichard, 2007; Savickas, 2005), life and career stories highlight the course of a person's life and their experiences. It corresponds to two distinct temporalities: the present of the narrative and the past of the story. The past is recounted with a vision of the present, the reflexive narrative thus making it possible to identify the turning points in an individual's journey that would not have been identifiable before. Finally, the method places the narrator at the centre of the story.

The first phase of the interview allowed the researcher to present the subject of the study (in general terms, 'to understand current careers better') and to inform the participants of the conditions of anonymity, confidentiality, and the possibility of interrupting the interview or recording at any time. The researcher then asked the subjects how they could retrace or re-situate their career path and suggested a number of repetitions when the subjects mentioned breaks in their careers and involuntary changes to try to make the resources mobilised in this situation and their effects on the trajectory more explicit. These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, then were fully transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis and Iramuteq software.

3. Results

The thematic content analysis highlights four main categories. The first three highlight the mobilisation of resources at different levels – social, psychological, and institutional, whether combined or not – to cope with involuntary career change: 1/ mobilisation of personal and psychological resources such as resilience, optimism, determination, openness to experience and adaptability (e.g., knowing how to "dare new things"; "I remain optimistic and hope that things will change"; "you have to fight"; "fortunately I know what I want"); 2/ social support from family, friends, and professionals in counselling and guidance area (e.g., "we had a good chat [with a counsellor], and that did me good"; "there was a mutual aid system with friends"), and 3/ financial support and resources (e.g., "I have an allowance fortunately, if I didn't I wouldn't be talking like this"; "I was able to go back to training"). The fourth category finally refers to the way how this transition was also able to trigger reflection on oneself, on the meaning in life and work, and one's aspirations for the future ("it allowed me to do a kind of introspection", "I even decided to take my things and go travelling, go out into nature [...] explore my limits", "become a performing artist, which was something I'd had in mind since I was fifteen but hadn't necessarily realised").

A complementary analysis was carried out with the Iramuteq software (Ratinaud, 2014). In addition to the Descending Hierarchical Classification, IRAMUTEQ includes other forms of analysis, such as classic textual analyses or similarity analysis. Here, the typological analysis reveals three main classes. Class 1 represents 41.6% of the analysed corpus. This refers to the subjects' discourse on the reflections triggered by involuntary career change and questioning in terms of meaning in life and in work. The specific vocabulary "interrogative", "question", "transition", "live", "life", "course", "think", "understand", "become", "change", "hesitate", "decide" is characteristic of the discourse and the class. It is interesting to note that class 1 also includes vocabulary referring to support and guidance for others in this stage of life. The terms "help", "support", "help", "parent", "family", "resource", "social", "entourage", "accompaniment", "human", "mother", or "friend" are also characteristic of this class. The second class is made up of two categories respectively representing 14.1% and 29.2% of the analysed corpus. This class refers to coping strategies centred on problems or emotions. A set of vocabulary refers to the steps taken to deal with the situation: "response", "announcement", "write", "interview", "colleague", "human resource", "CV", "letter", "application", "apply", but also to the management of possible related disorders and emotions: "physically", "depression", "morally", "positive", "negative", "energy", "love", "difficulty", "problem", "irritated", "distance", "psychological". Finally, the third class refers to institutional and financial support. This class represents 14.9% of the analysed corpus. The terms "pay", "insurance", "salary", "rent", "house", "pension", "child", "keep", "holiday", "serious", "financial", "pension", "lawyer", "feed", "problematic", "marry", "touch" or "right" are characteristic.

4. Discussion

Psychological resources are perceived, according to Csilik (2017), as resources that enable individuals to protect themselves from the harmful consequences of life events that are deemed to be difficult and to promote satisfactory general well-being. An analysis of 10 career stories focusing on involuntary career change highlights the importance of various coping strategies and psychological resources in dealing with the situation. It is interesting to note here how others can be levers or supports

to help reflect on one's career, make decisions, and better understand the meaning of the change in one's career. Class 1 of the computerised analysis is a particularly good example of this link. This also tells us about the conditions that need to be met if career change is to become an opportunity for people to career development. So, once again, the study reveals the importance of supporting people and helping them to develop or mobilise resources.

Back in 1998, Hall and Moss introduced the concept of a 'new career contract' to be established with oneself and emphasized the need to develop two major meta-competencies – self-knowledge and adaptability. This successful concept was further described and measured in the work of Savickas (e.g., Porfeli & Savickas, 2012). One of the ways how this can be achieved is by making people active players (Savickas, 2012) and enabling them to be more autonomous in shaping their own careers. This autonomy also involves the development of guidance skills (Guichard, 2007) or 'career development' skills (Turner & Conkel, 2010).

Finally, it would be interesting to be able to talk to the same 10 subjects again in order to try to understand how this narrative may or may not, with hindsight, have contributed to the development of reflexive skills and how their discourse has found a place in their way of pursuing their life and work path.

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