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CONSTRUCTING A CAREER AS A PROCESS OF INVESTING IN ITS PORTFOLIO

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Multicontextual social changes imply definitely new ways of interpretation and determine reflections about the condition of contemporary humans, including the human being as “a manager” of his own career.

A society has become an area where individuals can show their initiative. A contemporary study of careers demands the inclusion of multicontextual changes in the job world. These changes face employees with new requirements. The most important ones are the increase of the role attached to a career and the ability to plan, manage and monitor one’s own career in a lifelong perspective. Considerations about a career cannot leave out the issue of the subjective sense that an individual finds in one’s own career in the context of possibilities that a man can have a satisfactory career. The world of careers is a world of numerous micro-changes. In the “portfolio” of micro-changes, the time between changes is reduced and after a period of stability renewed separation comes increasingly quickly.

Key words: career, “boundary-less career”, career planning, constructing a career, career monitoring, subjective sense of career, satisfactory career

A contemporary study of career requires us to take into account the multi-contextual changes occurring in the world of work, which create new requirement for the employees. The most important among them include the increased importance of the role attributed to career and the ability to plan, manage and monitor one’s own career in a lifelong perspective. Career development and career management programs, which are crucial issues both from the perspective of individuals and organizations, are focused on many

aspects: "from individual careers and relations between work and family; to the policies and strategic dilemmas, such as the aging of the labor force, the application of new technologies, or organizational efficiency".¹ When we look at the problem from from this perspective, "the study of careers is the study of changes in individuals, as well as changes in organizations, and changes in the society".²

The pace of changes in the modern world of work, and even the "end of work" (J. Rifkin), changes the role of the quality of education and the required qualifications. The outlined changes in the highly competitive and demanding labor market are well illustrated by the statement that "short-term projects are becoming more common than a permanent job at one company (...) and *multi-skilling* is becoming a groundbreaking and crucial phenomenon".³ The zeitgeist also implies, as A. Bańka puts it, the trans-culturalization of the economic context, which in turn contributes to the trans-nationalization of personality development. That process is manifested "in the universality of the experience required for the achievement of the optimal level of life competences allowing for the realization of a boundary-less career".⁴ The presented reflections correspond to the category of the "career portfolio" developed by Ch. Handy. The career portfolio which is a tool for renewing career capital, is "a set of investment activities of an individual, included in career plans (...) it is a planned source of competences that have a measurable commercial value in the labor market".⁵ In the knowledge-based economy, which in turn determines the orientation of contemporary society towards knowledge, the career development of the members of society and the investment in career "portfolio" becomes a crucial element.

The world of careers is a world of numerous micro-changes. In the "portfolio" of micro-changes the time between changes is reduced - after a period of stability renewed separation comes increasingly quickly. In addition multiple career changes may occur simultaneously.⁶

¹ M.B. Arthur, D.T. Hall, B.S. Lawrence, *Generating New directions in career theory: the case for a transdisciplinary approach*, [in:] *Handbook of career theory*, Eds. M.B. Arthur, D.T. Hall, B.S. Lawrence, Cambridge 2004, p. 7.

² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³ J.G. Maree, *Brief Overview of the Advancement of Postmodern Approaches to Career Counseling*, *Journal for Psychology in Africa*, 2010, 20(3), p. 362.

⁴ A. Bańka, *Psychologiczne doradztwo karier* [Psychological career counseling], Poznań 2007, p. 47-48.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 89-90.

⁶ See: W. Mayrhofer, A. Iellatchitch, *Rites, right? The value of rites of passage for dealing with today's career transitions*, Career Development International, 2005, 1, p. 58.

The conceptualization of the qualitatively novel approach to the issue of career as an individual's "property", points to the multidimensional nature of contemporary discourse, which combines in itself the implications of interdisciplinary dialogue and creates the need for a review of theoretical reflections on the ways of understanding career, as well as the conditions and determinants which shape it.

Undoubtedly, a career, or rather its selection (as one of a person's most important and, moreover, most individualized choices), is a lifelong journey and has

characteristic turns, which individuals can get to know, evaluate, contemplate and foresee. (...) Professional activities last about 40 years and more, and it is hard to realize that individuals could not plan for such a long period of time.⁷

There is no doubt that active coping in a reality subjected to permanent change, requires people to adapt to the constantly changing context of the creation of individual careers, and the new way of thinking about career means, as W. Lanthaler puts it, "being a manager of knowledge in one's own case"⁸ and constructing a certain kind of a career "portfolio".

K. Obuchowski contrasted the structure of a culture of objects with the formation of a culture of subjects and pointed to the transformation, to use I. Wallerstein's words, "of the world, that we know" (in this regard it is worth noting that, according to the author, the quality of the social change taking place in fact constitutes "the end of the world that we know"⁹). The author's considerations lead him to the conclusion that

for the first time in the history of mankind, there is a real chance for the personal satisfaction and the freedom of initiative of the direct creators of ideas and things to become a condition for the proper functioning of their workshops, and not just the content of utopian, pro-humanist slogans.¹⁰

Indeed, as emphasized by A. Giddens, choice is a fundamental component of individuals' everyday activities. Intellectual emancipation and the ability of reflexive behavior in the world of permanent change and diversity of social environments (in which individuals are involved, either directly or

⁷ J. Adomaitiene, I. Zubrickiene, *Career Competences and Importance of Their Development in Planning of Career Perspective*, Tiltai, 2010, 4, p. 88.

⁸ See: W. Lanthaler, J. Zugmann, *Akcja JA. Nowy sposób myślenia o karierze* [The I action. A new way of thinking about career], Warszawa 2000.

⁹ See: I. Wallerstein, *Koniec świata jaki znamy* [End of the World as We Know It], Warszawa 2004, p. 55.

¹⁰ K. Obuchowski, *Człowiek intencjonalny, czyli o tym, jak być sobą*, Poznań 2000.

indirectly) enable individuals to express their personal subjectivity by creating individual lifestyles and “choosing” their own identity.¹¹

In this sense, the creation of a career in a world oriented towards global change becomes not only a problem of civilization, affecting the shape of the development of societies, state systems and their mutual connections, but also a problem of individuals.

The perception of individuals as causative agents is an important theoretical construct. This issue was outlined by Herr (1992), who stated, that it is the individuals who are capable of career creation. Careers do not exist, unlike professions or jobs.¹² As noted by K. Obuchowski, this peculiar shift “of an individual’s orientation from external conditions of existence to internal conditions”¹³ prompts us to consider career in connection with a person seen as an individual entity, who possesses an individual career.¹⁴ At this point we should refer to a fragment of Collin and Watts’ discussion (1996), in which the authors assert the necessity of reevaluating our thinking about career. They state that “we should focus more on career as an individual’s subjective construction, rather than on career as an objective construction”.¹⁵ Accordingly, the subject develops their career on the basis of their perception and attitude towards it. This means, as Patton and McMahon (1999) emphasize, that a career is “a pattern of influences that coexist in an individual’s life”.¹⁶ Referring to the title category, it is worth noting, that the individualistic model of careers, typical for the American society (in whose culture, individualistic orientation is omnipresent) is based on the belief that individuals are the main causative agents of prospective changes in their own careers, whereas employers are, to a large degree, reactive to the employees’ efforts and activities.¹⁷ This view is the background for thinking about career as a “property” of an individual, including their individual career choices, individual career planning strategies or individual stages of its development.

¹¹ R. Whittington, *Putting Giddens into Action: Social System and Managerial Agency*, *Journal of Management Studies*, 1992, 6, p. 695-696.

¹² W. Patton, M. McMahon, *Career Development and Systems Theory. Connecting Theory and Practice*, Rotterdam 2006, p. 2.

¹³ K. Obuchowski, *Człowiek intencjonalny*, p. 62.

¹⁴ A. Bańka, *Motywacja osiągnięć* [Achievement Motivation], Poznań-Warszawa 2005, p. 8-9.

¹⁵ W. Patton, M. McMahon, *Career Development and Systems Theory*, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ J.E. Rosenbaum, *Organization career systems and employee misperceptions*, [in:] *Handbook of career theory*, p. 330. Success in an individualistic approach to career may encourage individuals to conclude that “career systems either do not exist, or do not count” (p. 330).

In the assessment of the discussed position, it is of critical importance to emphasize, that individuals, admittedly, control their careers to a great degree, but when discussing the management of careers, we should also take into account the stream of intra-organizational experiences creating the mechanisms of the career system.

The vision of a career as “an individual’s property” (Y. Baruch – 2004, A. Bańka – 2005), involves an individualistic assumption of the unique quality of each person’s career, for it is “an individual’s collection of a series of unique functions, jobs, positions and professional experiences”¹⁸, as well as the subject’s responsibility for the construction of their own careers. As A. Bańka, points out, in the aforementioned position we can distinguish several ways in which career is approached, based on the selected distinctive career criterion: the promotion criterion, the profession criterion, the stability criterion and the criterion of work practice.

The contemporary approach to the definition of career is not limited solely to the aspects associated with the practice of promotions, with having a specific profession, with an individual's satisfying professional position or with the stability of the internal relations of the content of the practiced profession. A much broader scope of what is denoted and connoted by the concept of “a career” includes

in addition to a purely professional situation (...) also a level of psychological well-being, understood as the lack of tensions disorganizing the individual's activities, economic and social prosperity and a good family situation.¹⁹

In the contemporary interpretations of career emphasis is placed on the importance of activities not directly related to work, such as: the ways of spending free time, the forms of recreation, education, the fulfillment of family roles which are associated with employment.²⁰ In such a less restrictive approach to the definition of “a career”, the importance of constructing (and not choosing) a career for the design of the quality of life is emphasized.²¹ Career understood in this way, as D.T. Hall puts it, means a sequence of experiences of an individual (understood as “the formation of internal processes of an individual, such as: aims and aspirations, satisfaction, ideas

¹⁸ A. Bańka, *Proaktywność a tryby samoregulacji* [Proactivity and modes of self-regulation], Poznań-Warszawa 2005, p. 23.

¹⁹ A. Bańka, *Motywacja osiągnięć* [Achievement Motivation], p. 8.

²⁰ A. Bańka, *Proaktywność a tryby samoregulacji* [Proactivity and modes of self-regulation], p. 26.

²¹ J.G. Maree, *Brief Overview*, p. 362.

about oneself, attitudes towards work influenced by the changing roles")²² associated with their professional role, constituting the history of their professional life. As A.S. King (1999) puts it,

the psychological force of one's own identity, the insight into oneself and the persistence in the pursuit of career goals represent the main components of motivation and "dedication" [understood as commitment – note by A.C.-M.] to the career, as well as to cooperation, cohesion (...) in the organization.²³

Individuals ascribe certain specific meanings to selected elements of reality, thanks to the ability to read cultural codes, and they create their own individual stories and they have stories ahead of them. They construct their own lives and thereby – their personal careers "through identification (ascribing meanings) with their own professional behaviors and numerous experiences in the workplaces"²⁴, also ascribing meaning to the context of these experiences. Taking responsibility for the search for the meaning of one's role in the practiced profession – the source of which Ch. Handy (the author of *The Age of Paradox*) sees in: direction (individual sense of acting for a good cause), continuity (a subject's belief in the survival and continuation of the products of their work) and connection (participation in a community, with which we identify and which we co-create) – is a lifelong process and a task of lifelong learning.²⁵ The British scientist adds, that "meaning will come to those, who develop their own sense of direction, continuity and connection"²⁶ in their profession.

The essence lies in the sequential development of the individual (integrally linked with the development of their career) throughout their whole individual life. It is no wonder, that V.G. Zunker – in effect basing on the cognitive practice in the construction of the model of career counseling – stated, that the key role in designing a life integrated with the construction of career is played by: the subject's perception of success, their motivation for work, the individual need for internal satisfaction, the undertaken roles,

²² A. Miś, *Kształtowanie karier w organizacji* [Shaping careers in an organizations], [in:] *Zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi* [Human Resources Management], Eds. H. Król, A. Ludwiczynski, Warszawa 2006, p. 477.

²³ B. Adekola, *Career planning and career management as correlates for career development and job satisfaction. A case study of Nigerian Bank Employees*, *Australian Journal of Business and Management Research*, 2011, 2, p. 104.

²⁴ J.G. Maree, *Brief Overview*, p. 363.

²⁵ D. Piotrowska (translation), *Zarządzanie karierą. Wstęp* [*Career Management. Introduction*], Warszawa 2006, p. 11.

²⁶ J. Biolos, *Modele kariery XXI-go wieku* [21st century career models] [in:] *Zarządzanie karierą* [Career Management], Warszawa 2006, p. 30.

the quality of relationships with other life partners, the developmental and contextual changes.²⁷ In this approach, as emphasized i.a. by J.H. Greenhaus, "career" is seen as "a pattern of work-related experiences, which bounds and determines the basic direction of an individual's life".²⁸ In this sense, to quote J. Arnold, "the broad approach to career assumes, that it is a sequence of positions associated with employment, roles, activities and experiences"²⁹ obtained by the subject throughout their lifelong development.

A cognitive approach – which is reflexive and organizes the knowledge on the definition of a career as "an individual's property" – requires us to look for a set of elements constituting this position. This appears to be necessary in order to determine the range of characteristics of the construction of "a career portfolio" within the adopted theoretical tradition.

One significant element of the distinguished definitions of "a career" is their clear subjective and personal character. "If a person happens to live in a particular society, they want to have a particular position suitable for them"³⁰, as Z. Bauman concluded. A career is always assigned to a particular individual, it is a state of their possession, and it is the individual who ascribes a certain kind of individual meaning to it. We do not emphasize the practice of a profession (e.g. I practice the profession of...), but the fact of "being" a representative of the practiced profession (e.g. I am a...). The profession is only a context, within which one's career is developed. Career is the experience of everyone who works or even looks for work (as in the case of the unemployed).³¹ In this sense, every subjective career is unique in character. On the basis of these assumptions, D.T. Hall emphasizes, that a career is "a structure, a sequence of experiences of a given individual, associated with work (...), it is a unique structure, dictated by autonomous choices".³² It is no wonder, because the individual dreams, desires, longings and imaginations make up the most personal and individual model of a life ideal.³³

Another element of the subjective approach is the focus on the existence of conditions in which an individual's career is shaped. Both the objective and subjective factors, considered in isolation, do not exhaust the scope of this context. A holistic approach to the issue of career development includes

²⁷ J.G. Maree, *Brief Overview*, p. 364.

²⁸ A. Bańka, *Proaktywność* [Proactivity], p. 24.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Z. Bauman, *Kariera. Cztery szkice socjologiczne* [Career: Four Sociological Sketches], Warszawa 1960, p. 16.

³¹ A. Bańka, *Proaktywność* [Proactivity], p. 25.

³² A. Miś, *Kształtowanie karier*, p. 478.

³³ Z. Bauman, *Kariera*, p. 18.

both objective elements (i.a. responsibilities, positions, activities, roles, professional decisions), as well as subjective elements (values, aspirations, attitudes, expectations, needs, orientations, emotional and sentimental aspects of professional experiences). Individuals who manage their careers can change the objective (e.g. a job change) or the subjective (e.g. a change of expectations) elements of their career development environment. In addition, in the case of a similarly developing and manifested career, systematic changes take place both in the objective events associated with the changes in the job market and in the individual's subjective reactions to these events.³⁴ Because of the subjective perception and sense of a career, "one man's career is another man's minor distinction".³⁵ Therefore, as D.T. Hall puts it, the course of a career is the result of two dimensions: that which is observable (objective dimension) and that which is unobservable (subjective dimension), which are closely related.³⁶

One example of a theory, which, while presenting a new perspective on participation in "the modern social formation" (P. Sztompka), focuses on the nature of the social world (showing the mutual interdependence between globality and the dispositions of individuals) and refers to the domain of life that is constituted by career, is the theory of career construction presented by M.L. Savickas.³⁷

It is, in fact, the first theory of career development presented at the beginning of the 21st century, and constitutes an upgrade, development and integration of parts of the theory of professional development presented by D. Super (1957). D. Super's influence on both the development of the concept of career exploration, and on the presentation of the distance traveled in career conceptualization – from the implementation of the image of self in the world of work to the integration of the career with the individual's course of life – cannot be overstated. The work of Savickas updates the issues from the field of career development, previously addressed in content theories and process theories, focusing on the issues of the professional personality and adaptability to a career.³⁸

The individual career pattern, constituting "a career portfolio", identified by the researcher with the achieved professional level and the sequence,

³⁴ A. Bańka, *Proaktywność* [Proactivity], p. 25.

³⁵ H. Worach-Kardas, quoted after: M. Szymański, *Ścieżki kariery studentów socjologii UAM* [Career paths of the students of Sociology at the Adam Mickiewicz University], Warszawa 2010, p. 80.

³⁶ A. Miś, *Kształtowanie karier*, p. 478.

³⁷ See: M. Banai, W. Harry, *Boundaryless Global Careers. The International Itinerant*, International of Studies of Management and Organization, 2004, 3, p. 97.

³⁸ W. Patton, M. McMahon, *Career Development and Systems Theory*, p. 162.

frequency and duration of work, is "determined by the social-economic level of the parents and the individual's education, their skills, character traits, concepts of self and adaptability to career, along with the possibilities provided by society".³⁹ According to the distinguished theory, reflecting the constructivist perspective on career development, the career domain is perceived as the central part of the subject's life and an important reference point in the shaping of individual identity. The essence in this case lies in the treatment of the career choice, the skills of adaptability and the development as elements of an integrated process. The author points to the concept of four cores: the structure of an individual's life, their professional personality⁴⁰, the skills of career adaptability and the subject's life theme, in order to enable the understanding of individualized professional behaviors. In the theory of career construction presented by M.L. Savickas, professional behaviors and their development are examined in a processual manner, taking into account their organization in a holistic, permanent and contextual way. An individual's career development is not analyzed in isolation from other dimensions and components of the individual's life. What's more, a career (which is not a context-free element) is seen as a central dimension for life design, and thus it should be integrated with the lifestyle of individuals.⁴¹

The theory of career design developed by Savickas states that "individuals construct their careers through ascribing meanings to their professional behavior and experience"⁴². The construction of an individual's life course, which was shaped by social processes (the society and its institutions) is composed of a core and of peripheral roles. The essence here lies in the balance between the social roles of the core.⁴³

As Savickas emphasizes, in the process of career construction, the essence is the development and implementation of professional self-concepts in the undertaken and fulfilled professional roles. The self-concepts "develop through the interactions of inherited abilities (...) to play different roles and the abilities to judge to what extent the results of playing of roles are met with the praise of peers and superiors".⁴⁴ Thus, the realization of the concept of one's self in the work environment is associated with a synthesis (developed on the ground of playing of one's role and on the basis of the

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 63.

⁴⁰ K.M. Czarniecki, *Problemy osobowości zawodowej człowieka pracy produkcyjnej* [Problems of professional identity of persons in manufacturing work], Warszawa 1973, p. 13.

⁴¹ J.G. Maree, *Brief Overview*, p. 363-364.

⁴² W. Patton, M. McMahon, *Career Development and Systems Theory*, p. 63.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

lessons learned from the received feedback) and a compromise between the individual and the social factors.⁴⁵

In order to explain and interpret the phenomenon of career development, and taking into account its individualized character, the author attempts to define the possibly universal essence of the mechanisms and assumptions, which should be included while considering the quality of people's professional life, and namely: [a] the contextual possibilities, [b] the dynamic processes, [c] the non-linear character of the development, [d] the diversity of perspectives and [e] the individual patterns.⁴⁶ As in the case of M.L. Savickas, this specific reference to subjective activity and social constructivism, further specified by P.J. Hartung, stresses the importance of the development of four dimensions of professional behaviors, distinguishing among them:

[a] the life structure (the set of work and other roles, which constitute an individual's life), [b] the strategies of career adaptability (copying/imitation mechanism used by individuals in order to deal with developmental tasks and environmental changes, which cumulate during the course of life), [c] the themes of life stories (motivations and driving forces, which shape life), [d] the personality styles (personality traits, such as skills, needs, values, interests and other characteristics that together make up the image of the self).⁴⁷

In accordance with the approach of the distinguished theorists, the theory of creation of a career and the practice undertaken in its scope play the role of a meta-theory, which connects and integrates three basic theoretical traditions: the developmental approach (the individual development of the subject), the narrative approach (the psychodynamic motivations of the individual and the themes of their life stories) and the difference/diversity approach (individual differences, capturing of the "difference" in relation to others), thus creating a theoretical perspective known as the theory of professional behaviors. The theoretical perspectives of professional behaviors and the development of career are considered jointly in an attempt to indicate a meta-theory, and emphasize the necessity of taking into account: (a) the structure of an individual's life and their adaptability in the context of career (how they organize their life roles and how they deal with the tasks of career development), (b) the life themes (why are the subjects moving in

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ J.G. Maree, *Brief Overview*, p. 363-364.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 363.

a given career direction) and (c) the subject's professional personality (features characterizing the subject).⁴⁸

The attempt made by Savickas to combine and integrate the three theoretical traditions: the developmental approach, the narrative approach and the diversity approach, leads to the creation of a theoretical perspective known as the theory of professional behaviors. It takes into account the individuals' life structures and "life themes", as well as the subject's adaptability in the context of career and their (professional) personality traits.⁴⁹ In this way the author - as an integrator of the content theory and the process theory and having regard to the fact that the development of the career theory is, in fact, a permanent process of theoretical transformation of the concept of career - emphasizes the importance of not only a new view on the topic of career (supporting new ideas), but also of the location of the existing opinions in the perspective of others, and of their reassessment.⁵⁰

The personal approach to career consists of a sequence of occupied positions, functions, experiences, and roles played by the individual. At the level of analysis of this element, attention is drawn to how a subject's individual positions, roles, activities and functions are combined, and to the question of whether the occurring changes are predictable, whether they coincide with the equally variable interests, competences, qualifications and talents, and whether they contribute to the development of an individual's potential.⁵¹

The nature of the discussed approach to the course of the career, distinguishing the contemporary approach, is its non-evaluative understanding. The lack of a comparative criterion for assessing individual justifications for the choices made in the course of a professional life renders unjustified the determination of the achieved success or lack thereof in the context of progress in an individual's career.⁵² In this sense, as Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989) put it, "everyone, who works, has a career". In this way they indicate the neutral character of the term "career", which as a descriptive category can refer to all professions.⁵³

Career development is a life-long process of a comprehensive nature. It is the result of integration of two processes: the individual's career planning and the processes of career directing and management. In this sense, it is

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 363-364.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ See: M.B. Arthur, D.T. Hall, B.S. Lawrence, *Generating New directions in career theory*, p. 20.

⁵¹ A. Bańka, *Proaktywność* [Proactivity], p. 25-26.

⁵² D.T. Hall, quoted after: A. Miś, *Kształtowanie karier* [Shaping careers], p. 478.

⁵³ W. Patton, M. McMahon, *Career Development and Systems Theory*, p. 2

understood as the subject's achievement of the objectives of their career. The distinguishing feature of proactive planning, directing and management of a career is the "awareness of being a subject that performs actions in a desired direction"⁵⁴ and influences the surrounding reality by initiating changes. There is a certain kind of qualitative "connection" between the activities of career planning and career management, which in turn determines the conditions of career development, the construction of its "portfolio" and influences the level of satisfaction from the course of the career.

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