

Social Representations of Career – Anchored in the Past, Conflicting with the Future

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Various issues surrounding career are part of people's everyday lives, so people have a kind of common sense knowledge of career. Although the meaning of 'career' is often taken for granted, mixed messages and the lack of a conceptual definition blur our understanding of career, especially in times of societal and contextual change. Social representation theory (SRT) responds well to the theoretical and methodological needs of this study, which explores social representations of career among a group of people in a context of changing working life conditions. Free association was the method used for collecting the empirical data for this study. The content of social representations is inductively and thematically explored to then disclose within which scientifically shaped thoughts on career the empirical findings are reflected and seems to be anchored, and how these representations relate to thoughts currently dominating on the structural level in today's changing society. The exploration resulted in two stable and two more dynamic social representations concerning career: *career as individual project and self-realization*; *career as social/hierarchical climbing*; *career as a game of exchange*; and *career as an uncertain outcome*. The respondents' common sense knowledge of career appears to be reflected and anchored in past working life conditions and in scientific

perspectives that no longer correspond to those now dominating at the structural level. This indicates a discrepancy between that which is socially represented among people and that which is communicated within the new conditions of working life.

Everybody seems to understand what career is (Collin, 2007). Career issues are important for most people as they act in their daily lives and in their working contexts – when they dream, plan, and make decisions about the future. People also reflect upon past dreams, actions and tasks. Clearly, these issues are part of people's everyday lives, and their thinking about them constitutes a kind of everyday, or common-sense, knowledge of career, where the meaning of career is largely taken for granted. Nevertheless, there is also a certain broadness and vagueness in the understanding of career. Career is not a simple, easily defined phenomenon; rather, it is multi-faceted, involving educational and vocational choices and prospects, various work-related issues, future dreams and goals. The term is used for various purposes by various stakeholders with varying perspectives (Collin, 2007). The effect of this multiple understanding seems to be that career phenomena remain shrouded in mystery, creating uncertainty among individuals concerned with career issues about how to relate to it. Moreover, as several authors (Allvin, Aronsson, Hagström, Johansson, & Lundberg, 2006; Ekstedt & Sundin, 2006a, 2006b; Herr, 2008) indicate, individuals' career issues are very probably influenced by changing conditions in working life, such as changes in the internal division of labour, demands for flexibility and adaptation, decreasing employment security, and blurring vocational barriers within companies.

Career-related issues generate higher levels of interest than ever before, in both public and scientific contexts (cf. Patton & McMahon, 2006). Career development is recognized as a key component of education and labour market strategies, and career supportive activities have been advocated as essential to the pursuit of public policy strategies (Watts & Fretwell, 2004; Watts & Sultana, 2004). Why are these issues receiving so much interest among different stakeholders and actors, and why are people in such increasing need of coaching and counselling? A previous study (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012) explored the understanding of career on a structural level as contained in European policy documents on career guidance. The study revealed that underlying views on career in policy documents were dominated by economic, political science and learning perspectives. It was suggested that careers were subordinated to market forces and that

individuals were left with sole responsibility for their careers, and it indicated a need to further explore the understanding of career on an individual level. The present study focuses on exploring the common sense knowledge of career phenomena among people in a context of changing working life conditions. It seeks to disclose within which scientifically shaped thoughts on career this common sense knowledge appears to be reflected and anchored, and how this common sense knowledge might relate to thoughts currently dominating on the structural level in today's changing society.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Previous research suggests that there are multiple meanings of career, used for various purposes among different groups of people, disciplines and perspectives (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989; Collin, 2007; Patton & McMahon, 2006). Everyday knowledge of career among ordinary people, however, especially in a context of changing working-life conditions, has not been as thoroughly investigated.

Reviews of career theory state that the field is dominated by psychological and sociological views (Arthur et al., 1989; Kidd, 2007). According to Arthur, Hall and Lawrence's (1989) overview, career, from a psychological perspective, is regarded as (a) a vocation, (b) a vehicle for self-realization, or (c) a component of the individual life structure. Theory related to career as a vocation accepts the position of stability of personality in adulthood. Theory that regards career as a vehicle for self-realization is humanistic and focuses on the opportunities and benefits a career can provide for individuals, organizations and society. When career is regarded as a component of the individual life structure, transitions are seen as predictable. Social psychology considers career as an individual response to external role messages, while sociology considers career as (a) the development of social roles in the social order, or (b) as social mobility, where titles indicate people's social position. Anthropology, in turn, overlaps with functional sociology and regards career as status passages. The economic perspective considers career as a response to market forces; political science focuses on career as the enactment of self-interest; history views career as a correlate of historical outcomes; and geography views career as a response to geographic circumstances (Arthur et al., 1989).

As a consequence of structural change and changed conditions for organizations due to globalization, a new division of labour has emerged (Ekstedt & Sundin, 2006a, 2006b). The fundamental idea of the organization as hierarchical, based upon industrial organizational thinking from the early 1900s, is no longer in focus (Dalsvall & Lindström, 2012; Ekstedt & Sundin, 2006a, 2006b; Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck, & van Vianen, 2009). After World War II, the growth of national and multinational corporations created hierarchical and stable structures within organizations, and the attendant possibilities for advancement and progressive improvement influenced people's view of career (Savickas, 2008). However, the concept of career and the theories and models within the field – originally developed from the aforementioned nature of organization and often pictured as a pyramid where the power and reward system relates to the higher positions in the pyramid (Dalsvall & Lindström, 2012) – are based upon 20th century working life conditions (Patton & McMahon, 2006; Savickas et al., 2009). Stable, hierarchical organizational structures and security systems have been replaced by the need for flexibility, rapid change and adaptability as organizations cope with increased global economic competitiveness (Savickas et al., 2009). Decentralizations, reorganizations, flattened hierarchies, downsizing, temporary projects, and the reallocation of working tasks, responsibilities and authority characterize the organizational landscape today (Ekstedt & Sundin, 2006b; Södergren, 1992). The effects of globalization on the organization of work, along with increasing demands for lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2009a, 2009b; Rubenson, 2009; Torres, 2009) influence people's working conditions and possibilities for individual career development. Linear, predictable or secure employment patterns are a thing of the past (Herr, 2008; Södergren, 1992).

In response to such changes, several researchers began to look at the possible impact on the career field (see, e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1996). Hall points to the mixed messages that have followed the new working life transformation with his statement, "The career is dead - long live the career!" (Hall, 1996, p. 8). The traditional contract between employee and employer – where hard work, good performance and loyalty resulted in rewards and job security – has been replaced by a new *protean career* contract characterized by continuous learning (Hall, 1996), with *boundaryless careers* as a new employment principle (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Empirical investigations have revealed that decentralization

processes within companies have effects on established reward systems and on career paths. Upward movement and increased salary and status have been replaced by new career paths of lateral and downward movement (Södergren, 1992). Moreover, a learning perspective on career has gained increased influence in public policy, in line with the lifelong learning discourse (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012). Arguments have been raised to the effect that career belongs to the individual rather than the organization (Savickas et al., 2009). Paradoxically, individuals' career issues related to career guidance and counselling, together with human resource strategies, are more popular than ever among public policy actors (Patton & McMahon, 2006; Watts, 2005; Watts & Fretwell, 2004; Watts & Sultana, 2004), even as career is said to be "dead" (Hall, 1996).

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Social representation theory (SRT), originally formulated by Moscovici (1961), and its further development, responds well to both the theoretical and methodological needs of this study.

First, SRT provides a perspective that allows to grasp the common sense knowledge of career in today's upheaval in working life, as SRT is concerned with how different beliefs and attitudes are created, how they become common sense knowledge among people, and further create a common reality among them (Jodelet, 1989; Moscovici, 2008). Social representations are "ways of world making" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 231) and are described as a

...system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history. (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii)

Based upon this definition, this study assumes that social representations of career phenomena consist of socialized expressions which organize images and language because they identify and symbolize situations and actions common to us (Moscovici, 2008). People need to orient themselves in the contexts of which they are a part – in this study, the context of working life – and they therefore need to establish an order that enables

them to master and orient themselves in the world. This established order enables people to communicate and provides them with codes for social exchange and for naming and classifying various aspects of their world in order “to constitute reality”(Moscovici, 2008, p. xxxi)—in this case, the reality of career phenomena. Social representations thus help us to “make sense of our world and to interact within it with other societal members” (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005, p. 434). The main function of all representations is to familiarize the unfamiliar, because the unknown may be a threat to our socially constructed realities (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). The two processes of *anchoring* and *objectifying* (Moscovici, 2000, pp. 37-54) together explain how people make something unfamiliar into something familiar. Through anchoring, the threat of the unfamiliar is reduced as we classify, give name, and ascribe meaning to the new phenomenon by integrating the object that is represented in the existing world. Through objectifying, people translate abstract ideas to concrete experiences (Moscovici, 2000). These two processes are considered to have formed, and to continue to form, our common sense knowledge of career. This study assumes that previous working life conditions have contributed to the establishment of an order of work and have provided people with codes for social exchange, naming and classifying which in turn may have resulted in some common social representations of career phenomena.

Second, SRT also helps us understand the relation between scientific knowledge and common sense knowledge concerning career. Scientific knowledge and common sense knowledge are complementary: we use common sense knowledge in scientific settings, and scientific knowledge is also integrated in our everyday settings (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Moscovici, 1961, 2008). Moscovici (1961, 2008) explored how scientific theories of psychoanalysis were received and transformed into so-called 'common sense knowledge' and what happens to scientific theories when they are disseminated to larger audiences. SRT seeks to explain “how scientific knowledge about a certain phenomenon is reflected (transformed) into common sense knowledge of ordinary people” (Chaib, Danermark, & Selander, 2011, p. 2). SRT thus responds well to the present study’s interest in how people’s common sense knowledge of career reflects scientifically shaped thoughts on career.

Third, SRT also consists of elements for describing continuity and stability over time (Moscovici, 2000; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005) as well as changing conditions influencing common sense knowledge (Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 2000), which are both of particular interest in this study because of the emerging transformation of working life. Moscovici (2000) states that nobody's mind is free from the effects of earlier conditions that have been imposed upon us through representations, language and culture. Moreover, social representations are created by human beings and, once established, influence human behaviour and social interaction by imposing themselves upon us: once they are "fossilized" in earlier conditions, they become part of the collective practice and are taken for granted in social practice (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). These elements describe the stable character of social representations. This study therefore assumes that earlier conditions of working life and the division of labour – upon which our theories, models and concepts of career and career development are founded and from which they have been developed (see, e.g., Patton & McMahon, 2006; Savickas et al., 2009) – have formed and shaped our minds and representations of career and career development. However, social representations can also be challenged and changed: they are created by human beings, so they can also be changed by them (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). Current conditions of working life and division of labour are therefore assumed to influence the current formation of social representations about the phenomena. Marková (2003) considers social representations as open, dynamic phenomena that are conceptual and communicable, defined as thoughts in movement. The character of social representations is revealed especially in times of crisis and upheaval, "when a group or its images are undergoing a change" (Moscovici, 2000, p. 63). Under changing conditions, images and expressions are more vivid, and individuals are more willing and motivated to talk because of their need to understand an increasingly unfamiliar world. When tensions arise between the language of concepts and that of representations, between scientific and ordinary knowledge, people's common sense knowledge is challenged. Change versus stability has long been an issue in writings on social representations, and a gradually increasing understanding of space for change in SRT has been pointed out, as well as the necessity to understand change in relation to stability (Gustavsson & Selander, 2011). In

order to consider these dynamic elements of change related to stability, social representations are proposed to be *mediated meaning making* (Gustavsson & Selander, 2011), similar to suggestions that social representations, within such tension between stability and change, can be considered *a space of negotiation of the meaning* (Tateo & Iannaccone, 2012). This study therefore considers this tension between stability and change and aims to explore both the stable and dynamic characters of social representations of career.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In order to best grasp people's common sense knowledge of career phenomena in a context of changing working life conditions, the study focuses on people who are believed to be affected by such changing conditions. Once social representations have become established, they become part of collective practice; they are taken for granted and thus describe stable elements of social representations. However, because social representations are positioned inside the triadic asymmetry of self, other and object, they can be "volatile and will transform over time" (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005, p. 436). The methodology therefore follows a descriptive and inductive approach, where the aim is to characterize both the stable and dynamic content of social representations and take into consideration their inherent dynamic (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005) in order to answer the research question: In a context of changing working life conditions, what social representations, of both stable and dynamic character, do people have about career and career development? I then further analyse the data in exploring the question: Within *which* scientifically shaped thoughts on career do the representations appear to be reflected and anchored and how does their anchoring and reflection in those particular scientifically shaped thoughts relate to thoughts currently dominating on the structural level?

Data collection and sampling

The particular interest in social representations of career in a context of changing conditions in working life delimited the study to focus on people currently undergoing or recently having

undergone changes at their places of work. It is assumed that the character of social representation is especially revealed when a group or its images are undergoing change (Moscovici, 2000). The purpose of this selection criterion is to search for the latent patterns of common thinking, of both stable and dynamic character, that emerge among people who are affected by changes that might be related to the transformation of working life. Thinking is regarded as a form of internal dialogue, characterized by variety and two-sidedness where people argue and reason with themselves when they think about certain issues and strive to solve something for themselves (Billig, 1996). To investigate people's common sense knowledge of career, free association (see, e.g., Abric, 1995; Andersén, 2011; Germundsson, 2011) was found to be the appropriate method for collecting the empirical data for this study. The method and the words and phrases to be used were previously verified through a pilot study with 6 employees who experienced reorganization at their workplace. Free association as a data collection method is pertinent to the research questions because of its associative character, which stimulates spontaneous, less controlled answers. The method is assumed to stimulate and provide space for the respondents to answer based upon their underlying, latent patterns of thought, which might otherwise remain hidden (Abric, 1995).

The main data collection was conducted among a group of twenty-one university students who participated in an independent course. In line with the lifelong learning trends and increasing competence demands, it was assumed that several students, who participated in an independent course, might also have work-life experiences and/or be employed, as they were not participating in a full university programme. To ensure that the students responded to the selection criterion, they were asked to fill in a form. The form asked whether they were employed, whether they were workers or in a leading position, whether they had work experience and whether they were undergoing or had recently undergone changes at their workplaces. Relevant changes were defined as: organizational changes and restructuring of various kinds caused by factors within and outside the organization; increased/changing skills requirements; and changes that affected their work situations, jobs or roles either positively or negatively. Fifteen of the students were then selected as having met the criteria. The six employees from the pilot study, who also met the criteria, were included in the empirical data for this study as well. Altogether, this yielded twenty-one respondents between the ages of 24 to 53, with an average age of 34 years. They were

identified as undergoing or having recently undergone changes at their workplaces. Nineteen were employed, and two were unemployed at the time but had 12 and 24 years of work experience, respectively. Two also noted they were in positions of leadership. Nineteen were women, and two were men. Educational level was not part of the selection criteria; however, all had at least basic eligibility for higher education.

The participants were asked for their spontaneous free associations of career based on the following specific words and phrases: *career*, *career development* and *work situation in change*. *Career* and *career development* were chosen because they have been identified as key concepts related to career (cf. Arthur et al., 1989; Collin, 2007; Patton & McMahon, 2006; Savickas et al., 2009), and because it was assumed that these could help to reveal whether there is stability in the common sense knowledge formed. The phrase *work situation in change* was chosen with the aim of grasping the career in change related to changing conditions in working life. Again, these words/phrases had been worked out previously and tested in a pilot study prior to the main data collection with the aim to explore and identify both stable and dynamic elements of people's common sense knowledge.

The data-collection of associations was conducted in two steps: First, the participants were asked to make associations to each word or phrase, one at a time, and to write them down. They were then asked to combine the original word with each of their freely produced associations and to give their association to this new combination (Abric, 1995). This way of working was intended to strengthen the trustworthiness of the collected data by making clearer the intended meaning of each word the respondents produced. This procedure was repeated for each original word/phrase and resulted in 303 free associations in the first step and 305 free associations in the second step. Below are some examples of free associations written by respondent (i) that illustrate the collected data in the form of free associations produced in the first step (see Figure 1) and the second step (see Figure 2). Similar statements were made by several respondents, and this example was selected because of its clarity.



Figure 1. Example of free associations related to the word career produced by respondent (i) in the first step.

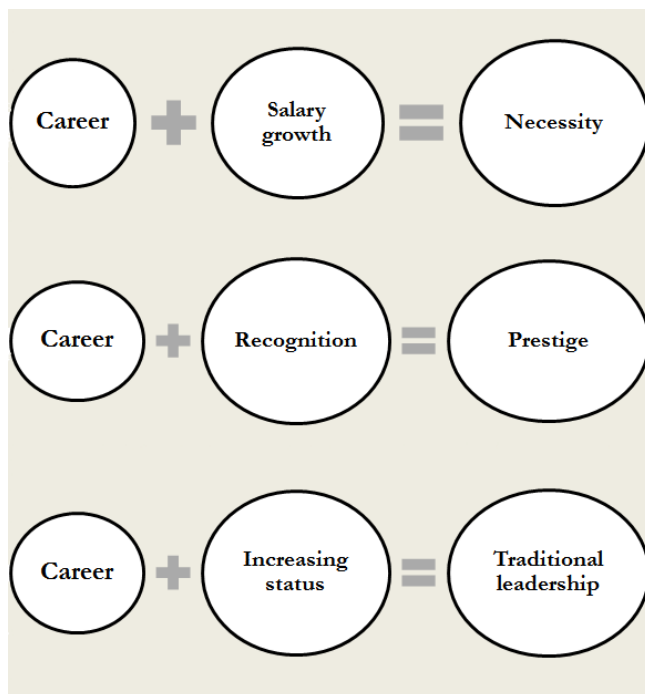


Figure 2. Example of free associations produced by respondent (i) in the second step.

Processing and Analysis of the Data

The respondents' free associations in the first and second steps were summarized in a matrix and read several times to get an overview of the material. Each respondent received a code in the form of an alphabetical letter which was noted on each series of associations they produced so that each association could be related to a respondent during the analysis process.

To answer the research question concerning what social representations people have about career and career development, the analysis follows a descriptive, inductive approach (cf. Gustavsson & Selander, 2011; Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 2000; Tateo & Iannaccone, 2012; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Moscovici, 1961, 2008) was used as the basic method to inductively approach and explore the content of the collected associations, which are regarded as the units of analysis. The associations of each respondent for each word/phrase were processed by an exploration of primary ideas, concepts and images among the units of analysis, and those with similar or identical content were brought together. The analysis further applies the concept of *themata* (Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 2000) as a means of understanding the latent pattern of thoughts expressed by the respondents in the associative data collected. According to Markova (2003), it appears to be essential to human thinking that people communicate and think in pairs of opposites. *Themata* refers to antinomies of thought (Holton, 1975, 1978), or taxonomies of oppositional nature (Moscovici, 2000), and can also be described as dialogical antinomies (Marková, 2003). *Themata* is composed of a *thema* paired with another *thema* which together focus on oppositional dialogical antinomies (Marková, 2003). According to Moscovici (2000), *themata* generates social representations through the processes of anchoring and objectification, when people strive to familiarize something unfamiliar within an internal dialogue (Billig, 1996).

When those primary ideas, concepts and images among the units of analysis with similar or identical content had been brought together, an exploration of what constitutes a common *thema* among the same or similar units of analysis was conducted, resulting in the naming of several *themas*. Thereafter, an exploration of oppositional antonyms among *themas* was conducted, resulting in the naming and composition of several pairs of opposites, i.e., *themata*. In order to explore both the stable and dynamic character, the inductive thematic exploration of

primary ideas or concept images among the units of analysis considers those that emerge with few oppositional thoughts, appearing as taken for granted in social practice, (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005), as stable. Those units of analysis that emerged as thoughts in movement (Marková, 2003), with a significant number of oppositional thoughts, that further relate to those of stable character (Gustavsson & Selander, 2011), are considered to represent the dynamic character. The exploration of the generative function of *themas* and *themata* (cf. Moscovici, 2000) considered what seemed to be common thinking among *themas* and *themata* and revealed four social representations, two stable and two more dynamic, which are illustrated in Table 1 and will be further presented in the section of empirical findings.

In order to explore and interpret within which scientifically shaped thoughts the empirical findings are reflected and appear to be anchored, and how these in turn relate to the structural level in today's changing society, the following analysis explores words, expressions and concept images in the associations collected. The analysis focuses on those *themas* and *themata* that emerged in the empirical findings and explores relations between (a) words, expressions and concept images within these *themas* and *themata* and (b) scientifically shaped thoughts and statements about career phenomena. The analysis is thus inspired by Moscovici's work and proposals to explore the relationship between scientific and common sense knowledge (1961, 2000, 2008), considered as not entirely distinct (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Moscovici, 1961, 2008). The present exploration and interpretation of relations, which will be presented under the section of interpreting the findings, rests upon literature reviews of different disciplinary perspectives on career and career development (see e.g., Arthur et al., 1989; Patton & McMahon, 2006) and of the transformation of the world of work (see, e.g., Ekstedt & Sundin, 2006a; Ekstedt & Sundin, 2006b; Hall, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Södergren, 1992), combined with recent explorations of the understanding of career on a structural level, as contained in EU policy documents on guidance (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012). The perspectives on these topics, according to SRT reasoning, are assumed to have influence on the way career phenomena become common sense knowledge among people. In the discussion section, some possible implications of the findings will be further highlighted.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The inductive thematic exploration generated two stable and two dynamic social representations of career, as illustrated in Table 1 and presented below.

Table 1. List of themas/themata related to the social representations of stable and dynamic character.

Themas/themata	Social representations
Themas	Stable social representations
<i>Personal meaning</i>	Career as individual project and self-realization
<i>Social meaning</i>	Career as social/hierarchical climbing
Themata	Dynamic social representations
<i>Expected effort – expected outcome</i> <i>Internal reward – external reward</i> <i>Created outcomes – offered outcomes</i> <i>Individual assessment of value – social assessment of value</i> <i>Beneficial to individuals – beneficial to organizations</i>	Career as a game of exchange
<i>Environmental influence – individual powerlessness</i> <i>Predictability – unpredictability</i> <i>Security – insecurity</i> <i>Control – lack of control</i> <i>Improvement – deterioration</i>	Career as an uncertain outcome

Stable Social Representations

The social representations of stable character are generated through associations from which two particular types of meaning emerge captured in the *themas* of ‘personal meaning’ and ‘social meaning’. On the one hand, there is the social representation *career as individual project and self-realization*. This social representation contains associations – primary ideas of the desire to

focus on oneself and one's aspirations, to realise one's dreams and goals, to do something one is passionate about that gives pleasure and a sense of meaning – that express the meaning of 'career' as personal significance and self-realization. The following examples of associations to 'career' illustrate this: "doing what you want; achieving personal goals" (k); "a positive word for personal working-life; meaning for the individual; something one wants to do; a sense of self-realization; success in what you want to achieve" (u); "realizing your dream job; the goal/meaning of working-life" (o); "realization of your dream-job; work hard and well; investing; recognition" (o); "doing what you are passionate about: easier/more fun" (j). The associations also relate to desire to learn for personal development, development in work-roles, life enjoyment and personal satisfaction.

On the other hand, the social representation *career as social/hierarchical climbing* is generated. This social representation contains associations that clearly express another type of meaning, one that is related to social importance and social ranking. There are very clear concept images of career relating to upward mobility and hierarchical climbing towards higher positions and roles with status, i.e., managerial and leadership positions. "Status" and "ladder" emerge as typical key concept images here. It is also evident that the meaning of career success is connected to increasing status, as judged by others. As one respondent put it, "career – hierarchy: socially/culturally determined caste system" (g). To pursue a career thus means to pursue higher status. Success can be regarded in a positive sense, as in the following example: "career – success, positive; higher position, greater responsibility and authority" (m). On the other hand, it can be regarded in a negative sense, seen as something "bad to climb the ladder, to have ambition and drive" (f).

The two social representations presented above appear rather stable and coherent, as they do not reveal a significant number of oppositional types of thought. They appear opposites in the sense that the former emphasizes the personal, whereas the latter emphasizes the social; nevertheless, they are not mutually exclusive but can be relational in the sense that personal fulfilment and objectives may involve hierarchical climbing. These two social representations seem to be part of an established order wherein certain codes for social exchange, and codes for naming and classifying the meaning of career (cf. Moscovici, 1973) have become "fossilized" (cf. Voelklein & Howarth, 2005) due to former conditions in working life.

Dynamic Social Representations

The two more dynamic social representations are generated through several *themata* among the associations. Emerging first is the social representation *career as a game of exchange*. Associations revealing oppositional thoughts such as the *themata* ‘expected effort–expected outcome’ illustrate that education (courses, training, competence development, etc.) is considered an expected effort, a pre-condition for career, and that career is regarded as the expected outcome. Other associations express expected action and behaviour related to expected outcomes, as exemplified in the following: “career–education: a prerequisite for development and for making a career” (a); “career–education: the foundation for making a career” (b); “career–education, career–competence development: the same as development” (d); “career–well-educated: thinking that many who make a career are also well-educated” (e). Hard work, good co-worker relations, good performance and experience appear as expected efforts, or prerequisites for career. Career development appears as an outcome of such efforts. Other expected outcomes are better or new working tasks, challenges and broader possibilities. Loyalty and greater responsibility emerge as expected efforts; responsibility also emerges as an expected outcome. A negative expected outcome of responsibility is the risk of becoming *worn-out*. Efforts in the form of action and behaviour are expected to result in certain rewarding outcomes, captured by the *themata* ‘internal reward–external reward’. External rewards are the most frequent associations. Financial reward in the form of higher salary and other external rewards such as social ranking and recognition in the form of higher status and position emerge as primary ideas and concept images in several associations. These are closely related to the social representation *career as social/hierarchical climbing*. Internal rewards, expressed in terms of personal satisfaction, relate more closely to the social representation *career as individual project and self-realization*. Furthermore, the *themata* ‘created outcomes–offered outcomes’ captures an ambiguity about whether or not the individual creates his or her own outcome. It is common to speak about “making a career” for oneself, especially when discussing education as a type of effort required, but when it comes to outcomes, career is something that one is offered by others, i.e., by employers or society. The following associations illustrate these antinomies: “Career–big cities: it is in the big cities that you find the great possibilities” (e); “Career–private sector: the

only place where you can make a career, i.e., earn money” (f); “Career–goal: the goal of moving forward/upward, being promoted, growth” (c); “Career–promotion: the meaning of making a career for oneself” (d); “Career development–decided by the boss: I as an individual don’t control it, it’s someone else who promotes, dependent on relations” (f); “Career development–workplace: something happening at the workplace, it’s something that is offered” (e). There are also associations to the effect that the absence of outcomes depends on societal and/or surrounding conditions. Who is in charge of deciding the value of one’s outcomes is ambiguous, as shown in the *themata* ‘individual assessment of value–social assessment of value’, illustrated as follows: “Career–movement forwards/upwards: towards something you/others believe to be better than the present” (g). These social assessments of the value of the outcomes are linked to the meaning of career as social and hierarchical ranking. ‘Beneficial to individuals–beneficial to organizations’ reveals a complementary way of thinking about the outcomes of career phenomena: “Career development–for whom? Has to be beneficial for both individual and company” (r); “Career development–necessary: for both individual and organization” (h).

The second social representation emerging is *career as an uncertain outcome*. Several oppositional thoughts reveal career as an ambiguous or uncertain outcome due to changing conditions. ‘Environmental influence–individual powerlessness’ illustrates associations that relate changes of an individual’s work situation to external conditions such as profitability requirements, competitiveness, globalization, cost focus, outsourcing and technical development. The following associations illustrate this: “work-situation in change: reorganization” (o); “work-situation in change–globalization: the increasing competitiveness will kill us” (r); “work-situation in change: competitiveness” (i); “work situation in change–low income countries: an alternative, not always the only possibility” (r). The continuous pressure for change leads to work being tiring, demanding and challenging, as illustrated in the following examples: “exhaustive – never to be complacent” (h); “demands on adaptation: the slow ones are excluded” (h); “chaos – your world is turned upside down, the conditions are re-arranged”(f). It is also apparent that the individuals consider themselves powerless and unable to influence, as illustrated here: “work-situation in change – external conditions that I cannot influence” (d). The *themata* ‘predictability–unpredictability’ reveals associations regarding a need for transparency, to be able to foresee a future goal. The need for planning, finding strategies, choosing, and for prioritizing

between work, and family and, different career paths, and selecting courses and specializations all fall under the single *thema* of predictability. It is also apparent that predictability and transparency are needed for planning and strategizing, so that people know how to react and what behaviour to exhibit. Associations revealing unpredictability express an anxiety about not knowing what will come and a fear of leaving the known. Moreover, there are associations expressing a need for career support and advice in order to handle unpredictability. Other *themata* closely related to these associations are those of ‘security–insecurity’ and ‘control–lack of control’. People feel secure when they know what they have, and insecure when the future is unpredictable. Some expressions reveal an uncertainty regarding who is really governing: “Work-situation in change – Who is governing the change? To have control over one’s own situation and work” (g), as well as an “experience of being out of control” (g). Associations related to changing conditions are captured in the *themata* ‘improvement–deterioration’ expressing on the one hand hopes for improvement, and on the other fear of deterioration. Change might lead to hopes for improvement, such as: “Work-situation in change – exciting: full of expectation” (q); “work-situation in change–curiosity: might be better” (t). Changes might lead to new working tasks, more responsibility or a new position, and in this sense they are seen as possibilities for career development and progress. Change might lead to fear of deterioration. This emerges in examples expressing anxiety when change results in difficulties, insecurity, loss or change of working-tasks or redundancy. These oppositional thoughts are all closely related to the social representation of *career as a game of exchange* – the changing conditions appear to influence the conditions of exchange – and express career as an uncertain outcome. These oppositional thoughts show that career is considered to be environmentally or externally influenced.

In summary, these more dynamic social representations reveal an ambiguity concerning career. They create a space of negotiation of the meaning of career (cf. Gustavsson & Selander, 2011; Tateo & Iannaccone, 2012) as they stand in relation to the simultaneously-held stable social representations.

INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS

Below, I explore and interpret within *which* scientifically shaped thoughts on career the empirical findings (i.e. the representations) are reflected and anchored, followed by an interpretation of how these representations, as so anchored and reflected, relate to thoughts currently dominating on the structural level in today's changing society.

The social representation *career as individual project and self-realization* contains expressions of self-fulfillment, realizing dreams, focusing on oneself and doing what one is passionate about. These expressions of common sense knowledge reflect the psychological perspective that regards career as a vehicle for self-realization (Arthur et al., 1989). Expressions of work-role development reflect the social-psychological position which regards career as an individual response to external role messages (Arthur et al., 1989). The social representation *career as social/hierarchical climbing* contains expressions and concept images of upward movement and climbing towards higher positions and higher-status roles. These largely reflect the scientific perspective of sociology, which regards career as social mobility wherein a title indicates a person's social position, as well as in the perspectives of anthropology and functional sociology, which regard career as status passages (Arthur et al., 1989).

The social representation *career as a game of exchange* contains expressions relating to expected efforts such as action and behaviour, education, high performance, responsibility and loyalty. These expressions reflect the psychological perspective, which regards career as a component of the individual life structure, where transitions are predictable (Arthur et al., 1989). It overlaps with the social representation *career as an uncertain outcome* in disclosing the need for predictability and transparency in order for people to know what efforts to make and what outcomes to expect—that is, how to react and what behaviour to exhibit in their efforts to reach desired outcomes. Expressions of expected outcomes such as higher salary, recognition and higher status clearly reflect the perspectives of sociology, anthropology and functional sociology (Arthur et al., 1989). These expressions also relate to the established order of career in social exchange, rooted in the earlier contract between employee and employer, with its time-honored reward system, that has influenced the world of work for a long time (cf. Hall, 1996; Savickas, 2008; Södergren, 1992). Expressions describing complementary thoughts such as career

development as beneficial for both individual and environment (companies or society) reflect the psychological perspective focusing on benefits for individuals, organizations and society (Arthur et al., 1989). These representations are composed of ordinary language, an “applied common sense” (Moscovici, 2000, p. 183) which describes career and career development in relation to work and professions and objectifies career phenomena in working contexts. In this sense, these representations reflect the psychological perspective that sees career as a vocation (Arthur et al., 1989).

The social representation *career as an uncertain outcome* discloses a tension between anchored and objectified common sense knowledge and the influence of new conditions emerging with change. This indicates that people’s common sense knowledge of career is located on the border of stability and change. Expressions of unpredictability appear to be symptoms of the new working life; already anchored and objectified representations of predictability are challenged in changing working life conditions. Several *themata* reveal oppositional thoughts which capture in the most obvious way the dynamic dimension of social representations as thoughts in movement (cf. Marková, 2003). The transformation of the world of work (Ekstedt & Sundin, 2006b) appear influential in these *themata* (‘improvement–deterioration’, ‘security–insecurity’) in that they express effects on career related to the game of exchange. The many expressions of various educational efforts might also be a symptom of social influence on common sense knowledge (Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 2000), where said social influence might be the dominant lifelong learning discourse in public policy. Moreover, expressions of educational efforts reflect ideas of the new career as continuous learning (Hall, 1996; Patton & McMahon, 2006). However, the expressions of expected outcomes reveal tensions as symptoms of this social influence.

The common sense knowledge of career is reflected in, and thus appears to be anchored and objectified within scientifically shaped thoughts of psychological, social-psychological, functional-sociological and anthropological perspectives on career (cf. Arthur et al., 1989). Moreover, the social representations appear to be anchored in the working life conditions of the 20th century, characterized by the hierarchical nature of organizations from which the career concept was originally developed (cf. Patton & McMahon, 2006). They also appear to be anchored in the psychological and sociological perspectives that have historically dominated the

career field (Arthur et al., 1989; Kidd, 2007). The participants' common sense knowledge is influenced and also challenged by the lifelong learning discourse. However, their common sense knowledge is in conflict with the two underlying views of career that dominate on the structural level as communicated in European policy documents on guidance – that is, the economic and political science perspectives which regard career as a response to market forces wherein the individual is left with sole responsibility for responding to such (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012). The participants' common sense knowledge of career appears to be anchored in precisely those scientifically shaped thoughts and previous working life conditions that are now challenged (see e.g., Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009).

DISCUSSION

The tremendous changes in working life appear to create tensions and a discrepancy between people's social representations of career and that which is communicated on a structural level. This discrepancy highlights the need to understand change in relation to stability (Gustavsson & Selander, 2011). Individuals express the meaning of career as a vehicle for self-realization and for social/hierarchical climbing. These two stable social representations appear as a taken-for-granted, established order for social practice derived from earlier working life conditions, suggesting that they still influence individuals, even though the conditions of the world of work have changed and have led to new employment principles and protean, boundaryless career models (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996) now dominating in the career and management literature (Zeitz, Blau, & Fertig, 2009). This should be of interest to employers, career guidance counselors, human resource practitioners and others concerned with career issues. This study does not provide generalized results in a statistical sense, but it does reveal a tension between stability and change in the representations of career phenomena among a group of people undergoing work-related changes; thus, it informs current debates regarding career. When tensions arise between the language of concepts and that of representations, between scientific and ordinary knowledge, people's common sense knowledge is challenged. This might explain the tensions visible in the two more dynamic social representations where external influences of change challenge the former established order and conditions of exchange. The amount of

themata, which generates the two dynamic social representations, seems to have their respective homes in the same mental spheres (cf. Billig, 1996), and appears thereby be expressions of how people use an internal dialogue and argumentation (cf. Billig, 1996) about career, because their stable representations are challenged by such changing conditions and ways of talking about career. The trend of locating the responsibility for career in the individual, the idea that the individual is to be self-governing, relates to the political science perspective on career as communicated on policy level (cf. Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012) and conflicts with the respondents' common sense knowledge of career as something provided by others, and as subject to individual powerlessness in career. Current public debate indicates tensions between employers and employees, with employees arguing that neither education nor increased responsibility pay off (cf. e.g., Fransson, 2012, May 22; Rolfer, 2006). The social representation of career as a game of exchange is challenged by the discrepancy between certain efforts and uncertain as well as actual outcomes. Several oppositional thoughts emerge that indicate tensions and uncertainty of how to play the game. The increased needs for career support also indicate this. If an employee acts loyally, gains broader competence and responsibility, or acts responsibly, the employee might be guided in his or her thoughts, ideas, actions and feelings by a common sense knowledge anchored in a social representation of expected outcomes. These expected outcomes include higher salary and upward mobility, which in turn relate to the social representation of *career as social/hierarchical climbing*. If expected outcomes are not realized, and efforts rather result in lateral and downward mobility (cf. Södergren, 1992) the social representation is challenged, and something familiar becomes unfamiliar. This then creates difficulties with *anchoring and objectifying* (Moscovici, 2000) the new ways of communicating career into our existing world view. People's perceptions, feelings and actions in career-related issues might be trapped in social representations, or patterns of thinking (cf. Dalsvall & Lindström, 2012), that collide with the establishment of a new order of social practice in such matters. The dynamic social representations discussed create a space of negotiation of the meaning of career (cf. Tateo & Iannaccone, 2012), since the 'taken-for-granted meaning' of career is challenged by the new arrangements of work. The fact the participants mainly consists of women, raises questions about whether it is primarily women who need to renegotiate their meaning in the new world of work. A comparative study, with mainly men as participants would be of interest for future research.

Employers need to reconsider their role in the game of exchange, taking into account the consequences of communicating a new employment principle, new career contracts and changing rewarding systems (cf. Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996; Södergren, 1992) and clarifying what kind of outcome people can expect from a certain effort. Consequently, the rules of the game, the former codes for exchange, are currently under reconstruction and thus challenge the social representations of career that are still anchored in the past and somehow conflict with the future.

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