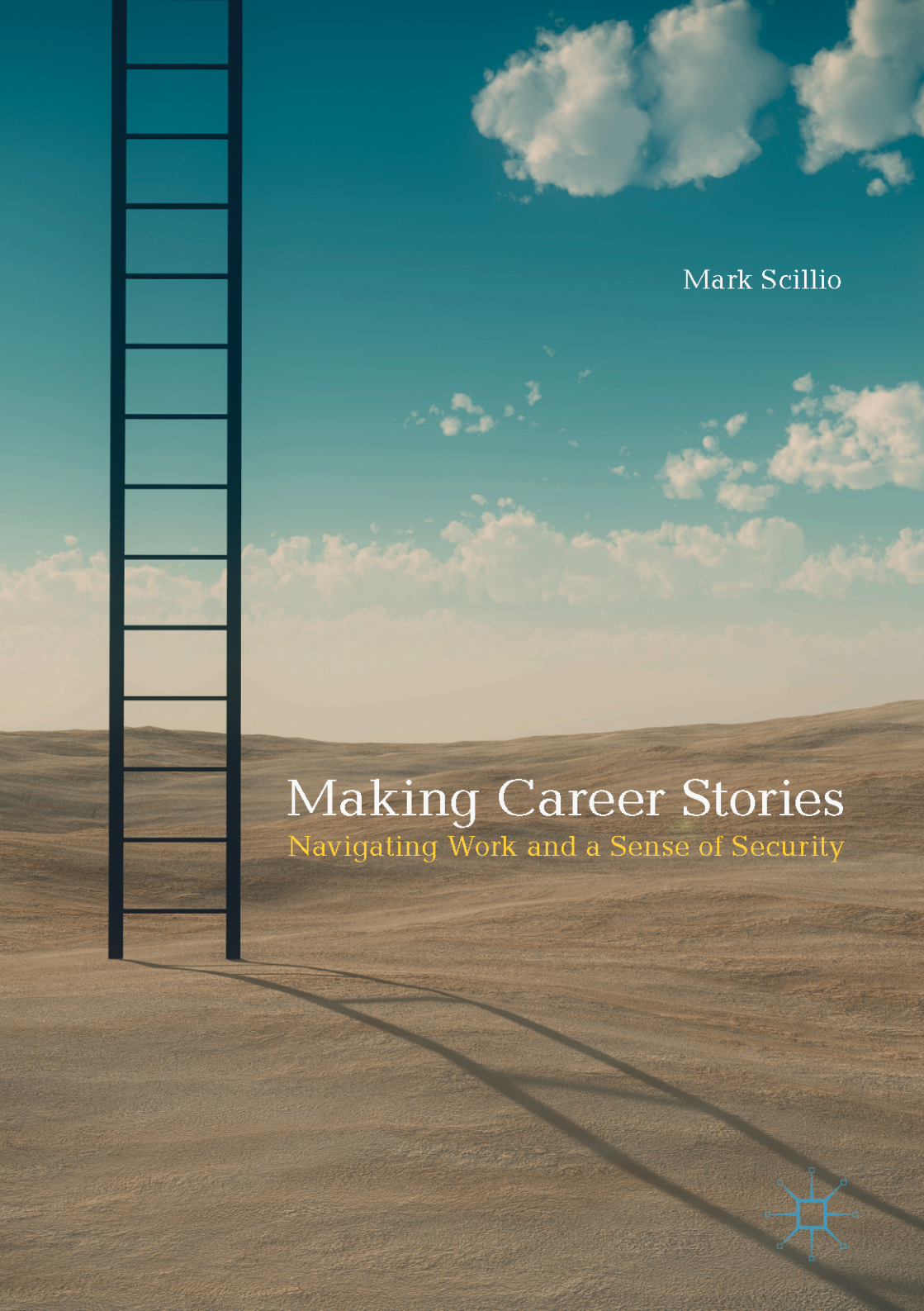
Mark Scillio
Making Career Stories
Navigating Work and a Sense of Security

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Preface

This book is about career stories. These are the stories we tell, ourselves and others, about our work lives. We tell stories to make sense of our work situation – how we got to this point and where we think our career is going. We use stories to articulate our hopes, dreams and values. Career stories are ultimately ways of making sense of who we are in our work.

Consciously or not, we are always "working" on our story, crafting it to fit current circumstances. Sometimes our story serves us well. Sometimes it runs into trouble and must be revised. And here is the thing. A good story makes us feel grounded and secure. An inadequate one makes us feel dislocated and anxious.

Stories are not made from nothing. We use our imagination and past experience, but we also draw on the social resources we have available, including our social relationships, our felt membership of an organisation and our actual work practices.

A lot of good writing has been done on the experience of work and people's work stories. In this book, however, I focus on the neglected connection between our career story and the sense of security we have about our work path.

I tackle this subject of security because it is so central to today's experience of work. In wealthy countries like Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, the employment landscape is undergoing profound changes. Neo-liberal capitalism, globalisation, new technologies, organisational restructuring, austere labour market policies – these pressures are making careers more fragmented, complex, uncertain and precarious. How people navigate this uncertainty and establish a sense of

security about their work path depends on their ability to make a good career story.

This book will appeal to academics and practitioners in the careers field, to sociologists interested in work and organisations and to general readers interested in their career.

In the first part of the book, I develop an original concept of *career security*, drawing on the sociologist Anthony Giddens' notion of ontological security. This idea of security goes beyond economic and financial concerns to encompass the personal and social meanings of work. In the main part of the book, I delve into the stories of mid-career Australians with a tertiary education. Through a series of in-depth case studies, I look at the ways people make (or fail to make) a good career narrative.

I compare people in three different work situations – people working in large organisations, people working for themselves, including entrepreneurs and artists, and people going through a career transition. In each case, I identify how different social aspects of a person's situation function as resources for making stories.

This project was the basis of my doctoral thesis, carried out at Latrobe University in Melbourne, Australia. As such, many people deserve thanks for their help. Firstly, I want to thank my supervisors. John Carroll lent his critical eye and unique provocations to my work. Throughout, he made me question and carefully think through my assumptions. John, in particular, taught me the importance of a good story. Peter Beilharz encouraged me to trust myself and follow paths that seemed unclear. Raelene Wilding read my work closely and thoroughly, and her comments were insightful and immensely helpful in clarifying my argument.

All intellectual endeavours are shared ones. I have learned so much from myriad conversations along the way. Here I want to particularly thank the people who participated in interviews. This project is based on their stories. I thank them for letting me briefly into their world, for sharing their worries as well as their hopes. It was from them that I learned the most. I also have a great network of colleagues. Glenda Ballantyne was a wonderful interlocutor and helped me develop my ideas through many conversations. Edgar Burns pushed me along, generously read an early draft and was an excellent academic role model. In an earlier incarnation of this project, Rob Watts was a profound influence. He opened up intellectual horizons and introduced me to the pleasures and craft of intellectual work. My colleagues in sociology and anthropology at La Trobe University made the place vibrant and engaging. Special thanks to Tania

Lewis, Anne-Maree Sawyer and the "Red Ink" group – Cathrin Bernhardt, Mark Feigan, Jody Hughes, Sara James, Mark Mallman, Senem Yekenkurul – for conversations, reading and sharing each other's work, and for exemplifying a collaborative intellectual culture. Thanks also to the administrative staff in the now defunct School of Social Sciences for making the practicalities of thesis life run smoothly.

Finally, I want to heap thanks on my amazing family for putting up with this project in their lives for so long. My partner Alex encouraged and supported me in countless ways, even as it dragged on. She remained enthusiastic and patient. Her love of learning and truth has always been an inspiration. Our two daughters Juno and Cassia always helped me put things in perspective.

Contents

PART I

Career Security – An Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Situating This Study on Career Security

Work, as paid employment, is central to the lives of most adults in market-based societies. It dominates our days, shapes our biographies and provides many of our significant interactions. We work out of economic necessity. But it is much more. It is an activity through which we make sense of ourselves and others. In complex ways, selfhood and identity are entangled in work.

An aspect of work is the experience of *career*. That is, how each person experiences their work life over time. This experience is profound and not easy to define. Commonly, careers are talked about in concrete and objective terms – as sequences of jobs and key events in a work life. But the "subjective" understanding of career reveals a more open and dynamic picture. It can be seen as a personal narrative about work life, connecting the present to the past, and to how people imagine themselves in the future. As such, a career story is intimately tied to personal identity. Crucially, because a career story involves an unknown future, there is always a sense of openness and possibility. And because we are beings that change and develop through time, our career story is something that changes too. How people make sense of their work identities within careers stories, and how these stories are part of a larger thing called "selfhood", is the terrain of this book.

It is in this terrain, amidst these dynamic relationships between work, career and identity, that I explore the vital issue of *security*. Today the problem of security in work is pervasive and much debated. In Australia,

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the country where the research for this book was done, the employment landscape has been changing profoundly. The last three decades have seen the growth of new forms of "non-standard" and temporary jobs. Similar changes have been occurring in the United States, United Kingdom and European countries. In commentaries about these changes, the issues of job and employment security occupy centre stage. The focus is on what is happening to, and how to measure, job characteristics such as tenure, entitlements, rights and so on. Security in these discussions concerns job and employment *conditions*. When the predicament of particular individuals is discussed, the lens is on their job or employment situation. Although these ways of talking about security are important and indispensable, I want to shift the angle of view. I want to ask if we can talk about security in relation to a person's career, not just their current job situation. And also, I want to ask if we can talk about the *sense or feeling* of security (or insecurity) a person has about their career – their subjective experience of it. In this study, I argue that we can indeed talk about these things, and I develop a way of doing so. I address three overarching questions: What constitutes feeling secure about one's career? What is the role of a person's career story in this? And, what aspects of a person's social context shape this?

A Bit of My Story

To get closer to what I mean by "a sense of security" about career, and to explain my interest in it, I need to tell a bit of my own career story. Up until I was 30, in addition to going to university, I had lots of different, mostly casual sorts of work: labourer, builder, printer, kitchen hand, radio announcer, tutor, lecturer, social researcher. This jumble of jobs partly reflected my interests – I had quite a few! – but also things like job availability, my networks and resources, necessity and happenstance. Nearing 30, I started to crave a stable, well-paid job with a so-called career path. No doubt this reflected some of the changes going on in my life, like finding myself in a good relationship, feeling the pressure to buy a house and not be at the mercy of the rental market, and generally wanting some kind of stability. I decided to sit the public service exam and, as it happened, passed and was offered a position working for the Australian Federal government in Canberra. I took it. This felt like a good move. A proper job. For a few years, then, I was satisfied. Work was engaging and my career – it now felt like I had one – had a certain shape. At the time,

there was also an acute and growing public awareness of insecurity in employment. The Australian job landscape was seen to be becoming more precarious and risky. It seemed I had managed to find a stable foothold in work.

Another snapshot. Ten years later. I have stayed in the public service, but moved through two different portfolio areas, and roles in policy, research and training. At this point, I had become dissatisfied with my job. But more than dissatisfied. I had a sense of not being grounded anymore, and was especially unhappy about the career path I was on. There was something wrong about my direction. I could say a lot about why I felt this way. But I want to draw out one thing here. At one moment of my life, the issue of not having stable employment was problematic, and I felt a certain insecurity about my career. At a later point, when I did have an ongoing job, with a good income and career path, I experienced another instance or version of this insecurity. Apparent in these examples was the existence of a tangible experience of security related to career. It was a form of security *distinguishable* from the kind associated with employment and job conditions (although somehow related). It concerned the extent I felt fulfilled, satisfied or grounded in my career trajectory. It was also about my sense of the future. Specifically, what seemed possible from where I stood at any particular time. Talking to friends and co-workers about their work lives – in the public service, in various other occupations, and in precarious jobs too – I began to detect something similar. A *species* of security related to career. I felt drawn to investigate this area of experience. This project is my attempt to do so.

The Importance of Paid Work

Why is the relationship between people's understandings of career and a sense of security important? There are a number of compelling reasons. The first, and perhaps most obvious, relates to the importance of work itself. Paid work is a dominant part of adult life in capitalist societies like Australia. It is about earning money necessary for living. For most individuals, income from employment is the basis of their economic resources (Edgell 2006). Australian society in particular has always been work-centric (Fox 1991). The history of welfare provision for example has been based on the imperative that adults be in the labour market, with Australia being dubbed the "wage earners' welfare state" (Castles 1994). In the last two decades, this imperative has become stronger within welfare

policy, where support for unemployed citizens is conditional on their active efforts to seek employment (Whiteford 2016).

It is also a sociological truism that work's importance goes well beyond its economic dimensions. Among other things, work is a major arena of social interaction, is a crucial source of identity and plays a large part in determining one's social status (Gini 2001; Hodson 2001; Jahoda 1982). These social and economic reasons also entwine with a moral one – in the form of a strong work ethic, which continues to prevail in Australian culture (Beder 2000). Similarly, the moral imperative to work is powerful in American culture (Ciulla 2000), and in the United Kingdom (Bunting 2004).

In Australia, work exerts a profound force on individuals from an early age. Children for example engage in paid work in increasing numbers, and at younger ages. Between a third and over half of secondary school students are in paid work, and three-quarters of them will have been employed before completing school (McDonald et al. 2014). The Australian education system itself continues to be shaped by an "instrumental" view which sees schooling as preparation for work (White and Wyn 2008, p.142). An aspect of this is the cultural pressure on young people to develop clear vocational identities and career trajectories. Practically, high school students choose their vocational paths early.[1] But this message also permeates popular culture, in TV shows like Master Chef and The Voice, which portray exemplary young people following their "dreams", discovering their "calling" and "passion" (S. James 2012; Kelly 2009). Thus, individuals not only experience work at an early age but also begin imagining their careers and formulating their vocational identities.

The Changing Australian Employment Landscape

Another reason for exploring the links between career and security concerns the changing nature and shape of career paths. At the same time as Australian culture continues to be work-centric, careers are becoming more variegated and uncertain. One aspect of this is the changing employment landscape. Although Australia has had sustained employment growth and mostly low unemployment since the early 1990s, closer inspection of the labour market shows a more uneven and less optimistic picture. A significant portion of workers, for example, are *under*employed – they have some work but want more. In May

2015, unemployed and underemployed people together made up 14.5 per cent of the labour market (ABS 2015).

The most notable feature of the employment landscape has been the decline in the proportion of full-time "permanent" jobs, and the growth of "non-standard" modes of employment, like part-time, casual and fixed term contracts. Casuals now make up about a quarter of employees, compared with only 15 per cent in 1984 (ABS 2013; Burgess et al. 2008). Taken together, all forms of non-standard employment account for more than half the workforce (Campbell 2007; Van Wanrooy et al. 2007). A significant proportion of casual jobs are characterised by insecure conditions, variable and unstable incomes, and few of the rights and benefits commonly attached to permanent employment (Buchanan 2004; Burgess et al. 2008; O'Donnell 2004). As such they can be seen as more "precarious" (Vosko et al. 2009).

Importantly, there has also been an erosion in the quality of so-called permanent full-time jobs. This category, often used by policy makers and commentators as the benchmark for "good" jobs, is itself increasingly characterised by low pay, decreasing employment security, and diminishing protections around work-time arrangements (Campbell 1997, 2007). In other words, there has been a growth of precariousness *within* the sphere of standard jobs.

These changes can be seen in terms of a broader shift in the Australian system of labour regulation, a system that was built up during most of the twentieth century. This system provided strong minimum standards for wages and conditions as well as a social safety net (Castles 1985). Since the mid-1980s, federal and state governments, trying to further integrate Australia into global markets, have pursued policies of "labour market flexibility". Strongly influenced by neo-liberal ideas, governments have dismantled key elements of the older system of labour regulation (Bell 1997). This has contributed to the increasingly "fragmented" labour market (Watson et al. 2003), a decrease in minimum standards of employment, and an erosion of the social safety net and social wage. It has also intensified many inequalities within the workforce (Buchanan et al. 2006).

This is only a brief sketch, but it highlights how parts of the work landscape are becoming more precarious and insecure. It is important, however, not to paint too simplistic a picture. These developments are uneven, and great variations exist across the labour market (Watson et al. 2003). It is also important not to create a crude contrast between past and present: a new context of risk and insecurity versus a stable and secure past.

The current period is often contrasted with "a golden age" of full employment in the 1950s and 60s (Robinson 2000). But the so-called job for life was never available to women during that period, and in reality was an experience for only a minority of men in professional and organisational positions (Strachan 2010).

The Changing Career Landscape

When we shift our view from jobs to *careers*, the Australian picture is complex and uneven. However, in recent decades a broad consensus has emerged among writers, researchers and policy makers across areas such as education, youth studies, career development, sociology of work, and management. The consensus is that careers are becoming less clear, less uniform and more risky than in the past. Also, that individuals face new kinds of risks and pressures in making careers (Dwyer et al. 2005; Furlong and Kelly 2005; MCEECDYA. 2010; McMahon and Tatham 2008).

These commentaries describe, what I will call for convenience, the "new careers" picture. They are part of and draw on research showing similar changes in other rich, developed capitalist countries like the United States and United Kingdom, as well as some in northern Europe. Putting aside the contextual nuances and differences, all these commentaries present a discernible picture of the new careers, with number of key features. One concerns *instability and change*. With the demise of a "job for life", the post-war male model of employment, individuals today experience more instability over the course of their careers. This trend is predicted to continue and become more widespread across the workforce. For both men and women, there will be more frequent job changes, more periods of underemployment, and more stints of not having work, compared to the previous generation. Careers are becoming more fragmented, variegated and unstable (Arthur 1994; Cuervo et al. 2013; Hall 1996; Kalleberg 2009; Morgan et al. 2013; Rifkin 1996; Sennett 1998).

The second feature concerns *individual responsibility*. Individuals are seen to be increasingly "on their own" in making careers. Stable career paths within bureaucratic and organisational structures are slowly crumbling, and individuals find themselves more responsible for carving out their own routes (Handy 1998; Rousseau 1996; Savickas 2012). With this comes a greater *burden of choice*. Through their careers, people now face many more choices about what to do and which paths to take. There is also more uncertainty in regard to the consequences of choices. Increasing

instability and movement in careers brings *new kinds of personal pressures and challenges*. People need for example to cope with the uncertainty about how long a job might last, and the potential for sharp and unexpected shifts and changes of fortune.

This new careers picture closely aligns with the view that contemporary social conditions are increasingly reflexive and individualising (Bauman 2001; Beck 1992; Lash 1994). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) for example argue that the life course has become de-standardised and individualised in the developed West. Individuals are saddled with the responsibility for crafting their own biographies, and this has become a more risky and fraught endeavour. Similarly, Giddens (1991) argues that selfhood itself has become a *project* each individual has to actively manage for themselves, one requiring the navigation of an indefinite range of information about decisions and ways to act.

In making careers, individuals have to expend more effort navigating their paths and transitions. It is in this context that career experts and educationalists now emphasise "lifelong learning" skills, adaptability and a focus on "employability", instead of expertise or content knowledge in only one area (Krumboltz 1996; McIlveen et al. 2011; McMahon et al. 2003). It is also precisely in relation to the new careers context that there has grown, since the 1990s, a vast careers self-help literature aimed at helping individuals cope with the new landscape (Gauntlett 2008; Kenny and Bell 2014; McGee 2005).

The extent to which the new careers picture accurately applies across the labour market however is not clear (Inkson et al. 2012; Storey 2000). As with the changing employment conditions, the same caveat applies – it *depends* on the specific context and any individual's situation. Some Australian commentators for example doubt that people are moving between jobs more often than in the past. Data on job mobility in Australia is sparse (Buchanan et al. 2011). And mobility is an extremely complex phenomenon to measure. It is sector-specific and depends on a range of variables including business cycles, occupational, organisational and geographical contexts. Mobility is also age-specific, and young people are more likely to move jobs more regularly than older workers (Watson 2011). Sweet (2011) contends that there is little solid evidence of an overall increase in job mobility since the 1980s, or that job tenure has significantly decreased. That said, he also notes that Australians are more likely to change jobs than workers in most other OECD countries. More than 10 per cent of workers change their job every year, and of this about

75 per cent change industry, occupation or both. In addition, about 20 per cent do not change jobs, but have a major change to their work. Put simply, Australians do have high levels of job mobility, but this has been the case for some decades.

Another aspect of mobility is that it is not necessarily experienced negatively. Although a significant proportion of job changes are involuntary, people mostly change jobs because they are dissatisfied with them. Job changes are just as likely to lead to more satisfaction and skill development as they are to an inferior situation (Sweet 2011; Watson 2011).

This is only to add nuance to one strand of the new careers picture. It does not negate its relevance. Moreover, while questioning the novelty of mobility and some of its consequences, some commentators still acknowledge that many individuals increasingly *feel* insecure and worried about their job and career (Sweet 2011). They do so even though their jobs may not be as "objectively" insecure as they think (Guest 2000, p.141). Here we touch on the complex issue of perceptions, and the multiple factors, including cultural ones, that shape them. Factors beyond one's job conditions come into play. Burchell (2002, p.71) makes the important point that peoples' worries about losing their job are not only determined by perceptions of its likelihood but also by "their anxieties about the consequences of such an event". In other words, to understand employment insecurity we need to take into account the personal meanings of job loss. As such, individual experiences will vary significantly. Burchell's data on UK workers for example suggests that mid-career individuals with large mortgages and children to support are more likely to feel insecure about their jobs than younger workers (Burchell 2002, p.71).

There is also evidence of a *climate* of insecurity – one which affects people's perceptions of their work situation. Across OECD countries, surveys have shown increasing perceptions of job insecurity (OECD 1997). In the United Kingdom, perceptions of job insecurity have been shown to increase at times of upheaval, during industry restructures and job redundancies for example (Noon and Blyton 2002). In Australia, in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, perceptions of job insecurity have also increased, especially for workers with families (Kler et al. 2015). A poll conducted by the Centre for Workplace Leadership, at the University of Melbourne (2014) found that half the people polled were worried about the future of their work. A host of other surveys have shown that losing one's job continues to be among the biggest worries of Australian workers (Lewis and Woods 2014; Pash 2014).

So at the very least, and staying with the Australian context, there is evidence of an ambient sense of uncertainty about work. This suggests that aspects of the new careers picture have real resonance for many workers in Australia. In other words, the image has some anchoring in changes occurring in employment and the economy, but also reflects a broader cultural climate of risk and uncertainty. Moreover, if Giddens, Beck and other theorists of reflexive modernity are right, the shifts described by the new careers image are not just about the sphere of employment, but more fundamentally, about the social structure.

This brings us back to the importance of linking career and security. On the one hand, we have the continued cultural centrality of work and vocational identity. On the other, we have the emergence of uncertainty, instability and insecurity about careers, at least at the level of expectations. Taken together, these two aspects create a profound social and cultural tension. How will individuals make careers and work identities for themselves? How will they navigate the new complexities of making a work life? If individuals are increasingly "on their own", as the new careers picture has it, how can they attain a sense of security about their careers? It also raises an issue about careers stories: what role do they play in relation to security?

Individuals Want Multiple and Competing Things from Work

There is another important piece in the puzzle about work today. To return to my story: at one point I wanted job stability and regular income; at another, I wanted more satisfaction and fulfilment. My feelings of insecurity at each stage were somehow related to unsatisfied aspirations. This points to a crucial aspect of the experience of work – that contemporary individuals want a range of things from their jobs. The vast literature on job satisfaction attests to this (Clark 1998; Locke 1984; Spector 1997). Research across Western countries has shown that people place a high importance on the economic dimensions of their work like income and job security (Freeman and Rogers 1999; OECD 2009). These are often referred to as "extrinsic" rewards. But people also place high value on a range of "intrinsic" aspects of their job, like having interesting work, a chance to use skills and abilities, as well as good relations with co-workers and managers (Herzberg 1971; Hodson and Sullivan 2008; Locke 1976).

To take one of many surveys as an example, data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) reflects this (Wilson et al. 2006).[2] In the 2005 survey, most respondents (71 per cent) thought that a *high income* was important and almost all rated *job security* highly. In addition, a very high number of respondents (96 per cent) thought that having an *interesting job* was important. Most respondents also thought a *job that allows someone to help other people* (80 per cent) and a *job that is useful to society* (79 per cent) were important. Data from the previous AuSSA also showed that aspects of a job like being able to use one's skills, and relations at work actually exerted more influence on job satisfaction than income (Martin and Pixley 2005). On a general level at least, this data indicates that Australians value a range of intrinsic rewards from their work, just as strongly as extrinsic ones.

These values are often in conflict, and individuals prioritise different things at different times in their lives. In my own case, money and stability were once important. At another stage, more engaging work came to the fore as a more powerful force. Without trying to theorise how these complex dynamics operate (and there are various competing perspectives in sociology and psychology about how they do[3]) the simple point here is that individuals continually juggle competing desires and shifting priorities as part of making their careers. It is an ongoing process. These tensions about what individuals want from work raise an important issue for my study – about the role they play in individuals' sense of career security. They indicate the dynamic nature of career stories, and invite certain questions including: In what ways do career stories address different aspirations and desires? And, in what ways do individuals change their career stories over time in response to changing circumstances?

These questions form part of the research problem at the heart of this study: about what constitutes a sense of career security. In the next section I briefly situate the concepts of "career" and "security" in the relevant sociological literatures. I then outline the design of this study, including how I chose a sample of people to interview.

Situating Some Concepts

Careers and Career Stories

This study is about people's experience of work – but from a particular angle. It is about the experience of *career* – the way individual's experience the trajectory of their work life through time. The sociological study of

careers has a long history. In the 1950s and 1960s, the dominant approach to careers was a "macro" one, based in functionalist theory. Careers were defined as particular sequences of work roles or positions within organisational and occupational structures (Evetts 1992). Alongside this however, sociologists of the Chicago School developed a more individual-level approach. Here, careers were seen as the passage or sequence of work positions an *individual* traverses. Moreover, the concept of career was used as a way to understand individual trajectories in areas of life other than employment. Becker (1966) for example studied the "deviant careers" of marihuana users, and Goffman (1961) the "moral careers" of mental patients. In these cases career was used broadly to refer to an individual's "course through life" associated with a particular social role or identity (Goffman 1961, p.119).

This individual-level approach permeates current academic career literature[4] (Patton and McMahon 2014). Careers are seen to be idiosyncratic. A career is a person's trajectory through employment and the labour market over the course of their lives (Super 1980). A career is not confined to progression within a particular occupation or organisation. It can be made up of many different jobs, shifts in occupations, breaks, periods of study and absences from the labour market. On this reading everyone *has a career* (Arthur and Lawrence 1984). Many career commentators argue that this broad definition better reflects individuals' actual (and more complicated) work trajectories as well as the more variable ways contemporary careers are taking shape (Savickas et al. 2009; Young and Collin 2000).

The Chicago School sociologists not only broadened the scope of the concept of career but also stressed the importance of the individual experience of it. Hughes for example defined career as "the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him" (Hughes 1937, pp.409–410). In this sense, a career is a *perspective* through which a person sees herself moving through time. Stebbins (1970) referred to this as the "subjective career", a kind of orienting *schema* through which we make sense of past and future in a particular social role or area of life. The methodological approach adopted by the Chicago School was one which saw personal reality shaped by the individual's perceptions of it (Thomas and Thomas 1928). But in turn, these perceptions were the product of the social interactions and relationships the person was embedded in. Goffman

(1961, p.127) captured this "two-sidedness" of career well, as both institutional product and individual construct.

A prominent current within the career guidance literature continues this perspective – that career be defined in terms of its subjective meanings (Collin and Watts 1996; Guichard 2009). In particular, that career be seen in terms of a narrative (Cochran 1997; Hartung 2013). Our "career story" is a way we give our work trajectory shape in narrative form. Through story, we impose a unity on our work life, integrating discrete experiences into a meaningful whole. And through story we express a work identity (Savickas 2013). As such, career stories are dynamic, "moving perspectives", in Hughes' words, changing over time according to our changing experiences. Importantly, career story-making relies on the social relationships and environments in which it takes place (Savickas 2012). These contexts provide recognisable cultural resources from which to build individual stories.

Defining Security in Relation to Career

In what ways can we talk about "security" in relation to career? To start with, security is a complex term with a wide range of meanings. The Oxford Dictionary provides two pertinent ones: "the state of being free from danger or threat", and "the state of feeling safe, stable, and free from fear or anxiety" (OED online. 2016). The first highlights the fact that security establishes a relationship between present and future. It refers to something about a current state which provides protection from something that may occur in the future. The two definitions also show that security can refer to a state of *being* as well as a state of *feeling*. That is, security can refer to something "objective" about a person's situation, but also to how they perceive or feel about their situation.

This duality is particularly important because it causes much confusion in debates about work. Sociologists of work tend to treat security "objectively" (Burgess and Campbell 1998; Robinson 2000). That is, as referring to characteristics of jobs and the employment situation – for example job tenure, employment conditions, the legislative context and so on. Psychologists of work, by contrast, treat security in terms of perceptions and feelings. More precisely, they use a construct called "job insecurity", which attempts to measure "the perceived threat of job loss and the worries related to that threat" (De Witte 2005, p.1).

But the term security is complex for another reason. By itself, it tells us very little. We need to know what the safety, stability or freedom relates to. We need to know what the security is about. And in this, security can be discussed in relation to an indefinite range of things. People can *be* and *feel* secure in relation to their housing situation, health, finances or the possibility of war, to name only a few examples. This is why the noun "security" needs a prefix, as with terms like "job security", "economic security" or "national security".

In this vein, Standing (2011, p.10) lists several forms of security related to work. These include: *labour market security* – opportunities to earn an adequate income; *employment security* – protections against arbitrary dismissal and regulations on hiring and firing; *job security* – opportunities to retain a niche in employment and for upward mobility; and *income security* – the assurance of an adequate and stable income, including minimum wages and social security. For Standing, these forms of security are part of the "objective" conditions of work, existing as various rights, protections, assurances or opportunities. He argues that these forms developed in social democratic countries through the post-1945 period, but since the 1980s, have been gradually eroded (Standing 1997). Looked at slightly differently, these forms of security can be seen in terms of resources. Various forms of security resources are linked to different dimensions of work; and individuals possess these resources in differing amounts depending on their situation.

In Standing's taxonomy, the distinction between employment and job security is important. He argues that in debates about contemporary work, the issue of employment security is given most weight (Standing 2011). For example, in Australia, commentators tend to focus on the growth of casual and temporary jobs, and the relative decrease of long-term contracts. The focus is on job tenure. However, for Standing (2011), job security is just as pertinent because it concerns the capacity of an employee to hold on to a particular job, not just an employment contract. This means having some protection against being moved around at management's discretion. Here, Standing (2011) wants to emphasise the idea of a job as a context for skill acquisition and upward mobility. In this sense, his definition of job security captures elements of "career", and the potential opportunity a person has to progress along a career path. However, he does not attempt to define a notion of career security.

Within Standing's framework, and other "objective" perspectives, the subjective experience of security is secondary. The presumption is that

the possession (or lack thereof) of security resources is reflected in how a person perceives and feels about that aspect of work. Having reasonable job security, for example, results in a person *feeling* secure about holding on to their job; not having enough is a source of anxiety. However, the relationship between objective conditions and subjective experiences is not straight forward. For example, psychological research shows that the same "objective" possibility of job loss can be experienced very differently by differently individuals (De Witte 2005; Probst 2002). People, in other words, will experience the same risk differently and this is influenced by a range of factors including gender, age and personality (Hartley et al. 1991).

This has prompted psychologists to treat an individual's perception of job insecurity as an object in its own right. Perceptions of job insecurity are recognised as a stressor and have been shown to correlate strongly with decreased well-being and decreased quality of life (Nolan et al. 2000). What this research alerts us to is the importance of taking seriously how individuals interpret their situations, and that interpretations shape how people feel and act. Thus the *meanings* of job insecurity are important and need to be thought of as more than epiphenomena of objective conditions. Moreover, this research also alerts us to the fact that a range of possible factors shape perceptions and experience. In other words, the subjective experience of job insecurity has a range of causes, not just the characteristics of the job. This is a crucial point and one that guides my exploration of career security in this study. The difficulties involved in analysing the subjective experience of security are perhaps a reason sociologists of work have steered away from it.

The picture becomes more complicated too if we acknowledge insecurity is an ambient cultural condition. As noted, several commentators stress the existence of a pervasive climate of insecurity, cutting across all areas of social life. Some see this condition originating in the changing labour market (Bauman 2001; Beck 2000; Heery and Salmon 2000). Others see it as a separate cultural development, associated with a preoccupation with risk (Furedi 2002). In either case, a sense of insecurity is tangible, but dispersed, subtly shaping individuals' experiences of their work and career.

In terms of the focus of this study, the sociology of work research does not take seriously the subjective experience of work-related security, with some notable exceptions (Burchell et al. 2002; Heery and Salmon 2000; Martin and Pixley 2005; Sennett 1998). More crucially, there does not

appear to be a concept of security applied to a person's career, and in particular, to the subjective experience of "career". But we can make a tentative conceptual step here. I noted that security is about a relationship between present and future. Feeling secure involves having an expectation of being safe in the future. As such it is about confidence in the future. I also noted that a person's career story, the interpretive "frame" which gives shape to their work trajectory, includes their view of the future. We can say that a notion of career security would involve *a sense of confidence in one's career story.*

Ontological Security

A useful perspective along these lines, one that links self-stories and security, is provided by Anthony Giddens. He outlines what he calls "ontological security" as part of his account of contemporary selfhood (Giddens 1990, 1991). Ontological security is a fundamental form of psychological security. It can be construed as basic *trust* in the reliability of others and the life-world. It is anchored in the practical, taken for granted routines of social life. Ontological security is something all human beings develop and maintain, but it becomes more of a practical accomplishment, as well as more vulnerable, in contemporary social conditions. For Giddens (1991), social institutions today in the developed West are radically "post-traditional". Reflexivity is their central feature, where most aspects of social life are open to revision in light of new knowledge and information (Giddens 1991). Most of the time, individuals live within particular routines and lifestyles. But these patterns are achievements rather than givens, and individuals regularly face many choices about "how to go on". Moreover, individuals have to make decisions about possible courses of action in a context of doubt and uncertainty about the consequences of those decisions.

An important part of this, Giddens argues, is the way the "self" becomes a reflexive project (Giddens 1991). We understand ourselves in terms of a "biographical narrative" that needs to be continuously maintained – and this maintenance is crucial for ontological security (Giddens 1991, p.58). Giddens' approach has some resonances with that of Richard Sennett. Sennett also links a sense of security with personal narratives in his account of work (Sennett 1998, 2006). He argues that people need coherent narratives for anchoring in the world, and that work plays a

foundational role, especially in terms of its routine character. But unlike Giddens, he does not overtly theorise a concept of security.

The concept of ontological security has been used to explore the meaning of home and home ownership (Dupuis and Thorns 1998; Saunders 2007) and to migrants' sense of belonging in Australia (Noble 2005). But beyond a few examples, its application in the sociological literature has been sparse. It promises however to be useful for understanding the relationship between career stories and security.

For Giddens, sustaining a biographical narrative involves what he calls "life planning" (Giddens 1991, p.85). Here the individual continually assesses the risks of various courses of action. Life planning is not the only way individuals project themselves into the future, but it becomes dominant the more self-identity is something to be made. Some writers have criticised Giddens for over emphasising such a "strategic" mode of thinking about the future (Adams 2004; Mestrovic 1998; Mouzelis 1999). On my reading, however, the notion of life planning is malleable and Giddens acknowledges other modes of apprehending the future. In any case, Giddens' conceptual framework is cast at a high level of abstraction.

Giddens theorises a link between self-stories and security in a way that can be applied to work careers. However, exploring this link requires empirical research. We need to examine individual stories. We need to find out how particular individuals "keep a career story going", and how this might produce a sense of career security.

Giddens' account of selfhood has close affinities with other theories of reflexive modernity (Bauman 2001; Beck 1992; Lash 1994), as well as with the image of the active and individualised self in the "new careers" picture. In all these accounts, the emphasis is on the individual, forced to cobble together and maintain a biography in conditions of risk, uncertainty and multiple choices. However, it is important to determine the specific ways individuals are "on their own" in making their work careers. As a basic point, for example, though self-employment has increased in Australia (Chesters et al. 2007), most workers still work with and for other people, in some kind of organisation. We should expect great variation in people's experiences of crafting their career paths, depending on their particular circumstances. Thus we need to find out how keeping a career story going is shaped by different work contexts.

This also raises the major issue of how individuals' social background and education might influence their experience of career security. In the

next section I discuss how I designed this study and chose a particular sample of individuals to interview.

Designing the Study

How I Chose a Sample of Individuals to Interview

In this study, I set out to explore people's experiences of security in relation to their work and career. I also wanted to develop conceptual links between security and career stories. To do this, I needed to delve deeply into individual accounts of work careers, and so I designed the study as a qualitative one, using in-depth, life-story type interviews. The broadness of the topic, and the great variation in people's work situations across the social spectrum however, posed a serious challenge. I risked generating an unmanageable diversity of material. The study needed a focus. Even though issues about career security are potentially applicable to everyone engaged in paid work, I had to narrow the sample. I decided to interview people between the ages of 25 and 45. I chose to compare people working in large organisations with those working for themselves. Their jobs ranged across the private and public sectors, and the arts. Importantly, I limited my sample to people with a tertiary education. In all, I interviewed 22 people, evenly split between men and women. At the time of the interviews, all except one lived in Melbourne.[5]

In the chapters that follow, I present the stories of 14 of the participants. I present them in the form of a series of case studies, mostly long, but some short. This way of presenting the material, as individual portraits, shows well the intricacies and richness of people's stories. It is a way of illustrating the complexities and tensions in a person's work life, but also helps to make it recognisable. I discuss this method in a little more detail in Appendix 1.

Why then these choices for the sample? For a few reasons, I decided to focus on individuals who had gone through university. Firstly, I had such an education, and to be true to the motivations for this study, I was interested in examining others with a similar educational experience. But also practically, this was a way to limit the range of variables. Since level of education is acknowledged as a rough indicator of class and social status in Australia (Connell 1993; Pusey 2003) this was a way to concentrate on what might be called a "middle class" experience of career, although I use the term with caution. Another reason is that university educated people

have high expectations about their work and career (Dockery 2010).[6] For example, students who intend to enrol in university expect to have good job prospects, but also rewarding careers (R. James 2002). Surveys also show that university graduates expect to get jobs with good financial rewards (Graduate Careers Australia 2008). This is probably unsurprising in a context where many students see tertiary study primarily as an economic investment (Pearson and Chatterjee 2004).[7] But graduates continue to expect engaging and fulfilling work careers as well (Graduate Careers Australia 2008). I thought, therefore, that these individuals would probably be familiar with juggling competing aspirations about their work.

In terms of age, I limited my sample to the 25 to 45 range. This gave me a spread of individuals in the *middle* of their work lives. They already had some experience of making a career. I surmised that the aspirations they had coming out of tertiary study had been modulated by the realities of working. In addition, they still had a long work life ahead of them, and therefore would be concerned about their future trajectory.

I further focussed the sample by choosing individuals in particular employment situations. Part of my research problem concerns how work circumstances shape an individual's sense of career security. This of course posed an enormous problem in terms of the wide variation in different contexts. I decided to focus on individuals in two very different, almost polar opposite, situations. Individuals in one group (about a third of the sample) worked for themselves. These people were of key interest for me because they symbolise current trends in much of the discourse about the changing work landscape. The new careers picture suggests that everybody is being forced to become, in some way or another, "on their own" or effectively self-employed. By and large this group did not have a stable or ongoing job. I wanted to contrast this group with individuals who did have a steady job in a large organisation (again about a third of my sample). Although my own public service experience suggested that organisational life is undergoing its own transformations and the "life long career" orientation is waning, the contrast between the two contexts would be instructive.

Through the course of the interviews, a third group emerged. Some of my interviewees were going through a major career transition. I found a common set of themes emerging in their stories, enough to warrant treating them as a separate group, and to seek out other interviewees in this situation. These individuals were in a period of uncertainty and

change: moving from one place to another, not very clear place. Transitions such as this, liminal periods, are an important window on how individuals make sense of their career (Ibarra 2007). In the end, about a third of my participants were in this situation.

Finally, I limited my sample to people living independently and supporting themselves. This was an important criterion because I wanted to focus career stories of individuals who felt the full economic pressures of making a living.

Interview Themes and Questions

As a way to access particular individual experiences of work, I used in-depth, "semi-structured" interviews. Although it is common to distinguish between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, the distinction is better seen in terms of "a continuum ranging from the relatively structured to the relatively unstructured" (Brinkmann 2014, p.285). Towards the relatively unstructured end is the life-story type interview, which allows an interviewee to "tell their story" with minimal interference. The method I used was somewhere close to the semi-structured approach, but moving towards the life-story approach in parts. I came to interviews with a consistent set of broad questions (see Appendix 2), but interviewees largely determined the course of their telling. Not all questions were covered in each interview. They were a guide rather than a checklist, and I used them flexibly in response to the material that emerged in the interview encounter. Also, interviewees often spent large parts of the interview telling about aspects of their work histories. In these parts, my approach moved towards what Wengraf (2001) calls a biographic-narrative interview. This has the qualities of the life-story interview, but addresses a specific aspect of life – in this case, work careers. Each interview went for between two and three hours. In some cases, I followed up with a second interview about a month later. I did this if there were themes the participant felt they had not covered properly and I wanted to explore more. One of the benefits of the second interview was that both I and the participant had a chance to reflect on the first encounter, and they could provide another layer to their account, thus adding to its richness.

In terms of the content of the interviews, I asked participants to talk about their current situation, including their actual work tasks, role and relationships with other people. I asked how they felt about it, what was satisfying and pleasurable, challenging and difficult, as well as worrying,

frustrating and unpleasant. Participants described the arc of their work life: how they got to their current situation, and where they thought they were going. They told about what made them worried and anxious, but also what gave them a sense of solidity, stability and security. Crucially, I tried to detect the various sources, social and psychological, of their sense of career security.

Career stories involve aspirations. Given that people want many things from their work, I paid attention to how interviewees navigated conflicting desires and values about their career. I listened to how interviewees characterised their economic needs, for a good steady income for example, as well as their needs for interesting and fulfilling work. I especially tried to capture the way they understood and juggled these tensions in practice. Inevitably their stories ranged across areas of life beyond work: family, relationships and lifestyles. All the while, I attempted to draw connections between these broad personal experiences and work.

From preliminary interviews, it was clear that the aspects of security I was trying to elicit from participants were not straightforward and not easily spoken about. I then made a methodological decision to refrain from using the words "security" and "insecurity" in the interviews, unless interviewees themselves used them. I wanted to tease out relevant experiences using their own words. This meant I had to cast a broad net in regards to the theme of security. I did not pose the idea of "career security" or use those particular words with interviewees.

Through the interviews, I tested out Giddens' simple but provocative notion that a sense of ontological security is reliant on "keeping a coherent narrative going" (Giddens 1991, p.58). I tried to discover what this actually meant in interviewees' particular practices and situations. As part of this, I gauged the extent to which they "planned" their future and how much of this was overtly calculative.

Importantly, in terms of the scope of this study, I was not attempting to definitively prove or disprove the "truth" of the new careers picture. This would be too vast an exercise. I wanted, however, to find out how aspects of this image have relevance and resonance for individuals. My focus for this was to look at the ways in which particular individuals, in particular work situations, make career stories, and how this shapes their sense of career security. My aim has been to use these nuanced individual accounts to build the beginnings of a conceptual framework for career security. Such a concept would be a powerful lens to scrutinise the contemporary work landscape. But this latter task is beyond the scope of my study.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 2, I detail the main conceptual issues in my investigation of the experience of career security, beginning with a more extended outline of Giddens' notions of ontological security and life planning. Using a case study, I then draw out some of practical implications of Giddens' concepts, and then further elaborate the conceptual issues around linking career stories to security. In Part II, I present a series of case studies on individuals working in large organisations. In Part III, I focus on individuals working for themselves. Chapters 7 and 8 concern entrepreneurial career stories, and Chapters 9 and 10 are artistic ones. In Part IV, I focus on individuals who are "in-between" work contexts, going through a major career transition. In the concluding chapter, I bring together my observations and findings about how individuals make their career stories, the influences on story-making and how these shape their sense of career security.

Notes

1. Students' "choices" are of course shaped by their socio-economic backgrounds. Education researchers have long noted the ways in which the curriculum in secondary education itself is hierarchical and operates to "stream" individuals into different vocational pathways – for example into academic paths, or trades and apprentices – and thus serves to reinforce existing social inequalities. For research on Australia see (Teese 1998, 2000) and (Connell 1998).
2. The AuSSA is a statistically representative national survey of Australians conducted by the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research's Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University. It is currently the most comprehensive survey of Australian public attitudes (Denemark et al. 2007).
3. The different ways of approaching the issue are numerous, and encompass such areas of research as job satisfaction, motivation, commitment, meanings, expectations and so on. In psychology two (related) currents stand out. The first derives from the humanist psychology of (Maslow 1943) which treats human motivation in terms of a hierarchy of fixed needs. In this frame, an individual's material security needs, which would translate to needs for income and job security for example, would have to be fulfilled before they were motivated by higher needs such as good work relationship, status, or interesting work. Maslow's influence on human resources and organisational practitioners has been profound (Ciulla 2000). The second current relates to the strand of cognitive psychology most notably associated with work of (Locke 1976, 1984). Here individuals are seen to possess unique and indefinite sets of multiple "values", which they use to appraise their work

situations. The frame here is cognitive and utilitarian. The main sociological current dealing with work motivation traces to the work of Goldthorpe, Lockwood and their colleagues (Goldthorpe et al. 1968, 1969) on "orientations to work". Here workers have different hierarchies of wants and values, but these clusters are shaped by social structure and culture. Different groups within the occupational structure have different orientations to work (Reed 1997). This general orientation also finds support in Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (see for example Bourdieu (1977)).

4. Apart from sociological studies of career – which can be traced to the Chicago School, and although influential, is small – career literature can be divided into two main groups. One is the academic career guidance literature – which is predominantly influenced by developmental and social psychology, with a minor influence from sociology. This literature is aimed at the profession of career guidance practitioners. The other is popular self-help career literature, which is also prominently influenced by psychology, but which is less systematic and more didactic. When I refer to the career literature through the study, I indicate which of these I am referring to.
5. One of my interviewees, Fran, was originally from Melbourne, but lived in Brisbane at the time of the interview. She was one of the first people I interviewed, and I did so before deciding to limit my sample to Melbourne-based individuals. I kept her in the sample because some of the key themes in her story became important for my thinking about the other case studies. The case study on Fran appears in Chapter 11.
6. This is not to suggest that expectations are mainly formed in university education. The origins of personal expectations are complex and multi-faceted, mainly tracing back to family and school settings and therefore influenced by the social and cultural processes, and economic conditions of those settings (for example see (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977)). On the complex multiple social and cultural influences on aspirations see also (Zipin et al. 2015). Here I simply use university educated students as a broad group who have high expectations of their careers.
7. This is particularly the case with the re-introduction and spread of university fees in Australian universities since the 1990s.

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CHAPTER 2

Conceptualising Career Security

In this chapter, I outline the key conceptual issues in this study of career security. I begin by further outlining Giddens' notions of ontological security and life planning, and their relationship to his theory of contemporary selfhood. As a way of drawing out some practical implications of using Giddens' concepts, I then present a case study on "Cath". Cath's story usefully illustrates the ways her career experiences connect to the broader theme of security and insecurity. In the final section of the chapter, I use themes raised in Cath's story to elaborate the conceptual issues of narrative coherence, the role of shame and the role of personal and cultural expectations.

Contemporary Selfhood – and Making Careers

Giddens – Ontological Security

What makes people feel secure about their career? How can we usefully apply a notion of security to the realm of career? Giddens (1984, 1991) supplies us with a line of inquiry with his general theory of psychological security. Borrowing the concept from Laing (1965), and weaving it into a social account of selfhood, Giddens (1991) spells out the idea of ontological security. Ontological security refers to each individual's psychological and emotional anchoring in the world. It relates to the experience of basic trust we have in social reality.

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Our capacity for basic trust in the everyday world originates in infancy and is largely unconscious. Drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Winnicott, Erikson and Sullivan, Giddens argues that the origins of basic trust lie in the relationship the infant has with early caretakers, usually the mother. Early on, the mother's absences produce a potentially engulfing anxiety. Through the experience of the mother's reliability, the infant begins to cope with her absences. The infant develops a "security system" – a mechanism for containing anxiety (Giddens 1991, p.43). For Giddens, this early formation of basic trust becomes the basis of our trust in social life generally. We trust in the reliability of others and the stability and coherence of the social world. It becomes the basis of what Husserl called the "natural attitude" (Giddens 1991, p.36). Most of the time, we engage with others and the social world without thinking about the basic parameters of this engagement. Everyday social life is grounded in practical routines. For Giddens, this realm of taken for granted routine is what sustains trust in the social world, and is the main anchor of ontological security.

Ontological Security and Contemporary Identity

Basic trust in the world is also about a stable sense of self. Thus ontological security is also security about self-identity. Today, Giddens argues, self-identity has become much more of an active project for the individual, requiring ongoing effort (Giddens 1991). Contemporary social life in developed Western societies is set within particular kinds of institutional conditions, which are radically post-traditional. The nature of modern institutions gives rise to a range of personal "reflexive" tasks. Giddens does not make this distinction, but these tasks can be divided into two (albeit interconnected) kinds.

The first kind concern life choices. These are the significant, more consequential decisions we face in different arenas of social life. Individuals face a plethora of decisions regarding "how to go on". For example, in the arena of employment, everyone at particular times faces major choices like: Should I leave my stable job and go for a more risky one? Should I apply for that promotion? Is a change of direction in my work life necessary? Can I find more fulfilling work? How can I spend more time with my family? Giddens (1991) thinks that most of the time we do not have to think about our actions – they are embedded in routines. But ways of doing things, from the mundane to the important, are always subject to revision.

That people face such choices is not novel. Nor is the fact that no clear or certain answers to them exist. For Giddens (1991), the important aspect of these personal decisions, that which contemporary circumstances impose on us, is the absence of solid guidelines. Questions of "how to go on" occur with a backdrop of radical doubt about the "right" way to act (Giddens 1991, p.181). The knowledge which we might draw on to assist our decisions is itself open to question, continuously revised, and most often subject to multiple interpretations. And the trustworthiness of any particular source of authority that we must rely on is never settled. We do, of course, "go on". We make decisions, and select from a variety of opinions about the best course. But the point is our decisions and actions require particular effort, and are the site of strain and potential anxiety. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, p.49) make a similar point about the personal consequences of reflexive modernity: individuals are massively "overburdened" by the need for continual decision-making, as older institutional forms recede. Bauman (2001, p.44) too refers to the burdens of making choices without guidance, and the resultant anxiety about coping with "boundlessness".

The other kind of task concerns self-identity itself. By self-identity Giddens means "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography" (Giddens 1991, p.53). Self-identity is the biographical story we supply ourselves. In contemporary conditions, self-identity becomes a reflexive "project" whereby our self-narrative has to be continually sustained in the course of everyday experiences. Importantly, in a post-traditional social world, each person's ability to maintain a "coherent biography" becomes crucial for ontological security (Giddens 1991, p.65). Our basic emotional anchoring in the world depends on it. Giddens is vague about what precisely "coherence" entails, an issue I take up later. But at a general level, a coherent self-story is one that connects current experiences with those of the past and with future goals.

These two kinds of reflexive tasks, of making life choices, and of maintaining a self-story, are forced on individuals by modern social life. The more institutional reflexivity intensifies, as is the case in the contemporary developed West, the more our biographical narrative becomes a central reference point for our actions across all spheres of life. This is effectively to say, that the two types of reflexive tasks come together. The task of making decisions about courses of actions in particular contexts brings into play self-identity. Making decisions about my career for example, becomes more and more a question about who I "am".

Overall, Giddens' account is schematic and short on empirical examples. On the other hand, it is useful and provocative. In late modernity, where people are increasingly loosened from previous traditions, our own biography becomes a central reference point. Daily decisions, even though they are mostly made without much deliberation, are always subject to justification and orientation with respect to our biographical story. In their theory of individualisation, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) conjure this image well: today we are all forced to "make a life of one's own". This is not just an expression of individualism, but indicates how each person's own biography becomes their primary guiding framework. In effect, self-identity becomes internally referential.

Risk and Life Planning

Keeping a biographical narrative going also involves a continuous awareness and appraisal of the future. Giddens acknowledges the different ways people apprehend the future – we still think in terms of fate, fortune and hope, for example (1991, p.110). But, the more the institutional reflexivity of late modernity becomes prominent, the more individuals are forced to apprehend the future in terms of risk. This means we think about our actions in terms of their possible consequences. We adopt a "calculative attitude", weighing up possible benefits and drawbacks, and recalibrating our courses of action. As such, everyday situations, where we need to determine how to act, continually throw us into the territory of possible future states:

> In a post-traditional social universe, an indefinite range of potential courses of action (with their attendant risks) is at any given moment open to individuals and collectivities. Choosing among such alternatives is always an "as if" matter, a question of selecting between "possible worlds". Living in circumstances of modernity is best understood as a matter of the routine contemplation of counterfactuals. (Giddens 1991, pp.28–29)

As such, the future continuously enters the present as particular possibilities. And our apprehension of these possibilities takes the form of "risk assessment".

Giddens argues that we, in a certain way, map out our future paths using "life plans". They are the "strategic content" of our biographical narratives (Giddens 1991, p.85). To the extent that we see the future in terms of risk,

life planning becomes necessary. Although we may not follow plans systematically, this process is one all individuals, living in conditions of late modernity, are forced to engage in. Giddens is also careful to avoid the implication that individuals strategically plan their lives as a *whole* (1991, p.85). Instead, individuals tend to plan for segments of their life. Although he does not talk about work careers, this arena of life is a good example. Forecasting our careers is something everybody must do at some level.

For Giddens, life planning becomes central to sustaining a biographical narrative in contemporary social conditions. Thus, it is crucial for ontological security. Plans provide individuals with tangible guides for action, and a means for "keeping a story going". If, in earlier social conditions, ontological security was sustained by the everyday routines of life, today it must be sustained reflexively by the individual. Through life planning individuals attempt to "colonise the future" (Giddens 1991, p.118). Such attempts are necessary for the anchoring of self-identity.

Giddens' account of contemporary selfhood, tied to the institutional mechanisms of late modernity, has particular relevance to careers. Making a career can be seen as an important part of the biographical project, and the site of complex ongoing deliberations about risks, courses of action and self-identity. The idea that people are more and more required to be self-reliant and to reflexively make their own career paths squares well with what I have described as the "new careers" picture. The more fragmented and uncertain nature of careers can be seen in the broader context of increasing institutional reflexivity. Giddens thus supplies us with a powerful general account of the institutional dynamics of social life, within which career-making takes place. Importantly, his notion of ontological security, tied to self-identity, provides a possible template for exploring career security.

Security, Control, Plans

Within Giddens' framework, feelings of security depend on having a sense of control over the future. This is a widely held view across the work literature (Bandura 1997; Sennett 1998; Warr and Wall 1978). But more specifically, he proposes that such a sense of control occurs through risk assessment and planning. Individuals achieve ontological security when their futures are "mapped out". This premise is also woven deeply into much of the career guidance literature, which is geared to helping individuals gain control of their careers through planning their "goals" (see, e.g., McGee 2005).[1] The links between security, control and planning, however, are not clear cut. For

example, in life-course literature, stability and security have been seen as the *prerequisite* for planning, rather than its outcome (Mayer 1986). In other words, secure and stable conditions allow people to plan into the future (Bergmann 1992). Planning itself is also a nebulous category. Some studies on young adults for example show the variety of ways they apprehend the future (Brannen and Nilsen 2002; Nilsen 1999). Moreover, individuals can have confidence about the future in a broad range of ways, other than by formal "planning". At the very least, planning is only one aspect of what could be called "forethought" (Anderson et al. 2005).

A series of questions arise. To what extent do people need to have plans to feel secure? Does thinking about the future have to take the form of risk assessment, and occur in such a calculative way, for it to be effective? Giddens' position is ambiguous. For him, the foundation of ontological security is the realm of practical consciousness – the taken for granted, non-articulated realm of routine. On the other hand, today, increasingly, a sense of control requires conscious cognitive mapping of the future. This ambiguity suggests that people's actual need for planning will vary with the extent to which they are forced to be institutionally reflexive. Practically, this calls for empirical study. For example, how do different work situations and contexts influence individuals' apprehension of the future, their forms of planning, and ultimately their story-making?

In the next section, I begin to unpack these questions through a case study. I use some themes raised in Cath's story to refine the issue of ontological security and life planning in the realm of work careers.

What Will I Do with Myself? – Cath's Story

Cath is 29 years old, single and shares a house with a friend. Work is a big part of her life, especially in terms of time commitment. She has two jobs at the moment, although in the past she has had up to four. Her main job is working in her father's pharmacy. She serves customers and fills scripts. She has been working with her dad part time, on and off, for about 11 years. It started out as weekend work while she was in high school and, at certain periods, became a full-time job. At the moment she works four days a week at the pharmacy, and this is her main source of income.

Cath also works at a pub three nights a week. This is something she has done, again on and off, for about five years. The pub job is casual and she does not know how long it will last, but she likes it as a contrast to the pharmacy. It's "more social", she says. It allows her to see her friends who

meet there, and counterbalances the isolation she often feels working with her dad. Cath is accustomed to working long hours. Until recently she was working about 55 hours a week. But now, she has cut this back to 40 because she was "going insane". It was not good for her health.

Cath has had a complicated trajectory since leaving high school, mixing work and study. Initially she started a nursing degree, although it was not her first choice. At the time she felt a pressure to just get into any course at all. She completed a year of nursing and then left it, realising it was not for her. After periods of travel and working in various service jobs, in cafés and shops, and some office work, she went back to university and did a degree in environmental planning. This she completed a few years ago. She loved the course, and says "it was really instrumental in helping shape the way I view society and the way we interact with our society". Although towards the end she realised it was not for her. The course was aimed at working in environmental policy, an area she found too bureaucratic. She also felt there was only a limited range of related jobs. In any case, for a range of reasons, she has not pursued employment in this area. Instead, she has gravitated back into the work regime she knows best – the pharmacy and pub.

Motivations

We talk about her motivations for work and the place it has in her life. On a basic level, Cath works for money. But she is not motivated by becoming wealthy or successful in a "corporate" sense. She works to support herself – to pay the rent and the bills – but also to support her lifestyle, which includes a fairly intense social life. Cath says she has been doing this ever since she was a teenager: "I've never been without money. I've never been without a job." She stresses the importance of supporting herself:

> Well it's important because I'm an independent young woman and I rent, and I own a scooter, and I've joined a gym. You know you've got all those, I've got to pay my bloody RACV,[2] I've got all those social responsibilities.

She tells me earnestly, without boasting, she has never been on unemployment benefits and stresses that it is something she would never contemplate.

Cath also expresses a very strong "work ethic". It is important to have a "purpose to get up everyday" – and her jobs provide this. She also gets a lot out of her work. One of the most important rewards is feeling she is doing work that helps other people. Cath feels her work generally entails some kind of service to others, and this is something she is drawn to. Both the pharmacy and pub jobs embody this.

Current Assessment

In spite of these rewards, Cath does not assess her work situation very positively. She is very frustrated and worried about the future. A big problem she cites is the lack of job security. Her pub job is not secure. She has managed to get regular hours, but she knows that in this business, nothing is set in stone. There is also a high staff turnover at the pub. I am surprised to hear that the pharmacy job is insecure too:

Cath: This is a bit of an issue for me. Because really it's not all that secure, in that, as soon as [dad] retires, which has got to be soon because he is 67 [. . .] I don't see that I will continue in the pharmacy. Despite the fact of being quite experienced in the way a small community pharmacy works, I think the whole point that I'm there is because of [dad] and because we work quite well together. When he's not there it is [emphasis] utterly stressful and I really don't like being responsible for anyone's health, which is really what it boils down to. And I really couldn't hack that.

Mark: So you wouldn't see yourself moving into another pharmacy job, say after . . .

Cath: Certainly not community pharmacy, because I just don't think I could work with anyone else, because I've been able to work with [dad] so well, because I spend more time with [dad] than with any other member of my family. Obviously. And sometimes I think oh my god, if things go to shit, and I end up with no job, I could probably, I have a dispensary technician certificate, [. . .] I can always maybe work in a hospital pharmacy, that would be quite interesting, because you don't have to deal with customers, you don't have to deal with running a business.

Mark: So it's possible you could keep that line of work going?

Cath: It's possible, yes.

Mark: But not in the form that it's in at the moment?

Cath: No, not in the form that it's in at the moment, and not that it's ever been anything that I've wanted to do. [emphatically] Never.

People always, always say to me, why don't you do pharmacy? And, it's never crossed my mind to do it. Really

Mark: To study it, as a profession?

Cath: Yeh. I've got no interest. Which is weird because it's my job, but the interest there is, it's family.

A crucial reason she has continued with the job for so long has been a sense of obligation to her family and particularly to help her dad. He has been running the business for 35 years and supporting their large family. Cath says she wants to "give something back and help him out". The idea of service ties in here. But she notes that it is not an easy situation because "it's not any normal job, it's a family business". It involves her in the role of daughter as well as employee. "There's a lot of emotional stuff there that makes it more intense."

Cath feels her pharmacy job lacks security because she realises it would not take much for the business to fall over. Her father is getting old, already past retirement age, and the pressures of running a small business are heavy. She worries he will get sick. In any case, he will not be working too much longer, and she is not planning to stay after he retires. But there is a broader sense of insecurity being expressed here. It is closer in meaning to being "unfixed" or "unconnected". Cath feels a certain lack of attachment to what she does. She finds herself in a line of work that she does not want to be doing. Clearly she exercises some agency as she remains in her job: responding to her sense of family obligation, but also seeing the job as a reliable source of income. But an unintended consequence of these decisions is a current malaise. Cath feels stuck.

Invidious Comparisons

Cath's sense of being "stuck" is articulated through comparisons she makes between herself and her friends:

> I get really frustrated. Because I'm at the age now where a lot of my friends are, their careers are really starting to kick in. And other life stuff, like, partnering off, and getting married and having babies and stuff. But in terms of careers, a lot of my friends, whatever they've studied at uni, a lot of them have gone on to follow that through or, have jobs. I mean really, the two jobs I have are quite casual [. . .] So I sometimes get really scared,

> worried that I haven't got enough security, really. And I see myself as coming on to 30 and still not having security.

As noted, Cath is not interested in "climbing the corporate ladder". However, she still feels a social pressure to succeed, in the sense of moving along a clear work trajectory. Compared to her friends, who are "getting on with it", she feels left behind.

Here Cath makes a connection between security and having a career. It is more than the continuity of a particular job that is implied. Her friends have "gone on to follow . . . through" their studies, and develop their careers. They are on a path in their work, and moving somewhere. Cath's worries involve not being on a clear path like them. This gives weight to the idea of her feeling stuck. She is implying, too, that she wants more clarity about her future, and this would make her feel more secure.

The comparisons with her friends are also about other areas of life like partnering and having children. Work career intertwines with family. Some of her friends are "already there":

> *Mark*: Do you see yourself starting a family, having kids?
> *Cath*: [shaking her head] No. It's getting to a point where it's kind of a bit scary, [chuckles] because my brothers are all doing it. And my friends are doing it. And everyone around me is getting married, and having babies, becoming pregnant.
> *Mark*: These are your friends with careers?
> *Cath*: Yeh, these are my friends who are perfect, and then there's me [puts on silly voice] hey guys, I still haven't got a good relationship or a secure job but that's okay, I'm really fun to be with. [now serious] And I'm almost 30, and [emphatically] I've got to do these things in the next few years if you want to do it, have kids and stuff. And that's another pressure, in terms of working, for women. How do you start working because at some stage you're going to have to stop, to pop something out, if that's what you want to do. And how much do you do before then? And how do you fit that in? I assume, I don't know, I don't see myself really heading into family life any time soon [. . .] And you can't plan that, I can't plan meeting some guy and falling in love, and then we decide to have children, whatever. So you've just got to keep going with what you know.

Her friends are "on track" with their lives. They have reached these significant milestones. By comparison, Cath feels she lags behind. The pressure is growing. Part of the difficulty, as she notes above, is the specific pressure on women, to juggle career decisions with those of motherhood. She also highlights the way uncertainties compound: not having a relationship for example means not knowing what will happen about having a family, and this means another variable she has to deal with regarding what kind of work to do next.

But it is more than just reaching milestones. Cath feels certain social pressures about *achievement*, and these are also expectations she has about herself. She cites the huge pressure that was cultivated at her Catholic girl's high school for girls to go to university, and to be successful in professional and corporate life. Cath thinks this a powerful social expectation today facing women – that you have to be a success in both work and motherhood. And she thinks the pressure is too heavy.

Inevitably, these social comparisons rebound on her as a person. Because she feels she lags behind, Cath judges herself negatively:

> You know, coming up to 30 and you're still working with your dad and you're working in a pub, you know, people [. . .] You can tell that people look at that and go, oh yeh, you haven't really achieved very much have you.

Thinking About the Future

We talk about the future. Cath says she does not think in terms of plans or planning. Since school, her work life has been more like "rolling with the punches" than any concerted following of a plan. It has been a mixture of happenstance and deliberate action, responding to opportunities. Most of her jobs for example have come through friends or family. Instead of clear plans, Cath has ideas, "sparks". Sometimes they grow more powerful. At the moment she has an idea to open her own bar with a friend. It seems to promise many of the things she wants out of work, like independence and social engagement. And it draws on the part of herself she thinks is oriented to service – the "hostess". I ask her about how these ideas shape her actions:

> *Cath*: Yeh well I figure I can't do what I'm doing forever. So, I have these ideas, probably in panic, I think oh my god what will I *do* when I

grow up. Which I still sort of think of, in that way. Because I haven't been blessed with the knowledge of what I want to do. And I'm constantly frustrated by that.

Mark: So you wish you had a clearer understanding of what it is you want to do?

Cath: Mmm. I hate it when people ask me what it is I want to do. [exasperatedly] *I don't know*!

Mark: Knowing what you want to do is important?

Cath: Yeh. At least then it gives me a bit of definition, doesn't it? And that's when you come back to saying well we're all defined really by our, generally people are defined by their work. And if I was able to say, actually, I'd love to be a horticulturalist, that's my dream job, and one day I will get there. You know, at least you've got that. A dream to follow.

Talking about her ideas for the future, Cath validates the importance of work. But the topic makes her uncomfortable. She thought that by this age she would have figured out a career path. This has not turned out to be so. She still does not have "a dream to follow". Moreover, not knowing what work to do impacts her sense of self, because people are "defined by their work". This seems to be the crucial principle she applies to her friends who, in her reckoning, have achieved more. The reason they have moved forward in their lives is that they appear to have a strong idea of what they want. Cath chides herself for not knowing. This is *her problem*, the reason she is stuck.

Reflecting on Cath's Story

Job Insecurity

Cath does not have job security. In many ways, her situation is an example of the non-standard work that has been at the centre of debates about growing precariousness. Her two jobs are, she says, "quite casual" with no long-term continuity. Another aspect is the variability in work hours. They frequently change from week to week, creating uncertainty. On the other hand, we cannot find an easy label for Cath's work situation, and characterise it solely in terms of insecurity or instability. Cath also experiences aspects of her work very positively. She earns enough money to support her lifestyle. She mostly succeeds in juggling two jobs, and is proud of being able to live independently. Her jobs are also a source of intrinsic rewards. The pub job is a site of social engagement, something very dear to her, and both jobs are vehicles for

different kinds of "helping" and providing service to others – important values she holds. At a deeper level, her work provides her with daily routine and purpose. She recognises overtly that this facet of work is stabilising – "work gives you something to do each day". And this is possibly one of the reasons she has consistently gravitated towards regimes of long work hours.

Worries About the Future and Career Trajectory

Cath's situation is ambiguous. Part of her sense of insecurity relates to not having an ongoing job. But her worries about what to do in the future are more revealing. They are about how she imagines her future and path forward. A number of themes can be distilled. The first concerns *movement*. Cath feels stuck in a line of work she does not want to be doing. Compared to her friends, she feels she is not "progressing" or developing. Moreover, this is about not moving *somewhere*. She mentions not having "a dream", or a destination she can aim towards. Reinforcing this image is her comment that she does not have a career in the traditional sense – a recognised pathway with markers of progress. Her friends seem to have a direction that is absent in her own life. This connects to the issue of *meaningfulness*. Cath wants to be doing something else, making progress in an area that matters. As it happens, she does not know what this is. Her friends seem to know what they want and are following it through. Cath thinks her work should be more personally fulfilling. Importantly, this theme about what area of work to be involved in concerns *identity*. Not knowing what path to be on is akin to not knowing "what to be". Finally, her sense of being stuck connotes the issue of *control*. Cath feels she does not have enough control over her situation. Her inability to steer or navigate compounds her anxiety about direction.

These themes represent aspects of insecurity for Cath. In some way, these themes are also about *aspirations* she has of herself and her work career. They emerge as problematic precisely because she feels unable to attain them in practice. Cath desires a sense of movement, of direction and of control in the navigation of her career. She wants her work to be more meaningful, however that is defined. Importantly, she wants to be *becoming someone*. She wants her career to be connected to an identity, however that is defined. The implication is that if these elements were present she would feel more satisfied with her work situation and also more secure about her career. In summary, Cath's account highlights a certain relationship between her career story and security. It shows that insecurity can

arise from unfulfilled aspirations. The themes may provide clues about what it might mean to maintain a career story, and thus to have a sense of career security.

Sustaining a Career Story: Some Issues

Trying to Plan

Cath does not plan in the way Giddens has it, nor in the way that career guidance experts say she should. She does not appear to be engaged in any kind of "strategic" or rational career planning. Moreover, she says she never had any kind of career or life plan. Like all social actors she does of course imagine herself in the future, engaging in what Schutz termed "projectivity" (Schutz 1967), and deliberating about her choices in ways that Anderson et al. (2002) call "forethought".

In this example, Giddens seems correct: the future enters the present in a chronic way. However, Cath's difficulties envisaging her career trajectory problematise the idea of planning. We can interpret Cath's deliberations as an attempt to articulate her future, and as a nascent form of planning. Her anxiety is evidence of feeling a lack of "control" over her trajectory. In this configuration, the connections between planning, control and a sense of security seem plausible. But what is entailed in successfully keeping a career story going? What kind of career story does it have to be?

Making a Coherent Story

In Giddens' terms, Cath is having difficulty maintaining a coherent career narrative. What does "coherence" mean? And what does Cath's account show about it? Giddens notes that "the individual must integrate information deriving from a diversity of mediated experiences . . . to connect future projects with past experiences in a reasonably coherent fashion" (Giddens 1991, p.215). This "temporal" coherence is something basic to all life stories (Habermas and Bluck 2000). Giddens also gestures towards a more substantial idea of coherence, where past, present and future are connected by an overarching principle, or life theme. Narrative theorists refer to this as "thematic" coherence (Habermas and Bluck 2000; McAdams 2001). Here, episodes in a person's life story are integrated in a way which conveys some kind of central theme – a theme which tells what their life is

about. Beyond some brief remarks, however, Giddens does not provide any detail. This is a strange omission given that, in his account, ontological security depends so fundamentally on successfully maintaining a coherent story.

Cath's feeling of not knowing what to do next, suggests she is struggling to make a coherent career story in both these senses. She does not have a clear idea of her story's next phase – how it will unfold. But from another point of view, her predicament is not unusual or deficient. Ricoeur (1991) argues that we are in fact *always trying* to make a coherent self-story, but it is something never completed. We continuously attempt to bring order to the experiences and events in life. This kind of interpretive, integrative activity is a defining feature of human life, distinguishing it from mere biological life.

Ricoeur calls this integrative activity "emplotment", the process of establishing a plot. But emplotment produces particular kinds of order. It is order shaped by the "stock" of plots given to us by our culture. Each individual continuously tries to discover, amidst the available stock of cultural stories, a narrative which integrates their experiences. As such we tend to see a given series of life episodes, not as disparate, but as a potential story. We see these episodes within the frame of "stories that have yet been told, stories that demand to be told, stories that offer points of anchorage" for our own narrative (Ricoeur 1991, p.30). Experience, Ricoeur says, has a kind of proto-narrative quality. And life is "an activity and a passion in search of a narrative" (1991, p.29). This is the sense in which people attempt to make a thematically coherent and meaningful story about themselves. And this is the sense in which self-identity takes a narrative form.

Ricoeur provides an important qualification to Giddens' outline. Self-stories are never completed. Ricoeur's image is of an active self, always making a story because it must continually incorporate new and sometimes discordant experiences, and these continually force a reinterpretation. This is a useful insight for exploring interviewees' accounts in this study, and particularly for looking at how achieving "coherence" links to feelings of security. It suggests a focus on the *attempt* to make coherence, not on an articulated, settled narrative – on the process not the product. Ricoeur also shows that the resources out of which coherence is made come from culture – from the plots we are familiar with. The individual's activity of interpretation, of assembly, is thus more akin to "discovery" than to the act of self-creation ex nihilo.

Shame – Having an Inadequate Story

Giddens (1991) provides other clues about maintaining a biographical story in his discussion of *failing* to do so. Central to this is the idea of shame. Shame relates directly to self-identity. Here, Giddens draws on the psychoanalytic notion of the "ideal self", as elaborated in the work of Eric Erikson and Heinz Kohut. The ideal self is "the self as I want to be" (Giddens 1991, p.68). Shame can be distinguished from guilt, although both are unconscious. Guilt concerns anxiety relating to transgression or wrongdoing. Shame, on the other hand, is more nebulous, and is anxiety about personal insufficiency. Appropriating this within his framework, Giddens says shame is anxiety that accompanies a failure to maintain a coherent narrative (1991, p.65).

But what constitutes failure? Presumably there are many ways this could occur. Individuals are always trying to assemble a thematically unified story about themselves out of their experiences and circumstances, and the implication is that this is a struggle. The task may not come off. But Giddens' point about shame is that failure relates to situations where we feel our story is "inadequate" (1991, p.65). He briefly mentions two versions of this. The first is when we feel we are failing to live up to something – certain personal goals or ideals (1991, p.68). The second is when we have difficulty finding "worthwhile" ideals (1991, p.69).

Cath's case is illustrative. It appears as a kind of amalgam of both versions. On the one hand, she does not know what to do, and does not appear to have a clear ideal about herself. But on closer inspection, this is not so, because she assesses her career story as inadequate in terms of it not meeting certain (semi-articulated) aspirations. A sense of shame is evident in the way she talks about failing compared to her friends. Although from the interview alone, it is difficult to know to what extent this is the case.

Summarising his stance, Giddens says that ontological security depends on individuals maintaining a coherent and adequate story. Adequacy is about a judgement of our story in relation to ideals or goals. Beyond this, Giddens does not elaborate. Cath's case though illustrates the complexity involved in people's judgements of their stories and the elements that come into play – tangible goals, less tangible aspirations and hopes, ideals about herself. It also illustrates that a person may not be conscious of any these elements.

This has implications for my study. Exploring career stories entails a sensitivity to *how* individuals judge the "coherence" and "adequacy" of theirs. It also means identifying the elements that form the basis of such judgements.

Cultural Norms and Social Comparisons

Cath's case also provides clues about the social and cultural mechanisms involved in her judgements about a good story. The reference points for her evaluation are certain images she has about how a career should unfold, emblematised in the lives of her peers. Cath judges her situation as a failure by comparing herself to her peers. When Cath says she feels stuck, this is not so much about an absence of any idea of what to do, but more a judgement about her current lack of progress against an image of what she should be.

These images link Cath's thoughts about career to cultural norms and expectations. Her sense of shame indicates a negative *social* judgement. This is unsurprising because shame is fundamentally grounded in relation to others. A sense of shame is the result of the negative judgement of others, judgements which we internalise (Kohut 1971). She judges her career as lacking movement, direction, meaningfulness, as being not in her control and not leading to a clear identity. In certain ways, which need to be determined, these images point to cultural expectations about what a good, acceptable, successful, or worthwhile career looks like. This normative dimension is central to the notion of a "subjective career" (Stebbins 1970). Our career "schema", the perspective through which we understand our work identity, is made in the context of the social relations associated with that identity (Stebbins 1970, p.34). Although it is experienced subjectively our schema only makes sense in the specific social context in which we make that career. We judge our own progress via the markers provided by our "reference groups". Through these social markers, our assessments are given moral weight.

Career schemas can be thought of in narrative terms. We make judgements about their coherence and adequacy with reference to cultural expectations about "good" stories. Extending Ricoeur, Bruner argues that culture provides a range of possible "scripts" which describe the course of a life (Bruner 2004, p.694). Some are more powerful than others – more likely to exert pressure on our own story-making. Our stories feel "more justified" in relation to these scripts. Cath's aspirations are shaped by these cultural scripts about a "good" career story. A good story flows, has

direction and leads to a particular kind of identity. It is one where we are in control – the author of our story. In terms of interpreting people's stories, then, we need to be sensitive to the cultural shaping of career stories, and the social mechanisms through which they operate.

Cultural Norms About the Life Course

Some of Cath's aspirations relate to the life course. They relate to what she regards as normal in terms of timetables and itineraries of adult life. For example, Cath feels she should by now be well into her career, and that compared to her peers, who embody "normal" adulthood, she lags behind. At the same time, she feels pressure to have children and start a family, and again, she should by now be well along this course. Yet it feels far away because she does not have a partner. Cath is also aware of the unfairness of this judgement. She recognises that there are powerful cultural pressures for women to achieve certain professional and domestic goals, at certain stages of life. She is aware of that these norms are gendered. Nonetheless, they still weigh heavily on her.

Cultural norms about the life course shape individual biographies, both in terms of how people make sense of them and their decision-making (Blatterer 2007; Kohli 1986). From the point of view of individual developmental, Habermas and Bluck (2000) argue that children begin to internalise cultural conventions about life timetables from about the age of five to ten. They acquire a capacity to link events in their lives within certain conventional sequences. This normative frame, then, also becomes a way individuals judge the coherence of their biographies and it influences the ongoing organising of self-stories through later life.

In this sense, standard timetables form part of the ensemble of cultural scripts available to people. They shape expectations of "normality" in a powerful way. We can surmise that standard timetables play a part in how individuals judge a good career story. By extension, a sense of career security would depend on this too.

Cultural Norms About Being in Control

Perhaps what Cath feels most shameful about is "not knowing" what she wants. Her friends seem to know. They appear to have a strong sense of direction, and from this she imputes to them a control of their lives. Again, her peers are exemplars of an ideal.

Ideals about individual autonomy have a long tradition in Western societies (Christman 2015). But if indeed the life course and work careers are becoming more open, diverse and individualised, then having a sense of personal control over one's trajectory becomes an even more pressing imperative. It becomes a functional necessity. Cath here is drawing on a powerful cultural image, where the protagonist is in control of their story. Cath's judgements about the adequacy of her own career story and biography are based on this.

The Influence of the Context of Work

In the first part of this chapter, I raised the issue about the social context of work. An ambiguity in Giddens' framework concerns the extent to which individuals have to make self-stories and overtly plan their futures. His argument implies that this depends on how intense institutional reflexivity is, and how extensive it has become in their particular social contexts, including their work contexts. Cath has two casual jobs. Her job tenure is uncertain, and a source of insecurity. On the other hand, she also gets anchoring from her jobs. They provide sociability, a livelihood, routine and some purpose. To examine the ways in which the work context shapes Cath's story-making, we must therefore include these broader aspects of her work experiences and practices, not just the characteristics of her job. This insight guides the rest of the study.

In the chapters that follow, I explore ways in which different work contexts – in this fuller sense – shape story-making, and how this links to career security. In the next four chapters, I focus on individuals working in large organisations.

Notes

1. This is more the case in the career self-help literature, than in academically based career counselling literature. The former promises individuals more of a "sense of control" by adopting its particular techniques. But also official career advice carries this implicit message, see, for example, MyFuture (2013) and MakeYourMark (2015).
2. RACV, short for the Royal Automotive Club of Victoria, is a popular provider of automobile and motorbike insurance in Victoria.

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PART II

Being in Organisations

CHAPTER 3

Tina – The Quest for Material Security

In this chapter and the next, I look in depth at two cases: two women who work as public servants in a government department but with different employment and personal circumstances. Besides their similar work context, both women, at least on the face of it, see the meaning in their lives coming from outside of work. Both do not think their work is a major source of identity.

Tina is 35 years old, married and has a three-year-old child. She and her husband are paying off a mortgage on a house in an outer suburb of Melbourne. She works for the Victorian government, in a department which develops policies and programmes to assist small business. She is a public servant with a "permanent" position. Hers is a story about the importance of work and the gravitational pull of material security. Tina recounts growing up in a family imbued with a strong work ethic. Hard work and long hours were commonplace, with her mother, a nurse working nightshifts, and her father running his own building business. Through high school and university, Tina worked for him, and also had many other jobs. Being in employment has always been part of her life. When she finished an economics degree, she worked in the newspaper industry for nine years. After that, she got a position in the public service, where she has been for the past five years.

Tina likes her job, which mainly involves implementing programmes for small business. In practical terms, this means "communicating with stakeholders", gaining the cooperation of relevant parties, and getting consensus

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on how specific programmes will run. She says her job is essentially about being a good communicator – a knowledgeable, helpful and friendly face of government. Tina has been in the role for a couple of years now and reckons she is pretty competent.

Relations within her work group are very good. In the past, she was in various unpleasant, "toxic", and "fractured" environments, where she felt "totally depressed" and "wanted to quit". But now:

> There is a great vibe and great people and everyone is interested in working together. Yeh, it's a huge factor. I like coming to work in the mornings, I like talking to everybody. There's just a real sense of team, sense of community in that team at the moment.

The term "team" comes up a lot. Hers consists of about eight people. These are her primary colleagues, and this configuration is her social anchor point at work. Having good relations within her workgroup is clearly very important to her.

Tina likes to throw herself into the job. Several times through the interview she notes her "need to be busy", and how she "thrives on pressure". Government units like hers, however, tend to cycle through busy and quiet times. I'm surprised to hear that instead of enjoying quieter times, Tina actually feels frustrated and bored. She prefers not having to think about what to do next and having clear demands to respond to. At busier times, she feels like work is "flowing" and is "buried in it". Currently, this is the case.

Satisfying Job Conditions

The pay and conditions of her job are a big part of her satisfaction. Tina thinks the money is good and the benefits of being a public servant are excellent. She has been able to take long periods of leave, some paid, some not, when she had a baby for example. And she is comforted by other generous provisions like sick leave and holiday pay. In particular, Tina values her job security. It is different compared to the smaller places she has worked, and less volatile than the newspaper industry. She reminds me however, that there is no absolute certainty about employment in the public sector, and restructures happen often. But, overall, her conditions are more stable and secure than anything else she has experienced.

Since having a child and starting a family, secure employment has become more important to her. Her husband, who is involved in large construction projects, is "very well paid", but his job she says is "insecure". Tina and her husband are also focussed on their new house, which is currently under construction. This project dominates their attention. Tina believes that her steady, predictable income is vital to their planning.

But stability and job security have not always been her main goals:

Tina: There's been such a change in my work attitude, because in high school I remember thinking I want to be in the BRW top 100[1] you know. Now I think what an idiot, it's so different. And I worked really hard for not a lot of money and got nowhere. And then I joined the government and it sort of stabilized, and my attitude to work completely changed, and lots of little events that happened along the way that shaped the way I do things, the way I approach work. And at the moment I've got great conditions and great people I work with which is a huge factor as to why I stay put, and generally mostly interesting, although [her area of policy] is a bit beyond me from time to time, this whole [area of policy] ok, whatever just do it. It's definitely changed, how I approach work.

Mark: So there were different phases that you went through, in terms of ideals, of what you wanted out of work?

Tina: Yeh. And I saw this with another friend of mine, who I went to school with. And we were always like, we want to join the corporate world. Be this, and be that. She's an accountant for [large resources company]. And she said the same thing has happened to her now, she just got so tired of this whole corporate life. And she just completely changed the way she approached everything. Actually two friends of mine have done that. We all started off in the same area and then we kind of moved. And now we seem to be in the same area, we all have kids now.

In her telling, what Tina wanted from work shifted over time. This also seems to reflect a deeper shift in ideals and values. She once wanted a successful corporate career - the high income and the status trappings. Over time, however, through various life experiences - like working furiously in the newspaper industry and not getting very far up the ladder, and then starting a family - these desires changed. Job stability and a good work environment now eclipse her previous dream of corporate success.

There is also another important shift signalled here, with regards to the significance of work in Tina's ideals. In the earlier phase, work figured centrally. Her aspirations were built on career success. In this recent phase, her aspirations have become centred on family and life outside of work. Importantly, Tina makes reference to some of her female friends who have gone through a similar transition.

She also implies that the shift to working in the public service, was one to a more convivial, less demanding and less competitive place – a place which does not engender the same ambition to "succeed". It is an image of a kind of sanctuary, from the harsher forces operating in the private sector.

The Pressure to Build Material Security

Overall, Tina assesses her financial position as "reasonably good". She is satisfied with her and her partner's combined income and the financial resources they have at their disposal. They do not have problems making ends meet. But in the broader frame of her future, this positive assessment is not, of itself, comforting. In fact, a powerful theme in Tina's story is the pressure she feels to *keep strengthening* her position. The imagery she conjures up is of a constant task ahead, to continue building on what they have, and that she and her husband have only just begun to establish strong foundations. The building metaphors, which she uses often, are also quite apt – she is preoccupied by the task of constructing their new family home and then paying it off.

Practically, Tina feels this as a pressure to maintain a certain level of income. She is working full time, even though she wants to be working less and spending more time with her little boy. Her rationale is to work hard now to pay off the house. She is doing this because she and her husband "hate debt": "we are very risk averse" and "like to pay everything off as fast as we can". Tina notes the tensions that arise from her pursuit of financial security:

> *Tina*: I guess my husband and I don't want to be ever in a position where we're cash strapped. Like we want to have a comfortable life, we want to provide good experiences for our son as well. We want to be able to go on holidays. It's not so much about material things, but then the way I'm seeing it is if we work hard, if I work full time for the next year or so, I can relax a bit, and [her husband] can relax

> a bit and we can spend more time with [her son] and do what we need to do, you know, go away. It's a really hard thing to call because I'm constantly going backwards and forwards between these ideals of I should be at home more and I'm doing this for something maybe more relaxed later on, but I'm thinking am I doing it at the expense of what I could be experiencing now? If that makes any sense? So it's a constant battle in my head. Constant juggling.
>
> *Mark*: Weighing up.
>
> *Tina*: Yeh, weighing up. And at the moment, there's just that fact that it's the global financial crisis going on as well, and you just think it's better to be a bit more cautious, just work it out.

Her desire to accumulate wealth and build security is strong. But it clashes with her wish to lead a more engaged family life. Tina is thus quite consciously involved in assessing her actions in terms of *competing* aspirations, "constantly going backwards and forwards" between them.

Tina appears to resolve this tension, at least in this telling, by seeing future fulfilment in family life as predicated on financial security. Tina currently comes down in favour of spending more time in her job now, in order to make a more comfortable life in the future. In other words, this vision allows her to defer her wish to engage more fully in family life. In future, she hopes she and her husband will "have more quality time", and be able to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

But she is "not there yet". Even though she feels "on target", she is anxious about maintaining her trajectory towards it. I interview Tina at the tail end of the global financial crisis (in 2009) and she is acutely conscious of the economic environment. She thinks there is too much uncertainty in the job market and it is too risky to get off her secure track. Interlacing her future talk is also a theme about hidden risks. She fears the possibility of "random events" that could destroy what she has, and wants to be as prepared to face them:

> There's always going to be things that are out of control, and I'm a control freak, so I like to have a lot of control, and a lot of that stems from that, I don't want to have external factors come in and decimate my life. You know take everything apart. And I want to do everything I can to keep control. Financial stability is a huge one, because I keep reading about these people who get into debt, because one partner has gotten sick or something like that, so I feel I have a reasonable amount of control over how we are now and our

> future. But I always know that there's that wild card that could be dealt at any time, and really I'm just trying to set up, I think we've got the main pillars to keep us going hopefully. Ever since I had [son], constantly, there's this terrible kind of flash forward thinking, oh what if something bad happens, what if we get cancer, what if this happens, there's that element of out of control. Then there's this other thing, ok we'll be alright, I think we're ok.

Her project involves a struggle to build a place of security – a place to buttress her family against an unknown and risky future. The struggle can be heard in alternating emotions: confidence that she has control and her project is going to plan; but also worry that what she is erecting may not protect her against future hazards.

Intrinsic Rewards of the Job

I have highlighted the importance Tina places on the material rewards of her job, but she also derives much satisfaction from doing it. Going in to do her job each day, with its specific routines, makes her feel good she says. Being occupied with tasks, especially when she does not have to agonise about what to do next, is satisfying. The times she most enjoys are when she is busy, when there is pressure to get things done:

> This is the thing, when I'm totally inundated, I'm so motivated. I'm a person that thrives on pressure. I mean you have to do that in balance, because other times, oh god I can't deal with this. In most cases, a lot of work means I am so productive, and I do really good work. The less I have to do, the less motivated I am. I think it must have to do with the amount of value I put on my work. I go, well, I don't have much to do, so I can just slack off for a little bit [. . .] But as soon as I've got lots of things happening, I am just right there, in the thick of it, and I love it, I thrive on it. And that's why newspapers, we did work well together for a while. But you couldn't sustain it over a long period of time. I mean I did work in newspapers for a good nine years.

Tina is accustomed to the rhythms of the newspaper world, with its bursts of pressure, and hard deadlines. And although from this vantage point, she is glad not to be in that world, it still rouses excitement and passion. Being busy is pleasurable.

Being busy and working to tight schedules is also about navigating social relationships. Tina puts a premium on good relations at work. Her

account of the pleasure of being busy and immersed in tasks is inflected with the pleasure of working well with others. Getting things done means team members coordinating their tasks successfully, and this entails smooth interactions. At the moment, there is a "real buzz", and she feels the team is working well.

It is apparent that Tina is more enthused about the generic processes her tasks involve as opposed to the specific content. She is not interested in any particular area of policy. In fact, she is not very animated about her current area, finding it "pretty dry". What she does find satisfying are the tasks involved with implementing programmes: the organisational tasks of communication, interaction, discussion and some of the writing.

Interestingly, one of things Tina cites as satisfying about her job is what she calls "the project nature of it". The programmes she works on generally only operate for a particular time. Tina likes this "because it gets exciting and you work hard, it gets boring and then you finish it off, and then its over and then I can start something new". In other words, her role involves taking charge of projects that have a defined life span. Thus with her tasks, there is a built-in mechanism of renewal which keeps her interested. There is a promise that she will experience and learn something new.

What Rewards Are More Important: Intrinsic or Extrinsic?

I noted how Tina came back to work because of the pressure she feels to build wealth. But in her account she cites both extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of her work. She had planned, for example, to take at least a year off, but after eight and half months at home, felt compelled to return to work for her own "mental health". Being at work, in its routines, in its social relationships, helps her keep sane. Tina stresses how important it is to have an interesting job:

Mark: So in terms of the rewards that work gives you, is money the main issue at the moment?

Tina: No, not the main issue. Because I think if I really hated it, I wouldn't be there. Like I can't stay somewhere where I'm not fulfilled or I'm not busy, like I need to be busy and need to have something to do. And that's when I suffer. And if I don't, I've got to leave. And as long as I'm challenged, as long as they keep giving

> me challenging projects and things to work on, I'm ok. And the money is really good anyway, so that's part of it too. Definitely a big factor. And at times when it's got pretty bad, or I've been underutilised, I'm thinking oh stuff this, I'm going to quit my job and just work in a coffee shop. I'd rather do that, because I'm sure that would be more satisfying than sit around and doing nothing and getting paid. So I would be prepared to leave if it was no longer something that interested me.

Tina feels so strongly that her job should be engaging that she would quit if this ceased to be the case. This seems striking given her emphasis on income and building material wealth in other parts of the interview. Not to mention the caution she displays regarding the current risky economic environment. On the face of it Tina seems to be providing contradictory accounts. In each, either a steady income or engaging work is given more importance. So, which drive is primary? Would she really leave her job if it became too boring? Or is this something she can say now because she has attained the comfort of a good steady income?

Of course these questions cannot be answered, other than retrospectively. And tensions like this permeate most people's stories. Rather than interpreting one of these emphases as self-deluding or disingenuous, I suggest that the contradictory elements in Tina's story highlight the fact that she is driven by both kinds of rewards, simultaneously. Tensions in stories reflect the conflicting desires and ideals that people constantly navigate. At the moment, Tina feels her job provides her with both kinds.

New Challenges – Comparisons with Colleagues

Recently, Tina's role has been changing and now requires more writing and policy development. These are areas she does not yet feel competent in. On the one hand new challenges like this are an engaging aspect of her job. She usually likes to stretch herself and learn new things. In this case, though, she is perturbed. Her colleagues, she notes, are more skilled than her in this kind of work, especially writing. "Everyone in the group writes so well", she says. "It's a bit intimidating". Although the team environment is supportive, she still feels self-conscious and a big pressure to "get up to speed". These comparisons with colleagues come up again when we

talk about self-improvement. Tina feels like she "should be doing more studying", to keep up with them:

> Because everyone in my team is doing it. It's a like a real peer thing. Because they're all so intelligent, highly intelligent, and the majority of them are all studying in their spare time and they're doing law degrees or management or something, or I don't know, MBAs. I kind of feel almost like, I'm not quite smart enough. I don't quite have that level of education.

Related to this, Tina worries about whether her skills and experience will be good enough for other jobs in the future, especially in the private sector. Since leaving the corporate world she wonders whether her time in the public service has adversely affected her employability. Even though she feels happy with her job, she wants to be prepared and keep her options open.

Though these worries are chronic, they are not paralysing. In fact, as with her anxiety about debt, Tina's worries are also a spur for action. In this case, for self-improvement and to make herself "more marketable". She is not willing to enrol in another higher degree course, or anything run outside of work hours. But she tries to do as many training courses as she can within the public service. In this sense, Tina is quite consciously engaged in a long-term strategy of professional development, beyond her daily job.

Confidence

When I ask Tina about what kind of work she would like to do in the future, she is not sure. She wants to explore more "creative projects", but is uncertain what this means practically in terms of specific jobs. Not having a clear plan of her future comes through when I use the term "career":

> I think it's on hold for the moment. I'm still not sure what I want to do, believe it or not. It's going well, this pays the bills well, and it's interesting, and I find as long as I'm mentally stimulated I'm pretty happy to stay somewhere. And the conditions are great. But career, I mean I had my performance plan last week and my boss asked me, she said where do you see your career heading, and to be honest I hadn't even thought about it. I guess it's something I've been meaning to get on to [laughs] in the past two years.

For Tina, not knowing how her career will unfold in the future is not a source of worry. The issue is not pressing. She feels confident about her career moving *somewhere*, even though she does not know where.

Kinds of Grounding in Tina's Account

Her Job as a Means to Achieve a Particular Lifestyle

A powerful theme weaving through Tina's story is her drive for material security. She imagines a future built around a particular material lifestyle – a comfortable house, money in the bank, enough resources to ward off possible hazards. But also, these hopes incorporate future family happiness and wellbeing, where she can spend more time with her child. These ambitions are *not centred on her work career*, but on a particular way of living. Tina's vision is a version of the widespread cultural ideal of material security through home-ownership, a version of the "Australian dream" (Hamilton and Denniss 2005). Her employment in the public service is a vehicle to attain that vision. Tina noted how this was not always the case, and that originally her aspirations were more centred on a successful corporate career. Career ideals can change over time.

Within the terms of this desired lifestyle, then, the extrinsic rewards of work appear to be the most obvious. Tina values her job as a reliable source of income. She does not have to worry about where the next paycheque is coming from, or what to do to get it. As many labour market commentators note, employment stability facilitates the ability to plan ahead (Howe et al. 2012; Standing 2009). Tina does however worry about future risks, and being able to continue building toward this vision. She is anxious about being "on track", and feels a pressure to pay off her mortgage. There is a timetable associated with attaining the Australian dream. Importantly, her judgements about progress in relation to this timetable seem to be a crucial part of her career story. Overall Tina feels she is succeeding.

This is an important point: Tina feels secure about her career trajectory even though she has no clear plan or vision about it. For Cath, in the first chapter, not having direction or a sense of a career path was a source of insecurity. But this is not the case for Tina. Although she does not have clarity about career direction, she feels on a path in relation to her lifestyle aspirations. In other words, she is maintaining a good career story – it is leading to something she desires, even though it is not centred on work.

Good Relationships at Work as Grounding

Although material and lifestyle goals are central for Tina, they do not satisfactorily explain her career decisions. It is clear that her job is much more than a means to an end. Her account is rich with expressions of work's broader meanings, beyond the financial. The association she makes between being at work and feelings of wellbeing are important. It is possible to discern some of the ways in which the social context of work provides her with a kind of "grounding". By this I want to emphasise something more than just "satisfaction".

The most obvious kind of grounding relates to her relationships at work. Tina talks about her team, and stresses the importance of good relationships. Studies of job satisfaction have repeatedly confirmed Tina's own assessment: relationships with co-workers are one of the most important factors shaping people's work experiences (Burawoy 1983; Vroom 1964). The interactions one has with co-workers are a fundamental part of the job itself, especially in a large organisational setting, and thus provide a medium for both solidarity as well as conflict (Hodson 2001). Tina reports feeling happy at the moment because her relationships are harmonious. Likewise, her bad relations in past jobs had a powerful negative effect on her morale.

Tina's immediate reference point is to her work group. She very much "feels part of the team". She also refers to her colleagues as a "community". Both metaphors, team and community, offer insights in Tina's identification with her work group. That is to say, an aspect of her identity comes from a feeling of *belonging* to her work group. The basis for this identification comes from the work activity itself. Team members depend on one another to get their tasks done. She does have a reasonable amount of autonomy, but her particular tasks are part of larger projects involving co-workers.

A Place of Challenges – Competence and Identity

Tina's work continually throws up new challenges to her skills and knowledge. A key dimension of this is how it results in comparisons with her colleagues. As in all social contexts where people are interdependent, cooperation coexists with competition (Bauman 1990). Tina's account of her workplace shows this in a subtle way. In her everyday interactions, her colleagues represent living examples of standards of competence

expected of job performance. They are also potential competitors for status in the workplace.

One consequence of this competition is the way it drives Tina to learn new knowledge and skills. Anxieties about inadequacy are a spur to learning and self-development. More deeply however, Tina's identification with her work group involves seeing herself as the bearer of particular kinds of competence ("I'm a doer", "I'm a program person", "I love communication", "I'm good at getting things done"). That is to say, she experiences herself as competent with reference to her co-workers. That her job gives her an opportunity to practise these kinds of competence, and these aspects of identity, is one reason it was so attractive to come back to after having a baby.

Entangled Motivations About Work

Tina's story also shows how difficult it is to disentangle her different motivations about work. A plausible explanation for Tina's return to work could be her desire for a comfortable and secure lifestyle. Pocock (2003) argues that Australian women experience a great pressure to return to work after having children, in essence to follow aspirations like Tina's. The result is heavy burdens on working families, and especially women, who have to sacrifice their engagement with family life. It leads to a "work-life" collision. Tina's deliberations do evince elements of this. But her motivations to be at work are more complex. Hochschild (1997) provides a different account. Her research on women in the US workforce highlights the importance of the intrinsic rewards of work, including its pleasures. This squares with Tina's account of her identification with the job. The key point here is that, even though her lifestyle goal is a powerful driver, it does not completely shape her decision-making about her career path. Just as important are the more intangible rewards of being at work – being part of a team and feeling competent at what she does, for example. These are ways she identifies with work.

In sum, Tina has a clear vision of a materially comfortable, family-centred lifestyle. Her job stability allows her to plan, and although she is anxious about the future, she feels "on track". But the social context of her work, in a large public sector organisation, also provides other important forms of grounding. Taken together these elements have implications for her career story. She has a sense of confidence about her career and life trajectory - she has a sense of career security. In the next chapter, I turn to another story. Rita also works in the public service, but her work arrangements and family circumstances differ, as does her experience of career.

Note

1. *Business Review Weekly* is an Australian business magazine. It produces annual lists of successful entrepreneurs and companies, and wealthy individuals.

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CHAPTER 4

Rita – The Public Service as Refuge

Rita is 27 years old, single and lives on her own. She was born and grew up in Melbourne, in a Lebanese family. She works full time in an administrative role within the Victorian public service. Unlike many of her colleagues, Rita is a "temp" – a temporary contractor employed for a fixed period of time. Her current contract is for three years, the longest she has had in a string of temporary jobs within the public service. Before that, after completing a public relations degree, she worked in a small advertising agency for a few years, and also spent time travelling and working overseas.

Rita is very happy and "thankful" about her current job. She values the good relations she has with colleagues and feels lucky to have "nice people" to work with. The public service has turned out to be something of a haven, compared with her "really awful" experience in the advertising agency. In that "cut throat environment", she was belittled and bullied. The public service, by contrast, has "human rights":

> I think I'm really really blessed. I'm so blessed I almost feel emotional about it, because they're so nice and I can be free to be the person that I want to be.

Being free to express oneself is a recurring theme through our interview.

Most importantly, Rita is relieved at securing a longer contract. Applications for jobs in her area of the public service had increased sixfold

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since the beginning of the Global Financial Crisis. The turbulent labour market is clearly on her mind, and has affected her directly. Her boyfriend (although they have recently broken up), who had been working as a labourer, has been unemployed for the last six months. Her brother too is struggling to find a job.

Rita's job is essentially administrative. She provides admin support within a team that works on science and technology policy. Part of her role is to coordinate the individual members' contributions to particular reports and briefs to the minister in charge. This means being "an organiser", and making people keep to certain schedules. Her tasks are on the periphery of the policy work itself. In any case, she finds the subject matter "a bit boring". Although Rita is not challenged by the content of her work, she loves performing a helping role and the tangibility of her tasks. She takes pride in what she does and puts great effort into it; "I've got initiative and I'll go the extra mile." She adds, "I'm good with people, I'm very, very organised, and I think that's what my skill is and I enjoy it and I love getting things done – things that are small."

Being a Contractor

I ask about her status as a contractor, and contrary to common views about its inferiority compared with being a "permanent", she says it suits her very well:

> I think I love being a contractor. Everybody hates it and feels sorry for me but I'm like, no, I love it, because you get paid more. You get paid more because it compensates for your sick leave, your annual leave, your long service leave, all of those things, but because I want to buy a house, I don't care. I'm willing to work hard. And I do. Like I haven't had a day off since I've started. It's been ten months. And then I can benefit because then I'll have more money. But then I don't have the security.

Rita knows her position is less secure than her permanent colleagues, but the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Getting paid more money is important to her at this particular point in her life. She throws herself into working hard and is focussed on the goal of saving for a house deposit. Choosing to maintain these employment arrangements, she says, is "a risk

I'm willing to take". In any case, this is a much longer contract than she had before.

Being employed for fixed periods of time has also allowed her to take breaks between contracts and travel overseas, something she enjoys doing very much. Moreover, being a contractor within a large government department has meant she has been able to move around more and shift roles. Her contractor status has given her more "possibilities":

> Well it means I'm getting the experience that I want now, for example I could work in something, in any area of the department . . . as soon as I finish this I can earn more, I can jump in another area, or even department at the same level doing something else, and it may be in a more interesting area. At this pay, I'll be as happy as I am now. And I may decide at the end of it that I'm so happy here that I want to stay.

Her particular status within the organisation provides a combination of financial reward and mobility. And, especially with her new three year contract, provides *relatively* more security than previous jobs.

Rita values the possibility of job mobility. This is part of a broader theme in her story – her strong desire to not be tied down. Being on a contract with a fixed end point "excites" her. Gleefully, she says, "the fact that you know, ooh, where will I be in two years?":

Mark: So in terms of the future you see yourself moving around a little bit?

Rita: Definitely. Because I have to. That's the nature of it. [emphatically] And I love that, because I'm one of those people who is like a hippy, always questions, oh my god, routine, what am I doing for the rest of my life, I've got to do something, and I love the fact that, it keeps me on my feet and I'm really energised because I am a contractor. If I feel no end to it, I'd be like oh fuck, I'd be depressed coming to work every day. Cos it's like three years, it really gives me that extra energy.

So far in her career, being on fixed term contracts has meant not feeling constricted by particular jobs, not feeling "stuck". Her future always seems open to other possibilities.

I ask Rita about her ambitions for work. She would like to stay within the public service and to eventually climb further up the ranks, but not to a position of heavy responsibility. This would be too stressful. She doesn't

see herself going into a leadership role. I ask her if she is searching for a particular kind of work. She wants to be "passionate about" her work, and to "serve the greater good". She also wants to work with "nice people". She has a few ideas about other areas to go within the public service. Beyond these generalities, however, she has trouble articulating anything specific. She says, "I can't think of what I want to do":

> But then I ask myself, if you're so happy and comfortable and never come to work feeling nervous or anything should I really want more? So now I'm like no, I don't want more, I'm going to be here as long as I can until maybe, like I'd like to work for something like the Department of Immigration or something to do with people overseas or, I don't know, that's an area I find very interesting, or multicultural stuff I also find interesting. So, yeh [the area she's in] is a bit dry for me. But I don't care, I'm really happy and I'm learning, for now, I'm thankful.

Some of the intrinsic rewards of her work come from the administrative tasks she does. This is her area of expertise. And to a large extent, her current job seems to embody all that she seeks. In this last passage we also hear a message about the dangers of wanting *too much* out of work. There is almost surprise in Rita's voice about having found a patch of contentment in her job situation. It has exceeded her expectations.

"Career Is a Path for Me to Live My Life"

The more we explore ambitions and ideals, the clearer Rita becomes about the place of work: work is subservient to other aspects of her life. She says that work is not where she derives meaning – this happens elsewhere. She works for pragmatic reasons, to earn enough money to make other things possible:

Mark: So do you think of yourself as having a career?

Rita: [pauses] Mmm not really, no. I think for me, life is more important. And this [job] is a means to do things I want to do in life. Like my friends would say yeh Rita's got a career. But for me, my perspective of it, my life is first. I'm not really looking at it as a career. Of course I respect my job and give it my best when I'm there, but I go home and I forget about it because it's a thing I do

so I can do the things I want in life. So that's not my intention but that is what I'm doing.

Mark: When you say the things you want in life, this is outside of work?

Rita: Yeh, like buy a house and travel. So, I'm doing this, so the career is a path for me to live my life not I'm living my life so I can have my career. If that makes sense?

Some of the activities that have "meaning" include her stint teaching English overseas, the possibility of working in an orphanage in a poor country, and generally "helping people". She articulates a strong ethic of service. Even though it is apparent that she brings this ethic to the workplace, she largely sees her work as having an ancillary place in her life.

The position of paid work in Rita's life starts to make more sense when it emerges that she has a great desire to have children and make a family. She would love to be a stay-at-home mother. If she were to meet the right person, she would happily change her employment situation. But she realises this is not something she can control, and the future is full of uncertainty. At the moment, her biggest anxiety is on the relationship front. She has recently broken up with her boyfriend. It was her decision, and overall she thinks it was the correct one. But she is also feeling shaken and unconfident about finding "the right partner".

Family Pressures and Being Independent

There is a palpable longing in her talk of family-making. I assume that part of this is cultural – that there would be pressure on her from her Lebanese parents to marry and produce some grandchildren. But, I find a more complex situation. It turns out that they have shunned her. Strict Muslims, they had demanded she go to Lebanon and marry a man of their choosing. Rita refused. Essentially, refused to be constrained by their religious customs. Her parents and some of her siblings have since left Australia and gone to live in Lebanon. She says they have "disowned" her. In asserting her independence she has been cut off from them and now feels isolated. Even one of her brothers who remains in Melbourne will not speak to her. Part of the force, then, in Rita's desire to find the right partner and make her own family is about addressing this feeling of being alone. She wants to feel part of something. But, on the other hand, it has to be on her own terms. She values her independence. It is within this

messy tension, between a desire for connection and a desire for autonomy, that Rita's work acquires certain meanings. Her job, in various ways, seems to address both.

As we have seen, Rita values her job because of the money, and the capacity she gains to make an independent life. This is also cast in terms of a buffering against future risks:

> I definitely want money. Because I think I need to be self-sufficient. Because I always worry, you know, what if I become a quadriplegic and I can't fend for myself, I can't live off the dole. So that's why I want to be safe, get a house.

She is building up material resources for an uncertain future, working towards self-sufficiency. This is something Rita can actively achieve, regardless of what happens in her search for the right partner. Her job allows her to keep her options open.

A Place to Be Busy

But the way she talks about her work is also about being connected to a certain place. Several times through the interview Rita talks positively about her work as a place to "keep busy" and be "occupied". There is something very comforting about having a day-to-day routine to immerse oneself in. "If I'm not busy, I go very crazy", she says:

> But because people are so lovely and it's so busy, and I love being busy, I feel like I've got ADD. If I'm not busy I get depressed. So I love the fact that I'm so busy. So I am very happy.

Being busy in a routine is good for mental health. Tina, in the previous chapter, made this connection too. In other parts of the interview, Rita adds another element by talking about her job as "a distraction". Being busy and occupied are important for keeping her mind off the deeper questions of life, about the "meaning in life". This makes sense of her reference to going "crazy" when she is not busy.

I also detect another practical role played by daily routine. It is something which staves off the uncertainties of the future. This is a very tangible example of how Rita's current work practice shapes how she imagines the future.

Being More Assertive

In many ways the story Rita tells me is an improvement story. From the awful days as a "shit kicker" in the advertising agency, to now being content with her job in the public service. The salient theme of struggling to become independent in her wider life has played out in her work, through attempts to become a more assertive person. She tells me that because of her Lebanese background, where "women are always taught to be polite", she has always been very accommodating in office environments. "A pleaser and a yes person and someone who is very compliant", she says. But after a while co-workers, especially men, take advantage. In the nasty workplace of the advertising agency this became oppressive. She had to "smarten up" and find ways to defend herself, and "talk back". Now, in her current role, these problems are not as acute, but still require ongoing effort:

Rita: One thing you get now is a lot of lazy people, that's the type of role that I'm in. But I'm the admin person for the team and you do have a lot of responsibilities, but you're everybody's shit kicker. I found it really hard in this role and I had to be assertive. The smallest things like, have you got that phone number, when they've got the phone book on their computer, or my stapler is broken, can you fix it, or just leaving all the dishes on the desk in front of you, which they've done. They've been there for a week and a half. I'm going to protest and not clean it. Because I always clean it, it shouldn't be my job if someone's left their dishes. But I don't want to be one of those people who doesn't want to do anything, because I hate those people. It is a hard role for my personality to be in.

Mark: What is your type of personality?

Rita: I would rather do something than argue with someone to get them to do it, when they should be doing it. And really like, chauvinistic lazy pigs who should be doing stuff and they don't do it. And other guys will say yeh, get Rita to do it.

Her team environment is a kind of testing ground for negotiating these tensions. The task, as she sees it, is to become more assertive without being harsh. To somehow balance pleasing others without being taken for granted. In her office interactions, Rita makes an effort at comporting herself in particular ways. This effort is what Hochschild calls "emotional labour" – the internal psychological work one does in order to sustain a particular outward appearance in the workplace (Hochschild 1983). But

Rita also sees learning to be more assertive and independent in terms of self-improvement – it is a personal project to become closer to an ideal she has. The office is a context in which Rita can practise this identity.

Relatedly, Rita says she has to develop her personal resilience. There are co-workers in an adjacent area who have a "bad energy" – who are "very bitchy and always bitching about people". They make the workplace uncomfortable. Frequently, Rita herself is the butt of their catty commentary. She tries hard to ignore them: "that's been a technique of mine, which I'm very happy with, not getting involved in bitching about people". If this workplace is a "haven", I wonder what the advertising agency was like.

Being in the Public Service – Financial Security and Mobility

On the face of it, Rita thinks about her job instrumentally. It is a source of income to make a living and save up for a house. She has a powerful vision about a certain kind of family life. Like Tina, she is not driven by work-related aspirations. Work is circumscribed by life outside of it. To quote her again: "the career is a path for me to live my life", not the other way around. In Rita's case, however, not having a partner means uncertainty about attaining her family aspiration. Much of the worry she exhibits in her story relates to this. She navigates this uncertainty by making financial stability an immediate goal – a secure platform that will serve her, regardless of what happens with her family plans. This will allow her to keep her options open.

Rita is not a permanent employee. But she now has a long contract and feels confident about getting another one, given her work history in the public service. It is important to note, though, that she has consciously chosen to remain a contractor because she does not like to be "tied down". In short, she feels she has *enough* job and income security for the present. She has enough to make future planning possible. Rita can imagine the kind of life she wants to make, and her employment within the public service is a key part of constructing it. Moreover, she feels she has some control over her destiny which her work situation contributes to.

In addition, being a contractor within a public service organisation has provided her with important benefits. Having limited term contracts has

allowed Rita to move around the organisation, and serendipitously provided opportunities for mobility and advancement, which she has been able to exploit. Her roles do not threaten to ossify into the same "boring" projects. She knows they will come to an end, and she can experience something new.

Routines as Grounding

Rita makes a strong distinction between her job and the rest of her life, emphasising that what is meaningful happens outside of work. But despite this, her appraisal of the job shows there is much in it which contributes to her well-being and sense of identity. Her work is a realm of meaning which Rita does not overtly acknowledge. I have already noted her need for routine and being busy – much the same way as it was for Tina. Rita articulates this strongly, highlighting how important it is to feel occupied in tasks and social interactions. Her work context provides a place for this immersion.

The psychological benefits of routine, and the role of employment in providing it, has been a key theme in social and psychological studies of work. In their classic study of unemployment in a small community, Jahoda et al. (1972 [1933]) found that a corrosive consequence of unemployment was the dissolution of time structures. Without a shape to time, without the regularity of activity, people faced with long-term unemployment suffered heavy psychological burdens, including a descent into purposelessness. Jahoda (1982) argues that underneath the manifest functions of employment – as a way of earning a wage for example – are deeper, latent functions, which address individuals' fundamental psychological needs. These needs include a structure for personal time and regularity in day-to-day time. Ongoing paid employment addresses these needs and is thus of immense psychological benefit.

Despite the functionalist framing, the research of Jahoda and her colleagues has proven to be of lasting insight, and has generated much research confirming the basic propositions about routine and well-being (Fryer and McKenna 1987; Wanberg et al. 1997). Importantly, routines are embedded in the social context of work. Employment in almost all of its forms requires interactions and some kinds of cooperation with others. Employment provides a context within which people can engage in purposes beyond themselves. People are able to identify within a larger structure. Routines and time structures are thus

enmeshed within social relationships. This is so about any regular job, but these features of work are particularly salient in a government bureaucracy like Rita's. Of course, this is not to idealise all employment. Rita has had exploitative and degrading experiences at work. But it does alert us to the crucial role of work routines, which perform a grounding function with respect to time and psychological well-being. Jahoda's insights also add weight to the link Giddens makes between routines and ontological security.

The Public Service as a Refuge

The theme of place weaves through Rita's account of work in the organisation. She is grateful about finally finding a work environment in which "human rights" are respected, and where she can be "free" to be herself. Having such a place takes on a particular meaning in the context of her family situation. Her workplace acts as a kind of sanctuary. The theme of place also comes through in her social relationships. For the most part, Rita feels her colleagues are very welcoming. Even in respect to the difficulties she has with co-workers, the organisational context exists as a special kind of place, although this time it is much less obvious. Rita uses it as a kind of testing ground. It is a place to practise a particular kind of identity: a person who is independent, more assertive and resilient.

Her workplace also has a particular resonance for Rita, given that her personal life is characterised by feelings of isolation. She feels an *attachment* to her work, through its routines and social relationships. She feels connected to it at a time when other contexts in her life do not provide belonging. This throws up a paradoxical idea: Rita sees her life and identity as existing outside of work, and yet, she experiences her work as a kind of home.

In sum, these are some of the ways Rita's work situation provides her with grounding. Routines provide a shape to her time. Performing her tasks allows her to practise independence and control. Work contributes to a larger identity project about autonomy. Importantly, we can see the connections between these points of grounding and her career story. Like Tina, her job allows her to imagine the future in particular ways. She is able to imagine becoming more independent. She is able to plan ahead and, at the same time, keep her options open.

The Organisation as a Place That Supports a Career Story

In this chapter and the last, I have examined two case studies in depth: two women in a large public sector organisation but with different employment statuses and family situations. Neither Tina nor Rita identify strongly with their work roles. "Meaningfulness" is seen as outside of work. Their work careers are experienced as ways of facilitating aspirations about lifestyles and material security. That is, they judge their career stories not in terms of work goals, but in terms of broader life aspirations. And yet, both women experience their work itself as a grounding activity. I have tried to bring out the role of the *place* of their work in structuring their experiences. Tina and Rita experience work in a large public sector organisation as a place of belonging, a kind of sanctuary, or even, in Rita's case, a kind of home.

All these elements contribute to the maintenance of a good career story, and thus to a sense of career security. Tina and Rita feel that through their current work practices, they are addressing their aspirations, but also their ideals to become certain kinds of people – competent, skilled and independent people, who have control over their lives. In the next chapter, I continue to examine stories of work in large organisations.

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CHAPTER 5

Neil, Melissa and Britta – Organisations as Places of Development and Learning

In the previous chapters, Tina and Rita did not identify strongly with their work roles. The individuals in this chapter do. Neil, the main case, is employed in a large bank. In exploring his story, I identify the ways he experiences his work organisation as a particular kind of place – a place of belonging, but also a place of development. I also look at the way the organisation provides him with possible career pathways into the future.

In the second part of the chapter, I draw out key themes from Neil's story, about aspects of the organisational context that provide grounding and security. I then present two short case studies, those of Melissa and Britta. Their stories delve further into some ways learning and personal development take place within large organisations. I conclude the chapter with some themes about working in an organisation and maintaining a career story.

Neil's Story – Finally Arrived at the Right Place

Neil is 40 years old and works as an IT specialist for a major bank based in Melbourne. His is a positive story of improvement, where the present is represented as a resolution of past struggles and hurdles. He lives with his partner in an inner city apartment. She has a daughter from a previous marriage, who now lives independently. Neil and his partner haven't had children together, but he is open to the possibility. I interview him at a time in his work life when "things are going as well as they ever have". Neil

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is employed full time, and he likes his work very much. Each day is filled with a continuous flow of requests to solve various IT problems. He finds the constant challenge stimulating, and enjoys immersing himself in the technicalities of each problem. His job suits him, he says, and accords with a view he has of himself as a "fix-it" person. It is clear through the interview that work occupies a central place in his life, and he gets much satisfaction from doing it well.

There are other grounds for being positive about his current situation. He thinks management has very reasonable expectations of his workload and there is no pressure to work much overtime. This is one aspect of what Neil thinks is a very good "organisational culture". Another is the amiable relations between people. This compares starkly with previous jobs, which have been "cut throat" and "aggressive" environments:

> I like working at [the bank] because I like the culture. I like the fact that it's not the bloke with the loudest voice that wins any given argument. And it's not the biggest alpha male, or female as the case may be, that gets their way. And I like that because I don't see the need to have to continually fight just to do your job, you know, which I've experienced at other places.

The company tries to create a culture of collaboration. Neil feels like this context suits his own approach to working. He "fits in" well:

Neil: They've [the bank] got a very strong focus on the culture, and in an interview, how you fit into the culture that they're trying to foster within the organisation is just as important in a lot of ways to what skills you have. And I fit into that pretty well. Just from discussions with some of my bosses, supervisors [. . .] There's a very strong emphasis on a collaborative workplace [. . .].

Mark: So that idea of collaboration is different to previous places you've worked?

Neil: Oh, it's different to almost every place I've worked in.

Perhaps the main reason Neil is upbeat, however, is that just two months ago he was offered a permanent position. Until that point, for 18 months, he had been working as a contractor, hired by the bank through a recruitment agency. He is especially pleased with this latest development, gaining some security and stability in what he regards as a volatile labour market.

Taken together, all these factors make this the "best job" he has ever had. And he's had a few. Conveying the depth of his contentment, Neil contrasts what came before. His career story starts with a long period, after high school, of "shitty" jobs in factories, then in pubs, as well as some time on the dole. At some point in his late 20s, his growing interest in computers spurred him into doing a tertiary course in IT. To support himself during this time he toiled in "crappy jobs" in the security industry. After he finished study, and by this time in his early 30s, he managed to get his first IT job. From there on, Neil worked in a series of IT jobs, varying in quality, stress, reward, conviviality and stability, culminating in the present one.

Listening to Neil's story, I get a picture of long years of struggle in employment. Not miserable or joyless. In fact, he has fond memories of some jobs. But his effort to improve his work life is a major theme.

Searching for Good, Interesting Work

Two salient phases of struggle are depicted in Neil's story. First, in his late 20s, to find an area of work that was engaging and interesting – an area that could be personally fulfilling. He decided that IT and computers had potential, and this has turned out to be the case. Then, through his 30s, the search was for the "right job". One that actually involved interesting work, but also offered good income and security. Neil realised these aspirations gradually and piecemeal. Our interview occurs at a time of seeming resolution – where Neil has finally "found a place" which addresses what he wants.

The overall arc of his story then is one of improvement – from lowly beginnings to a satisfying, secure situation. But told retrospectives can smooth out the bumps of lived experience. As recently as a few months ago, for example, Neil's situation was much more precarious. In his division of the bank, management decided to change its policy of using IT contractors (hired through a recruitment agency) and directly employ a number of them on a permanent basis – essentially a reversal of the trend of contracting out. The catch was that fewer would be re-employed. Cost was cited as a factor. Interestingly, although Neil earned more money on a contractor's wage, the promise of a secure, ongoing job with its attendant conditions was more attractive. He felt that the labour market in his line of work was very competitive – too harsh a place to remain in. In the lead up to the job shedding, there

was also a cut to contractors' wages. "There was a lot of unrest", as contractors didn't know their fate. Neil talks about how anxious he was: "I was shitting myself, I really was."

Things however turned out favourably. And in the last few weeks, Neil has even been given a more senior role. As noted, his positive evaluation of his situation partly reflects his relief at gaining some security and stability, and ending the prevailing uncertainty. Mixed in is a feeling of pride that management have "made an investment" in him:

> They seem pretty keen on me, doing some team leadership stuff [. . .] I mean I've been there for 18 months, all my foibles and flaws have been on display for a while, and they're still backing me. They've still moved me into this more senior role. It's like I'm, I honestly feel that I've found the place I've wanted to work at for quite a while.

There is, too, a tinge of surprise present. It is evident that forces beyond his control – the opaque realm of management decisions – have determined his situation. His struggle to find the right job has been resolved. But he intimates that luck has played a large role.

A Sense of Place

Besides being relieved at gaining a secure job, Neil is happy about being in *this* organisation. He feels he is now at a "place" he wants to be. The words he uses are "arrival", "found", "landed this job". There is a tangible sense that Neil has discovered a home for his work. This is amplified by the way he talks about the organisation's culture. The culture embodies values like his. One concerns collaboration. Neil feels that a collaborative approach to tasks is encouraged, and manifest in practice. He feels part of a team. By contrast, his previous work environments have been overly competitive, aggressive and unsettling.

I noted how Neil feels he "fits in". This comes through in his comments about the language management uses. Neil dislikes "management speak" and makes fun of some of the "symbolic" attempts to make the environment feel more democratic. But he also tells me that, beyond the symbolism, management "really are trying to remove that power structure aspect of the workplace". He is ambivalent about their language, but supportive of their messages.

Much of Neil's account of his present circumstances concentrates on the nitty gritty of his tasks and the kinds of interactions he has with colleagues and managers. What comes through is the way the job provides him with a context within which to talk about himself. This is most apparent in the way Neil outlines his "role". The term "role", ubiquitous in today's job talk, is polysemic. It can mean the playing out of a *defined* script, and relatedly, one's place in a larger structure. It can also mean the *active interpretation* of a part. Neil's identification with his role carries all these meanings.

Importantly, Neil's talk about his role presages the future – it connotes *development*. He refers to "growing into" his role, and the new skills he can gain from performing it. He mentions the new knowledge he can acquire from his more experienced colleagues. With gratitude, Neil tells how his boss is willing to support his development with an eye to promoting him to more senior responsibilities. His role, therefore, provides him with future career pathways. Neil can imagine himself doing particular kinds of tasks and having particular responsibilities. But also he can envisage developing further his current skills and attributes.

"It Doesn't Mean I Will Stay"

There is however a very crucial and apparently contradictory theme in his future talk. Although he feels positive about his new position (and the possible paths it provides), Neil also expresses caution about committing to it. He is already questioning where this role will lead him:

Mark: How do you see your future in that respect?

Neil: Well, I've been thinking about that, the last week or so, just because, as I'm growing into this part of the role as it is now I'm starting to think, well where's this going? And I mean you have to think about that, not just because where am I going in this organisation [. . .] I mean [the company] is pretty damn big, and I could certainly find myself spending a long time there if I wanted to. But I've also got to think about well, this is where [the company] are going, this is how their structure works, how does that fit, somewhere else? Am I putting myself into a spot where I'm really good at this job but this is the only place in the world where that job is? [laughs] So I've thought about that. And just wondered where is that going to take me? And to be honest I'm not really sure.

This is risk assessment. Neil projects forward, assessing the consequences of continuing in his current role and forgoing other avenues. What is in his best interests? There is uncertainty. Even though his current job seems to offer the rewards Neil has struggled to find in work for such a long time, he wants to keep his options open:

> But where I'm working now, doing what I'm doing and working with who I work with, it's the best workplace I've worked in. I'm pretty sure. Probably actually by a long shot. But yeh, nothing's etched in stone. Whatever I would have to do would have to be interesting. It would have to be challenging. I get pretty bored pretty quickly if I don't have any challenges.

Neil thus speaks with two voices. In one, there is relief and gratitude. It speaks the importance of gaining a foothold within the organisation. The voice in this last excerpt is more confident and is already practising detachment. Here, Neil seems to be getting ready to move on.

Points of Grounding in Neil's Situation

Finding Stability in His Industry

In summarising the aspects of Neil's situation which bear on the issue of security, the first one relates to his ongoing, stable employment. Neil is up front about money being a "driver" for him, but he is not interested in becoming wealthy. He is most relieved about not having to "look over his shoulder" all the time and wonder whether he will be "let go", as was the case when he was a contractor. As we have already seen with previous cases, having job stability provides a platform to make plans about the future. This is so regardless of the employment context – it's not something specific to large organisations.

Historically, the bank Neil works for – one of the "big four" in Australia – has provided stable jobs for a large swathe of its work force. In the last 15 years, the banking industry has undergone large upheavals. Neil's own bank has gone through several waves of restructuring – outsourcing functions and reducing layers of middle management. But also the use of information technology within banking has had radical implications for both the number of workers employed and the nature of operations (Gondolfi 2007).[1]

Neil's area of expertise puts him in an ambiguous position. The banks' increasing reliance on IT has meant a rise in demand for skills like his. On the other hand, the number of IT professionals has also increased dramatically, especially through the period Neil trained to become one. As his own experience testifies, the competition for good IT jobs has been fierce. His bank has made the most of the glut of IT workers by its extensive use of contractors. Most of Neil's time there has been as a contractor, a position always permeated by uncertainty.

To some extent then, landing an ongoing job goes against the grain of current trends in Neil's area. His newfound feelings of security (and the accompanying euphoria!) have to be seen in this context. These are in part an expression of having gained a secure job in the bank, in a shrinking pool of secure jobs. But also because his expectations of his industry are of volatility. He did not expect to have this level of stability. This is an interesting point, because it shows that "stability" is not just determined by "objective" job conditions, but also by a person's expectations. The key point is that Neil feels he has exceeded his expectations and this contributes to the adequacy of his career story.

Organisational Culture and Belonging

Another point of grounding relates to the organisation as a certain kind of place, and emerges from Neil's comments about belonging. He recognises that there is a distinct organisational "culture", different to other places he has worked, and he feels an affinity with its values. To this extent, Neil identifies with the organisation. He picks out the "symbolic" dimension of the culture as noteworthy, in particular management's policies that promote a democratic and collaborative environment. Although Neil retains a measure of scepticism about management speak, he strongly supports the message.

Symbolism, Durkheim showed, is a crucial part of collective identity (Durkheim 2001 [1915]). A sense of an "us" relies on a symbolic construction – a story a collective tells about itself. Such a story includes an account of "how we doing things here" (Cohen 1985). This is no less the case in modern organisations, which are particular kinds of collectivity. Here, corporate language, mission statements, organisational charts, just to mention a few, all act as symbolic tools engendering an imagined sense of community. In another metaphor, Jenkins (2008) suggests the symbolic universe of the organisation is like an umbrella, under which members feel they can shelter.

Belonging is not felt evenly however. It is most powerful at the "boundaries" (Cohen 1985). The boundary here refers to the categorisation of organisational insiders and outsiders. Neil's positive assessment of his place within the organisation could be seen as evidence of his recent transition. Not long ago, he was a kind of outsider (a contractor); now he has been granted membership (a permanent). His strong support of official messages seems to reflect his gratitude not only for landing a secure job, but also at being made a member. He is identifying with the organisation.

A key to the symbolic functioning of the organisational umbrella is that members feel part of the group, but at the same time, different and unique. It must not force a "consensus of values" or "conformity" (Jenkins 2008, p.136). Neil's identification with his role shows these dual elements of similarity and difference succinctly: identification with the group, but also with a position that highlights his own particular talents and skills. His identification with his work role is thus a part of his identity-making more generally. Through his role he is able to practise an identity he has as a "fix-it" person and problem solver.

Organisational Structure and Advancement

Another point of grounding concerns the way Neil's employment situation allows him to see the future in particular ways. The organisational structure of roles and positions, which exist in a hierarchy, provides him with pathways for mobility and advancement. Despite the "flattening" and "delayering" in recent restructures, the bank is still a bureaucracy. From his position, Neil can see a range of possible pathways across the organisation, both at the same level and into more senior roles.

The possibility of career paths is one of the defining characteristics of large bureaucratic organisations. Weber (1978 [1925]) characterised modern bureaucracy as an institution with a high degree of specialisation and a clearly marked division of labour. Positions or offices, which exist independently of particular individuals, are organised hierarchically, with clear lines of authority. Incumbency depends on expertise or experience. Occupants have the possibility for gradual advancement in exchange for their service and capabilities. The bureaucratic career thus rewards loyalty with long-term security.

Weber's picture is, of course, an ideal type. Real bureaucracies do not operate so smoothly or rationally. But the image is useful. As noted, Neil

identifies strongly with his work role – which is to say his career story is an important carrier of his identity more generally. In a very tangible way then, the organisational structure Neil is embedded in helps him imagine the future. It provides pathways for his career story to unfold. Whether these pathways are in fact "real" and reliable is another question. It may be that they are more part of the symbolic construction of the organisation, part of the *promise* associated with membership. What matters is the extent to which he believes they exist.

There is an important caveat however. Neil exhibits a very different attitude from the Weberian ideal type of steady service. Although he identifies with the organisation and his role, he does not express loyalty in the sense of expecting to stay for a long time. Having arrived, he is also preparing to leave. He does not appear to expect the organisation to reciprocate either.

Organisational "Role" – A Vehicle for Self-Development

Another point of security concerns the way Neil's position in the organisation provides pathways for learning and development. Positions further up the bureaucratic hierarchy are usually seen as representing higher skills and more experience. As such there is a close link between notions of advancement and personal learning. Neil talks about his particular role as being a location which offers the potential for development. He uses the evocative phrase "growing into the role". The image is one of personal development where, through experience, by doing the job, he becomes more competent. Moreover, this has a social dimension. Neil emphasises how learning comes from practice, in the context of collaboration with colleagues and more experienced senior figures. Being in his role, then, which is a vehicle for self-development, contributes to his career story. It helps him imagine become more of an expert. It thus provides resources to help maintain his career story.

As an addendum to these points about organisational culture, a powerful part of the modern corporate organisation's symbolism concerns learning. Companies like Neil's pride themselves on being "learning organisations" (Senge 1990). One element of this is the promise that the employee's own desires for learning and self-development will be addressed by their membership (Argyris 1993). This theme of the organisation as a place of development and learning figures prominently in other interviewees' stories. The following are two cameos.

Organisations as Places of Learning – Two Short Cases

A Place to Learn from Others – Melissa

Melissa is 41 and a senior manager in a large mining and resources company. She is based at their head office in Melbourne. She did an accounting degree and worked in a few organisations before this one. She has been with the company for six years, in different roles, but has found herself within the human resources area. Melissa's account of her trajectory, gradually moving through different and more senior positions, is inflected with the themes of learning and development. The company has, she says, "a strong organisational culture, which recognizes and rewards people's skills and efforts". It is also one which invests in its staff. When Melissa took up her current position two years ago, for example, she was sent on a professional development intensive for three weeks at a well-known US business school. Practices such as this, contribute to her very positive portrait of the organisation:

> I think my situation is probably unusual, because I look at some of my friends who studied with me at uni, and they've moved around a lot more. And there's always a bit of luck involved, you know, that this turned out to be a good organisation to work for. I mean, I've really learned a lot here, and had plenty of opportunities. And of course it's a global corporation, so that opens doors. And I've been in different roles, in other locations. But obviously, I've been pretty proactive and worked hard. You have to. You can't survive at my level unless its two hundred per cent application, you know. As we've talked about, my job is all consuming and dominates my life [chuckles]. [. . .] So that's the thing, unless you are proactive you can't capitalize on what the organisation has to offer. But you asked me to describe my trajectory here, and yes, I've had a good career path, and progressed through the organisation, but I've also made good decisions [. . .] I've definitely grown with experience.

Melissa talks about the "really important relationships" she has developed with her colleagues over the years. "Relationships are everything", she says. Her job, leading a large team, relies heavily on her ability to work closely with many people, to "overcome friction" and deal with "multiple perspectives". Her key skill, she tells me, is communication. This is something she has improved through the experience of performing her role. Melissa fleshes this out: "I've become very good at reading people, seeing

where they're coming from [. . .] I've become a more authentic communicator, I think, which has made me a better leader."

Melissa says her job is very difficult and challenging. A big part of which, something she faces almost daily, is trying to keep people motivated when the environment is changing. For this, she says, she has to "demonstrate patience, because you have to take people with you and adjust to their individual needs". As we saw with both Tina and Rita, the work context, of social interactions, can be a kind of laboratory, a place where people test themselves out, and try to become more skilled at those interactions. In this case, Melissa feels she is developing herself as a leader.

Relationships with others are central to another way of learning – mentoring. Melissa notes that the organisation has been a place of learning for her through the various ways mentoring operates. There is in fact an official mentoring program, which she herself has not yet participated in. Additionally, in some areas of the organisation, one-on-one coaching for senior managers is regularly provided. But Melissa talks about the more informal mentoring she has received from some of her colleagues in the past:

> I really have had a lot of exposure to development experiences. Not just the courses, but also some really good mentors. People I've learned from. My last boss, for example, was a fantastic leader. She actually showed me how you can be strong, in a male culture, without adopting a lot of domineering behaviour that you get in an organization like this one. You know, with its history. She was able to have real empathy for her direct reports, at the same time as being incredibly decisive. I've been trying to emulate that ever since. She spent a lot of time with me, and I've definitely been a beneficiary, you know. You just can't put a price on some of that wisdom [. . .] And I know there are other people who have drawn on other pools of experience. Yes, I've learned a lot from others. And developed.

Her colleagues, with their accumulated knowledge, are resources to be drawn on. The organisation is a kind of repository of expertise and wisdom. In this way, Melissa experiences the organisation as a place to learn and develop from others. And she can see herself continuing to do so for the foreseeable future.

Self-development is clearly something she values highly. I get a strong sense that at least part of her contentment, and her confidence, relates to knowing that she is developing herself through her work. In

this way, her position in the organisation shapes her career story. It not only provides pathways of self-development, but the tangible unfolding of an identity – she is becoming a better leader.

Melissa wants to continue to be part of the organisation and to take on more senior executive roles. But, she reminds me, nothing is certain. She also thinks that given some of the turmoil her company has gone through (not long ago it went through a merger and a series of restructures), she should not place all her eggs in one basket. For the moment, though, she feels pretty confident about her career story. She has a sense of career security.

A Place to Learn Through "Conversations" – Britta

Britta, who is 26, and works as a policy advisor in a Victorian government department, expresses a similar view about her role. She, like Neil and Melissa, identifies strongly with the work she does. Work is much more than a necessity. She very much enjoys her role which involves policy writing and research.

The social relationships at work are one of its most important facets for Britta. She values feeling connected to her team. "I'm a very social person", she says. "I love people and interacting with people" and "I make people feel comfortable around me". She is aware of the importance of being a good communicator and thinks highly of her skills in this area. In addition, she is conscious of making a certain effort to help make relations "hold together". She reckons that since her arrival, the work group has become more harmonious and productive.

One of the central motif's in Britta's story is her experience of the job as a vehicle for learning and personal development. She expresses this nicely when talking about how she has improved in her current role:

Britta: You sort of come into a job thinking you're the perfect specimen and you look back two years later and say oh god, I was terrible. I'm two and half years into my job and I think god I wasn't good, and I've learned all this stuff. But I suppose it's not something I plan for. It's just something that happens. It's inevitable that when you work hard and when you enjoy what you do that that will come. It's not something that I've consciously thought of before . . .

Mark: So it's the actual experience of working?

> *Britta*: Yeh, through the work, on the job, more confidence with understanding what the [her area] sector is doing which translates to more confidence with speaking to people with authority on that topic. And more confidence with other stakeholders both within and out of the public service. You know, getting new contacts from people you've worked with, that sort of thing.

Time on the job, gaining experience in one's responsibilities, interacting with colleagues – this is how she has become better at her tasks. There are no secrets or quick fixes. Self-improvement, Britta tells me, comes from *doing*. But the doing, in all her references, is in the context of relationships with others.

Britta is very eager to take on new tasks and responsibilities. For her, the role is a context for gaining new knowledge and skills. At one point, she talks about wanting to become an expert, probably, but not necessarily, in the policy area she deals with. A "guru" as she puts it. But later qualifies this:

> I think I just quite like the fact that I'm learning new things. So maybe I don't crave being an expert, I just want to have a pretty good understanding of lots of things is probably what's appealing to me. Like I should be able to participate in a whole bunch of conversations about different areas, of different things with people you might work with.

Importantly, Britta links learning about new areas with the ability to have new "conversations" with people. Learning, in her eyes, facilitates social connections. Conversely, those relationships bring new learning. Britta sees her learning as a way of "participating" with various groups and on different topics. The department she works in, because of its size and range of policy domains, offers broad possibilities for new learning and thus new conversations.

Another word she uses to talk about her relationships is "collaboration". Because a great deal of Britta's tasks, and those of her colleagues, involve independent research, and then the bringing together of that research, she sees her interactions in terms of collaboration. Thinking about interactions in terms of conversations and collaborations suggests that Britta feels an underlying sense of autonomy, as well as a certain equality of status.

Britta has a pragmatic strategy in operation too. She sees her learning and self-development as part of a longer term plan to enhance her employability. Gaining skills and expertise through her work in the organisation

are central to this. In addition, she is studying an MBA part time. Taken together, these activities are part of "investing" in herself. She wants to make herself "more marketable", as a way of "keeping doors open in the future". Britta says she does not have a clear career plan and can imagine herself being in different roles in the near future. Some of these relate directly to her current policy area, but she is also considering a move into the private sector. But at the moment she feels content about where she is moving: she has possible pathways before her. In her career story, she is becoming someone (or various someones) – an expert, a great communicator, a participant in several conversations.

Working in Organisations – Grounding and Career Stories

Through this chapter and the last two, a key trope has been the idea of "place". I identified some of the ways an organisation can be "grounding". In this chapter the idea of "pathways" has come to the fore. These case studies exemplify different ways that the experience of working can involve a sense of having pathways into the future, and how this is associated with feelings of security. Tina and Rita are able to envisage paths into the future related to their lifestyle ideals. In this chapter, the imagined paths are more work-centric. One way Neil, Melissa and Britta experience this is in the traditional sense of career paths, in terms of occupational mobility and positional advancement. Another way concerns learning and professional development.

I want to translate these points into the terms of making career stories. The organisations depicted in these chapters are bureaucracies. Employees are provided with, at least at some level, possible avenues to move and advance across and up the hierarchy. Of course, it is impossible to capture the complexity of each organisation and the multitude of forces in operation shaping people's situations. This would require particular ethnographic research. Instead, I just want to bring out the way that the organisational options open to these individuals, as they perceive them, can be thought of as possible ways these individuals can continue their career story. The positions and roles are "resources" for writing the next part of their stories.

Neil, Melissa and Britta also experience organisational pathways in terms of learning and self-development. They are interested in the content of their work, and therefore opportunities for mobility are also seen in

terms of professional and personal development. They can imagine their futures in terms of becoming more knowledgeable, better leaders or more expert at something. They can imagine becoming particular kinds of people. In this way, organisational pathways are resources for continuing or making new identities.

This is not to say that such pathways do in fact materialise, or that such possibilities are experienced by all members in the same way. This is patently not the case. It is simply to say that these possibilities are part of the experience of "membership" of the organisation: a result of identification with it in some way. Part of being a member is the *promise* of possible futures, which can be seen as resources for continuing a career story. The availability of these resources contributes to a sense of career security.

In the next chapter, I turn to a less positive account, where organisational life is experienced as dominating and depleting.

Note

1. For a good overview of these changes through the 1990s, see Littler and Maguire (2001).

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CHAPTER 6

Rick – The Organisation as a Place of Immersion and Domination

In this chapter, I look in depth at Rick's story, which illustrates the themes of belonging and attachment to work and to a large organisation. Compared to previous case studies however, the organisation is experienced more ambivalently. It is not just a place which provides various kinds of grounding, but also one which is dominating and depleting. Rick's story also introduces a new element into our considerations of career security – his strong identification as an engineer. In the final part of the chapter, I briefly summarise the observations and themes so far about being in organisations.

Rick is 42 years old, single and lives by himself in Melbourne. He studied mechanical engineering at university and for the last 19 years has worked for a large well known brewing company. Over the course of his employment, he occupied a number of positions. He started out as a trainee engineer, in a support role, and slowly gained more seniority, working on different packaging and canning production lines. In the last eight years, he managed the maintenance of a production line which bottles beer. About 20 people were under his care. This is now past tense though because Rick has just been retrenched. His maintenance division has been shut down and the operation outsourced to an independent contractor.

Rick's story is interesting for many reasons, not the least of which is that he has worked for the same company since leaving university. His career does not resemble the "new careers" image. However, he now faces a

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profound change. Rick's story is an example of a life built around – he would now say "dominated" by – work. But also of the strong emotional and social attachments that develop in a long relationship with one organisation.

It is useful to clarify exactly what situation Rick understands himself to be in right now. He is angry about the decision to outsource his department. After putting so much effort into his job, he feels "a bit betrayed". This decision, he says, was not made because of poor performance in his area. Productivity was up, and so were the company's profits. Rather, the decision was the result of a new CEO and management team wanting to "put their stamp on the company". They had a new vision for the company's direction (which Rick disliked), and wanted to assert more control over a shop floor they regarded as too union dominated.

Technically, Rick is unemployed now. But this label doesn't quite capture his situation. He could have applied for a job with the new contractor. Some of his crew have in fact regained employment with the contractor. He suspects he had a good chance of getting a position, effectively doing the same role. And it is still possible that he might, although a month has gone by since the retrenchment.

But Rick has chosen not to apply for a position, for now anyway, because he wants time to think about what to do next. This is a time for reassessment. In terms of income, Rick is secure enough. He owns his house and does not have a partner or children to provide for. The issue which looms largest is not financial insecurity, but uncertainty about the future. Not being clear about what do next, along with a pressure to make a decision pervade the interview:

> What I feel now is a question mark. Is uncertainty. And I don't know which avenue to pursue, there's really a lot of indecision. And this is part of the reason why I've actually let it happen, because it's time, I want to see a little bit of navigation, without the big, sort of shadow of the company determine it. But even having said that, I haven't totally cast that shadow away because, right now, I've still kept that option open. Of doing contract work with them [. . .] But I'm really not sure what the best thing is to do at the moment with all that. Because I think for my own welfare, it may actually be healthier for me to move on. Or, do other things as well.

Although this is a period of anxiety for Rick, he has held back from the more straightforward course of going with the new contractor. He is pausing to reflect on his welfare and health. It is time to do some "navigation" of his own.

To understand why these are issues, and why the company he worked for still casts a "shadow" over him, we need to listen to how he arrived at this point.

Work – The Centre of His Life

What comes through very strongly in Rick's story is how devoted to work he was. And how large a part of his life it became. Bottling lines in breweries run continuously and require constant supervision. Crews work in rotating shifts. Although Rick was a manager, he worked closely with the men (all men) who operated the production line. He in fact resisted the appellation "manager" and instead referred to himself as a "coordinator". Even though he was a trained engineer, he often wore overalls and got physically involved in fixing the machinery with the crew.

Rick worked long hours, between 60 and 70 a week, and was on call. Although he worked closely with his crew, he was ultimately part of management. As an engineer, he was not in his crew's union. Something I found surprising was that many of the men he supervised earned more than he did through union-agreed overtime pay. He, on the other hand, worked many unpaid hours because his salary was fixed – the standard monthly rate for an engineer in his position.

This point highlights how unhelpful stereotypes can be. Rick's position straddled management and the factory floor. He felt close to his crew, an "ally", but also carried the responsibility for ensuring productivity and efficiency. I get the impression (because he does not say so directly) that he had a different attitude to income than his crew. Financial reward seems a subordinate value in Rick's own thinking. His long hours, many of which were effectively unpaid, attest to the responsibility he assumed for keeping the production line going. There is a powerful sense of the job and the role having personal importance to him. Rick's work, in short, was central to his sense of self.

Intrinsic Rewards

Rick's devotion to his job is partly accounted for by the satisfaction he got from it. He particularly enjoyed problem solving:

> The best thing about it was on the days where you had problems, you could see the direct results of your work when you walked home. There were problems fixed and you could say, done and dusted, problems fixed, I can go

> home now. And that's a great feeling to go home and you can actually say I've had this much difference in the day, I've done something which has actually got value in it. And I can say yeh here it is. Snapshot. That was a very enjoyable thing. And the creativity part of it. Every time you saw that end result, coming up and the actual thing come to life, that was a fantastic feeling. Fixing it or making it work [. . .] That was probably the best part of it. The other part of it was people's appreciation for your work. That was very important I think, having recognition of that. And I'm not talking about you know here's the award for the month. I'm talking about the real thanks from people, genuine thanks. That they had a problem, they were dealing with shit, and they had it removed.

Solving technical problems; making machines run again. This is tangible work that is intrinsically rewarding. Moreover, in the workplace the technical and social intertwine. A fault in the production line effects everyone. Rick valued the recognition from colleagues for solving problems. But his enjoyment is also inflected with an ethic of service. It is as much about helping others and knowing that he made a difference.

The way Rick talks highlights some of his underlying values. It points to his *professional* values, including the craft virtues of doing something properly and the ethic of serving others. This implicit framework comes through strongly in many parts of the interview. It is clearly something deeply felt, part of his work identity.

Social Relations at Work

Not all aspects of the job were satisfying though. He did not enjoy managing people and says it was the "hardest stuff to deal with". There were particularly difficult periods when he had to manage changes to staffing for example and implement redundancies. These were very stressful times. He is not sure, he reports modestly, how good a manager he was. Over the years, he tried to improve the way he understood and dealt with others and became better at communicating. But there are things he wished he had done differently. As an engineer, Rick talks like one. There is a sense in which he is more comfortable dealing with machines than people. Machines break down and can be made to run again. People are more recalcitrant. Although, through experience, he came to realise that people issues matter more in the workplace.

He also did not like dealing with the layers of management above him. A strong thread running through his account is about the constant tension with his superiors. Rick characterises his situation as being "the meat in the sandwich": caught between having to ensure production targets and dealing with the realities of the bottling line itself – both the people in his crew, and the machines.

One of the reasons he believes he was able to work effectively, as well as feel satisfaction for what he did, was that he developed a relationship with his line managers whereby, for the most part, they left him alone. In return for a commitment to his role and to working as long as was necessary "to get the job done", his bosses granted him a certain day-to-day autonomy. There was an implicit bargain in place with his bosses:

> *Mark*: Sounds like you were at the beck and call of the company?
> *Rick*: We were also autonomous though. This is the part of it which becomes difficult to understand. The expectation was there, but there wasn't a lot said about it, as well. It was quite often open ended. Which probably suited everybody, because nobody could say, hey it's your fault. There was no real cutting point on when you worked and when you didn't [. . .] it was left up to us.

He felt he had "flexibility" in relation to time (although working up to 70 hours a week, I'm surprised Rick uses this term!). But he also felt room to manoeuvre in terms of doing his job. The tension with management also concerns the clash between their imperatives and his expertise. Rick was able to carve out a space in which to practise his professional craft. But this came with the heavy responsibility for the smooth running of the line.

"Becoming Your Work"

Over the course of his 19 years with the company, the job became the centre of his life. He does not exactly know how it happened. When he started there, soon after graduating, he was young and "didn't have a lot of other commitments". It felt natural to throw himself into the job. The work was engaging, and he enjoyed being able to put in practice what he learned at university. His knowledge was not just abstract any more. Rick says he felt "effective", probably for the first time. As we have seen, he received much pleasure from doing his job

well. And as he gained experience, and was given more responsibilities, his role became all the more consuming.

Gradually he slipped further into the world of his job and his company. In a striking passage, Rick describes this process of identification, in terms of *internalising* his work environment:

> *Rick*: You definitely become more of the workplace. You become like the workplace you're in. No matter what you start as, you will always be that at the core, but you become like the environment you're in. There's no doubt about that.
> *Mark*: So work got under your skin in a way?
> *Rick*: It becomes a part of you, there's no doubt about that. When you're spending most of your days and time there, it's going to happen, it's going to have an influence on you. Unless you're an extremely strong willed person who can kind of put a barrier up and say well that's just my work. And some people can do that, but I don't think that's me.

He became his workplace. The rhythm of the continuous production line, always running. Just like it, Rick was always working, always on call. His description of the identification process highlights how unconscious it was, or at least something not consciously controlled.

He tells me this matter-of-factly. Even with a hint of nostalgia. There was a great deal of comfort in the routines of the job, in being immersed in something. In the overall scheme of his life, it was often more attractive to allow work imperatives to swallow his time than to deal with "other issues". When I ask him to say more about these other personal issues, he prefers not to. His work was a realm he felt part of and a place he could get things done. In these different ways, through the sense of autonomy, the feeling of authority, the recognition of his efforts, the enactment of his professional values and the comfort of defined routines, work held Rick in its thrall. It shaped his life.

Reappraisal – "The Company Dominated My Life"

When we talk about the retrenchment, however, Rick's assessment shifts. Butting up against his positive account of the satisfactions of the job, displacing it even, is a more critical version. The event seems to have been a shock, forcing him to reconsider his past. This is not to

suggest that Rick idealised his situation before the retrenchment. He had been aware of a gradual shift in the balance of forces between himself and management. Management was becoming more interventionist, and there was a narrowing of his autonomy. But a workable relationship persisted. Being made redundant however hit hard. Now, from this vantage point, he thinks his existence in the organisation was not very healthy, and that the job had indeed taken over his life.

It is difficult to disentangle the complex of emotions Rick expresses here. To be sure, there is anger at management, from his line managers right up to the CEO, for their decision to outsource his division. He says "betrayal" might be too strong a word, but he feels "let down" by those immediately above him. After having given so many years of service, with the company's "best interests at heart", the retrenchment feels like a personal rebuff. Rick also talks about this as a loss of trust – trust he had placed in his bosses, as part of the implicit "effort bargain" I noted before. Management have taken advantage of him. Rick saw some of this coming. When appointed, the new CEO brought a different approach to the business. The message was "be accountable, aggressive, and adaptable". Rick says the emphasis was on "aggressive", and he did not like it all. It was a change to the symbolism of the culture.

Importantly, what also comes through is a disappointment with himself – he should not have let this happen. Dwelling on this makes him uncomfortable. Rick thinks his immersion in the job went too far. He gave too much to the company, too much time especially and too much of himself. At 42, he feels he has neglected other parts of his life. Work has been "damaging" and he has "deteriorated".

I get the sense Rick is being quite restrained in our conversation. That he could say more, but does not feel comfortable unravelling in front of me. But I also detect something positive – a small measure of relief. It is as if Rick also sees his situation as a kind of wake-up call. Like he has been snapped out of a slumber, a habitual way of being, and there is an opportunity to reconfigure his life.

Difficult Decisions Now

Rick sees this situation as a time for decisions. The immediate choice seems to be between applying for a position with the contractor, doing a job he knows, or striking out and doing something new. The first

option promises a more comfortable route: a return to familiar tasks and routines. Rick is cautious though about employment with the new contractor. They might want to put "their stamp" on him too, and there might not be any autonomy.

The second option is really, as he says, "many options". I ask him what it means to strike out and try something new. He has considered pursuing some personal projects that have gone unheeded. His house, for example, is old and requires renovation. He wants to do some writing on a family history project that has been percolating in his head for many years. As he spells these out, I realise they are not about paid work, but about neglected areas of his life. I get the sense that Rick is not ready to contemplate re-entering the labour market.

What becomes apparent is that Rick's main task now, as he sees it, is not deciding on his next job, but figuring out what he wants more generally for the future:

Mark: Project yourself into the future a little bit. What do you see?

Rick: That is a very very difficult thing for me to do. Having said I could see things clearly once I've got a vision, I don't have a vision at the moment. So I think I've spoken to you a bit about things I'd like to do, but I don't know how clear they are for me, real objectives which I can achieve or be a part of, or do things about. I'm not sure about my abilities at the moment. I think that when you lose the core of your earning and your security, that obviously undermines the foundations a little bit, and your confidence is affected by that. There's no doubt about that as well. So what do I see as the future? I see uncertainty is what I see, at the moment.

He has not yet been able to conjure a "vision" of his future. Part of the difficulty, as he sees it, is separating "fantasy" from reality. Rick is trying to imagine his future pragmatically (he is an engineer after all). What can he realistically do now? What skills does he have, after being in one organisation for so long? It seems useful to say that Rick is trying to disentangle himself from the organisation, and re-imagine his future outside of its framework. He is quite consciously doing risk assessment. But it is not a rational process, because much in the equation is unknown. His main choice is to stay or go. But he does not clearly know what he wants. Moreover, the process is permeated by a range of emotions – anger, sadness, confusion. The retrenchment has severely knocked his confidence.

Taking Personal Responsibility

Part of the complexity for Rick, in this process of reassessment, comes from trying to make sense of what happened. To put the past in some kind of order. What is striking, listening to Rick talk about his predicament, are the different ways he makes himself the object of critique. One strand of this relates to feeling responsible for what happened. Rick took his job seriously, and as part of his professionalism, assumed personal responsibility for maintaining the production line. This tendency persists in his way of characterising the events leading up to the outsourcing. He wonders, for example, if there was anything else he could have done to prevent it. And even whether he contributed to it in some way:

Rick: I think, you're there, you have to take responsibility, if you are a part of that [. . .] Obviously in [the company], in that environment, I'm a manager. I have influence, and it's a greater influence as well. So yeh, you've got to be accountable [. . .].

Mark: Are you saying that there's stuff you could have done differently which might have resulted in you not being made redundant?

Rick: Not just that, but things that might have made a difference in the plant I think, made the plant where it was in a stronger position, lets just say. And we're not talking about major managerial type things where I've got the troops together and put them up against the wall or anything like that. Just, some of those things are actually smaller things and I regret, some of them were Russian roulette let's just say, and I suppose the call went one way, and it happened the other. That kind of thing. I guess the feeling is, when you're in that role, I call it, you feel like you're a Jedi. Oh fuck, every decision you're making you think is quite good, you feel like a sense of invincibility about some things as well. And obviously that's always dangerous.

Rick thinks he might have taken his eye off the ball at certain points. He had built up his confidence about his decisions as a manager, but maybe this was ill-founded. In retrospect, Rick conjures a view of himself as less capable than he once thought. Self-doubt is creeping in. It is interesting to counter pose this with other parts of the interview, where he suggests that the decision to outsource was out of his control; where the performance of his area of the plant was strong, and for that matter, he gave as much as he

could. In this newer telling, Rick implies the closure was somehow his fault. The taking on of responsibility now grades into self-blame.

"I Have Been Too Clingy"

Rick becomes the object of his own critique in another way. When talking about his immersion in the company, there is a hint of shame: firstly for letting the company take advantage of him, but more, for *allowing himself* to be under its sway for so long. I ask why it would be "healthier" to resist doing a similar role for the contractor and move onto something else:

Rick: Good question. Um, I think the fact that it's [the company] dominated so big a section of my life, and I have this other sphere which likes to be independent, and not under any sort of obligation or fear of being held by it. And that was actually the part of the relationship I liked before. It meant before I had nothing to lose and I was working there, and it was sort of a mutual happiness between the company and myself. Ok, things could go wrong blah blah blah, but we could have moved on, both of us. I think it's got to the stage where I don't know if that's the case anymore. I can feel the reliance, the sort of clinging thing happening there. Now I don't like that.

Mark: Clinging for?

Rick: For myself, to want to sort of hang on to it a little bit. And I think that that's a dangerous thing. I've never had the opportunity to sort of say well ok, oh that's wrong. I haven't really been confronted with it before. And I think it's a good thing to be confronted with this type of thing and actually come out of it with a position.

A change is needed, Rick thinks, because from this vantage point he still feels an unhealthy dependency on the company. It is interesting that Rick speaks of his relationship with the organisation in the manner of one with another person ("we could have moved on, both of us"). For a long time, there was reciprocity (a "mutual happiness"). The implicit effort bargain I noted before was a kind of marriage.

What before was a relationship, freely entered into for mutual benefit, now becomes Rick's own unhealthy reliance on the company. Now that he has been cut loose he can feel the pressure to return, to hang on to a familiar work role and routine. This is a problem. His need for attachment is now a problem within himself.

The Need to Change Himself

Rick sees though that this situation has also provided an opportunity to confront his "dependence". The challenge is to now learn to be on his own – to make his own "position". This is going to require strength. He uses phrases like "forge ahead" and "forge one's will", phrases which conjure the effort of making a new career direction. They imply that a certain craft will be needed. And, that what he is working with is difficult material, material that resists change. This is not just a struggle against an uncertain future, but really a struggle with himself.

Rick thinks, for example, that there are aspects of himself that stymie his ability to move on. Significantly, he thinks he is a "reactive person", someone who reacts to situations as they occur, rather than "a person that forges a path". He wants to become more "proactive":

Rick: I think I need to have some more aspects of that within my makeup. That's what I feel [. . .]
Mark: Because now you need to make a decision about your future?
Rick: Yeh, for security, for health reasons, for my welfare as well.
Mark: So is that about
Rick: Taking more responsibility for your own life. It is. I think it's about taking responsibility for your own life, rather than just living to others, to what others want out of you as well. It's an interesting one isn't it though? Because as I said, it never is one or the other in reality. Because it comes to you to decide how you're going to fit that in somehow, and whether you're comfortable to do it, as per somebody else's picture, or whether you want to paint your own.

Here, changing his inclination towards dependency is seen as critical to moving on. He sees that to make a new work path for himself, whatever that will look like, will require some kind of self-modification.

Rick in Summary

I have examined Rick's story in depth because it highlights important themes about working in a large organisation. In this case, from the viewpoint of somebody who has been deeply immersed in one, whose career has been shaped by it, and who has now been thrust outside of it. Rick's story is complex, both in terms of the emotional tumult he is experiencing, and the conflicting interpretations he presents. He is at a

turning point. His situation is forcing a reassessment of his past life in the job, as well as his future career direction.

Without simplifying Rick's story, some salient themes about identity and security arise. His work provided him with such firm grounding for so long. The organisation was a place of routine within which to organise himself, providing a shape for his time. It was a place for him to practise his craft. This is where he developed his technical and social skills as well as his confidence. It was where he found social recognition for his work. In many different ways, work provided him with daily purpose and meaning. Having autonomy has always been a central concern for Rick, connected to his identity as a professional engineer. He was able to carve out a space for himself, in negotiation with management, and have some control over his work.

He also, for a long time, felt part of the organisation's culture. He did not agree with all of management's edicts – in fact he existed in constant tension with them. But he believed in the company and its purposes. Rick found the last period of employment particularly difficult because of the new management's overhaul of corporate values. Rick took this as an attack on the meaning he had made of his membership.

These themes highlight different ways in which Rick's work provided him with a sense of security. They relate to the organisation as a particular "place". In addition, the organisation provided Rick with pathways. Through his different roles and the attached responsibilities, he became more senior and developed his abilities. Within its structure, his career unfolded. The organisation provided ways for him to develop as an engineer and, more broadly, ways to imagine the future. In all these ways, the organisational context provided resources for Rick to sustain a career story. As a result, over the course of his tenure, he had a strong sense of career security.

Rick's account also shows the dangers of such a place. His work swallowed up his time, exploited his commitment, and ultimately dominated his life. Rick's characterisation of its darker side though is not straightforward. It carries a tension regarding who is to blame. The organisation was a place which dominated him; but it was also one where *he* "lost control", became too attached, and gave too much of himself. Rick has a tendency to view himself as responsible for these burdens.

Despite the negative assessment of the organisation, Rick's new situation has brought into stark light what he has lost. Not having a routine or

a structure for his work is disorienting. In the organisation, Rick felt secure: he knew where he stood, and where he would be tomorrow. Now he has lost that sense of career security and the uncertainty breeds anxiety. Part of this concerns the realisation that he is now on his own. He needs to make his own path. His big challenge is to work out how. It will involve trying to determine what he wants, needs and is capable of. Rick has the task of re-imagining his future. This also seems to involve *working on himself*. He wants to change aspects of himself, to become self-reliant, and "a person that makes their own path".

Key Themes in Sustaining a Career Story

Rick's Narrative Crisis

A way to understand Rick's anxiety is to see him in the midst of a crisis about his career story. All the above mentioned elements of grounding he had in the organisation were resources for maintaining a particular story. In a sense, the organisation provided some of his story's "plot". Now, without those resources, he is struggling to keep his career story going.

A major event like retrenchment is a turning point. Stebbins (1970, p.35) reminds us that such events serve to "activate" a person's awareness of their career schema. The person becomes more conscious of their identity in that particular area of life, in both retrospective and prospective terms. Rick's understanding of his career, which was for the most part taken for granted within the deep routines of his organisational role, has now become more explicit. In narrative terms, he has become more conscious of his story because the situation is forcing a re-articulation of it.

Attachment as Dependency

Now having to rewrite his career story, Rick is re-appraising his relationship with the organisation. He thinks his attachment was in fact unhealthy. He blames himself for being swallowed by its demands and for not asserting his own. Rick confesses this with a measure of shame. This contributes to the story-making crisis noted above: Rick feels his career story has become *inadequate*. He feels he has not been living up to an ideal, of being autonomous, which has hitherto been a powerful part of his career story.

In these sentiments, Rick voices a widespread cultural message about the dangers of too much attachment at work (Brown 2003; Garsten and Grey 1997). Therein, attachment to any particular organisation, job or place is a kind of servitude, a weakness, a relinquishing of control. Individuals must be masters of their career. We saw this theme in Cath's story. This message is also prevalent in the careers guidance literature (McGee 2005).[1]

Personalising Failure

Rick is taking responsibility for his predicament. He does so, however, for events that were not within his control. He did have some control over the running of the production line, but none at all over the larger forces shaping the restructure. Rick's tendency is an example of what some commentators see as individualisation processes within employment. Employees are increasingly entreated to see their situations as self-generated (Du Gay 2004; McCabe 2007; Rose 1990). This is an aspect of individualisation processes more generally (Bauman 2001; Beck 2000). Being responsible for their own biographies leads individuals to see bad events as personal failures. But in this case it is difficult not to attribute Rick's tendency to his identity as an engineer. It is part of his professional ethic, and a trait he has displayed throughout his career. It is part of the career story he has hitherto sustained for a long time.

In his study of contemporary work, Sennett (1998) interviewed a group of IBM programmers in a similar situation to Rick's. Recently retrenched, the men met regularly to give each other moral support. Sennett joined in on their discussions a few times through this period. His study is useful because he also sees these men involved in a process of constructing a narrative for themselves. One of the things he noticed was their account of events changed over time. At the start they saw themselves as "victims" – first of malicious management decisions, but then of global economic forces (Sennett 1998, p.126). They were angry. But gradually they formed a different understanding and took some responsibility for events. They started to see how they themselves might have done things differently or better. Sennett notes they began to reconstruct their stories, portraying themselves as having more agency in events.

Sennett sees this as a positive step – a way the men confront failure. Rick seems to be taking a similar line: he blames management for what happened, but this is giving way to a story where he himself played a bigger

part in the course of events. In a way, he is reinstating his agency, strengthening an important thread of his professional career story. It is important, however, to see the role of shame in the way Rick judges the inadequacy of his career story, in light of deeper ideals. Thus, it is not clear where this personalising of failure will lead. It may be a prelude to Rick taking more control and moving on with his career. Or, it may lead to more paralysing self-blame.

Career Story and Multiple Identities

Rick's career story crisis involves various strands of identity. Following Jenkins (2008) I have been referring to identity in terms of *processes* of identification; identity is something we actively *do*, rather than a fixed or essential substance we have inside us. This frame also highlights the way identifications can be multiple, complex and overlapping. Rick's account highlights two important kinds related to work. His identification as an engineer and with the organisation. Rick's identification as an engineer involves his imagined (but not imaginary) membership of a group that possesses certain expertise, values and ethics. This has been an important form of grounding and has provided him with a guide for action. His identification with his role in the organisation entailed being part of a collective with a common purpose. This too shaped his actions around the goals and responsibilities associated with his position.

In Rick's history these forms of identification have been in tension. Very often, organisational goals have clashed with his professional ethics. However, the organisation was also a place within which he was able to practise being an engineer. Within its ambit, he was able to enact his ideals of independence and autonomy. The organisation was enabling.

Rick's career story, like everybody's, weaves many facets of identity. Rick was able to practise being an engineer, a team leader, an ally to his crew, a dedicated corporate citizen and a good helper, to name the most salient. This point highlights the limitations of the idea of social role or social identity in the formulations of Stebbins (1970), Goffman (1961), and other Chicago School sociologists. A career story does not carry just one "work identity", but weaves together all the identifications that relate to work.

These two strands of identity have thus been interwoven in Rick's career story. His current crisis is also about the "coherence" of his story, in the sense of how the strands knit together. After the retrenchment, who

is he now? He is not a member of the organisation. He is, however, still an engineer. Although, clearly his professional identity remains entangled in the organisational one. Perhaps his narrative of self-responsibility is a way of practising being a professional engineer. It seems Rick is trying to rewrite his career story, searching for a new coherence, and for a way to unravel the engineer strand from that which was grounded in the firm.

Being in Organisations

In the last four chapters, I have identified two metaphors about organisational life which relate to the ways people feel "grounded": places and pathways. In the cases so far, organisations are experienced as places where individuals are embedded in specific social relationships, relations of cooperation and competition; where they carry out daily routines, and practise certain forms of identity. Organisations are also experienced in terms of their symbolic dimension, as places of belonging, attachment and obligation. Organisational membership also provides pathways; avenues for occupational mobility, professional and self-development.

I have suggested that these forms of grounding can be thought of as resources which individuals draw on to make their career stories. I have shown how different individuals actively draw on these resources in ways that reflect their own values, goals and ideals. Tina, Rita, Neil, Melissa and Britta are able to sustain a coherent career story – they had a sense of their future, moving somewhere. With the resources they have available they are able to imagine various possible next steps in their stories. They have also been able to maintain adequate stories, where they believe they are living up to certain ideals. The successful sustaining of these career stories appears to result in a sense of career security. Noteworthy is that in each of these cases, the person does not have a clear or mapped out plan for the future. Instead, they have a strong *sense* that they are moving towards a goal or ideal, and have a range of unspecified possible paths to reach it. This involves an implicit feeling of control.

Rick's situation can also be seen in terms of a problem of story-making. Outside of the organisation, he is struggling to find resources to continue a career story. His case also shows how identifications are multiple, and that story coherence is also about how different strands of identity weave together. In the next few chapters, I explore these themes in the stories of individuals who with a very different work situation – working for themselves.

Note

1. See chapters 4 and 5 of McGee (2005) on self-help related to employment.

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PART III

Going It Alone

CHAPTER 7

Fabian – Searching for Proper Reward

In Part II, I explored stories about career from the viewpoint of individuals located in a large organisation. By contrast, the stories in the next four chapters are about people who work for themselves. One feature of their situations is that none have employment security. In varying degrees, their work projects are precarious and uncertain. But also, they have to expend much effort trying to establish some kind of structure. In terms of career stories, resources for story-making are not easily available.

In the next two chapters I examine two cases. The first, Fabian's, concerns his recent solo venture to trade on the share market. The second is about Enzo, who has been running a small business for some time, and is now experimenting with going it alone. In different ways, both cases are entrepreneurial ones. Both are also about experiments in career-making and about finding avenues to make a living outside of organisational structures. These two men are motivated by, among other things, a desire for independence and are carving out a path for themselves. In what follows, I explore the reasons for their choices but also the personal consequences of making them – the freedoms and the burdens.

Fabian's Story

I interview Fabian at the beginning of a bold experiment. Just a few months before, he left his job in the travel industry and embarked on a new occupation trading shares on the stock market. Unlike traders

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employed by merchant banks however, Fabian's new work situation is unusual: he is working on his own, from home, as a "day trader". He has begun this new career chapter at the age of 35.

Fabian lives in a north eastern suburb of Melbourne, with his partner and their nine month old daughter. His partner works part-time in retail, in a large department store. She earns "pretty good money" and has a stable job. Originally, he did a business degree in tourism and marketing, and then worked in the travel industry for over ten years. He has had a number of jobs in different companies, and in the last three years had been working for a prominent travel agent, selling travel packages to the public. For some time, Fabian enjoyed what he did. He reckoned that working in tourism was "in the blood" and he felt very good at it. Travelling was also a personal passion, and he was able to incorporate it into his jobs. For a period he worked in the United States and, at other times, travelled extensively through South America researching and developing travel packages.

A Lack of Reward

Fabian's decision to radically change his work situation had been some time in the making, the confluence of several factors. A salient one concerned the lack of financial reward he felt his job delivered. At the start of his time in the industry, this fact did not matter so much. There was a *promise* of career progression – promotions and better pay. But these hoped-for rewards did not materialise. In his last job, he found himself working long hours, an average of 60 per week with, he thinks, no fair recompense. It became increasingly apparent to him that having a job you love and earning good money are incompatible:

> Travel is an industry that is littered with people who are passionate about travel. Which means you get paid bugger all. You know. Like, any kind of industry where there's a passion behind it, I mean, who's going to have a passion for being an accountant? [chuckles] You know what I mean? So, it pays well. And you can't, account, do you know what I mean? Whereas if you work in travel, you can travel. You know? So you can get cheap discounts to go anywhere in the world, packages and all that kind of thing. So, the pay was terrible. So my last role at [company], I'd get in at 7:30, and leave at 6:30, and it was rotating roster, so I'd have to work every second Saturday. And you know, base salary 32,000 plus commission. Just couldn't do it anymore. Sitting there and slugging my guts out.

Fabian reckoned his aspirations for higher wages and progression were not going to be addressed if he stayed where he was.

The job itself was also taxing. Selling products to people, face to face, day in, day out, required a great deal of effort. Fabian describes himself as a very social person and he enjoyed experiencing "all the different personalities that would come in". But in retail "jeez you have to have a thick skin". He tells me about the long sessions, helping clients plan their travel, only to have them go away and book trips elsewhere. There was also the emotional strain of maintaining a friendly "the-customer-is-always-right" persona. Working in retail, he realised, "has a life expectancy".

Some of these difficulties would have been ameliorated, even avoided he thinks, if his managers had rewarded him with promotion. At the agency, he did rise from sales consultant to assistant store manager after a relatively short time. But this was a small gain. Fabian recounts how much he threw himself into his work, how quickly he mastered his responsibilities, and the long hours he put in. I ask him what he wanted:

> Just progression, I think Mark. You just sit there and you think, am I just going to do this one job for four years before you're going to promote me? What a waste of time. I know this job inside and out, inside nine months. Why can't you give me a new challenge? Something new.

By progression, Fabian means moving up the "corporate ladder". But part of this was also wanting more interesting and challenging work. None of this was happening. He "wasn't getting anywhere". If it had been an isolated experience in one company it would have been easy to rectify. But it was a recurrent experience in several jobs in the industry, and it was the main reason for his decision to leave. His story depicts a struggle to have apposite recognition for his efforts, and the failure of his bosses and the organisations he worked for to provide it.

"I Am Gen Y"

Weaving through Fabian's narrative and amplifying the theme of reward and recognition is his feeling of being "stuck". In each of his previous jobs he reached a point where it felt like there was no way forward. The meanings which Fabian imputes to a path forward, in his talk about the absence of one, include all the above-mentioned rewards: more money,

interesting work, recognition for his efforts. All promised paths turned out to be chimera.

In each of these periods however, Fabian did not remain passive. On the contrary, when a job did not deliver what he sought, he took the initiative and left. Importantly, he talks about this mode of being matter-of-factly, as the way *his generation* approaches things. This comes through when he describes his work history:

> I guess it's a very choppy journey, I'd say. You know, like I've only stayed in one job, the longest I've stayed in a job is three and a half years. And then three years, and then every other job, 18 months or less. Then again, that's my generation. My parents and your parents would have stayed in theirs for 25, 30 years. That's just what you did. You know, less opportunities, and more stability. And you were a career man. And you worked for the company, you know. For the good of the company, the name. Whereas now, I think, I've always worked hard, I've never been a bludger, I've always worked hard and probably too ambitious. Trying to jump too many hurdles and when I run into a barrier, I think well I'm not going to get anywhere, so screw it, I'll go jump ship and go somewhere else.

A few points strike me here. The first is Fabian's awareness of having a very different work experience to his parent's generation. This experience is about more movement and change – not staying in the same place for too long. Secondly, he is, or at least believes himself to be, the instigator of these changes. He does not feel forced into career moves other than by dissatisfying work. That is to say, he articulates the situation in terms of the primacy of his agency, not the decisions of employers or outside forces. Thirdly, Fabian moves to pursue opportunities for better rewards, clearly, but more importantly, he prioritises new possibilities over stability. This is taken for granted among his generation, he suggests, and represents a different way of acting in relation to career. Adding emphasis to this idea is his evident restlessness and the impulse he has to move on. Through our interview, Fabian worries about "doing the same thing in three years time", being "in the same position" for a long time and being stuck on a "merry-go-round". His talk thus portrays an expectation that work should be rewarding and engaging and that change is called for if job situations don't deliver.

The actions of his colleagues seem to reinforce this orientation to career. There was, for example, a great deal of dissatisfaction with conditions in the travel industry. A common response to feeling unrewarded was to quit:

> So, you get very fed up, very, very quickly, and then like I said, take home a shitty wage. It's bullshit. And people around you, you know the turn over in staff in these travel places are huge you know. 35 per cent on average a year. So you're working next to Sally and then next week she's gone. And Billy's there and Billy's gone two months later. And that kind of has a real impact on you because you think where are these people going? They've come here, where I've worked and they're like oh, this isn't so fantastic and so you start to second guess and think maybe they're right. And then you hear they've gone somewhere else and they're making twice as much, and you think, well I'm smarter than them, why aren't I doing this?

Comparisons with colleagues are unavoidable. They are tangible reference points for appropriate action, and a gauge for one's own progress. Many of his colleagues appeared to be actively addressing their desires, and moving to better pastures. Fabian's reference to being a member of "Gen Y" suggests these facets are part of a particular cultural orientation to career.

The Promises of Share Trading

But this is a new time, and like before, Fabian has taken action to address his malaise. Unlike before, however, he has struck out on his own. Fabian's talk is animated and excited about the new path in share trading. It is a risky road, but also one he has considered carefully. Trading shares has been his hobby for several years. He is no novice. But he realises that making a living from it is a serious step up. As a precaution Fabian has set himself modest short-term goals for income, treating it as supplementary to his wife's wage. His grander plan though is to build his earnings to a point where his wife does not have to work.

In presenting his account, I have trouble designating Fabian's new line of work. Is it a job? In a way. Is it a business? He is certainly buying, selling and investing, but it's not clear what goods or services he is providing. Is it an occupation? It is in a general sense, but one not yet formalised institutionally. He has not had specialised training other than by doing it. All these titles have partial traction. So how best to characterise what Fabian does? He works at home, on his own, at his laptop. He buys and sells shares from his

computer from the time the stock market opens, at ten o'clock in the morning, to the time it closes, at four. He uses special software that allows him to carry out share transactions, but also to follow the market, analyse and compare stocks, track their histories and forecast movements. Fabian tells me the ins and outs, what he focuses on, the signs to look for, the approach he takes. Through the day too and outside trading hours he does research, and reads financial news. These are his daily tasks.

It is early days, only a few months in, but so far the signs are good. He is already earning more money, on average, than he was in the old job. I notice an interesting ambiguity in the way he talks about money. Clearly, making money is a central priority and Fabian feels he has a lot of ground to make up after years of poor pay packets. But he says he does not have any pretentions about becoming wealthy. He is happy making the "average Aussie wage" and that his "prime mover" is simple, financial security for his family. On the other hand, the realm of his work is the stock market! The signs of money flow before his eyes (on the computer screen) all day. In our interview there are moments when he can barely contain his excitement at the potential to make a lot of money. More than the average Aussie wage.

But the money motivation cannot be examined on its own. This would be to miss much his new occupation's appeal. A key attraction concerns time – the control he feels he has of it. His previous work schedule was rigid and onerous. Now, he says he can make as much money as he was earning before, working fewer hours each day. Putting more time in would yield more financial reward, but it is up to him. "It's so much better", Fabian chuckles; "it's freedom. I'm buying freedom". He is also excited about the portability of his work, being able to operate anywhere he can take a laptop. Several times Fabian uses the word "flexibility". This is "as much of a lifestyle as it is a job". The benefits include being able to spend more time with his daughter, and do more things around the house.

'Freedom' and having more control over his time is also a reference to being more independent of others. I ask whether his decision to strike out on his own was overtly about not working for someone else:

> Absolutely Mark, that's probably the majority of it too. You know I've worked for some great bosses and I've worked for some absolute pricks. You find yourself, there's the prick, you turn up late for work, you don't shave, you'll give 60 percent because you just despise that person, whereas the manager that's fantastic you'll give a hundred and ten percent, you'll work overtime. So [chuckles] I just can't work for people anymore. I've got

> to a point where I've worked for enough people and I don't want to, I mean, I think I've got enough smarts to do it for myself. So, yeh a big part of it is not working for the man.

Fabian characterises his recent move as an escape from the yoke of employers, and essentially, from the employment relationship itself. Ultimately, this new career path represents a way to be more in control of his time and what he does.

Forms of Personal Effort – Routine and Social Connection

Along with all the benefits and freedoms of his new career path there are, however, some difficult challenges. These require particular forms of personal effort. For example, working for himself, by himself, has quickly made tangible the question of routine. Although he extols the virtues of his new time-freedom, Fabian realises that he must very consciously create some structure for his time. I ask what this requires:

Fabian: Discipline
Mark: Really?
Fabian: yeh. Discipline. And routine. See, cos if I don't have a routine, it won't happen. Because, you know, society is conditioned. We're all creatures of habit and we all revolve around routine. We get up, we shower, brush our teeth, have breakfast, we get on the train or drive to work. Your day is planned. Everything is planned. So, I've gone from being a person of routine to, you know, I've got to get up and feed my daughter, once I drop her off at childcare, ok, you know, I might go for a walk. I might go back to bed [laughs]. So if I don't have a routine, I'll fail. I know I'll fail, because, I won't be forcing myself, pushing myself, to be doing things. So I need to have a routine. After I drop her off, I go to a coffee shop, I buy the Fin Review,[1] and sit there for coffee, and I start researching, at eight o'clock. And I read, and I find out what's going on. Then I get home at nine o'clock and I put on the business channel, and I'll see what the general feeling is, see what happened overnight in New York. And then ten o'clock, I'll start, seeing what the market does and seeing how it trades. So that's my mini routine, so I need to stick to it, and evolve it as well.

His previous job provided a structure for his time. It shaped a routine, but one that was oppressive. Now, working for himself, there is no imposed structure, and this fact, Fabian thinks, threatens the success of his experiment. There is a measure of irony in the fact that he must now put effort into creating some routine for himself.

In a parallel way, leaving a job partly because of the difficult social interactions with clients and managers has resulted in having to deal with the opposite problem – coping with isolation. Fabian's previous job had been full of social interaction, and he regards himself as a "very social" person. Being at home therefore "can be quite a lonely thing". At times this new isolation has been hard to deal with. Unexpectedly he adds, "it's completely out of my league". Establishing a routine for himself helps to take his mind off it. But his prime effort so far has been to establish a social network. At the moment it is small – he has linked up with two other day traders. They keep connected on Skype, discussing stocks, sharing information, and generally helping each other. Fabian says they are basically chatting online with each other, in the background, all through the day. They have created a substitute office environment.

Peter, one of the other traders, acts as a kind of mentor. More experienced at the game, Peter was influential in convincing Fabian to shift from being a dabbler to making it his full-time occupation. He has shown Fabian some of the tricks of the trade, and is on hand to answer Fabian's frequent questions. Peter has even suggested they form a partnership. But for the moment, Fabian wants to operate independently.

So in forging this new path, Fabian is working to create his own network of expertise, to make social connections, and to establish a routine. In short, he is having to create for himself the kinds of structures that existed in previous workplaces.

For This Work, I Need to Become…

In addition to these "structural" tasks, his new work path requires other kinds of personal effort. On a basic level, he says he needs "more knowledge". There is a lot to learn to get better at the game, about trading itself, but also about the economic context and the social and political factors that influence commodity prices. Right now, for example, he is researching the possible rise in demand for rare earths like lithium. Although he finds this interesting, the enormity of the task feels overwhelming. "Yeh, I've got to read some more books on that", he sighs.

Gaining knowledge grades into a broader issue of being able to perform better at what he does. I want to use the term "skill" here, but it does not quite fit. The way Fabian talks about what he needs to learn refers to being better able to "handle" the new situation. He says there are lots of "bad habits" which need to be "stamped out". One is about acting less impulsively, for example to sell a stock when it is going down. The stock market is volatile, unpredictable, and things happen quickly. Much of what Fabian refers to seems to be about having more self-control and the capacity to manage stressful situations. Moreover, there is a sense in which there are not just stressful moments in his work day, but the stock market presents a continuous stressful situation. There is a constant pressure about when to buy and when to sell.

However, this is where technique can help. Fabian says he is trying to develop a method. He tells me about "stop losses" and "take profits", times to pull out of a trade. The trick is to be rigorous in the application. One is always tempted to see if a stock goes up a bit more, but this must be avoided. What strikes me here, in Fabian's attempt to articulate his method, is its insubstantiality. There is no clear body of skill or know-how that can be learned, and although there are some principles to apply, it seems he has to make up his own approach. Successful people appear to have developed their own effective techniques, he suggests. But I wonder whether this appears the case *because* they are successful.

Other new character traits are required too. If impulsiveness is to be avoided, then, being decisive is essential. For Fabian, there is a distinction. He reckons he is developing decisiveness. The stock market forces one to make decisions with imperfect information. Fabian criticises another trader he knows for lacking conviction; "whereas that's the one thing I have". Once you have done some research and got just enough information to determine that a stock is a reasonable prospect, you should buy it.

Relatedly, Fabian says that to do this job one needs to get used to an irregular income. Trading is by definition an activity with uncertain rewards. Pay packets do not arrive regularly:

> *Fabian*: I don't sit there and say, eight hundred bucks a week, that's come in. I mean I may make nothing, I may execute a trade and make five thousand dollars, but I haven't been paid for six weeks. But I got paid then, know what I mean? So you kind of have to, yeh, you have to expect that. And that's part of the strategy as well, cos people tend to overtrade. Oh, I need to make money this week. So they

might buy a stock today and sell it this afternoon. Try and make a quick two hundred bucks. I've just paid myself, kind of thing. You know? Whereas that's just stupid, bullshit. Cos, you're losing sight of the object, the objective, and that is to sort of successfully trade, not to go in and out, in and out all day. You lose half of it in brokerage fees anyway. And you drive yourself mad, you know? [. . .] Trades are stressful. You buy something at 22 dollars in the morning. I need it to hit 22.20 in the afternoon, for me to make 200 bucks. So you don't leave your computer, you're like this [mimics being hunched over a computer] and you click refresh, refresh. 22.01, 22.02, yes, yes, 21.90, oh no it's gone backwards. And then what do you do? Do you sell and crystallise a 200 buck loss? So you have to, from the start, say this is not a regular job, which means it's not a regular income. You have to realise that.

Mark: It sounds like one needs to handle uncertainty.

Fabian: Yeh, absolutely, yeh, exactly. Because Mark, I may not get paid for three months, and then all of a sudden, those four trades that you made come through, and you might make half of what you might make in a year. So yeh, you got to, you do. And you might even, even worse instead of making a weekly wage, you might have lost for the first two months and you're like, not only am I not making money, I'm friggin losing money.

To engage in this activity one has to handle uncertainty. Moreover, it's the kind of activity that will punish you if you approach it with the expectations of a normal job. This work requires a certain kind of mettle, for the micro decisions of buying and selling and for coping with an irregular income. This is not an occupation for everyone.

Performing in this arena also precipitates a deeper personal journey. It forces you to "find out a lot about yourself". When there is money involved you are put to the "test". You discover, among other things, "how greedy you are". You might say to yourself that you do not want to make a lot of money, but then you are seduced by the ascent of a stock. Citing a version of a familiar injunction, Fabian says "you've got to find out what sort of person you are". When I ask him what kind he is, Fabian ponders. He is "not greedy". He reckons he is "much wiser" and more "rational" than he was ten years ago: "I know where my limits are." As a result, he is "calmer". After experimenting in trading for some time and now doing it full-time, he thinks he has the temperament for such a stressful game. Importantly, he now knows what he wants and what his "priorities" are.

Becoming Enterprising – Context and Identity

These ideas about the kind of person Fabian needs to be, and the kind he believes he is *becoming* – decisive, in control, able to handle stress and uncertainty – are classical enterprising ones. Along with "knowing oneself", Fabian is essentially articulating a version of rugged individualism: self-defining and autarkic. If these values reflected the way he understood himself before – in his decision to break free from previous employers – then they are pushed to the fore in the current context. His new work practice, within the environment of the stock market, turns these qualities into daily necessities.

What is striking is the way the game of trading gives Fabian a context to talk about himself. An element of this is the idea of the stock market as a personal testing ground. I quote the following at length:

Mark: Why are you attracted to it [share trading]?

Fabian: Ah, I think cos it's uncapped, you know. As in like, if I get good at this I could make a million dollars a year. There's nothing in any book to say I can't. So I'm attracted to the fact that, I can test myself. I can say, alright, lets see how good you are kid. And just go for it.

Mark: Is this a bit of a challenge?

Fabian: Big time, yeh big time. Yeh, almost Mark to say, well done mate. Tap yourself on the back, you did good. You can do this, and you are a success. Do you know what I mean? Because you know, my parents don't understand what I'm doing.

Mark: Really? Why not?

Fabian: Because I'm not making anything. What are you doing? I'm buying and selling shares. But you're not making anything. I'm like, I'm making money. No, no, you're not. Bricklayers they build things. Chippies, hairdressers we cut hair, cos dad's a hairdresser. You're not making anything. People have to make things for the world to go around. So it's that old mentality, that they can't understand. What's this share trading? I don't get it. It's almost like, you don't work, you sit at home on a computer. You're lazy. You know what I mean? But it doesn't bother me. I'm already over it. I got over it in a day. This is my life, you do what you've got to do, I'll do what I got to do. So yeh, part of the success is driven by, to be able to say, remember how you said I was lazy, wasn't doing much, see the house on the corner, I just bought that mum. Thank you very much [we laugh].

Mark: So you've got a point to prove?

Fabian: Yeh. A little bit of a bee in my bonnet, but that's not the sole reason. Certainly there's always drivers in the background, isn't there? And for me, that's one of them.

Mark: And that's about showing you can do it?

Fabian: Exactly. Yeh. Yeh. And that you don't have to be, because what I'm doing is essentially, it's not really deemed as part of normal society. Normal people get up, they shave, they put on a suit, or overalls, and go to work. I get up, have a shower, feed my daughter, take her to childcare, buy the Fin Review, sit there in front of the computer, and I trade. It's not something most people in society do. So that attitude certainly is, mmm, it's a bit different, and who does he think he is, Warren Buffett? [. . .] And I'm sure a lot of it is, oh, see how long he lasts. Give him a year and he'll be somewhere else, doing something else. I understand that, cos I've done that many times with different jobs, so that's cool. Some of its envy, cos they'd like to be sending their wife off to work while they sit at home and trade shares. You know? Hey I don't have to answer to anyone. I don't have to brush my hair. It's pretty cool. So, a mate of mine said he's quite envious. But at the same time Mark, I didn't just, you know, I'm making this happen. Nobody's knocked on my door and said why don't you do this? [he puts on a meek voice] Yeh, ok, sounds good. I've said this is what I'm going to do, and I'm going to do it. So, you know, if you're envious, fuckin do it. Know what I mean? I've got a kid, I've got a wife. It's not like I've just finished university, and I've got nothing to lose. I've got a hell of a lot to lose. But, I'm having a go. So, you know what, at least I'm not going to die not knowing.

This excerpt highlights some of the intertwined motivations driving Fabian's project. It also highlights the broader function of his new work context. The stock market offers potentially unlimited financial reward. It is "uncapped", and thus in stark contrast to previous jobs. His work promises to address his financial aspirations. But its main offering relates to identity. It is a context he identifies with; a place where he can enact certain values and develop desired qualities. The key ones are about being enterprising, being decisive and a risk taker.

The function of the context is not just about *images* of these values and qualities. It provides a practical place to test himself. The market is a harsh environment and survival here is proof of one's competence. In this sense,

Fabian's work practice is a vehicle by which some of his enterprising ideals can be realised.

Related to this is the issue of recognition: the valuation of oneself by others. Woven through Fabian's talk about achievement is a deeper dynamic. He is engaged in a struggle with his parents for approval for what he does. There are doubters among friends too. The new career in trading offers the possibility to answer his critics and show he is a success. Earlier, I noted Fabian's search for due reward from his employers; this seems to be part of his deeper search for recognition. One of the promises of trading is that he will be able to gain recognition for his skills, but also for who he is. In narrative terms, achieving recognition is part of having an adequate career story.

It is moments like this in the interview that, despite his upbeat demeanour and strong action-talk, Fabian reveals the fragility of his undertaking and an underlying anxiety about succeeding.

Identifying as "The Independent Operator"

Towards the end of the last quote Fabian emphasises the effort he has made, the risk he has taken. He has left the relative security of a permanent job to be a lone trader on the stock market. He has left his comfort zone to have a go. There is a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" philosophy being sounded – a Samuel Smilesian programme of self-help. To his detractors he is saying, "well, I'm having a go", and "you can't expect to be satisfied with work if you don't take risks". Part of his story-making concerns his identification as an "independent operator", having chosen an unorthodox job ("it's not something most people do").

Accompanying this is his critique of corporate life. He does this via the trope of the small-time operator versus the big greedy corporation. He makes an emphatic distinction, for example, between conventional stockbrokers who work for major investment banks, and day traders who work for themselves. The former are functionaries of the corporation. They represent and perpetuate the "Gordon Gekko, greed is good" approach. I am surprised at his disdain for them: "scum of the earth", he calls them. Day traders, on the other hand, are just trying to make a living. I do not press him on why he thinks independent operators are less guilty of greed. Perhaps his critique is more about market share. It may reflect how smaller players experience their more powerful corporate counterparts on the common playing field of the market.

Interestingly (and ironically) his identification as an independent operator is also a collective one. Fabian contextualises his activity with reference to others doing the same thing. In relation to other day traders, there is a "whole breed of us", he says. More generally, Fabian feels part of a larger group of independent operators, working for themselves. He even thinks it constitutes a *movement* which is critical of mainstream corporate life:

> So there's actually, I kind of feel like, maybe I'm part of a mini revolution of people who are giving the middle finger up to the corporate company they work for. Saying screw you, I'm not working for you anymore. I'm not making you the money, I'm making it for me, kind of thing. And this is just one way that people like myself can actually, carve out a living, you know?

In Fabian's account, being independent is defined, variously, as independence from large corporations, from all organisations, and from all employers.

Overall, Fabian is upbeat and excited about his new work activity and new path. Although he reveals some anxiety about success, this is overlaid with a thick confidence about his ability to meet the challenge ahead. Contributing reasons for his confidence could be that, so far, he has been able to carry it off. Also, the fact that with his partner working, he has some financial buffering and thus some capacity to experiment. But primarily what comes through is a kind of elation at having taken control of his situation, and having an adequate (and compelling!) career story.

In the next chapter, I examine another entrepreneurial case, which provides a useful contrast to Fabian.

Note

1. *The Australian Financial Review* newspaper.

CHAPTER 8

Enzo – Becoming Entrepreneurial

In this chapter, I turn to another entrepreneurial example of "going it alone". This time, with Enzo, we have someone more attuned to small business and more experienced with its trials and tribulations. His case displays similar themes regarding the struggle to make an independent path, but instructive differences too. In the latter part of the chapter, I briefly compare Fabian's and Enzo's cases and identify the key themes emerging from both.

Enzo is 45, married with three children, and lives in an inner city suburb of Melbourne. For the last 20 years, he has worked in marketing, within the telecommunications industry. Originally, he studied engineering, a degree he felt ill-suited for. Enzo did not finish it, in fact, and went on to do a business and marketing degree. He has had different jobs in large corporations, and for the last eight years, has been involved in running a small business with two other partners. Their business provides a data management service to telco companies. Enzo has played the marketing role within the partnership and the front person for clients. His partners have taken care of the technical side. The business has fluctuated in size, from just the three to sometimes up to eight people.

I talk with Enzo at a critical juncture in his work life. For the last ten or so months, he has been "taking a break" from the partnership. He cites a number of reasons for the decision, the main one being deteriorating relations with his partners. They differ strongly in their approach to running the business, and Enzo has decided to experiment with flying solo.

M. Scillio, *Making Career Stories*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-55179-1_8

He has been using his time away to generate new business ventures, as well as to consider his career options more generally.

Enzo is busy with other things as well. For some of his time he is overseeing the construction of a new family house. He has been involved in its design and it represents an enjoyable burst of creativity, something absent in his recent work. Financially, Enzo and his family are secure enough for him to have this time to explore work options. He tells me they have built up enough savings to see the family through for a certain period. His wife works part-time. With his accountant, he has even costed his time spent working on the house project.

The Importance of Creative Work

In exploring work options, making money is important, and Enzo states this freely. He has after all spent his life in business. But he makes it very clear to me that having interesting, creative work is more important. This is his "driver", he says. You have to love what you do and, in this regard, Enzo loves "creating things" and "engagement with ideas". These terms come up a lot in our conversation. Enzo sees his own creativity within the realm of business, a realm he feels naturally a part of. His current preoccupation is with finding new products to market. This is a "period of creativity"; a time to "create something new".

Very importantly though, Enzo does not see creative practice as something he can do by himself. Creativity comes from stimulating conversations and social interactions. A genuinely good work environment, he thinks, is a place to discuss ideas, business possibilities and strategies, where "exploration" occurs, and people are free to "say something stupid". Enzo is animated and passionate about this. It is through "discourse" and "engagement with others", he says, that innovation is fostered. He believes this is the key ingredient to success in business.

The lack of these features in the partnership made it unrewarding, and this was a reason for taking a break. Originally, when he and his partners started the business, it did contain an element of "free communication", something he now feels nostalgic about. But over time, and despite Enzo's best efforts, the spirit was not sustained. He puts it down to different personalities. His partners, both engineers, "tech heads", had a "style" and "character" that jarred with his own. They were not interested in cultivating an engaging work environment. Going back further in his past,

Enzo left his job in a big telecommunication corporation for similar reasons. The organisation did not provide a space for creativity or learning.

A major part of his current deliberations about what to do next involves how to construct a creative place for discussion with others. In talking about his desire for it, he leads me into a deeper theme about authentic work:

> And I seek that, I want that again. Not necessarily with them. But I want that environment. I mean, I believe that work defines us. I mean it used to, if you were a blacksmith, it defined who you were, you know, and what you did, your purpose in life. Well it gave you a sense of purpose. It wasn't like you went to work for eight hours a day and that was it, and then you went home and all of a sudden you were a different person. It's not. It's all in one. My father lived on the farm in Italy in the mountains. He came to Australia, looking to be a dairy farmer. He ended up being a fruiterer. So he didn't grow the fruit but he sold it [laughs]. He retires, so what does he do, he spends eight hours, ten hours a day in the garden. So he's got his hands in the dirt. He is a person of the earth in terms of he wants to be growing things and producing things. Whether it's a sense of security or producing for the family, I don't know, but that is him. I think what defines me, I think work defines me. I like to be able to create and engage with people. I've always liked that. Now I think it gets back to who I was, or how I was at uni and all the rest of it. I always liked sitting around having coffee and talking about things, and similar with business. I mean if you think about business, I'm trying to relate this discussion to business.

I note the way Enzo links the work he does, and the way he operates, to something in his own nature. He is very clear that he has a particular "character", suited to being in business, which includes being creative, curious, exploratory and gregarious. Doing work that exercises these personal characteristics is crucial to being true to himself. By extension, the business project he wants to construct must allow these traits to flourish. This theme of authenticity is a window on Enzo's storytelling. He is telling a particular career story, one which embodies these aspects of identity.

"Creating My Own Structure"

Herein lies a challenge. Pursuing his creative instincts requires connections with other people to facilitate it. But going out on his own poses the problem of isolation. He knows he has to manufacture a social network

which serves this function. More broadly, this practical difficulty exemplifies a larger tension running through Enzo's story – between autonomy and dependence.

Enzo has been putting effort into a range of tasks as part of making this solo business project. There is the need to make a social network for himself. One of the things he misses about previous roles is the social contact. Now, as a response, he is being very proactive. He is meeting with people everyday, over coffee, to let them know what he is doing, to throw around possible ideas, to explore possible collaborations. He is "fostering continuing relationships". Actually, straight after our conversation, Enzo has scheduled one such meeting. I can sense the importance of these social connections. They are not just about stimulation: the viability of his project depends on them.

The issue of making connections can be subsumed under the larger issue of making structure for himself. Working independently has several challenges. One is having to do everything for yourself. Before, in the small business, there was a time he could delegate many tasks to others. Now he does not have the "luxury of those people" and has to do everything for himself. This is a big challenge because there are some tasks he is not very good at. Enzo talks about this problem of "organising myself" when he compares what he has to do now with working in an organisation:

Enzo: One of the things that is important, or what is really a precursor to all this, and what I find is that you need structure [. . . .] I've often thought, working elsewhere, it gives me that structure that I would otherwise have to create. That it almost enforces it on you.

Mark: Working for an organisation?

Enzo: Yeh, you just have to walk in and sort of "do". It's already there. As opposed to having to create and you know, face all those challenges and do all those menial tasks, that, you know you've got to change, you've got to do this, do that, you've got to be the secretary, you've got to be the business person for the next hour. You've got to change your character all the time, based on those tasks. Otherwise you'll go mad. You think, I don't want to do that, I'll leave it till later. You can't. You have to do it now.

Mark: Is that something you want to do?

Enzo: No.

Mark: Provide your own structure.

> *Enzo*: Well I have to provide my own structure. And in order to do that, I'm going to have to change. Like every hour, I'll have to be a different person [. . .] So if you're in your own office and you have to communicate with these ten people, you've got to do it, whether you think it's beneath you or not. You've got to do that to start generating clients [. . .] But also, within that, you have to create a structure that makes sure that it continually happens. Otherwise you fall apart. And I don't know whether I'm really ready for that. Because you've got to create it, and then you've got to get it to a certain level, and then you can maybe employ a person or two to give you that freedom to then, to just liberate you from some of those tasks. Or do you just hop into another organisation with structure?

Different meanings of "structure" condense here, but they mainly relate to the division of labour. Enzo's reference is the structure of an organisation as a set of distinct, yet interdependent, roles. Working within a structure means being able to concentrate on particular responsibilities. It allows one to concentrate on something specific. Having structure also means clarity about the distribution of responsibilities.

There is another aspect of structure hinted at: the organisation's hierarchy. Enzo refers to his capacity within those settings to delegate the more menial tasks to others. Hierarchy gives some people legitimate authority to do so. He wishes he was able to palm off some of his more unpleasant tasks, like administration. Structure, in the sense that Enzo is using it here, is essentially *enabling*. It provides order, and renders complex tasks doable.

A central challenge Enzo now faces is how to provide some structure for himself. Running his own one-man business is difficult and potentially overwhelming. He has to do everything for himself, and play a range of roles. What is striking in the aforementioned quote is that he thinks this means having to continually change "character" with each role change. This is tiring and confusing. He is not sure he can pull it off. Practically, this means having to find a way to *be* this multifaceted person. Part of the answer is to become "more organised". He has to somehow replicate an organisation, in miniature.

Enzo also talks about the issue in terms of "resources". The difficulty of working for yourself or in a small operation is not having enough resources. As we talk further about the tasks involved in making his

business operate, Enzo remembers, with a measure of nostalgia, the positive aspects of working for a large organisation:

> What I also crave for is an organisation that had the resources. Because one of the things that really hit home hard, is that when you're out there, it's you. And whoever your partners you've chosen to be, and that's it. That's it. That's your resource. And that's tough. At an emotional level. At a physical level. When you need something, how are you going to do it? Everything is run on a shoestring. And that's tiring. And I realise how fantastic, when I reflect backwards on [the big telco he once worked for], how fantastic that was.

This is one of several moments in the interview where Enzo, despite his positive talk about being independent, reveals the fragility inherent in his current career story.

Seizing This Opportunity

Enzo realises that he is fortunate to be able to have this time for exploration – to be creative about what to do next. He has enough financial resources to be without income for several months. What accompanies this opportunity though is a strong sense of responsibility to "make something happen":

> That's why I've got to work out what I'm going to do, and how I'm going to do it. [hesitant] It's, look, I believe I'm in a very fortunate situation [. . .] I can be you know having this time where I can be trying to develop what I'm trying to do next, still having business conversations with other people. I know that's very fortunate. And therefore, I take this position quite seriously. And I take it that I must do the right thing, you know, here's a chance to do something again. Because I speak to a lot of people who are working, that are in a structured environment, that want to come out. And they've got all these ideas but they can't execute them, because there is no time to execute them. And the only way to execute them is to cut themselves, remove themselves from that structured environment, ie leave their work to start something up. And people just, they can't afford to do that. They can't afford the risk, and they're scared.

Enzo is no stranger to taking risks. He has done so a number of times in his career. Unlike many people he knows, he has relinquished the security of jobs in large corporations to pursue something more personally rewarding. A part of his identity is someone who takes risks – evident in the last quote where he implicitly compares himself to all those people too

"scared" to "cut themselves . . . from that structured environment". Leaving the partnership, even though it is a small operation, also means leaving an established routine and good income. What comes through here is Enzo's sense of independence, and even brave stance towards pursuing work he finds meaningful.

Hinted at is also a critique of the "structured environment". These environments swallow people's time, and prevent them from following their creative ideas. I think here Enzo is talking more about having to work for a wage, than anything specific about being in an organisation. But the two are intertwined in his history. Being familiar with risk-taking however does not make it any easier. There is a tangible anxiousness in his voice about making progress. He knows that, with a large family to support, this exploratory period will not last. The pressure is mounting. It is getting harder "to make something happen" at the same time as staying calm and being a good provider for his family.

Insecurity – "Can I Really Do It?"

Enzo's talk about being a risk-taker is ambiguous. Several times he mentions the possibility of his venture running aground, and he is acutely aware of the discouraging statistics about small businesses. "Failure" is an ever present companion. At one point in the interview, he characterises these risks as a source of insecurity:

Mark: When you say you're insecure, what is this about?

Enzo: Wanting to get on with this next phase and define what it is I want to do. And can I do it? Can I really do it?

Mark: Can you do what?

Enzo: Can I really start another business up, and make it happen? Look, I look at this all the time, everyone thinks, oh business person, they define them as a person in a suit that's always successful. When you look at it, intelligence doesn't mean that you're going to be successful. The papers are riddled with bloody people with degrees who are in failed businesses [. . .] So, the point I'm trying to say is that I'm not beyond failure. I'm the first one to recognise that failure is staring me in the face. That's the one that stares hardest. You know you've got to get past that. You've got to try to push that aside here and say how am I going to create success here? How am I going to do this? And that's why I believe you have to be dogmatic, you have to have this never give up attitude, but you need to find a space where you can begin to get some traction,

> because if you can't then you're slipping all the time. That's what scares me. That process of getting some traction to give yourself some sense of, to get some breathing done, to move on, to move on, to build some strength.

Enzo's talk about insecurity relates directly to how he appraises his business project. Although he can imagine having a successful business, he is still uncertain about the specific products to "take to market". In our conversation, he runs through some of the possibilities he has explored, assessing their costs and benefits.

But the above quote emphasises another risk of "failure". Enzo worries about whether he can carry it off. This is reflexivity of a deeper kind. As someone who sees himself as an independent businessman and risk-taker, doubt about being able to "make it happen" threatens his identity. Or perhaps, more accurately, casts doubt on an ideal he has about himself. Can he sustain this particular career story? His mention of "creating success" is poignant – it seems he is really talking about survival.

In this rendering, the social context of his work is ambivalent. As with Fabian, Enzo characterises his business world as a place of danger. In it, he is scared of "slipping", and "failure is staring me in the face". On the other hand, the context also plays a positive function. It is a place to test his capacities. His phrases about gaining "traction" and building "strength" highlight what is required to establish a position, and make one's mark. The context is also enabling. It gives Enzo a way to talk about himself – his character – and to make sense of his struggle ("you have to be dogmatic").

What is also striking about these paragraphs is the amount of personal effort involved in sustaining his project, and how much of this activity is about dealing with the fear of failure. Compared to Fabian, Enzo is not so sanguine. More years of experience in small partnerships have exposed him to the pitfalls of working independently.

Ten months on, Enzo is feeling the pressure to commit to a product to invest in. The longer it takes, the more doubt creeps in. As we talk, he seems to have decided to terminate the relationship with the partners. Sometimes though, the solo project feels too hard and he muses about getting a "normal" job:

> Maybe there will be a question, you know, do you really want to do this? Again? I mean I've asked myself that, I keep on asking myself that, but I'm sort of brushing that aside. But when push comes to shove, and it's really getting

> hard, do I say yes, I want to do it or do I say no, this is all too hard? You know, just brush up that resume, and just try to get a job. And the funny thing is, I keep on saying that, but I don't know if that's a realistic option anymore for me as well. Because, and that's the other thing, I feel as if I'm in a bind where, and this is where I guess self-doubt comes in at a lot of levels, who wants me? Who would want me? Who knows about me anymore?

In assessing possible courses of action, even the "get a job" path will not be easy. It is a peculiarity of his situation that the business he had been in for the last nine years only had one major client. This meant in effect that he was not building connections with other possible partners and clients. Now, he worries "who knows about me anymore?" He does not know how employable he is. One thing in favour of the solo path is not having to sell himself to another employer.

The Need to Change Himself

I have described some of the challenges Enzo faces taking this new path, from a small business to being on this own, and making a success of it. There are new skills to acquire like administration and time management. Also, more deeply, to change aspects of himself. He thinks he needs to be more organised and disciplined. And to be able to perform a range of roles, to be "many people all at once". He will need to become more patient, a "good listener", someone who can stay focused, and ultimately he thinks, to "change his personality". He has doubts whether this will be possible.

These challenges illicit introspection – "I need to work out a lot about myself". I ask him, provocatively, whether he has brought this difficult situation upon himself. His answer is revealing:

> *Enzo*: Yes yes. I did. I did. I know I did. Because back in the 90s when I had a great job with [large telco] and we were ten people at head office, and that was a magnificent opportunity to stay there and continue and grow with the business, but I became too entrenched and frustrated with the structure and lack of recognition within the organisation and head office all of sudden coming on top of us because they didn't understand. So they started putting in their bureaucratic processes and stifling us. I found that a very difficult and intrusive behaviour from the organisation and my reaction to that was stuff you. I'm leaving. As opposed to working through it.

Working through those challenges. Growing with those challenges. Being able to engage and change the way I operated. To say, ok this will be a transition phase for a while, but the business that we're in is a great business, and I want to continue enjoying that. I got very you know egotistical and saying you're not going to tell me how to do it now and I'm not going to put up with this and we've been doing it for four or five years. Get stuffed. That's stupid. Immature.

Mark: So you think you've changed?

Enzo: Yeh yeh. Because I did that. I left that environment, because of changes and I didn't recognise how I could have worked with the changes, nor didn't recognise that the changes were necessary. Reflecting back, the changes were absolutely necessary. I was an idiot. I was early 30s, young.

Mark: What was the problem with you?

Enzo: I think, as a business person, I didn't learn that fundamental lesson, of being a good listener. And also trying to assess the situation from a third-party perspective. Remove myself from the circumstances and look at it from an external position. And remove the emotion to say, why is this happening? I mean I knew why it was happening, but I thought they were wrong. You know typical. I always think everyone else is wrong. No, they were right. It did need to happen. If I was smart I should have taken on that challenge that this is going to happen, how do I ensure that I'm still part of it? And take on that challenge, as opposed to removing myself, which I did. It was a bit more complex than that, but, I still could have.

Mark: Do you think you were being too rigid or something?

Enzo: Yes. Absolutely. And too proud. Here's someone coming in and changing the way we do things, because the way we've done things is very successful. Surely there can't be a better way. But there was.

Again, Enzo covers a lot of ground. Most strongly, there is regret for leaving an organisation that would have provided him with opportunities for promotion and new challenges. In this passage, Enzo articulates a central theme I have highlighted in previous chapters: where organisations are experienced as places of development. He regrets his decision because he missed out on the self-development that would have come with staying – on the "magnificent opportunity to stay there and continue and grow with the business".

Enzo blames himself for this. At the time, he felt stifled by bureaucracy and managers who thought they knew better than he and his colleagues. But in hindsight, he thinks those imposed changes needed to happen. He now thinks he was being too obstinate and immature. What strikes me here is Enzo's self-criticism for following, what in other parts of the interview, he valorises as his independent inclinations – the strong, enterprising, innovating spirit, the one that does not want to be hampered by organisational structures. Here, instead, it is characterised as problematic and the source of his current difficulties.

What appears to happen in Enzo's account is that, dwelling on the difficulties of what lies ahead, aspects of organisational life he remembers from past experience emerge as highly desirable. These were structures that grounded him and provided resources for his career story. As the pressure mounts to get his business moving, this feeling only gets stronger. On the other hand, the opposite definition of "structure" is still there. He knows how restricted he felt in those environments. The tensions associated with this motif of structure are best seen, I suggest, as his ambivalence towards it. Enzo is caught up in the deeper conflict between autonomy and dependence.

Difficulties with Career Story

Through this solo project Enzo has wanted to realise a particular view of himself – the risk-taking, enterprising businessman. But in actuality, the project is throwing up unforeseen challenges. He is being forced to acquire certain traits he does not have; he is being pushed to be a kind of person he does not think he is. A disjuncture is emerging between the realities of his project and his entrepreneurial ideals.

If it is the case that Enzo's entrepreneurial view of himself has been carried in a long-held career story, then he is in the midst of a career story crisis. Like Rick, he is now having difficulty maintaining that story. The situation is forcing him to reconsider aspects of it. Perhaps he is not the risk-taker he thought he was. Perhaps he is not cut out to be on his own. Certainly some of his comments about longing for structure indicate this.

To be sure, though, this situation is not clear cut. Much in our interview confirms he is comfortable with himself, knowing his other strengths and inclinations. But Enzo is going to have to sort out *who he is* and what

he can do. He will have to sort out his story. As the pressure to "make something happen" gets stronger, so too do the many self-doubts and regrets that have accumulated over his work life.

Entrepreneurial Stories – Fabian and Enzo

Similarities and Differences

Fabian and Enzo's are two accounts of people making their own career paths by pursuing entrepreneurial projects. They have chosen to address their aspirations for money, for fulfilling work, but also for other rewards like recognition and status, by breaking free from the strictures of organisational life and working for themselves. Both cases are centred on making money. Despite this, however, having engaging and meaningful work is significant in both cases. Fabian has chosen day trading because it challenges his thinking and mettle, stimulates his learning, and is exciting in its riskiness. These rewards are also what Enzo seeks. In addition, he emphasises the creative and social dimensions of business.

Significantly, Fabian and Enzo's stories differ in tone. Age and work experience seem to be a factor. Although not working for himself, Enzo was part of a small business operation for several years and has experienced the difficulties involved in sustaining it. This contributes to the more muted and cautious tone of his prognostications. In comparison, it is early days for Fabian, which perhaps accounts for his ebullience and bravado. He has not yet fully experienced the difficulties of making a work life this way. He has not had time to fail. This difference is reflected in the confidence both have in their current career stories. Fabian expresses a sense of career security, while Enzo is experiencing more career insecurity.

Another instructive difference is about their relative expectations about career change and mobility. Fabian expects to be more mobile and to have high levels of work satisfaction. In this, he sees himself as part of the culture of "Gen Y". Here the expectation is that one's job must provide fulfilment, and if it does not, then it is natural to get up and leave. His work history is testament to this attitude. And although he has long-term plans for day trading to be a successful project, for the moment, he is just giving it a go. The sense is that if it does not work, he would try something else. Enzo, on the other hand, who is ten years older, does not characterise himself in this way. Although his work history has been full of change, and

he has acted to redress unrewarding situations, he has stayed in jobs for long periods of time. What is more, he sees himself as authentically pursuing the life of a creative business man. He feels vocational about his path, despite the encroaching self-doubts about going solo. Whether or not this is a generational difference, the instructive point is that Enzo does not hold the same assumptions about mobility and change.

Going It Alone – Creating One's Own Structures

In a very tangible way, these two cases portray features of the new careers picture. Both men are exemplars of making a career "of one's own". They are saddled with the burdens this entails. Both men have had to create certain structures for themselves. One kind concerns time structure. Having an established routine means the pressures associated with what to do next are lessened. In organisations, by contrast, time structures are imposed and routines shaped. Both men have experienced first-hand the dangers of open and fluid time. Both point out how crucial time structures are for their projects to succeed.

Another area of structure concerns social contact. They both have had to recreate a network – people they can interact with for information sharing, learning and simply passing time. Part of the effort involved has been establishing regularity of contact, another dimension of constructing a routine. In organisations, regular interactions are part of the landscape. Our two individuals are trying to approximate this situation, but it requires ongoing personal intervention. Enzo emphasises the importance of conversations and collaboration. Their respective needs for social engagement show the tension between autonomy and dependence. Fabian and Enzo pursue autonomy. But they need other people for their projects to be viable.

The effort at making social contact highlights the importance of relationships with others for learning and sharing expertise. In this way, relationships with co-workers and the structures of these interactions are foundational for self-development. Cut loose from organisations, Enzo and Fabian both have this sharp sense of needing to learn from others, about how to do things, and how to go on playing their game. These structures are ones I have identified in the previous section associated with the organisation as a *place*. They were features of organisational life which provided grounding for people. Fabian and Enzo have to create the conditions for these for themselves.

The Market Context – Ways to Talk About Oneself

Both men work for themselves. But they operate within the context of a competitive market, which is a social realm. Their use of language is a tiny mirror on these worlds and how these worlds shape them. Both men, for example, use the word "execute" a lot. Action is imbued with a particular intensity. Action is purposive, the product of tough judgement. The market context promotes a specific kind of personhood: the man of action, the risk-taker, the entrepreneur. In their daily work, Enzo and Fabian practise these identities. The social context of their work consists not only of material practices and social relations, but also language and images. Drawing on the symbolic resources of their field, Enzo and Fabian make sense of their practice, but also understand how to *be*. The symbolic thus carries ideals.

To further develop the points made at the end of chapter six, these symbolic elements can be thought of as resources for story-making. For example, the actual practice of trading involves images of what good and bad trading entails. In his activity Fabian can test himself, and at the same time, talk about himself. Fabian imagines himself operating as a particular kind of calculating risk-taker. The stock market is thus a field of practice which contains symbolic resources for the narrative he is making about being enterprising. For Enzo, the market context also provides resources for a story he is telling about himself. It helps him define himself as independent, a risk-taker, in relation to others who work in organisations (those too afraid to take risks). But it is also this context that is now challenging Enzo's view of himself.

Going It Alone – Implications for the Self

Both their accounts are clear examples of the heightened reflexivity that comes with operating on one's own. Both men are constantly having to think about, and seek information about their actions. But there is a deeper kind of effort being called for here. Their work projects turn Fabian and Enzo inwards. They believe that making one's own career path requires cultivating certain character traits. Both articulate the need to become more enterprising. They need to be comfortable with uncertainty and risk. Both assume they need to toughen up psychologically, to cope with the stresses and strains of their projects.

To make a routine and structure requires self-discipline. But the discipline these men also say they need is associated with constant decision-making. Both emphasise the need for decisiveness and conviction. There is a revealing difference between the two on this. Fabian is more strident and confident. In comparison, Enzo is struggling to make a decision about what to do next. He has been decisive in the past, but now his project is proving more difficult, and challenging his view of aspects of himself.

The differences between the two men can be seen in narrative terms. For Fabian, his experience of a solo project confirms a view he has of himself linked to entrepreneurial ideals. He is able to keep this particular career story going, although, as yet, he has not been significantly tested. In Enzo's case, the situation is challenging some views and ideals he has about himself. To survive in this field, he is being forced to change more radically than he originally envisaged. He is anxious that this path requires him to be somebody that he is not. Enzo is experiencing a career story crisis. This is so in a few ways. He is having difficulty sustaining a *coherent* story: in the sense that different aspects of himself – for example the creative person, and the risk-taker – no longer fit together. The situation is also challenging the *adequacy* of his story: for example he is not living up to the ideal of being a risk-taker.

In the next chapter, I turn to solo projects in the artistic field.

CHAPTER 9

Cam and Peter – Artistic Practice as Precarious Work

In this chapter, I continue to focus on individuals attempting to work for themselves, but in the context of artistic practice. First, I explore a short case study, then a more detailed one. Both Peter and Cam have a long history of trying to generate an income from their art, but have been unable to make a living out of it. We meet Cam at the beginning of another attempt to do so. These stories highlight the challenges and burdens of making one's own path in the precarious realms of doing art for a living.

Peter's Story – Art as a Path to Poverty

I begin with a cameo. Peter's story illustrates a central problem, present for most people trying to follow their artistic inclinations. This is the issue of how to make a living from it. Peter is a sculptor. This is his passion and something he has felt vocational about as long as he can remember. Now 45, he has been making sculpture since his early 20s. For nearly all that time, however, he has had to find income through other channels.

Peter's career history is complex and fascinating. It begins with an initial period focused on being a sculptor. After leaving art school he concentrated on making "fine art", some of which he sold in galleries, and in the process he became known in the art scene. But life centred entirely on making fine art turned out to be too precarious:

> I got going on the sculpture, and I was successful, and I knew this is what I'm good at, this is what I love to do. There was just never any doubt. The

M. Scillio, *Making Career Stories*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-55179-1_9

> days were just never long enough, you know. 36 hours just wouldn't have been enough in a day to do it. And it was just the poverty of it broke me. I've always said to people, sculptors are not a very necessary member of society. They're kind of one up maybe from poets. I mean they're heralded when they've fucked off and died and left some kind of legacy.

But, he continues, they are not rewarded for their work during their lifetime. Peter means rewarded financially, as well as recognised. It was the lack of income that "broke" him, however. In response, Peter started using his skills to make "practical things" for money – signs for shops, for example, lighting, candelabras, as well as other design work. It kept him going for a while. Peter talks about the constant tension, throughout his career, between earning a living and doing art:

> The dual things for me were, how do I make art and have reasonable, or, what I call, non-exotic aspirations like having a car that's not 30 years old or owning a home. And I think that when you start to have a family and want to do that sort of stuff, and they come along, the tension is increased, especially with one's partner.

He was not interested in being wealthy and says he just wanted "what most people would consider very standard aspirations". Peter has a partner and two children. When the kids entered the picture, the pressure increased to gain some financial security.

A key problem to negotiate, in the tension between art and money, concerns ways of thinking. Peter thinks that the artist has to somehow practically reconcile the two. Artists though often think of themselves as standing outside the sphere of commerce:

> When I first started as an artist, not unpredictably, I didn't have a lot of focus on business as such, or any real concepts about being able to sell work or use that as a means of surviving, you know, much less thriving. And that's a pretty frequent take on artists. They become very involved in their work. It's very emotional. And they almost all routinely reject, sort of the other side. It's kind of tainted, and you know, [puts on a voice] I'll let the gallery deal with that. Well that's all cool but the gallery will deal with it to the point of 50 fuckin per cent [we both laugh]. Even if you don't have a work in their particular space, that's how galleries work [. . .] So if you got a commission elsewhere they'd be into you for 50 per cent as well,

> even if they had nothin to fuckin do with it. So I started consciously trying to be more business-like about what I did.

Although he sympathises with the distinction between making art and making money, artists, when they begin to exhibit, are forced to think about their work in monetary terms. At the very least, they are forced to become more conscious of the financial dimension of their careers – unless they want to be taken advantage of.

The "making practical things to sell" approach only worked so well. After that, Peter tried his hand at various occupations. The list includes: property developer, real estate agent, running a pub, a partnership in a fruit and vegetable business, and developing and renting studio spaces. Some lasted a short time, others several years. All the while, through these income generating activities, he was trying to make sculpture.

Despite Peter's decision to become "more business-like", he also maintains a very tight separation between his fine art and making things for money. He says he did not ever want to "sully" his fine art with the "burden of income". Part of Peter's solution has been to reserve a commerce-free space for some of his work – his "real" art. But this has also meant being resigned to not earning income from it. The consequences have been subtle and profound. There is a sadness in Peter's account, which speaks the hidden injury of having an inadequate career story. He has not been able to live up to his ideal of being a financially successful artist.

Peter's case exemplifies one "model" of practising art, which I suggest is very widespread. It provides a useful reference point for the next two case studies. Before we leave Peter's story, he offers an insight into the burdens of making an artistic path, through a comparison between artists and professionals:

> Well you can go and train as a lawyer, and you can work as [signals inverted commas] a lawyer. But you can go and train as an artist, and you can, you know, work as an artist, but it may not mean you're being rewarded. You can devote yourself supremely to the task, but it doesn't mean that anyone is going to give you any fuckin money. Right? But if you go and work as a lawyer, you'll get paid, you know. As someone's described it, the difference being that, those sort of people you know doctors, lawyers, professionals, get to walk through the golden arches of their career every morning, and

> leave through those golden arches at the end of the day. Where they've had some positive input. They might have had a fuck of a day as well, but there's some kind of "get". Yeh? As well as the money.

This is the issue of reward again. And Peter is talking about money. But his reference to the "golden arches of their career" that professionals have also connotes social recognition. As an artist, it is very difficult to achieve this. Peter would not want to be anything but a sculptor. It is his vocation. But at his "worst moments", he thinks it has been a "cruel joke" of fate.

Cam's Story – The Trials of Making Art the Centre of Life

In contrast, Cam seems to have come closer to his artistic career ideal. Cam is 32, and like Peter, his is a story about the struggle to make an independent career from artistic practice. It is a story that concerns a constant wrestle between the twin goals of earning a living and doing what he loves. For paid employment, Cam works as a printer's assistant in a large printery in a northern suburb of Melbourne. He is a full-time shift worker, and has been doing this job, and others like it, for about ten years. But the work he finds fulfilling is silk screen fine art and graphic design. These are his true passions. He has been practising these for many years, but money and time constraints have relegated them to out-of-hours activities. Cam has never been content with this situation, and for a long time, has tried to make his art the centre of his work life.

Cam's career is made up of these two strands of work activity, which do not often weave together neatly. A strong theme in his story is about managing the schizoid character of his work life. I interview him at a studio he rents, which sits above a gallery space, in a busy multicultural precinct of Melbourne. It is mid-morning, and this week he will spend his mornings at the studio finishing his latest screen design, and work the afternoon shift at the printery.

There are big responsibilities in Cam's life. He lives with his partner and twelve year old son. Paying their mortgage is a continual pressure. A printer's assistant wages are not high, and Cam's partner works as a customer assistant in a call centre. Together they just manage to earn enough to keep afloat, but their work hours are long, and there is not much time left for family activities. Life in recent years has been a struggle to gain financial security, and has been pretty stressful.

Work History – Keeping the Art Project Alive

Cam tells his work history as a long struggle to follow an artistic path. Drawing and illustrating were activities he loved and practised from a young age, and then ones he became good at. At school however, he tells me with a certain sadness, he was discouraged by his teachers from pursuing these as a career. When he left school, he did a diploma in science, and then worked as a laboratory technician for a chemical company. Eventually, bored with his job, he recounts a seminal moment when a mentor figure in his life praised his drawings and encouraged him to follow his artistic inclinations. It is at this point that Cam locates the beginning of his conviction to make an artistic career.

There were setbacks. He tried and failed to get into a sought-after design course at a prominent university. Instead, he persisted, and did a more vocationally oriented course in screen printing. As well, he began an intensive program of self-directed learning, teaching himself as much foundational knowledge as he could about painting, materials and colours. During this period he met his partner and they moved in together. The exigencies of life, the need for an income, pushed him into full-time work.

But the imperative of a regular wage did not solely dictate his choice of job. He decided to get a job in the printing industry, because, apart from being available, he could see the connections with his art. There were skills he could learn that would benefit his art practice: in relation to the printing process, the application of colours, the use of technology and in addition, the possibility of making contacts in the industry. It was a pragmatic decision, but strategic too.

For ten years, Cam has worked as a printer's assistant in several printing companies. The realities of this experience have not been as positive or beneficial as he had originally hoped. His account is heavy with the difficulties he has encountered, especially in the first few years. Cleaning printing machines and performing the sundry tasks of the printing process is laborious and, as he has found, thankless. There is a hierarchy within the trade, and the assistant is at the bottom. Cam has had a tough time with some of his bosses. He has been subjected to their authority, and sometimes treated in a demeaning manner.

In addition, Cam notes the job's monotony. Repetitive, mostly predictable, it is a job best survived by thinking about other things. Despite this, he has stayed in the industry out of financial necessity. Also, the routine of shift work has been very useful for him, in terms of flexibility

to do his art. Moreover, somehow, he has continually kept focused on his grander, long-term plans. What is so striking about Cam's experience, in fact, is how persistent he has been and how energetically he has kept alive the art project. Throughout all of these printery jobs, for example, he did indeed attempt to learn as much as he could about his art. He gleaned knowledge, finding useful things within the laboriousness and monotony. Sometimes, when his bosses permitted, he would even set up a desk, studying books on art during quiet times on the shift.

Cam has found a way, through all the difficulties and unpleasantness of working in printing, to make a space for his art. This is one of the reasons he has remained an assistant and not tried to become a printer. He has never had any long-term interest in the trade. It has always been a pragmatic staging post for what he really wants to do. Being stuck in it for so long, however, has become problematic. It is clear that a crucial support, carrying him through, has been a very clear vision of himself as an artist. He has had a strong career story.

Tasting Success in the Art Scene

All the while, outside the hours of paid employment, Cam has been doing his art. His practice includes making posters and silk screen fine art, but also painting, graphic work and street art. Some years ago, he began to sell his work through selected galleries and shops. Steadily, it sold, and he began to be noticed. Eventually he acquired a reputation. Having "a name" is essential in the competitive art scene. Part of the effort in building a profile was doing street art. His version involved pasting up prints of his fine art in specific Melbourne locations. It was "a sort of guerrilla marketing", and it seemed to pay off. His art sold more, and for a while, he was "extremely successful". Money was coming in, not enough to support his family, but it was a good start.

This was a frantic period though, and unsustainable. He was trying to do so much: earn a wage at the printery, be a father, partner, and make his art whenever there was time. Cam says he became manic. To finally be getting his work "out there" was the realisation of a dream, but it brought a great pressure to be productive. In the competitive art scene he says, once you are recognised and have an identity, you need to hold on to your place by continuing to make work. There simply was not enough time to keep producing what he regarded as a necessary output. The multiple demands of Cam's circumstances bore down on him. But broader factors

were also at play. There are cycles within the scene, and it is difficult to maintain one's popularity. Cam eventually experienced a reversal of fortune where it became harder to sell work.

Breakdown

These are some of the factors Cam thinks induced his breakdown. He started suffering from anxiety and getting panic attacks. It became severe. At one point, personal relations broke down at home and he moved out:

> I physically moved into the studio here [where we are doing the interview] I was living here, because I started becoming depressed, because I wasn't actually doing things. The market had been flooded with art and I found that I was losing my place. The main reason for that was I wasn't making enough money to support myself. So I couldn't pursue what I was doing which I love doing, full time. So I just kept on working in the factory, and that led to me not being motivated. And there was a gap there. And I just started being angry and not focussed, which led to me just being angry all the time, and taking it out on [his partner and son]. And not being myself. I was this other person. Yeh, I was this other person. So that led to me moving out of home, and living with a friend, until this [studio] became available and that gave me a little break. And I ended up seeing a psychologist because I was suffering depression because I'd lost my family. And all this work I'd put in, it just wasn't happening.

Cam talks fast. A central problem was, to earn enough money, he was forced to keep working in the printery. This meant he could not devote the necessary time on his art. But as he points out, a deeper issue, one of the real causes of his depression, was the feeling that he was being prevented from following his preferred career path. Cam does not use the word "vocation", but his telling implies it. Not doing what he felt he was meant to be doing was, literally, making him sick.

Cam's description is a powerful one about career and identity. In effect, Cam felt unable to realise an ideal he had about himself as an artist. He was unable to sustain an adequate career story. In this, we can see the close connection between maintaining such a story and well-being. Eventually Cam went to see a psychologist, on the prompting of his partner. He was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. Cam says the sessions with the psychologist helped him "refocus" and eventually "find myself". It was practical too, because he learned "how I could be myself". Later in the conversation, I

tell Cam I am interested in how people think about their future trajectory. He says this topic was one the psychologist also addressed in his sessions:

> *Mark*: It seems like you've got a fairly nice picture of where you want to head.
>
> *Cam*: That's what the psychologist said when he eventually finished up my sessions [. . .] one of the most important parts of my future is my employment. Now if I continue to be a printer's assistant for the next ten years I won't be happy. I have to pursue my goals. And pursue my goals, and keep on going. That's extremely important.

The psychologist advised that having career goals and pursuing them was a key to coming out of depression. The message was that having clarity about one's future path and being able to follow it has *therapeutic* significance. What's more, it is a key to happiness.

What is interesting about this period of psychological intervention is the way Cam learned to reframe his predicament. Cam's account of his work history paints a powerful sense of vocation regarding his art. It was something he put into practice, even if he could not completely focus on it. It also seems that what prefigured the breakdown was not the absence of a goal, but the persistent reality of his financial circumstances, employment situation and time pressures: circumstances not conducive to following his art, and to a large extent, not within his control.

The psychologist wanted him to formulate his desires about art into goals that were measureable and achievable. Through this process Cam says, he could "gain control" over his future. The process involved particular kinds of work – exercises in mapping and planning. He spent time following this advice. It was a demanding project in itself, not unlike some of his previous ventures in self-education. Cam had to articulate in writing his needs and wants, "reassess" his "priorities", and "set some realistic expectations".

A tangible outcome of this process has been a reformulation of his desires for the future. He has a new plan to integrate his need for both income and artistic expression, which is to start a graphic design business. He is going to sell his services, designing things like company logos and websites. Cam is now "very happy" with the project and the opportunities it promises. Planning has been an important part of his recovery and given him a new burst of optimism. Following this new career path, he says, "should fulfil my goals".

The Social Context of Making Art and Recognition

The other thread in the episode of Cam's recovery concerns social relationships. An important factor he cites, leading to his breakdown, was the isolation he felt. Making art is most often a lone project. Not everyone copes easily with it. Cam felt this acutely. His move to the studio space had a positive effect on his morale. He began to interact with other people in his field. It was a significant moment of relief:

Cam: Because I was doing a lot of work just trying to get out there, trying to make a name for myself. My street art name was [V] and I just wanted to show the world hey, [V] was here. I'm [V], you know. But coming here [this gallery] helped me a lot, because when I was suffering from depression all of a sudden I found a space where I could come and meet other artists. Because one of the things which actually caused a lot of depression was, even though I was doing this work and becoming successful, I wasn't meeting people. There was nobody out there, like other artists, people I could communicate with. That's when I found this gallery. . . . All of a sudden I found other artists and I felt comfortable and I could share my work. People knew me and I knew them, so.

Mark: You were feeling isolated?

Cam: Yeh, extremely isolated. Because even though I was selling to people and moving my art I would walk into shops, and "oh the famous [V] is here. I've had all these people talking about your work". But I wasn't meeting these people, you know. I didn't get to meet them, which I really wanted to. I wanted to meet these people, or these customers, and get involved [. . .] There were little art groups happening, but I wasn't a part of that. You know, I'm doing all this work, and I sacrifice my wife and my family, and that brought on a lot, that's why I became depressed. I was doing it, but I wasn't involved in the scene [. . .] But now that I have met people, that do have my work hanging in their homes, I'm a happier person, you know.

The need to have social connections is a strong theme in Cam's story. Addressing this is one of the challenges of making an independent work path. Cam's experience is also revealing about the nature of relations in his art scene. He could participate in it, be "known", but not feel connected to other participants.

One group he refers to are the people who bought his art. For some time, he felt the kinds of attachment he had with these people were solely economic, between buyer and seller. This did not feel right. His desire to meet them, and "know them", tells of his longing to have a more intimate attachment to his audience – the people that appreciate his work. It also reveals something about the objects he produces – they are not just any sort of commodities. Coming to the gallery was important because he was thrown into contact with some of the buyers of his art. People he was finally able to make deeper connections with. The other group Cam was able to meet through the gallery were practitioners. It meant he could feel part of a community of art makers. Alongside the psychological intervention, Cam sees moving into the gallery as an important influence on his healing. In this respect, the "remedy" was a social one.

Threading through Cam's discussion about social relationships within the art world is the important theme of recognition. His practice is embedded within a social context, made up of overlapping groups: consumers, makers and appreciators. This context is "the scene". The connections Cam has been looking for with these groups are also about recognition for what he does. For an independent art maker, these groups are the main source of recognition. How else does one measure "success" if not from the people in the scene? More deeply, this is recognition for *who he is* – for his identity as an artist.

This is to highlight the grounding role of the social context of Cam's work practice. As with Fabian and Enzo, the work context is a place to test oneself and where one is tested by others. It is a place where approval and disapproval are meted out. Before, Cam experienced isolation and a loss of recognition – he referred to it as "losing my place" – and this was a factor in his breakdown. After that, he actively sought to re-embed himself in a network of relations, and the recognition he received has been part of his recovery.

A New Phase, New Effort

My interview with Cam, then, occurs in a period of renewal. Picking himself up after the breakdown, he is addressing some of what he thinks are the obstacles in making a living from his passion. The more "realistic" project of the graphics design business is providing him with a new focus. He has revamped his career story. As we have seen, Cam has always put a great deal of effort into fashioning his career along the lines of his art.

From the start he has been disciplined. He has engaged in research and laying the groundwork. He has been strategic, choosing jobs he thought would serve a greater purpose, even if they did not turn out to be as complementary. And he has been enterprising, from using his time at the printery to work on his art, to being innovative in promoting his brand name.

Following the advice of the psychologist, Cam has been much more conscious about how he approaches his work. He has been trying to find a "new way of being" at work. For example, Cam is trying not to put too much pressure on himself. One thing he learned from hitting rock bottom is that he does not need to prove himself any more. What matters is doing what he wants to be doing. In an attempt to dampen his manic-ness, he is instituting a different approach to time management. Before, doing his art out of hours, he was always trying to squeeze in as much as possible. Now, he is making sure he allocates time for his art, but also proper time for the family.

Cam is also reading self-help books. The business project has called out a range of personal tasks he thinks he needs to work on. He is trying to improve his communication, for example. Years in the printery environment, he reckons, have "degraded" the way he speaks, and he is trying to learn to "not speak as roughly". This is part of a broader effort around self-presentation. From now on, his business will depend on how he sells himself. So Cam is reading books on improving his image – from how to dress to how to engage potential clients. He is working hard to change certain habits.

Cam is feeling more confident and optimistic now. He paints me a picture of the planned graphics design business: the kinds of products he will produce, how he will organise himself. He believes he can make a living from the business if he can "keep on working hard", continues to study the market, and offers the right services. He has taken steps to make it a "phased transition". The plan is not to leave his job at the printery until the business is running well. I get the distinct impression that a very busy and challenging time awaits him, where he will be juggling both these work activities.

There is a lot riding on the new project. Cam really wants to make it a success. He wants to finally address the problem that has been grinding away at him for many years, that of not doing what he wants to be doing for a living. He knows that if it does not work, he can remain a printer's assistant. But, he exclaims, "I'll be miserable".

Taking Stock

Personalising a Social Problem

Before moving on to a contrasting artistic case study in the next chapter, a few themes about Cam's breakdown and therapeutic intervention are noteworthy. One theme concerns the way his difficult predicament becomes a "personal" problem. We saw a similar situation with Rick in Chapter 6. In Cam's case, a few factors could contribute to this. One could be the simple fact that his is an artistic project, and, by its very nature, a highly self-focused endeavour. It is possible that this engenders the tendency to attribute both successes and failures to one's own actions. Given the likelihood of failure, self-blame may be a common consequence. But also, in a more general sense, Cam works for himself. This can make a person more vulnerable to the stresses and strains of maintaining a viable project. Certainly, this is the gist of more general arguments about "making a life of one's own" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Individualised career paths turn individuals in on themselves, and self-blame for failure is a likely correlate (Bauman 2001).

A factor that shapes his thinking most tangibly however, is the psychological intervention. Through the diagnosis of his depression and anxiety, Cam comes to see his predicament as a personal problem in the sense that it relates to his internal psychological makeup. Whether it was the way he pursued his art without clear goals, measured timeframes, or realistic expectations, the cause is found somewhere in his attitudes, perceptions, or conduct. As such, the proposed remedy involves forms of self-rectification.

It is apparent from Cam's account, however, that he has been dealing with essentially objective, external pressures. The need to earn a living and the difficulties of doing so from art, are not forces within his control. Granted, he could choose not to do art. Or he could choose to live on less income. Choosing to pursue both has led to difficulties. But there is nothing unusual or psychologically deficient about attempting to do so – all people interviewed for this study try to pursue both in one way or another. Moreover, if per chance Cam had been more successful with his art then it is unlikely this judgement about his approach would be made at all. It is possible he would, like other successful artists, be lauded as a heroic and unique individual.

The psychological intervention has a kind of individualising effect. It turns a situation with both personal and social dimensions into an entirely

personal problem. Rose (1998) has shown how psychology, as a mode of understanding personhood more generally, produces this kind of effect. Relatedly, psychological models dominate self-help books, like the ones Cam reads. They frame life projects in individualised terms, where success and failure depend on an individual's actions (Brown 2003; Hazleden 2003; McGee 2005).

Psychological Self-Work – Rewriting a Career Story

The therapeutic intervention, including the numerous self-help books Cam reads, is a good example of Giddens' arguments about modern reflexivity (Giddens 1991). Individuals routinely draw on forms of expert knowledge to assist them make choices and determine their paths forward. Through self-work there is a promise Cam will be able assert control over his future – to "colonise" it. But the reflexivity reaches deeper. As I described in Chapter 2, Giddens' notion of self-identity as a project involves a reflexivity not only about how to act, but about how to change aspects of the self (Giddens 1991). Rose (1990) argues that psychological knowledge and expertise is a powerful vehicle for this in the realm of work and career. In Cam's case, he is incited not only to adopt new techniques, but also new attitudes and conduct. Through changing himself, the idea is, he will be able to overcome inner obstacles, fashion a path, and potentially be successful.

The psychological intervention involves reframing his original desires about artistic practice. It aims to resolve the tension between earning a living and doing fulfilling work, by a re-conceptualisation. Cam reshapes his aspirations into something "more practical": not just clear, measurable steps, but different goals. In response to a career story crisis Cam, with the psychologist's help, quite literally rewrites it, writing new goals and plans.

An observation to make about this process is a very interesting tension it contains. On the one hand, Cam is clear that he is involved in changing himself: that the psychological work is meant to transform his approach and thinking. On the other hand, he says the work is a way of "finding myself" and "finding out how to be myself". That is, he also thinks these practical exercises will reveal his "true self". They promise to reveal what is authentic. The tension appears thus: Cam undertakes a process to work on himself, to *transform* himself, but in order to *discover* his "true self".

This paradox can be understood in narrative terms, because it is always present in story-making. As we articulate self-stories (through telling or

writing), we are in certain ways transforming ourselves, because each retelling re-articulates identity. But at the same time, the very impetus of story-making is the possibility of realising an ideal or vision. Each time we judge our story to be good, we experience a sense of authenticity. Cam's case shows vividly that sustaining a career story holds together two distinct and conflicting modes of "writing" the self: transformation and discovery.

On one level, Cam keeps a career story going by rewriting his plans and goals. But this has ramifications for his identity. His aspirations in the art world were based on deeper ideals about being an artist. This is what he felt vocational about. Through the psychological intervention, he has redefined his art, now aiming to run a business in the more prosaic area of company branding and logos. He has, therefore, redefined what he feels vocational about. It seems that even his ideal of himself as an artist, something experienced as essential to his very being, is in fact malleable, something that can be refashioned.

In the next chapter, I examine a contrasting artistic case study.

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CHAPTER 10

Selina – Finding Self-Belief

In this chapter, I look at another artistic project. Selina has been earning an income and supporting herself from her practice for some time. How she sustains this path, and what gives her strength, especially in the face of difficult circumstances, form the main themes of this case.

Unlike Cam, Selina has been making a living from her artistic endeavours for some time. She has a lot to tell about her journey, its ups and downs. Selina's work is unusual. She is a belly dancer. This is her "profession", and she has been supporting herself in it for about seven years. Now in her early 40s, she knows she cannot do it forever, and is starting to plan her next career step. But for the moment, things are going well. The demand for her services is high and, most of all, she absolutely loves what she does.

Selina performs mainly in Arab and Turkish restaurants in Melbourne. Adding to the unusualness of her occupation is the fact that she herself is of Anglo Celtic descent. There are, therefore, cultural differences constantly to be negotiated, both with her employers and the people she performs for. This cultural interchange is a challenge; an exciting one, but also a difficult and sometimes even dangerous one. Selina is one of a handful of women dancing professionally in Melbourne. She is popular and tells me, without arrogance, that she is very good at what she does.

All through our conversation, I am struck by her passion – the way she talks about her work and the many aspects of it that are fulfilling. But her passion and energy also tell another story, of how hard she has had to

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struggle, first to find this path, and second to maintain it. It speaks of the many personal difficulties she has overcome, and of those that still beset her. On the home front, Selina is a single parent with a nine-year-old boy. A few years ago, she went through a divorce with the boy's father and now predominantly looks after him on her own. After the break up, they had to sell the family home and she now rents in a northern suburb of Melbourne.

How Belly Dancing Came to Be

Going back to an earlier period, there was no inkling she would end up doing anything like this. At university, Selina majored in music and English literature. Originally she was aiming for a music career as a violinist. She took it seriously, practising long hours, on the road to becoming a classical performer. For a few years following the degree, she concentrated on practice. But all this came to a halt. The long hours of training were taking a toll on her body. She began suffering severe back pain, an affliction which has continued to this today. There did not seem to be a way of practising without the pain. The main issue though, Selina says, was a deeper anxiety: "I just couldn't perform; I couldn't, couldn't perform." Although having great ability with her instrument, she was paralysed in front of an audience:

> My teacher said to me, look, you're more talented than a lot of people working in orchestras, in the Melbourne Symphony for example, but he said you've got a long way to go. If you're not going to believe in yourself there's no point. So he said, you have to believe in yourself and, yeh, it was just so sad, I realised I couldn't do it.

Selina says it was about self-confidence. She felt she just was not good enough. "After a lot of soul searching", she says, "I thought maybe I wasn't a performer." Being on this road felt like a big mistake. She decided to do the unthinkable and give up violin: "it was agony, making that decision, because I really loved it."

She went back and did honours in English, and then started a Masters. Salman Rushdie's fiction was the topic of her thesis, another love of hers. At one point in the research, she travelled to India to immerse herself in Rushdie's universe. But eventually the project ran aground. There were tensions with supervisors. She wanted to push the boundaries of what they

considered acceptable, and felt stifled by their "unimaginative, conservative ways". This theme – the importance of following your own ideas and path – is a strong thread through Selina's story.

But her old issue arose again, her lack of confidence: "I felt so insecure about academic work and being in the academic world". She could not apply herself to writing or make her ideas materialise. It became a constant personal battle to believe she could do it. About this time, Selina gave birth to her boy and the realities of being a mother took over. The thesis fell by the wayside.

All through university, Selina worked to support herself, mainly in various sales jobs. Jobs she mostly hated. Even though her parents "were comfortably off", they never supported her financially. She says this with a mix of pride and regret. Pride because she has managed to make a life independently. But regret at the lack of care her parents have shown towards her. This is another important theme in Selina's story: the absence of support from her family, not only financially but emotionally as well. They never supported her career choices.

While doing the Masters, Selina started belly dancing for fun. It was an innocent dabbling, but it grew on her. Once, after some time learning, she was asked to do a performance, and had a remarkably good experience. It felt beautifully freeing. She found she could do it well and people responded positively. She continued doing more and it became addictive. At a certain point, she says, something tweaked: "man this is *it*. This is what I should have been doing. It was amazing." More, she realised she could actually do this for a living. Thus began her professional path in belly dancing. For the last seven years, she has been earning a living solely from the dancing.

Reflecting on this with me, Selina makes it clear that belly dancing was something she just fell in to, and in this she considers herself very lucky. With a sigh, she adds, "it's taken me a long time to find what I enjoyed and to actually start to excel at".

Her Work

Selina performs in Arab and Turkish restaurants and clubs, mainly in Melbourne's north. A gig will involve up to three sets during an evening, and stretches over a few hours. The restaurant work is her mainstay, her "steady income". But it would not be enough to survive on if it were not for the private functions. She does weddings, birthdays, circumcision

parties, among others, again for people within the Arab or Turkish communities. She only works at "family oriented" gatherings, and is careful to avoid men-only gigs.

Selina is very busy and does about eight gigs a week. At the moment the work seems to keep coming. Over the years she has built a network of places that employ her on a regular basis. She is one of a handful of woman doing this job professionally, and because she says she is one of the best performers, the owners keep hiring her. The restaurant work is also her mode of advertising – people see her perform and want to hire her privately. It all happens through word of mouth and she does not bother advertising.

The tips are important. Sometimes they are substantial and boost her weekly income. Overall, the work pays well, much more she reckons than an average sales job. On the other hand, her income is very unpredictable and she does not really know how much she will earn from week to week. Moreover her whole enterprise is very precarious. Selina knows it would not take much for the show to fall over. This is a job that relies on her being well and fit. She could get sick or injured for example, or a restaurant owner might hire someone else. This uncertainty is definitely a big worry, palpable in our conversation. It is something she has to deal with everyday, part of the texture of her chosen work practice. Selina manages to keep a lid on the worry, but on her "bad days", it can be overwhelming. But she would not have it any other way. Selina is clear that working for herself is the best option. Being independent and creative go hand in hand. She has found an area of practice she is passionate about, and this overrides the difficulties. It is also apparent, though, that part of her contentment with her career is the fact of having succeeded in surviving independently.

Creativity, Performance, Body

The experience of dancing has been personally revelatory. I noted how Selina was wracked with anxiety about performing the violin. She never thought she would be a performer, but through dance discovered a realm in which it was possible: "as it turned out, I am a performer". In retrospect, it was not about performing per se, but about doing so within an art form that felt "right and true". Selina thinks there is a fit between dancing and who she is. It feels authentic. She says "it's not hard for me to perform; it's quite easy". Dancing is, literally, performing her identity.

To her constant amazement, when she dances her back pain goes away. She thinks it is because of the nature of the movement. Somehow it is relaxing at

the same time as energising. She knows it is also about not being anxious. When she performs there is no anxiety. This is a powerful statement about the relationship between practising an identity in work and well-being. The pain does return at other times though, and requires much management. In this sense, Selina experiences the dancing itself as therapeutic.

Selina has always been creative. The belly dancing has proven to be a rich forum for creativity. She learns new dances and teaches herself music, songs and even new instruments. Recently she has learned to play the zills, Turkish finger cymbals. Also she makes her own costumes, a delicate and time consuming process, but a crucial part of her presentation. Many of the women who watch her perform appreciate her skills.

About Time and Work

Selina has a lot of work on, and her job requires much preparation time for practice, costume-making and research. Being primary carer for her boy and running a house too takes time. Her days are very full and the schedule is tight. She tells me she is the type of person that gets a lot of things done. She also has a habit of being terribly late for appointments, but says so in a matter-of-fact way. I get the impression Selina is mostly at ease with the busyness of her life. Work can be demanding, but it happens in bursts. Overall she has time to do what she wants and seems at home with the rhythms of her job.

Getting gigs can be unpredictable and the need to switch into performance mode at short notice can be difficult. Selina though finds something edgy and exciting about living like this. Our conversation, at one point is interrupted by a phone call from a restaurant owner wanting to book her in for an extra gig:

> *Selina*: You've got all these hard things which a lot of people wouldn't cope with. Like people are ringing you right, like one of the restaurants, you just heard, rang me, but often I'll get maybe half an hour notice. And at first I thought, I can't do that. But very soon I realised you have to do that. And actually it's quite exciting. Cos you get really stressed out, you think I'm not going to make it, and you clean your teeth, you do your make up, you have to have a shower, you know, putting your make up on, and putting your costume on, and which costume are you going wear and if it doesn't fit, and then, the clips are broken or something.

There's all these dramas which sometimes wear me out. But I think I kind of like it too.

Mark: The slight element of

Selina: Danger or something

Mark: Not being sure of how things are going to turn out

Selina: The uncertainty or something, yeh, yeh, yeh. You never know, because you could be feeling shit. And you can go out there and you can have the best gig ever. For some reason you dance amazingly, and you get lots of money. And even just dance amazingly and don't get lots of money, but you know they just absolutely love it, and you loved it, and you loved them. And that's like really rewarding. That's why I like dancing for them because I understand the music you know. Even when people don't understand the music they will understand that you've done something amazing with it. That's exciting.

The unpredictability of this work is worth it; the risk of throwing oneself into a performance is worth it, because the intrinsic rewards are great.

Selina talks about performance in terms of her relationship with the audience. This is her main reward: "I get as much as I give; more, more, sometimes." Her performance, which involves a form of "giving", connects to other points she makes in the interview about being a person that wants to please others, and the satisfaction that comes from giving pleasure.

Learning *with* Other Cultures

Selina has quite consciously made decisions about what kinds of dance to focus on. Unlike most belly dancers in Melbourne, she says she does not do "corporate work". Also, she has chosen not to perform the more common "westernised styles" that are taught in popular dance classes. Instead, she has chosen to practise what she regards as more authentic cultural styles of dance. To do this has required close and careful study, within the particular communities she engages with – Egyptian, Iraqi, Turkish. Most of what she has learned has been self-taught, and "on the job". Her formal training ended years ago, after she felt she had surpassed her teacher. Selina says she has learned her craft "the hard way". There is pride in her talk of having made these decisions, to dance traditional forms, to have taught herself. These choices have brought rewards; richer connections with different cultural groups, and a stronger sense of her own capacities.

There is an ethical dimension to her work. It comes into view when she talks about her interactions with other cultures. This is a key part of the job, and a reason she loves it. Selina is attracted to learning about other cultures. Belly dancing affords her this opportunity. It involves learning not only traditional forms of dance, and ways of using her body, but also the chance to practise these regularly with people from those cultures. Belly dancing has provided a deep immersion where she can explore other cultures in a very practical and immediate way.

An interesting aspect of this is that, through her very careful study of other peoples' cultural practices, she has been able to re-present these practices to them, and fill a need to keep *their* traditions alive:

> I get all sorts of things, like the Iraqis when I go to their houses, they want me to stay for dinner and sometimes I have because I feel like you can't always say no you know. And they just give me all this beautiful food, these different things. All their little home made sweets and, it's just fascinating. And it's an honour and I kind of feel like if they love you that much, and they're so grateful that you're doing it, kind of, and that you're putting the energy into them, and that you're interested in their music. And you know that's the thing. I've taught myself all sorts of dances. Like I've taught myself Iraqi dance as well now. So when I've danced for them, I'll do an Arabic framework, but I'll do one song of Iraqi dancing because it's a little bit different, it's got this basic stuff that you do. And they just die. They do a lot of stuff with their hair, swinging and stuff, and they are so rapt that I can do it, and I can do it a lot better than most of them. And then they're asking "can you teach us, can you teach us, to do this bit".

Selina finds enjoyment in providing others with joy. But also, she has become an authority on cultural practices that, on one level, "belong" to her audience. She is able to teach them something about these practices. Moreover, she thinks she is "innovating" with these practices and can bring something new. There is a cultural reciprocity going on. Selina feels she has been "granted the gift" of their dance.

This ties into her fascination, and ethical stance, towards the importance of "hybridity" and the "intermingling" of cultures:

> I just think there's much beauty in mixing. And there's so much that you get from each other and like there's so much that those cultures have brought to our society. Like I wouldn't have this beautiful dance if they hadn't come here. I wouldn't get this chance.

Selina sees her art practice in terms of cultural and social interchange, in terms of the relationship she has with her audience and the sharing of interpretations.

To continue on the ethical dimension of her work, a central trope in Selina's story is the importance of learning through experience. Her work "is a way of learning about the world". This connects to her personal philosophy of pushing herself out of her comfort zone. Selina often spends time in Middle Eastern bars and clubs, which appear to some of her friends and family as "very sleazy" male establishments; "foreign places", uncomfortable for Westerners and "unsafe" for Western women. But Selina thinks these views are loaded with prejudice. She loves to talk to people about their lives and hear their "incredible stories and struggles". She has found that her work gives her a certain kind of access to people who have had difficult, tumultuous and "heroic lives". Their stories serve as counterpoints to "comfortable white middle class" ways of life. But clearly too, Selina sees their stories as reference points for her own. In some ways, and through her work, she defines herself via her proximity to these groups.

Challenges – Her Parents and Other "Naysayers"

Being self-employed requires fortitude, but especially doing the kind of unusual work she does. Selina has had to summon up a strong belief in herself, in the face of the many "naysayers" she encounters. The most difficult situation to bear is criticism from her parents:

> After you've had your own business you get a bit more arrogant. I think you need a touch of arrogance sometimes, cos there's so many naysayers in the world. I think that's the hardest thing in life, all the naysayers. Like my dad, he says to my mum, they're not even together, but they gang up on you, you know, "why can't she just get a real job". Fuck, I've been doing it for all this time. I wouldn't get as much if I was doing some crappy job that he wants to me to do. But you've got to be strong enough to deal with the naysayers.

She has not had financial support from her family. But at a deeper level she has had a long struggle with them for recognition of what she does. Her dad and brother have never come to a performance. This is a source of sadness because she knows that the dancing career will not go on indefinitely. Selina feels invisible in her parents' eyes: "It's kind of like you don't exist if people won't come and see you. Like, you don't know who I am, because this is me. You've got *[emphasis]* absolutely no idea who I am."

This is a powerful statement about the relationship between work and identity. Her parents' lack of recognition for her chosen line of work, she feels, is equivalent to not knowing who she is. Her identity as a belly dancer is a major part of who she is. Selina says she is "a real disappointment" to her father, who thinks she should have been an academic or followed a more traditional female role. Essentially his expectations are conservative images about career paths for women. Certainly belly dancing does not "fit the mould" of a proper one.

Selina lets me in on her tumultuous childhood, and the difficult relationship with her parents. She feels she grew up trying to please them, especially her mum. She continues to struggle with a pervasive feeling of guilt. It has been, she thinks, the major source of her anxiety and depression. She has been to counselling over the years, first to a psychologist, but more recently to a psychiatrist. She has read self-help books about this too. Selina has put a lot of work into coping with these feelings. It is within these complex personal struggles that Selina's chosen career takes on particular meanings. Her striving to make an independent work path has been tangled up with a deeper struggle for both autonomy and recognition. In this light, we can see that the recognition she gets from her audience is so important.

The Practice of Belly Dancing – Well-Being – Self-Development

Selina has not found the self-help books very helpful. And only some of her psychiatrist's advice has been useful. Instead, she says that the dancing itself has been the vehicle for feeling better about herself. Her work practice has been, as well as a way to make a living, a kind of therapy. Not the least of which because she has been able to prove to herself, and to others, that she can do it. On a practical level, she has been able to live autonomously, without help from her parents. She has been able to follow her chosen artistic career, and found a way to express herself. Importantly, the recognition she has received has been a tangible source of self-belief. In these different ways, Selina's dancing practice has been a grounding activity, and a source of identity. She has been able to sustain a potent career story.

I have noted how Selina characterises her work as a forum for learning. And how she thinks it is important to push herself outside her comfort zone. These themes come together in what seems a general personal

philosophy – that learning and self-development require a confrontation with difficulties and challenges. Her work provides such a forum:

> *Selina*: I find that work, when it's something you like doing, even when you don't want to go, there will be something you'll get out of it. Even if it was a crap night, later on, there will be something that I got out of it. So I think that when you're kind of reasonably happy with a job, even though it has its hardnesses, I think that that's how it is. You do get something out of it. So you're always learning, and I just love to learn, I think that's what it comes down to. I love feeling like I'm learning. I'm learning about other people, and I'm learning not to be judgmental.
>
> *Mark*: You sound like you've got quite an appetite for taking in the world?
>
> *Selina*: Yeh I do. I feel very sad about most things that happen in the world a lot of the time but I think the thing is that meeting people, and hearing their stories, it's actually very inspiring. And it makes you think oh it's worth living. You know despite all the sad things you see, it's worth living, so. And I think my job allows me that. I think other jobs that I've had haven't allowed me that, and I'm the sort of person that needs that.

One can get a great deal from work. Selina selects out the fact of learning from other people: confronting "difference", "learning not to be judgemental", and having exposure to "their stories". Through her social relationships at work, she says she learns to be a better person.

An image she conjures about this is instructive. Selina refers to discovering this job "as a kind of arrival". She refers to her work practice "as a kind of place I can go to". She is saying this not in terms of a physical workplace, but metaphorically, as a space she has created for herself. And because of this, her practice itself has become a forum for self-development.

In the future, Selina might teach belly dancing. In talking about how she wants to pass on her knowledge, she reveals much about the kind of personal development her work has afforded her:

> I think as I get older too I may teach people but, I want to teach people who know how lucky they are to get this. I know that sounds horrible, but I've worked so hard to be where I am, in terms of my own self-development, in terms of dancing, that I kind of want to give it to people who really need it. It's probably more that I'd do it for free for

> street kids or something [. . .] I'm thinking if I've got a small group of girls that came, one of them might end up doing it as a job or, they just get so much self-development from coming to classes because that's what I found when I was teaching, people's self-esteem would really increase. Because people who thought they couldn't do anything, like I'm so encouraging, they actually could do things, and after a while there's things they thought were really hard, some of the ones who were the worst at the start, got to be the best. So it's quite fascinating. So I just think there are people that have had no chance, and I'd like to give them something really good.

What she has, has been hard won. Gaining self-belief has been the main problem she has overcome. Selina would now like to help others, people who are not well off or suffer in various ways. Besides the actual skills involved in dancing, what she really hopes to pass on is a way of gaining self-esteem. In this way, she articulates her work practice as a form of grounding, and a source of security. Selina, in effect, makes links between her ability to practise her identity, to keep a career story going, and a sense of security.

Preparing for the Future

Self-made work paths, especially in a precarious field like belly dancing, require ongoing effort. Selina has to keep reminding herself to stay healthy and look after her body, for example. She knows she cannot keep this up indefinitely. Belly dancing is something one can do into middle age, but up to a point. "How you look" is important, Selina says, and as she gets older people will be less likely to hire her.

Knowing this is coming, Selina has been planning what to do next. She has a fairly clear idea for starting an interior design business. This is something she also loves, and informs me of the creative parallels with dance. Over the years, she has done design work for friends as well as herself, so she is not a complete novice. She has a two-year plan to have it up and running and is starting to develop a website. What is clear is that Selina wants to continue to make an independent career path, working for herself, and make a living from a creative practice. She believes she can do it and does not appear perturbed by the challenge. Instead, she seems excited about learning new things.

Artistic Projects – Themes

Comparing Cam, Selina and Peter

I briefly want to compare the artistic case studies in the last two chapters. Both Cam and Selina have found something they love doing. They are passionate about their artistic practice and this is what motivates them. Moreover, their practice is a major source of identity. Both Cam and Selina are also pragmatic. They are trying to earn enough income to look after a family. They have, in different ways, navigated a compromise between artistic motivations and the need to make a living. Cam has had to work in other jobs while he keeps his project alive. It is interesting to contrast both of these with Peter who, despite realising the need to be business-oriented, has had to partition off his fine art from the realm of money. He has, reluctantly, had to marginalise it.

Having said this, neither Cam nor Selina talk about money as an end in itself. Money is simply a means of support. Neither talks about material security as a goal in itself. This is further evidence that their passion sits at the heart of their motivations, and their identities. But also, both individuals are enterprising. To some extent they have had to become attuned to business and to find ways to sell what they do. Cam's new project is a reorientation of his practice along the lines of a small business. He has not yet experienced making a living solely from his art. Selina has been able to live off hers for several years.

"Success" – Confirming Ideals About the Self

Cam and Selina's cases though are also different. The obvious contrast between the two concerns the issue of "success". If we judge success minimally to be the achievement of work aspirations, Selina's is a success story. She has been able to make a living from her practice for some time. This has had a number of personal consequences. She has achieved independence and has a sense of control over her career – both very important in her own scheme of things. Finding something she loves doing and being able to perform has been crucial in achieving personal confidence and overcoming debilitating anxiety.

In terms of the elements I first identified in chapter two with Cath, Selina has been able to carry off a career story which provides direction, is

meaningful, and gives her control. This is not to say that all is well or that she does not experience any insecurity. Compared to Cam, Selina's job is essentially very precarious, as is her financial situation. Being a single mother, too, increases her vulnerability. But Selina feels a sense of career security because through her work she has been able to sustain a good career story. Through her practice she has confirmed an ideal about herself as a performer.

Cam is yet to achieve "success" in this way. He made progress selling his art and gained a position in the art scene. But he has not been able to make the transition to making a living from it. He is still working in a job he does not want to be in. Cam's story could go the same way as Peter's. Or he might succeed like Selina. A key factor in Cam's breakdown was the issue of not being able make his art practice the centre of his work life. He felt he was being prevented from his vocation – in other words, prevented from enacting his identity as the artist he believed himself to be. This triggered a crisis of confidence and literally made him sick. In these comparisons, I am not attempting to explain why Selina has succeeded or why Cam is yet to. I am suggesting that, by her own assessment she *has* succeeded, and this is consequential for her feelings of security and confidence.

Social Relations in the Contexts of Artistic Practice

Another theme in both their stories concerns the social reference points that they have for their practice: the arts "scene" for Cam, and the different ethnic communities for Selina. One group of relevance is the other practitioners. Cam, for a long time felt, isolated. He felt better when he was able to be part of a community of art makers. But he also realised that the field in which he worked was competitive and fickle. It did not take much to lose one's place. In Selina's case, she started out learning from teachers and mentors. But the dynamics of her field and the competition between dancers has meant she has not formed close relations with them. Her isolation causes her disappointment, but does not prevent her from operating effectively. It may even be a motivating force.

Key social reference points for both however are their respective audiences. Cam wanted a closer relation to his. Until he did so, he felt isolated. When he was able to make deeper attachments with the consumers of his work, he felt better about what he was doing, and this contributed to his recovery. Selina has come to know her audience intimately. This attachment to her audience is a primary source of intrinsic reward. From her

audience she learns about their cultures and is inspired by their stories. Moreover, she gleans new knowledge the dancing – her actual work practice relies on this interchange.

But this attachment is more than just a source of reward. I have tried to show how in both cases attachments with their respective audiences provide a form of grounding. Cam and Selina feel like they are part of a community. A close connection to an audience can provide stability; an absence of one can make the artist lose their way. A crucial ingredient here is recognition. Their respective audiences are a source of recognition for what Cam and Selina do. Who else will provide feedback? How else can they judge their progress? The audience even determines whether they can make a living. Recognition from the audience is thus an important part of how Cam and Selina judge the adequacy of their current career stories – helping determine whether they are living up to their ideals.

Postscript – On Going It Alone

In the last four chapters, I have examined stories of people working for themselves, making their own career path. In some sense, these individuals are exemplars of the worker depicted in the new careers picture. Perhaps it is not surprising that work is central to their self-identity. Working for oneself requires that one makes work a central activity and personal project. Working alone is also individualising. It brings the self into stark relief. Both success and failure feel self-generated.

We have seen that, for these individuals, success comes from being able to carry off their projects. But the sense of career security that emerges must be seen in terms of the way they are able to sustain a particular career story, one that confirms particular aspirations and ideals about themselves. To fail to sustain a career story, as happened with Cam, and threatens with Enzo, produces career insecurity.

In terms of career story-making, then, these projects I have examined are fragile. Individuals have to put a lot of effort into creating structures for themselves, in comparison to individuals who work in organisations. They have to create and sustain their connections and networks among clients, colleagues and audiences. Their different social contexts – the "scene" for artists, and the market for entrepreneurs – can be seen as layers of social relationships, which solo-workers have to work hard to embed themselves within.

These individuals' vulnerability is also about their *dependency* on their contexts. Of course, all individuals in any form of work are dependent on their social context in some way. But solo-workers are particularly reliant on clients, colleagues and audiences for recognition and for a sense of belonging and attachment; in short, for forms of grounding. Solo-workers are thus heavily dependent on connections and networks they themselves play a large part in creating and sustaining. This also highlights a contradiction in terminology. Solo-workers work for themselves and pursue their own paths, but it is a mistake to see them "on their own" or free from dependency.

In the next two chapters, I examine these themes with two individuals in the middle of a career transition.

PART IV

In-Between Places

CHAPTER 11

Sharon – Discovering a Profession

Career transitions are full of tension. During these times our work identities are uncertain. We become acutely aware of our career stories as they are called into question by ourselves and others. To borrow from the anthropology of ritual, these are liminal periods (Van Gennep 1960 [1908]). We are "in-between" places. In this chapter I explore Sharon's story. She is leaving behind an occupation and other unsatisfying jobs and now taking up a more meaningful profession in psychology. We catch her in the middle of a transition. Part of the richness of her account comes from her continuing struggle to find fulfilling work and to achieve independence. Her story shows well that searching for a career path is also a search for a *framework* for her identity and thus sense of career security.

Sharon is 28, and rents a house with her partner in an inner suburb of Melbourne. I interview her in the midst of a long and complex transition in her work journey. She is embarking on a new career path in psychology, a change of direction after working in a number of corporate roles. This is a time of mixed feelings. She has completed one phase of her studies, and is trying to choose a speciality within her new profession. She is also wrestling with deeper issues that have shaped her past work life. To understand her relief and hope, but also her uncertainty and anxiousness, it is important to sketch her work history.

Sharon grew up in a large regional Victorian town where she did a degree in business and computing at a local university. It was not her first choice, and was largely influenced by her father. He, a local doctor, well

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respected in the community, had for many years dissuaded Sharon from pursuing her primary interests – dancing, gymnastics and drama – as possible avenues for a career:

> At the end of year twelve, I was at a point, well I can even remember discussions I had with my folks you know where you're starting to choose your subjects and you need to know what you want to do. And I was one of the people who I guess had some ideas but just felt a little bit in limbo about what to go for. At the time I felt I had no idea, but in hindsight I had some really strong preferences. But in conversations with my parents, my preferences weren't approved of. And I think when you're that age, you're influenced strongly by your parents and you don't know it. You're affected by it and you think ok, I better not do it.

Her father cautioned that her interests were "not something that's going to get you anywhere in your life". He urged her to take a "pragmatic view" of her career and to choose a respectable profession. He emphasised making herself attractive to employers, and aiming for financial security. And with all of this, he exhorted the value of hard work. Sharon reluctantly complied. A strong theme through her story is the struggle she has had with this chronic pressure.

When she finished her degree, she worked for a well-known accounting firm in Melbourne as an IT consultant. Working in a small team, her role involved designing software to manage the tax reporting functions of large companies. In hindsight, Sharon thinks this situation ironic: "because all through high school I hated IT and I thought I'd never spend my day behind a computer". Her experience of working for the firm bore out her original inclinations. She hated it. In addition, the hours were long, the work was stressful and she felt out of her depth.

A large part of her dissatisfaction concerned social relationships. For one thing, Sharon felt nothing in common with her colleagues:

> I was really, really unhappy. And I ended up getting depression, that year. Because, I suppose a number of contributing factors, but I hated going into work, I felt so foreign going in there. Because I was young and I was really energetic, and I was around this team of older people who I just felt like worlds away [. . .] And there were just loads of little things, loads of differences like that where I just felt no kind of connection with the people there. Plus I didn't really enjoy the demands that were placed upon me either. I just had moved to a new city, I didn't really know anyone, and

> I found that I'd try and organise to go out with a group of people, you know the one social thing that I would have to look forward to for the week say, and someone from Sydney office would call me at five o'clock and say you cannot go home until this is done. And I'd know that it was going to take me two and a half hours and I was going to miss the one social thing that I had to look forward to. So it was just really difficult. For a lot of different reasons.

Sharon also felt a deeper isolation. It was an important period. She was living independently for the first time, in a new place, and needing to make social connections. Her busy work schedule was dominating her time, undermining her social life.

Sharon experienced a bout of depression, which she says was induced by her unhappiness at work. Part of it was about not finding connection with other people – both at work and more widely. Another part was about feeling she was not in the right line of work. Both of these are persistent themes in her account, and both reiterate the important link between feeling that one's career is "right" and well-being. After a year at the accounting firm, she quit.

To recover, Sharon travelled overseas for five months. It was a "mental health break", she says, and it helped her "remember what was good about life". When she got back she decided on a job with more "people contact". She continued to look for jobs in the human resources field, submitting many applications. But nothing came of them. Changing tack radically, she took a job in a gelati store which was part of a large franchise. It was different and fun at first, but then she accepted responsibility to manage one of the stores, and the hours and workload increased. She also found herself caught up in a nasty management culture. She was getting stressed and exhausted, felt her depression returning and after a year decided to leave.

There followed a period of trying to get a job in a human resources area, again without any initial luck, but also doing short-term contracts in offices while she looked. A permanent job for another large management consulting firm finally came up. This one promised a more "balanced" work life than her previous roles. Plus, it was an opportunity to join a fairly prestigious firm. But history repeated. The job turned out to be extremely intensive, with long days and frequent interstate travel. She had "no time for herself" and "no social life". She felt isolated, which was amplified by the fact of living alone. This job lasted less than a year.

It is around this period that Sharon locates her resolve to make a more fundamental change. She realised she had to pursue something more meaningful. Her interest in health and people's well-being and her own experience of depression led her to do a post-graduate course in psychology. It offered a range of possible pathways in "health-related" areas.

At the time of our interview, Sharon had recently completed the course and feels good about her achievement. She is planning to jump to an honours year but has eight months before it begins. All through this study she has been supporting herself in a range of casual jobs. These jobs offer experience in areas of psychology she might pursue. She has been doing some research at the Children's Hospital, working as a therapist with a boy with autism, and doing a low-level nursing role in a brain disorders unit of another hospital. In addition, she has been doing volunteer work.

Patterns and Motivations – Reasons for Becoming a Psychologist

Sharon's career trajectory marks out, in concrete form, an important pattern. One element concerns the sheer busyness she tends towards, best exemplified by her current juggle of study and jobs. Displayed here is her pull towards working hard, throwing herself into jobs. No doubt her work ethic has several sources, but one is the force of pragmatism – the importance of being employable and seeking material security. As we have seen in other case studies, this expectation reflects a powerful cultural norm. In Sharon's case, it is entangled in the edicts of her father.

Another element is the way these phases of immersion are punctuated by a breaking off, through becoming stressed and unwell. Literally her body telling her to stop. This cycle evinces her struggle with the chronic pressure to makes choices about work for reasons of employability and material security. But also, it is evidence of a more fundamental dissatisfaction with these priorities. At some level, these priorities continue to force her in directions that prove unsatisfactory. Her deeper struggle is to find a line of work *she* really wants.

Sharon's decision to set out on a new career path, a profession in psychology, is a major intervention in this struggle. She is addressing her strong desire for "more meaningful work". It is an attempt to turn

aside the force of pragmatism. How she defines what is meaningful emerges from her critique of previous jobs. I ask her about choosing the "health field":

> Yes, with health, I felt like at the end of the day, I was contributing to something meaningful. Like people's standard of living or you know how well people are enjoying their lives, quality of life, and something that had [. . .] a bit more substance than how much money the business is going to make [. . .] Like a lot of the professional services [the consulting work she previously did], the bottom line is that it's all about the dollar and the business that they're pushing.

Doing something more meaningful is being able to help people in a tangible way, as opposed to assisting a company make more profit. This was in fact one of her original motivations to go into the human resources area. She had thought "it was going to be about people's welfare". But the realities of corporate life proved otherwise. Often, her role involved finding ways of "getting rid" of employees for employers, for reasons that were seldom fair or sound. Most of the time, she laments, the real reasons were that the particular employee did not "fit in", or had a different "personality" to that expected within the organisation's culture, rather than underperformance. Gradually, she became disillusioned with HR and the role she was playing.

This also connects to the value Sharon places on "diversity". In the organisations she was contracted to, much was made of official policies about "respecting diversity" and valuing employees as individuals. But, she says, "in reality this was rarely implemented". One of the attractions to psychology and to working with people on an individual level is to understand their unique characteristics and problems, to truly value their differences. Meaningful work for Sharon thus has this ethical dimension. Through her work history, she has had a persistent ideal about helping people.

Sharon has also chosen a path in psychology because she feels, from her own experience, she has something to offer:

> When I went into psych, I sort of thought I'd like to be in a role where I'm helping other people and contributing to the community in which I live. So after being sick and having had that experience I sort of thought well, that experience will help me because I'll be able to use what I've learnt and that kind of thing. So that's kind of been very related.

In this way, Sharon has been able to turn some of her suffering into a positive attribute, a resource to draw on. Even a potential source of authority. At a basic level, she realises that being in a helping profession like psychology requires empathy. I wonder too whether Sharon's desire to have connection with others also plays a part in her decision. Here is a realm which brings her into intimate contact with people, and with their private concerns.

Current Difficulties and Worries

The new direction promises fulfilling work, but the road is still rocky. With her current situation, she is frustrated about the jumble of her casual jobs which "are not working out". She feels "all over the place". There are too many bits and pieces and each one entails working sporadic and unreliable shifts. Often they clash. Holding these different activities together is exhausting.

Sharon realises she needs to ride this situation through for another eight months, when she can begin her honours year. But she cannot help feeling unsettled by the "mishmash". She wants to have predictability and routine back in her work life. Also, not having a steady income does not sit well with her. It is fuel for the resurfacing of the voice of-pragmatism. Some days she just wishes she had "steady ongoing employment" again.

There are other challenges in her new profession. A major one concerns which area to focus on. Sharon is interested in a variety of areas, but she will have to decide on one. She is thinking about "heading towards the developmental educational psych area". She is also interested in social psychology. And through her work with kids, she is considering the "child adolescent and family clinical area". But the thought of specialising in this kind of work, in private practice, "could be a bit full on". Sharon is concerned about her capacity "to be working around people where there's no kind of light at the end of the tunnel".

Trying to weigh up her options, Sharon is "finding it really hard to know which area to go into". One of her telling phrases is about "leaving doors open". For example, Sharon wants to keep open the possibility of an academic track, and wonders whether to aim for a PhD. The phrase is useful for characterising her situation more generally – she is balancing her desire to invest in something that promises to address her values and ideals, with the equally strong wish to retain other opportunities.

On one level, her new professional path provides some clarity and resolution – but doubts about what will transpire still infuse her deliberations:

Mark: You've obviously decided you want to be a psychologist of some sort?
Sharon: Yeh.
Mark: So it's providing a kind of framework for viewing your future?
Sharon: Yeh, at the moment. At the moment. But I am quite worried about finishing honours and starting a role and doing that for what, six months, and finding that it's not something that I'm either good at, or enjoy. I'm quite worried about that. But that's why I'm doing these casual jobs to suss the different areas as I go. So I know what area to go into. But you know it's a constant source of anxiety or worry for me because I'm not entirely sure. I just think oh "what if"? The old "what if I get to that and it's not going to . . . "
Mark: What's the anxiety about?
Sharon: Well it's about finishing psych, working in psych, and having that not work out.

Only "at the moment" is her path providing some form of framework. There is a nagging uncertainty about whether this career path will indeed turn out the way she hopes. She is actively trying to address this however by exploring some of these areas with the casual jobs. But because the jobs are proving unreliable, she is not getting any clear indication.

Work and Life Trajectory – "I Feel Like I'm Failing"

Talking about these worries and challenges leads our discussion into deeper anxieties. Sharon desperately wants this next phase to succeed – to have a fulfilling job, as well as one she can settle into for a long time. She is self-conscious about her work history:

> I feel a bit ridiculous about my CV, having chopped and changed between so many different things. Like I've got like a year here, six months there, six months there, a year there, and six months there.

This feels like her "third career". I ask why this is problematic:

Sharon: Probably just because of what I perceive society expects. So it's this typical Gen Y thing. Where a finger is being pointed, you know look at you, a typical Gen Y, you've had all this fragmented work

history, you know the old, you're uncommitted. You're only interested in work-life balance. You're not going to put in the hard yards, all of that you get fed from the other generations. Yeh, it's funny [. . .] I feel like when I apply for jobs now, I feel like I need to explain my work history. And I assume that if you've got the choice between me and another applicant for a job and we've both got the same skills and experiences but the other person has been in one less role but for longer in each role, that they would be chosen. And I wonder if employers or managers look at my CV and wonder well what's going on with this person. Their work history has been really fragmented and they've done this and that and it's all over the place, what's going on with her.

Mark: But you don't feel that about yourself? That's just a worry that people are going to judge your CV by?

Sharon: No I think I probably feel that about myself as well. I think that's why I've got the feeling that other people will be having that feeling too.

Sharon worries about how prospective employers will judge her career history. After working in human resources roles, she knows well how some of them think. But this grades into self-critique. I can hear her father's voice breaking through.

Her mention of what "society expects" is important. She feels the weight of cultural norms about career:

Mark: You mentioned insecurity. Do you feel insecure at the moment about your work situation?

Sharon: I feel like I don't have any independence. And I have these moments where I feel like I'm failing [. . .] So there's all these things that society says that, you know if you're financially independent, maybe you had a partner depending on your age, well I'm 28 and I should have a partner, and I probably should be married and should be looking at having kids, because that's what most people do. Yeh, I just have these moments when I feel like I'm deviating quite a lot from that. And I'm not successful, because I'm deviating from what normal people do. That type of idea.

Sharon thinks she is "deviating" from the "normal" course – the clearly directed and unified career that other people her age, including a few of her friends, seem to have. This is why they are "successful". Compared to

them she measures up badly; her career is "really fragmented". She is *off course* regarding the normal trajectories of adulthood more broadly. At this point, she should be family-making, or at least have certainty about it. Instead, she has not even begun.

In our conversation, Sharon steers away from talking about her relationship with her partner; I do not probe too much. In any case, work and career seem to take centre stage in her planning at the moment. Sharon wants to be financially independent. The present "mishmash" of jobs is destabilising, hampering her ability to be independent. Perhaps this is about feeling she does not have the same kind of control over her situation, compared to past periods, where she successfully supported herself.

New Ways of Thinking About the Future

These are some of Sharon's challenges and difficulties. Even with this new path, which holds out the promise of bringing together elements of a meaningful work life, she struggles with a range of doubts. One thing her current studies seem to provide, however, is a way of dealing with and navigating these doubts. When we talk about the future I ask whether feeling insecure with one's career path might simply be about the uncertainty of the future, something everybody faces. Sharon's response is instructive:

Sharon: [pauses] Yeh, maybe. I'm not quite sure. Because I know it's quite important from my own studies, to be able to see yourself in the future. And to see yourself as doing well in the future. And not being able to do that, is linked to poor mental health and that kind of thing. Whilst I think that my mental health now is pretty good, I think about the whole future thing, and I would prefer that I didn't have the feeling of being uncertain about my future. Because I know that I have that. Because I think about it.
Mark: Do you think you have control over your future?
Sharon: Yeh, definitely.
Mark: How much control do you have?
Sharon: Yeh, I think I have a lot of control over my future.

She is learning how important it is to see herself "doing well in the future". Her current studies are thus pertinent for her own situation. Some of her psychological knowledge concerns how we imagine the future and relates this to well-being. This point is useful because it states, from the

perspective of psychology, the importance of having a clear view of the future for feelings of security.

Sharon mentions having "a lot of control". It is clear she is taking on board the messages of her studies – actively trying to adopt a positive view. An implication is that this new knowledge promises a certain power to intervene in the future. It teaches her that we have the power to shape where we are going by our *thinking* – the positive power of mind. In Giddens' terms, her psychology studies promise to help "colonise the future", reducing its uncertainty (Giddens 1991).

Self-Work and Change

When I ask Sharon what she does to exercise control over the future, she tells about her personal work seeing a psychologist. This is something she needs to do as part of her training. It is immensely helpful as well, she says, "helping me to learn more about myself and about the assumptions I'm making and whether or not they're necessary, and why." Sharon believes that by dealing with the "less positive feelings I have about myself", and by working to modify aspects of herself, she is effectively taking more control over where she is heading.

This squares with a deeper set of beliefs Sharon has about people's capacity to learn and develop, and "to change things about themselves" over the course of their lives. She and her partner have an ongoing heated "debate" about this point. He thinks, by contrast, that people should not try to alter themselves but accept who they are. It is a pivotal issue for Sharon which clearly animates her. She, for example, is "constantly interested in the feedback" from her sessions with the psychologist and very proactive in using it to change herself in whichever areas require it:

Mark: So do you feel like you're consciously working on yourself?

Sharon: I think I have this overarching idea that I'll always be interested in any of the feedback I get [. . .] and considering it and how it works for me and whether or not I'd need to change something about my self. Like I'm always open to that. And in terms of whether there are things I'd like to change about myself right now, um, there are things that I'm aware about, that I don't particularly like all that much and I know that, well I think about it in terms of my upbringing, and how I was programmed. And, so yeh there are things there that I don't really like.

I ask Sharon what is involved in this process:

> I use the feedback that I get from my sessions with my psych [. . .] I have this space to take anything that's on my mind to her and discuss it with her [. . .] Then it's something that I've got in my bag to remember for next time. And go better next time I'm in that situation. And I assume that lots of different circumstances come up if you're employed and when you're in a working situation. I definitely think that your personality and who you are as a person can effect how successful you can be in a working environment.

Clearly, in relation to this last point, Sharon's previous roles have sensitised her to how well people with different personality types "fit in" to organisations, and the consequences of this. On this, she is consciously trying to make herself more employable. She is working on herself, trying to be more "well balanced", somewhere in the middle of all the "different dimensions" involved in measuring personality.

All this self-work shows the extent to which Sharon is reflexive about her actions and interactions, and the way she uses psychological knowledge to shape her practice. The specific insights she gains in sessions are tools and resources she can apply to the next situation. Sharon says she has "made a commitment" to this personal work. As a new form of thinking and acting, it has been revelatory. Perhaps this is the most salient way her new profession provides a framework of knowledge and guidance. It provides a framework for working on herself. It is a *discipline*, in the proper sense of the term; a way of shaping one's own conduct. Through this discipline, Sharon can practice a new identity as a psychologist, someone who is an authority on the dynamics of personhood and who can help others.

To Be, or Not to Be, One's Work?

Talking about some of the insights she has gained through her new discipline, Sharon is keen to inform me about a particular point. It is an important prescription she is trying to adopt concerning the place of work in her life:

> *Sharon*: In terms of a personal identity perspective, the challenge for me at least, is not to define myself in terms of my work. So I think that it's really important to have a sense of who you are

as a person. And for that to be continuous regardless of what work you do. I think that happens a lot in society generally because we define ourselves by what we do, and as soon as there's a failure, for example if you define yourself as a mum only, and if your kids get to an age where they move out of home, well you're not that any more. You can either be left with loads of other things, but if you only define yourself through one means then you're left with nothing [. . .] For work, for a career. Like you're *not* what you do. Who you are is *not* what you do.

Mark: Is that something you've recently thought of?

Sharon: Yeh, yeh. And I don't know how well I'm going to go at *not* defining myself, *not* doing that, defining myself as what I do. Because you do take your personality to work and you know you are who you are at work and wherever you go. So its a bit fuzzy. But it's good to have a clear sense, coherent sense of who you are as a person and that being separate from what you do.

The larger promise of her new discipline is concerned with helping people (including herself) make a "clear" identity for themselves – a clear "coherent" sense of themselves, distinct from their work identity. Some of the self-work Sharon mentioned in the previous section was aimed exactly at this.

But this brings up a perplexing tension within the framework she is adopting. On the one hand, Sharon is quite consciously shaping herself for work, taking on new thinking and conduct as part of becoming a psychologist. For many reasons, this is an attractive proposition. But the tenet she refers to above, also from her studies, is that it is unhealthy to define herself in terms of work. I suspect part of the attraction with this almost opposite proposition is the idea that her self-worth need no longer be tied to the expectations of others, including her father's. Quite rightly, she wonders how to prevent such an identification.

Sharon is drawn in opposite directions: to invest herself in a professional path, and thus a new work identity, but also to *divest* herself from the constraints of such an identity and definition. The question is: to be, or not to be, one's work? One of the attractions of the new profession, and the framework it provides, is that it validates both options.

Reflecting on Sharon

Resolving Tensions

A series of related tensions shape Sharon's account and, in each case, her professional path in psychology offers a resolution. Through her career, there has been a tension between the force of pragmatism and her desire for meaningful work. The pressure to be pragmatic reflects a powerful cultural norm about career success. We see this operating in the comparisons she makes with her friends. Sharon tends to interpret this pressure in more personal terms – as the voice of her father and his "controlling" attitude. She has deeply internalised his message to work hard, attain a respectable career (like his) and be financially secure. In this latest phase of her career, however, she has resisted his message and reasserted her "own needs". The career path in psychology is something *she has chosen,* and feels more authentic. It is a victory in her struggle for independence.

The tension between the pragmatic and the meaningful is also about a deeper conflict between ideals. Among other things, becoming a psychologist promises to reconcile these. Since psychology graduates are employable in many areas, the path offers good prospects for material security, for becoming an expert and for doing ethical work, helping people.

In narrative terms, this tension between ideals is about different ways to judge her career story. We saw a similar tension in Rick's story, connected to two different work identities he held to. The figure of the psychologist brings coherence to these ideals, by embodying both simultaneously. Sharon now has a potentially good career story.

Possible Selves

Sharon's deliberations about competing aspirations and ideals provides a window on how she thinks about the future. Each of these proffer different career choices. However, these choices do not appear to Sharon so abstractly as clearly competing ideals, but in the more fluid form of different possible projections of herself in the future. A useful image is provided by Markus and Nurius (1986), who call these "possible selves". Possible selves include the ideal selves we would like to become – in the manner spelt out by Kohut (1971) and adopted by Giddens (1991). But possible selves also include the selves we simply *expect* to become, as well as those we *fear* becoming.

Any particular individual's horizon of possible selves are the "cognitive manifestation of their enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats" (Markus and Nurius 1986, p.954). As such, they provide guides for action. Sharon's possible selves include the successful career self, the materially secure self, but also the self that does meaningful work helping others. And she can imagine many variants in between. Sharon's feared possible selves also motivate action: the childless self, the dependent self and the peripatetic self.

Career transitions can be thought about in terms of possible selves. Ibarra argues that in transitions we experiment with possible selves, practising new potential identities (Ibarra 2007). Sharon's deliberations about what to specialise in in psychology is an example of trying out different selves – the academic psychologist, the family counsellor and so on. Experimenting with possible selves equates with trying out different ways to continue a career story.

In addition to incentives for action, Markus and Nurius argue that possible selves also function as an "evaluative and interpretive context for the now self" (1986, p.962). This is very close to the point I have been developing regarding aspirations and especially ideals. Individuals judge the worth of their career story in terms of whether it addresses their aspirations, but especially their ideals. Possible selves personify these various aspirations and ideals. These latter elements are thus transposed into a shifting gallery of possible selves – each of which provide a different reference point by which to judge one's current story. In Sharon's case, entering the field of psychology means being presented with a range of possible psychologist-selves. Each one a different reference point from which Sharon can judge her present story.

The notion of possible selves thus also provides a useful way of framing the complex conceptual relationships between values, aspirations and ideals, as well as the problem of determining which of these elements are more important points of reference for particular career stories. Values and aspirations, as well as expectations and fears, all manifest cognitively as images of possible selves. Some of these possible selves are desirable and therefore function as "ideals". Moreover, desirable possible selves need to be seen as fluid and shifting potentials, rather than as static ideals, as individuals experiment with different identities.

In the next chapter, the concept of possible selves proves useful in making sense of another transition story.

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CHAPTER 12

Fran – Between Unemployment and Vocation

In this final case study, I look at another "in-between" situation. Fran is struggling to find a meaningful career. Unlike Sharon, she has not been able to identify a practical avenue or context within which she can do good work. Her account vividly portrays the difficulties of finding an organising framework.

Fran is 33 and single. She currently lives in Brisbane. When I interview her, she is visiting Melbourne, the city in which she grew up, and spent some of her work life. Fran finds describing her employment situation a bit tricky. "Mostly unemployed", she says, but also "a little bit self-employed". Calling herself unemployed does not capture the many things she is currently engaged in, both for necessity and interest. Two days a week, she works at a city permaculture farm in Brisbane. This is part of her obligation to the government for receiving social security payments. The farm was her choice because she wants to explore permaculture as a career. She is also "dabbling in lots of different things", exploring various potential sources of income, including making baby clothes to sell at a market, doing life modelling and working as a masseuse from home. None of these, she admits, are sustained endeavours yet, nor have they generated much income. She has been dependent on social security.

Fran originally trained as a nurse when she left school, and after a few years of working in hospitals, decided to have a break, to travel and pursue other interests. She became interested in dance as well as massage, and did courses in these areas. Her intention was to continue nursing part-time as

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a source of income, but the dance "just took over". She decided to devote herself to it. This new route in her journey included doing an Arts degree in dance performance. She completed the degree two years ago. Since then, however, the going has been rough. She has not been able to find paid employment in the dance area. For various reasons, she has also resisted returning to nursing. Fran has been trying to explore a range of possibilities for meaningful work.

Feeling Stuck in This Place

Following her passions has been a difficult journey and has brought with it new insecurities. As yet Fran has not been able to decide on an avenue to pursue. As this exploratory phase lengthens, finding a way forward is becoming urgent. Mixed in is a creeping despondence. Her continued reliance on social security is also making her feel bad about herself:

> Particularly in the last two years since I finished study, I don't have a big focus. I think my self-esteem has dropped from not working and having direction. I think the main thing at the moment, well I don't feel good being on the dole, I don't feel very good self-esteem. I want to get off that, but not just get off that, I want to work. I do want to work and [. . .] I mean I've studied in this and this and this, now its time to work and get out there and so, yeah. I'm not feeling comfortable with that, I feel a bit of guilt from being on the dole and I know its not helping me grow.

Fran strongly wants to be back "out there" working again. Not that she is idle – far from it. Her current regime testifies to her energy and initiative. But she feels a strong pull to be part of the social world of work, to perform the daily public ritual of making a living and engaging with others. Fran is feeling too insular. "I think it would be good to be out there, relating to people, with whatever that brings, you know the difficulty and the enjoyment", she says.

Noteworthy is Fran's way of assessing her situation. She speaks about "growth" and sees her predicament in terms of self-development. Several times through the interview she makes reference to the importance of "growing". It is a kind of master value and imperative. She sees work as intrinsically linked to this process. At the moment she is frustrated with her situation: "I'm not really growing, just staying, stagnating, so it's time to challenge myself."

Looking for the Right Work

What is Fran looking for? Unsurprisingly, having a reasonable income is one factor in her considerations. She wants to buy a house one day. But for the most part, she wants to live simply. "I'm not interested in living an affluent lifestyle", she emphasises. Her prime aspiration in relation to money is financial independence. It is an important drive and one amplified by her current single status. This latter issue seems to induce some anxiety in our conversation. Fran worries about not having found a partner by now and this comingles with her concerns about work. There is pressure to gain financial security because, she believes, relationships are fragile and she does not want to rely on anyone. In this sense too, being dependent on the dole jars with her; it erodes her self-esteem. "I know it's not healthy for me to not be independent financially", she tells me.

What Fran is searching for but cannot yet find is the *right* kind of work. This is her main struggle. It is the reason why she feels without "focus", "direction" or "clarity". By the right work, she means work grounded in something meaningful and addresses her needs. This includes a reasonable income. Part of the struggle is about engineering some kind of resolution or combination of meaningful work and money earning. This struggle has been evident in the other cases I have examined in this thesis. In Fran's case, she is stuck trying to determine how much "meaningfulness" can be reasonably expected from paid work. What expectations should she have about her career? This comes up, for example, when she talks about dancing as a basis of employment:

> I think with direction, I lack long term goals and, I mean, I know what all the different aspects I want to be in my life. I want to be dancing in some way, whether it's in a workplace or whether that's just for myself, for my creativity to perform and choreograph, for *my* pleasure. So I suppose there's been questions of why I've done it, is it just for me, for healing, or is it just my passion that I just keep for myself? Or do I want it to be my work? So there's ambiguity around that, but I want it to be a big part of my life. There's other things, too, I want to be part of my life. So in terms of long term goals and direction, I want them there, but I don't have very clear visions like, right in ten years I want to be living here, doing this.

Fran is clear about some of the activities she wants in her life, like dancing and massage, which are creative and pleasurable. But what kind of place

should they occupy? Maybe she should reserve an area for them, partitioned off from work? Or, can she construct employment goals based on them?

This is a little window on the complex issues and questions involved in her future imaginings. She wants to be engaged in certain activities, but to elevate these to central work activities would mean also being able to imagine practical employment scenarios. She can't do this ("I lack long term goals"). Moreover, a key issue here is a judgement about values. Which should weigh more: pleasure or making money? Her struggle to find answers to these questions is one of the reasons the current period seems to have dragged out for so long.

Vocation – Wanting "Ethical" Work

There are other values in her considerations. For Fran, the right work also needs to be ethical – it needs to contribute to greater purposes. "I do feel I have to contribute, everyone has to contribute to society, to community, and give back", she stresses. Although she believes she is doing as much as possible at the moment, she is not truly contributing. Life feels "self-centred" without the "commitments" contained in doing good work. Good work pulls one outward.

Fran feels deep down that her work should be about "helping people". This was a reason she originally went into nursing. But through that experience she became disenchanted with the "medical model" and "giving out pills". Mainstream medicine seemed to be about "disempowering people". In the realm of health, Fran has turned to natural therapies which she thinks get to the deeper "cause of the problem" and are based on the idea of helping people "heal themselves". Her critique of the health field contains a message about her underlying ethics – a kind of ethics of self-responsibility. For Fran, helping others is about helping people take responsibility to help themselves become autonomous and not reliant on mainstream experts.

Contributing to the community and helping people – these are activities Fran wants to be at the centre of her work. She also wants to find a way to use her skills. She is good at "making things", good with her hands and "problem solving and designing things". "I am a doer", she continues, "I've got the energy to do things and make things happen." She also believes she is "good at communicating with different people", something that emerged while nursing. Her values and skills are

important aspects of her identity. They are things Fran has to offer, and feels "vocational" about:

> I'm not as clear as say, I'm not going to be Mother Teresa, but, I can't settle for a supermarket job. Somewhere, I don't know if that's clear enough [struggles] I do feel like I have a vocation, but I don't know that I necessarily know what it is, if that makes sense. Because I feel like I have these skills and from where I am, have this awareness that whatever it is, helping people, that I wouldn't have done this if I didn't have some purpose. Does that make sense?

Interestingly, her use of the term "vocation" evokes both older and newer meanings. She has a *sense of vocation*, much like the original sense of being called; called to use her skills and enact her values. But she has not yet been able to find *a vocation*, in the sense of a particular occupation or job. She has not found a practical work context to realise these skills and values.

It is apparent that her sense of vocation does not refer to something outside herself, but is a desire to express something within herself. This observation gives some clues to understanding Fran's quest and predicament. She is trying to find a meaningful career path – one within which she can express what she has to offer. Her search is full of gravity.

Structure – A Coherent Career Story

Fran longs for "structure". "I want structure", she says, and also "I'd like there to be structure in my week." She is willing to continue pursuing a variety of jobs and activities. But she wants there to be a shape to her time – a routine. Having to constantly figure out what to focus on each day is tiring and stressful.

There is a related meaning to her use of the word "structure". She wants an organising principle, which will give her activities some unity and clear purpose. Being able to articulate what she is doing, and where she is heading, will help her make sense of all the bits and pieces she is engaged in. Thus, Fran is trying to make a coherent career story, one that also expresses her sense of vocation.

Another connection can be made with the idea of "growth", which interlaces Fran's account. The work she searches for is one that provides a context for "growing" and "developing". Good work is a forum for self-

development. Fran talks about wanting to "focus on working at something that challenges". Doing work that is deeply engaging, and that throws up difficulties that need to be overcome, is how one can "get better at something". But more, it is how one develops as a person. Fran wants her career story to also be a story of self-development.

Too Many Interests

Fran's current situation started out as an exploration to find a more fulfilling career than nursing. She originally chose nursing because it was one of the few occupations she was presented with as socially legitimate: "I really had a very narrow range of things that I believed I could do or were suitable for women." Her school promoted a "pretty conservative" approach to this issue, and was slow to adopt more progressive views about occupations for women. Doing nursing was "a socially acceptable thing" to do, and "it was secure".

After a few years working, she realised these "limitations" and wanted to explore other things. Thus began her experiment to "expand herself". Primarily the dancing, which she took on as a serious project. Then massage. But also gardening and food production, crafts, making clothes, alternative medicine, music, drama and radio production. A persistent hope has been that many of these activities can somehow be brought together as part of a coherent project: "I'm trying to find a way, is it possible that *all* these things could be my work?", she says.

An unforeseen consequence of expanding her interests has been feeling drawn to too many possibilities, too many possible selves. "My difficulty has been, because I'm interested in lots of different things, I'm not focussing on one, you know, I'll do one and I'm not fully absorbed in that", she says. Each area pulls her in different directions. Moreover, she is aware that to be "truly good" at something, or at least to get better at it, one needs to concentrate on it:

> You do a bit of this, a bit of that and everything, and you're not consolidating anything. To be good at something it takes dedication in one area. I mean I think it's good to be broad, different skills. I've learned lots of things but, I mean if you want to be an expert at something or really move ahead in terms of, whatever, making money and gaining skills and expertise, you do need to consolidate something.

Fran aspires to be "great" at something. But she has found it hard to choose what to focus on. This is a struggle between two values in particular – variety versus depth. In terms of ideals, it is a choice between a well-rounded self and an expert self.

Cutting through this, Fran has a persistent feeling she has not achieved enough. She articulates the cultural expectation that by this age she should have achieved more:

> I'm 33 you know. At the moment, I have a feeling of not having achieved that much, or consolidated much in anything. So every now and then I think of nursing and think well if I'd stayed in that, where would I be? I know I didn't do that so that's okay. On the one hand I'll say that, but there is that thing of I would like to achieve and consolidate some things in the next few years. I think I would feel better.

The cultural pressure to be good at something in particular is strong. Like Cath and Sharon, women of a similar age, Fran judges herself negatively in terms of her progress regarding achievements and life timetables. With no clear way forward, her situation is taking a toll. She is frustrated and anxious. I ask her how she thinks about time:

Fran: Well my first reaction was that there's not enough time, and I get frustrated with that. I want more time in the day, because with all this work stuff, part of it is [emphasis] I want to do everything! I want to be in that, and I want to be in that and in that, I am interested in different things. So, frustrated that there's not more time so I can do it all [. . .].

Mark: Do you think about the future a lot?

Fran: No. Probably more just think of the short term. Yeah. I think I avoid the future in terms of long term.

Mark: So you're thinking in terms of where to next?

Fran: Yeah. I do think of the long term, you know, every now and then think, come on where do you want to be? Do you have a vision? Or do you want to be someone with a family? But I think I avoid it, because it brings up too much anxiety that I don't have it all plotted out.

Comparing herself to others, Fran thinks she should be clearer about what to do. "I suppose I feel frustrated that it's not clear, that obviously other people do have things more plotted out, and they have their long term

goals; they know." Unlike other people, she thinks, her problem is that she *really doesn't know what she wants*: "I'd like to make decisions and really know what I want." Importantly, these deliberations about what to do are also about identity ("do I want to be someone with a family?").

Overwhelmed by Many Considerations

Fran's search for direction in work is embroiled in many considerations. She is searching for a path that accords with her ethical values, that is challenging and creative, and that can provide a reasonable income. She is searching for a path that addresses her sense of vocation. She is feeling the pressure of cultural norms about career success, including the opposing ideals to be well-rounded, and to be "great" at something in particular. All these values and ideals jostle for prominence in the form of different possible selves.

In addition to all of this, Fran's deliberations are tangled in other life questions: where to settle down, for example? Brisbane is her current home, but Melbourne has more opportunities. Any decision, she thinks, will affect her social networks as well as the possibility of finding a partner. Deciding on what to do next involves "weighing up" the costs and benefits of different avenues. This is a kind of risk assessment – but it involves weighing up incommensurables – different values and ideals, different possible selves. She tells me that the process is "full of anxiety".

Inner Obstacles

We have seen how Fran's point of reference tends to be her "inner" self. This is apparent in various ways. For example, she sees that her difficulty choosing a path is the result of internal obstacles. A key one is "fear" of commitment:

> A big one is fear with me, fear probably to commit to these areas and also fear that its not the right thing, so not trusting myself that this is what work I should be doing at the moment. And I don't mean should in terms of expectations, I mean what I need and what is good for me.

Although Fran mentions some external factors like the availability of relevant employment, she ultimately characterises her struggle in terms

of inner impediments. She talks about other obstacles like her inability to trust herself and her "lack of self-esteem".

Moreover, the frame is therapeutic. Fran feels an imperative to overcome these internal problems. Changing her situation comes back to things she needs to do to herself, things she needs to fix up – forms of self-work and self-improvement. In addition to learning to trust herself, overcoming fear and working on self-confidence, she mentions practising to be assertive and becoming self-disciplined:

> I mean things like procrastination and fear or being under-confident. I have to be assertive with all those, when those thoughts come up or feelings come up and just say nah, no more, just do, get out and do it. Be my own, a bit like a coach [. . .] I've got to be more disciplined.

Earlier, I noted her ethical values about self-responsibility – about the need for people to help themselves. Fran applies this to herself forcefully. She wants to be her own "coach". There is an intensity to this declaration, part urgency, part frustration, at not having made more progress on these inner matters. As her experiment to find meaningful work becomes more difficult, the terrain of her effort becomes her own self.

But like we saw with Cam and his therapeutic work, the desire for self-transformation coexists with a desire for authenticity. Through self-work, Fran is not trying to *become someone else*. Although she talks in terms of self-development, self-improvement and self-rectification, she does not want to fundamentally change herself:

> I don't want to be a different person and personality, I don't want to be compromising. It's important that I'm myself. That's another important thing about where I end up working. Yeah, feeling I can be myself.

The goal of this personal work is in fact to become more true to herself.

Key Themes in Fran's Career Story

Summarising Fran

Fran is in the midst of an extended career transition. Since leaving nursing, her various activities, studies and bits of work are experiments with different possible selves (Ibarra 2003). But it is a transition which has not

reached resolution because she has not found a possible self to settle on. This is a source of her worry and insecurity.

It is important though to reiterate Fran's strength of character. To a large extent, she is in this position by her own choosing. She could go back to nursing (although this would now require some retraining) but wants instead to craft a more fulfilling career. She persists with this risky exploration. Her willingness to keep going shows she still has hope and exemplifies the sort of independent, critical and questioning person she is, one who is not prepared to just accept social conventions about careers.

A Good Career Story – A Possible Self

Fran's search for a line of work that will draw together all the fragments is a search for a coherent career story. One of the striking things about her account is her clear articulation of some of her needs and skills. She also has strong values and ideals – about helping others, and contributing to the community. They provide grounding and a kind of compass. This is what she expresses when she talks about a sense of vocation. Her account gives us some clues about how contemporary vocation might be experienced. She feels "called" not from the outside, but from somewhere within herself. It is in relation to these inner elements that she judges the adequacy of her career story. In sum, a good career story is one that organises her skills and interests into a coherent whole. And it is one that addresses her needs, values and ideals.

Unlike Sharon in the last chapter, Fran has not yet found an occupation or line of work which will organise and realise these inner aspects of herself. I have suggested that Fran's crisis can be thought of in terms of her inability to settle on a possible self – an image of a self to aim for. She is still caught in exploring many. Without a tangible possible self, she does not have a good career story.

Therapeutic Self-Work

As it was with Cam, the paradox of therapeutic self-work is transformation in the service of authenticity. Fran wants to work on herself, to change aspects of herself, in order to become more true to herself. Although it is not possible to detail what Fran actually does here, and what effects it has (this would be a study in itself!), it is possible to proffer an interpretation. If Fran's search is about settling on a possible self, then the therapeutic self-work can be seen as

a way to facilitate this. Among other things, for example, the therapeutic work involves "identifying" those values and desires that are difficult to realise in practice (in Cam's case, to modify them). It involves revising conflicting desires to bring more internal coherence to the self. Essentially then, this work is about articulating new possible selves. Although I can only speculate, this is how Fran is trying to write a good career story.

In-Between Places – Coda

In the last two chapters, I have looked at two case studies about being in a career transition. Sharon and Fran are "in-between" places, searching for a framework to organise themselves. As part of this, I have suggested the usefulness of the idea of possible selves. Career transitions are about experimenting with possible selves.

Both woman are trying to make a coherent and adequate career story. In part, this is about trying to settle on a possible self – a concrete image of a self that accords with a range of different values, aspirations and ideals. An image of a self that in turn will drive a career story.

In a similar way to the individuals who were "going it alone" (Chapters 7–10), these individuals are also searching for structure and a framework, but to some extent are in a more difficult position because they have not yet been able to establish a practice, although Sharon has begun to practise being a psychologist. Being in-between is thus a place of vulnerability. It makes Sharon and Fran turn in on themselves. They are both exposed to personalising their problems and seeing themselves in need of psychological self-rectification.

In the next, final chapter, I summarise my key findings from all the case studies.

Reference

Ibarra, H. (2003). *Working identity: Unconventional strategies for reinventing your career*. Boston: Harvard Business School.

PART V

Conclusion

CHAPTER 13

Career Security and Keeping a Good Career Story Going

Career stories are the way we make sense of ourselves in work through time. Through them we interpret our present, past and the way forward into the future. In this study, I have emphasised the future dimension – the ways people imagine their futures in career stories. The future also plays a prominent role in the present. We make sense of present circumstances in terms of our aspirations and ideals. Our hopes function as reference points for evaluating our situation. Through them we determine whether our actions and practices are worthwhile, or whether we feel "on track".

I have drawn on and extended Giddens' productive link between biographical narrative and ontological security (Giddens 1991). Applying this to the realm of work, I have described a distinct kind of security, which I call *career security*, which is a subjective sense of security, related to our career stories. I have explored how career security relies on a person's ability to "maintain" a career narrative. Through a range of case studies, I have shown in detail how some individuals actually do this in practice: the judgements they make regarding a good story; the ways in which career stories "carry" particular work identities; and how stories address values, aspirations and ideals. I have looked at what happens when individuals encounter problems with their career story, or when it runs aground – how they respond, experiment with new possibilities, reorganise and rearticulate their stories. I have looked at how a sense of career *insecurity* results

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when people fail to maintain a career story. Through a close examination of particular cases, I have been able to put some flesh on Giddens' skeletal conceptual framework.

Important findings were the ways different social contexts of work shape the story-making process. Social contexts matter. I have shown some of the ways contexts provide "resources" for keeping a career story going. This connects to another important finding: we make our work identities in practical contexts; different contexts allow us to practise identities in different ways. In this final chapter, I bring together the key findings from the study.

Job Stability Is Important, but Not Decisive for Career Security

The sociology of work literature grants a pre-eminent place to job and employment security as a basis for a person's sense of security in work. In my study, I also found that having a stable job and steady income are important sources of security. But I also found other significant sources of security, other forms of what I have called *grounding*, including individuals' relationships with colleagues, their actual work practices, their expertise, their symbolic membership of the organisation, their identification with occupational communities and the social recognition they receive for their work. In terms of shaping career security, job conditions were only one factor, and often not the decisive one. The above-mentioned broader forms of grounding were important in terms of being resources for career stories. Among other things, these aspects of work functioned as ingredients for stories, and material for possible "plots", helping individuals make their own story plots. Thus, they were sources of career security.

The case of Selina, for example, showed that it was possible to have a strong sense of career security, even in the context of a very precarious work situation. Her career security derived from having successfully practised an occupation as a belly dancer. It was obvious she had to work hard to maintain that situation. And it was uncertain how long this sense of career security would last. However, it was clear that her career security was tangible, and that it was explicable in terms of her ability to maintain a strong story. Selina's case demonstrated well that to understand career security we need to look at how career stories are made and sustained, and

that the factors which shape these are broader than job or financial conditions. This was evident in all case studies.

The Duality of Career Stories

The notion of career that I use in this study draws on the idea of the "subjective career" used by Chicago School sociologists and symbolic interactionists (Goffman 1961; Hughes 1937; Stebbins 1970). Here, career is a personal schema through which an individual interprets their trajectory in an area of life, like work. Importantly, through the frame of career, a person understands their social identity in that realm of life. But the perceptual framework itself is made through the social interactions and relationships the person is embedded in. Goffman (1961) referred to this as the "two-sidedness" of the concept of career – as both an institutional product and individual construct. This duality was evident in the career stories in this study.

The notion of "career story" builds on the Chicago School approach, but gives the career schema narrative form (Savickas 2012). A career story is the story we tell ourselves, and others, about who we are in work; it is the way we articulate our work identities. Career stories, like career schemas, exhibit the duality Goffman speaks of. We actively make a career story, in an ongoing way, modifying it in response to new circumstances, and at the same time, our story is shaped by these circumstances. As Ricoeur (1991) reminds us about narratives of identity, we are always trying to create concord from discordant experiences in life. Thus our stories are always in process, continuing to change over time.

The case studies evinced well these dimensions of career story. Career stories changed over time, and were the product of both individual interpretations and the social context. In particular, by identifying the social resources that individuals drew on to fashion their stories, and at the same time, the ways individuals actively used these resources, I have tried to show how this duality of career stories operates in practice.

When Career Stories Become Visible

Most of the time we are not aware of our career stories (Stebbins 1970). They are part of what Giddens calls "practical consciousness", the tacit knowledge through which we make sense of reality (Giddens 1984, p.4). However, we become aware of them at particular moments when called to

articulate them. The interview situation is such a moment – and the stories I have presented are based on a prompting, a call to "account". More generally, our stories become salient in consciousness at turning points (Stebbins 1970) or fateful moments (Giddens 1991). Events like losing a job, for example, expose and "reality-test" a person's career story.

In this study it was evident that the more individuals were embedded in strong routines, the less they were aware of their career story or did not think about it much. It was only raised as an issue occasionally and not with particular force. Light-heartedly, Tina told me she had not thought about her career at all recently. Melissa was so focused on her current role that the future was an open book. Neil, however, was more aware of his story, a result of his recent experience of being a contractor, not knowing his future, but then getting a secure position. Rick's case showed powerfully the way a career story moves from the tacit realm to the realm of acute consciousness, through the abrupt destruction of previous routines.

Being embedded in routines – but routines that the person was comfortable in – played a part in holding career stories below consciousness. By contrast, individuals who worked for themselves, who were not embedded in deeply grooved routines, had to address their career story more consciously and more often. Fabian, Enzo and Cam, for example, were all preoccupied with questions about "where am I going next?" They experienced more story crises. This was loudly amplified for Sharon and Fran, who were going through a major career transition. During such a transition, clear routines had yet to be established. Sharon and Fran were hyper-aware of their career story – it was the centre of their attention because they were focused on reconstructing it.

A Good Career Story – Vision, Endpoints and Desired Selves

It was apparent in the cases I examined that, for a sense of career security to be present, the person had to feel their career story was a "good" one. I found that a number of conditions had to be met for this to be the case.

All interviewees in the study told their career stories in ways which located their present work situation within a career trajectory, which had a history and a future. They engaged in this basic form of ordering events in their lives, making what Habermas and Bluck (2000) call temporal and causal coherence. The interview itself was an occasion where participants

were called on to articulate their career story in a unitary way. But the case studies showed that individuals attempted to construct a unitary narrative in a more substantial sense of having a *purpose* to their story. This is what Habermas and Bluck (2000) call "thematic coherence".

I found that a fundamental way in which a story had a purpose related to its endpoint. Individuals in the study needed to feel their story was leading to something they wanted and desired. A good story had to be built around a vision of some kind – a vision in which their aspirations were realised. In the cases I examined, I found that endpoints were important for specific reasons. Firstly they provided a sense of movement. This theme I originally detected in the case study on Cath. It turned out to be a particularly powerful theme for all cases. Everyone I interviewed wanted a sense of movement and mobility in their career. They did not want to be standing still or "stuck". The meaning or purpose of the movement was couched in a number of ways including: professional development, personal development or increasing material security. A good career story was one which conveyed this sense of movement and development.

Relatedly, endpoints were important in terms of the imagined destination. People needed to have the impression they were moving to a desirable destination – a way of working and living, and a way of being. It could be centred on a particular job or organisation. Or it could be based on a particular lifestyle and family situation. Usually both of these were present. Most interestingly, I discovered, this desired destination was also about *a kind of self* the person wanted to be. Endpoints took the form of ideal selves – desired forms of what Markus and Nurius (1986) call "possible selves".

In several cases, for example, where work occupied an important place in an individual's life, they projected their sense of movement in terms of professional development and they imagined themselves becoming a particular kind of person: the highly skilled IT manager, expert policy analyst or successful entrepreneur. Where aspirations were not work-centric, prominent desired selves reflected this: for example the reliable helper, good communicator, competent homemaker or engaged parent. Good career stories projected movement towards one or more possible selves which people desired to become. Sustaining a good career story therefore meant sustaining a story that led to a desired self.

In these specific ways, endings provided the career story with shape. These cases confirm Kermode's (1967) argument that to have a sense of a story's ending is to know its meaning. Different endings retrospectively

structure the events depicted in the story, turning some phases into low points and some into climaxes. The conclusion structures the narrative.

The Absence of Planning

A crucial caveat to this is that sustaining a story with a desirable endpoint did not mean interviewees had a clearly planned future. None of the interviewees, regardless of their situation, or how confident and secure they felt about their career, were clear about the path ahead. Their career future in terms of its specific content, to varying degrees, remained opaque. Instead, a sense of control and security hinged on having a desired image of themselves in the future, and a sense that their current experiences confirmed they were heading towards that destination. This is what sustaining a good career story requires. This finding is at odds with much of the career literature on future planning, which connects a sense of control to having clear plans. A sense of control and career security was evident where there was no clear, articulated or even conscious path forward, but where, instead, there was a sense of movement towards a desired possible self.

Good Endpoints – Holding Together Various Aspirations and Ideals

A starting premise of this study was the recognition that people want a range of things from their work, like money, financial security, status, recognition for their skills and, of course, interesting work. Through their career any individual continually navigates competing wants. This range of wants is reflected in their *multiple* aspirations and ideals.[1] Career stories therefore need to address this amalgam of aspirations and ideals, some of which exist in tension with each other. It was evident in the case studies that a good career story was one which could address a number of aspirations and ideals. Towards the end of the study, I introduced the concept of possible selves, which I suggested was a way of conceptually capturing this complex story endpoint. The story endpoint was a particular possible self. This possible self had to be broad enough to embody different aspirations, but narrow enough to be tangible and realisable. A good career story was built around such a possible self.

For example, Cam, Peter, Selina each had a very strong conception of themselves as artists. They felt vocational about their artistic practice. Economic and material aspirations were important, but subordinated to their artistic ideals. As long as they were able to sustain their career story as artists and make a living, they felt confident and secure. But when, at particular moments in their careers, they were forced to prioritise pragmatic economic goals, a personal crisis was provoked. We saw how Cam had a breakdown, in part due to not being able to satisfy his artistic desires. His career story was built around a view of himself as an artist. In effect, he felt unable to address his ideal as an artist. Peter did not report a similar personal crisis, but the same interpretation applies. He had been chronically despondent about not doing what he loves for a living.

A Career Story Carries Multiple Identities

In a related way, a career story carries multiple identities, not just one single work identity. This goes against the characterisation by the Chicago School sociologists of identity related to "social role". In this study rather than treat identity as a "thing" I have followed Jenkins' (2008) notion of *identification* as a process. The case studies showed that each individual has multiple identifications in the context of their work. In other words, their career story carries multiple identities. Moreover, a career story carries identities not tied to or limited to the work arena. Examples included individuals seeing themselves as a good communicator, a leader, a helper or a risk-taker. Extending the previous point, a good career story is built around a possible self that embodies various important personal identifications.

A Story That Is Justified

In the case studies, I found that a good career story, and thus a sense of career security, was dependent on the story feeling justified to the individual. The notion of justification here links personal expectations to broader cultural norms. I found that in most cases individual expectations about their career story were influenced (but not determined) by cultural images about "normal" or successful career paths.

In Cath's account, I identified several implicit expectations she had about her career. My hunch was that these functioned as implicit criteria for her judgements about a good career story. Two stood out regarding

life timetables and having control of one's career. Cath felt her career (and biography) needed to conform to a particular timetable. In the last case study, we saw how Fran also experienced shame about failing to conform to a "normal" career itinerary. She also felt this about not meeting broader biographical milestones, like partnering and having babies. By contrast, Tina's confidence was partly about being "on track" – having had a child, and feeling on the way to a secure and comfortable lifestyle. A good career story was one where the person felt justified about their current work situation in the scheme of a broader personal career itinerary. And this also meant that the person had successfully negotiated cultural conventions about a "normal" timetable.

Cath's story also highlighted the importance of feeling in control of her career. She felt a great pressure to be in control, which she thought she was failing to live up to. This pressure reflected a broader cultural norm about individuals being able to shape their lives according to their will. Sharon, still in the midst of uncertainty about her career path, also expressed shame about not being in control. Rick too, after his retrenchment, felt this way. By contrast, Britta, Rita, and Neil, felt in control and thus confident about their careers. A good career story was one that felt justified in terms of the amount of control the person felt they had over their career; and this involved the person successfully negotiating cultural conventions about "being in control".

Sustaining a Good Career Story

I found that interviewees sustained a good career story in two main ways. The first was when, through their work experiences, the individual was *able to substantiate their current career story.* This effectively meant being able to substantiate the important identities carried in their story. In their work, they were able to practice these identities. All the individuals working in organisations, except Rick (who had been retrenched), displayed this. In her daily work, for example, Britta was able to confirm her identity as a good communicator and interlocutor. Rita confirmed hers as a good organiser. In different contexts, Fabian was able to verify his identity as a risk-taking entrepreneur, and Selina as a performer. To elaborate, substantiating particular identities through practice meant individuals were able to confirm the aspirations and ideals their career story carried. They could confirm they were, or were becoming, a desired possible self that embodied these qualities.

The second way was when the individual's work experiences jarred with or contradicted their current career story. But in this case, they were able to adequately *modify* aspects of it. That is to say, their work experience in some significant way challenged the identities carried in their story. Here the person experienced a crisis. But the individual was able to rewrite their career story.

The process of modifying stories is extraordinarily complex and I was not able to capture what actually happens via interviews. What I did learn was that people first altered more immediate aspirations, and only attempted to reshape longer term aspirations the more their story appeared to be in crisis. If the crisis was very acute, even deeply felt ideals themselves were up for modification. I found that the notion of possible selves was very useful for understanding this process. Modifying aspirations and ideals can be seen in terms of looking for a new possible self to base a career story on.

Selina for example gave up the notion of being a violinist after a career story crisis. Some time later, she rediscovered herself as a belly dancer. She was able to draw on an aspect of her previous identity as a violin *performer*, and continue her identity as performer in the different field of belly dancing. Modifying her story in this example is equivalent to finding a new possible self to focus on. But it is one that has some relationship to a previous possible self. Cam continued his story as an artist, and as a person who could make a living from his art, by finding a different possible self to aim for. He shifted his goals to becoming a commercial graphics designer. He believed that this new possible self was still congruent with his early project to be fine artist. However, as we saw, rewriting his career story involved radically reshaping some deeply held artistic ideals.

These were the two ways that individuals were able to sustain a good career story. From this they derived a sense of security about their careers. When they were unable to do so, they experienced a personal crisis, and a sense of career insecurity resulted. Rick's retrenchment threw him into crisis. His identity as an engineer, long in the making, was tied to his identity as a member of the brewing company. Outside the company, what was he? Enzo's situation challenged his identity as an entrepreneur. Fran's challenged hers as a creative, ethical worker. In all these cases, the crisis manifested in terms of the disappearance or dissolution of a previously stabilising possible self. And the resolution lay in finding a new possible self to base the career story on.

Contexts of Work – Being in a Large Organisation

People had different experiences of sustaining a good career story. Without homogenising their unique circumstances, some common features could be identified. I found that the social context of work played a crucial role: different work contexts shaped story-making in particular ways. Through the study, I found that a useful way to understand the role of the social context of work was in terms of the kinds of *resources* it provided for stories. All individuals made and sustained career stories. This was an *individual* task, part of everyday actions, choices and practices. But the key resources for stories that I identified were not individual but *social*. In this sense, the social context of a person's work practices played a fundamental role in their story-making and thus their experience of career security.

The case studies in the first section showed that large organisations provided certain forms of "grounding" for individuals who were working in them. I grouped these in terms of places and paths. Organisations were places within which people *made and practised certain identities*. They were places where people were embedded in social relationships of cooperation and competition, and particular routines. They were simultaneously symbolic places, places of belonging, attachment and obligation. Therein, individuals navigated various identifications attached to their membership and to their work roles.

As mentioned, in each case study, these identities were multiple, overlapping, valued and not necessarily confined to work. Examples include: Rita the competent organiser and helper; Rick the engineer and loyal organisation member; Neil the fixer and team player; Melissa the leader; and Britta the good communicator and interlocutor. Thus the organisational context provided resources for individual story-making.

Although these resources mostly functioned at a tacit level, it was clear individuals did not experience them passively. Individuals could use them to validate or challenge an existing, unfolding story; or importantly, reject the resources on offer through the interpretive lens of their story. For many years, Rick was able to practise his identity as an engineer within the ambit of the brewing company. He was able to appropriate the organisation's resources to sustain a particular professional story.

Organisational contexts also provided another kind of grounding – possible pathways into the future. Pathways are resources for story-making because they are ways in which individuals can imagine the future. They

are possible trajectories. This is to say, they are possible ways current narratives can continue to unfold. But also, because of the dynamic, open-ended nature of self-narratives, pathways are resources for reconfiguring stories, by providing new plot lines. In identity terms, pathways are ways in which current identities can be validated. But they also proffer other possibilities and variations.

Via places and paths, then, organisational contexts provided potential resources for individuals to make career stories. These resources were "grounding" because, by assisting individuals in the task of sustaining a good career story, they were consequential for career security. This is not to suggest that organisational life was experienced unproblematically, as many of the cases attested to in one way or another.

A key feature of the resources provided by large organisations was that they operated below the level of consciousness. As an illustration of this, I found that participants in the study who were currently working in a large organisation felt confident about their future career trajectory, even though they were not clear about what they would be doing or where exactly they were heading. In their current situation, the question of career path did not figure as a problem to be addressed all the time. They felt they were on a path, but the path was implicitly part of their place within the organisation. The organisation provided it. As noted earlier, these individuals did not have to consciously think about their career story as much, as was the case for other individuals in this study. They did of course think about it and their future, but it was not an issue always in question. From day-to-day, they did not need to modify their career story much unless something dramatic occurred.

This provides some explanation for the point about planning and control raised earlier. Individuals who worked in large organisations had a sense of control over their paths. But this was not the result of conscious planning or decision-making. It was a result of having organisational pathways, implicitly or explicitly, as options. The individuals felt in control, even though in a sense, this was due to the organisation shaping some of the plot to their story.

Career Security – The Stability to Imagine Possibilities

An aspect of this implicit sense of having a pathway concerns the critical relationship between stability and mobility. These individuals had ongoing work and a stable income, but still felt restless. They assumed their work

would keep evolving and changing, that there would be movement through different roles, jobs and organisations, and that they would develop themselves personally through their work.

This reveals a fascinating aspect of the experience of career security for these organisational people. I will formulate it in the following way: career security means stability, but not in the sense of standing still or being static. Because as we have seen, a sense of movement is so important. Career security means having a solid place to stand – a place from which a person can imagine and explore many possibilities. Not having career security means not having this firm grounding. Even though that place is grounding, the person does not feel tied to or "stuck" in that place. A sense of career security involves a feeling that one has many options and that one can keep options open.

Contexts of Work – Working for Oneself

In contrast to those in organisations, individuals who work for themselves experienced their careers, as well as their sense of career security, in different ways. These individuals were in a situation more closely resembling that portrayed by the new careers picture, as well as by theorists of contemporary life like Giddens, Beck and Bauman. These individuals were making a working life "of their own", on their own. They had to expend more *effort* creating structures for themselves. They needed to create routines for organising time, and social networks for organising relationships. In this sense, they had to make a "place" for themselves. Moreover, because these structures had to be maintained, individuals had to continually work on them. This was in marked contrast to the individuals in large organisations.

For example, Cam, Fabian, Enzo and Selina all spent significant time and effort creating networks of contacts for their practices. This included finding potential clients, collaborators, mentors and other service providers. These practical and logistical issues are a well-known aspect of working independently or running a small business. But a more profound personal consequence concerned the issue of social recognition. Everyone in any work context needs recognition from others, to affirm aspects of identity. In the cases of people working for themselves, this recognition was more mediated and unreliable. This was because the social networks through which recognition flowed had to be continually sustained. Individuals who worked for

themselves were not as thickly embedded in sets of pre-existing relationships compared to those in large organisations.

These individuals also had to create structures that provided pathways. Working for themselves made them acutely aware that the progress or forward momentum of their career was very much conditional on their own efforts. They had to continually make choices and judgements not only about their work tasks, but about "what to do next", and where to take their project. Their pathways were self-generated. In effect, compared to those in organisations, these individuals had to make their own organisation. They had to *organise themselves.*

In the study, I drew out some ways working for oneself shaped career stories and career security. The primary difference about self-employed individuals was that they were more aware of their career story. They were aware of actively making it, and that it was something dependent on their actions and efforts. As with the other cases, the structures that grounded these individuals' work projects can be seen as resources for their career stories. But because these structures were self-generated, and required constant effort, they were also more fragile. This was reflected in career stories. The career stories of self-employed individuals were more vulnerable to changes of fortune and unforeseen events. I found that individuals who worked for themselves were more prone to anxiety. As noted above, career *insecurity* arose when an individual was not able to confirm or successfully modify their story. For these self-employed individuals, the realities of their work practices posed constant challenges to their story. Thus, their sense of career security was also more fragile.

However, this did not mean a strong sense of career security could not be achieved. Selina, for example, had a strong vocational career story as an artist, even though her situation and occupation was more precarious than many others. Part of the strength of her story was the way it carried deeply held beliefs about herself more generally – as a performer, as independent, as creative, for example. Being able to sustain a career story meant affirmation of these aspects of selfhood.

As noted, what was common to self-employed individuals was they were more aware of their career story, and it was more open to question. The view that one's story only occasionally comes to light when we experience "turning points" (à la the Chicago School sociologists) does not apply to these workers. Individuals who worked for themselves were conscious of having to articulate and fashion their career stories continually. Their situation equated to a perpetual turning point, or series of

turning points. In this respect, these workers do resemble the image depicted in the new careers picture.

Working for oneself also made it more likely that individuals attributed their current conditions to their own actions. Successes were generally seen as the result of personal effort and application; and failures, their own fault. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that the decision to work on one's own entails a stronger focus on the self.

Career security for people who work for themselves was indeed much more of a personal achievement. However, importantly, it was *not* something created by the individual alone. As the points above indicate, individuals still relied on social resources to make their career stories. In particular, they were dependent on social networks. A more accurate representation is that each individual had to generate connections and insert themselves into social networks. In a limited sense, the argument that individuals are "on their own" holds true in that they had to be more active to maintain their networks, and craft their work projects. But at the same time, these individuals were also *more* reliant on particular social resources for these projects to work. Ironically, the more "on their own" the person was, the more their story was dependent on particular others.

Contexts of Work – Being In-Between Places

The case studies of people in the midst of a major transition highlighted the effects of not belonging to, or being anchored in, a context. Like those working for themselves, these individuals were "on their own". But, in contrast, they had not settled on a pathway. These individuals were still searching for a good career story. They were yet to find a desired possible self to base their story on.

The experience of being "in-between" places had many of the same features as working for oneself, except that these were amplified. In-between individuals' career stories were most in turmoil, constantly in question, continually tested and being worked on. Their situation required the most effort. These people were also vulnerable in the same way as those working for themselves but without the sense of grounding that came from having a routine or other structures like a clear set of work relationships.

Being in-between also amplified the feeling of being on one's own. It was an individualising situation. One consequence was the tendency to experience difficulties and challenges as personal problems. Even when

social factors were clearly the cause, Sharon and Fran saw the cause in terms of psychological inadequacy. As their situations became more difficult, they both saw solutions to their career situation in terms of self-rectification. They were also both most vulnerable to cultural images about failure, not being in control, and about not conforming to life timetables.

This individualising experience was facilitated, and magnified, by the psychological practices and language they adopted. With help from psychological expertise, Sharon was rewriting her career story. This involved an imperative to change aspects of herself. In this, I found that psychological self-work can usefully be seen as a way individuals try to continue making a career story. It is a method of rearticulating aspirations and ideals. Specifically, it does so by making visible and analysing current possible selves, and helping to create new ones.

In their different ways, Sharon and Fran were searching for a framework for their work. This was doubly difficult: they were searching for a practice, and a way to practise identities; but they still had to settle on a possible self to base a practice on.

Career Security and Keeping Up a Good Story

The idea of career security is a powerful lens on our experience of work. It shifts attention away from the economic dimensions of work life, toward the social, cultural and symbolic ways work provides grounding, and ultimately, moulds selfhood. I have shown the fruitfulness of conceptualising career security in terms of the individual's ability to sustain a good career story.

Through narrative, the present and future mutually shape one another. A career story is a perspective through which an individual makes sense of themselves, their current work practices and circumstances, in terms of an imagined future. At the same time, a career story and the imagined future it contains are shaped by those practices and circumstances. We make sense of the present in terms of the future; but the future is a moving target, always being re-imagined in our negotiations with the present. A good career story is one that promises to lead to a desired self, and one that is confirmed by the continual and multiple tests of everyday work reality.

Career stories are made, not given. Attempting to keep up a good story is a task all individuals in this study engaged in and, I suggest, *all*

individuals engage in. It is a task that requires effort and deftness. In this sense, the new careers image has a broad applicability and resonance. We all have to be active story makers. However, story-making is intimately dependent on the social and cultural resources individuals have available to them. Context matters. Thus, a sense of career security will vary for individuals, depending on how they negotiate available resources.

Importantly, the more "on their own" individuals are, that is, the more cut loose they are from organisational structures, the more dependent they are on the particular social resources they have available. Being on one's own is thus less about self-sufficiency or isolation than about the kinds of personal effort required to practise identity and make career stories.

As people's work lives and biographies become more uncertain and risky, in Australia and elsewhere, how to feel grounded in one's career will become a more pressing and vital issue. A notion of career security, based on our ability to keep a good career story going, can be a valuable device to make sense of it.

Note

1. Even though they are intimate, the relationship between wants and aspirations is complex, and I have not been able to tackle this relationship in this project. Different wants entail different images of the future (Beckert 2013) and different possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986). To be motivated by money can entail a vision of oneself as variously rich, financially secure or enjoying a particular lifestyle; to be motivated by interesting work can entail an image of oneself as happy, fulfilled or competent. This is also to suggest that wants do not appear as free-floating elements, ranked in personal hierarchies of preference as is the dominant view within psychological studies of job satisfaction (e.g. Locke 1984). Wants appear in configurations embedded in cultural models.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Presenting interview data as case studies

All ways of presenting qualitative data have pros and cons (Travers 2001). In this study I have chosen to present the interview material in terms of a series of case studies. To some extent this method of analysis and presentation follows from my choice of using in-depth biographical-type interviews, which delve deeply into each person's work story. This approach has some drawbacks compared with a more "thematic" one. Comparisons and generalisations across individual cases are more difficult to make because themes attain prominence and gain their meaning within the context of each case. In addition, the amount of space I decided to devote to most of the cases meant I could not present all of them in this study.

A biographical case-study approach to analysing and presenting the data however has strong advantages. Firstly, keeping the elements of a person's story together rather than cutting them up into different themes is a way to capture its richness (Riessman 2008). It is a way of seeing the complexities, tensions and contradictions in an individual's situation – dynamics that are easily lost when particular themes are distilled and presented separately. Secondly, this approach made sense in the context of my research problem which acknowledges that each individual actively makes their career story, that it is an ongoing task, full of tension, and requires the navigation of competing desires and ideals. The case-study approach is attuned to making sense of what drives individuals. Analysing and presenting each individual's account as a case in itself is a way of

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depicting the dynamic changeable nature of career stories, and how experiences become "storied" (Riessman 2008, p.12).

At the same time, attempting to paint an individual portrait in its complexity and particularity also helps to make it "recognisable". Brett and Moran (2006, p.9) argue that although there is always a danger of stressing too much each individual's uniqueness, the biographical case study is a powerful method for showing what is representative or "typical" about that case. It does so by drawing the threads of a life together in ways the reader can imagine as being true. The reader recognises that portrait through identification. This mode of representation has long been common in literature and in cinema and television. Rustin (2000, p.39) argues that works of fiction have "paradoxically been able to come closer to the truths of subjective experience". Further, because of their capacity for verisimilitude, fictional portraits have probably exerted more influence on people's understandings of the human world than any works of social science.

The case study or fictional portrait can also represent what is typical in the sense of connecting that individual life to its wider social and historical context. Again, through identification with what Rustin calls an "imaginable life", the audience can recognise the social meanings of individual life stories (Rustin 2000, p.42). This form of representation is thus a good example of applying what C. Wright Mills famously called the sociological imagination. It is a way of looking at what is happening in a life "as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society" (Mills 1959, p.7).

I do not, through these case studies, pretend to neatly capture each person's story, nor to do it justice. My method still entails a crafted interpretation of the interview encounter. It is partial, and driven by specific interests and research questions.

To recruit participants I started with my own networks, including people in organisations I had worked for. I asked my contacts to recommend potential participants for my study. Through this "snowball" method, I gathered more individuals for the study than I was able to interview. Given the extensive amount of interview data in these types of interviews, I limited the number of interviews to 22, making sure I had a roughly equal number of women and men. To ensure the anonymity of participants, I have used pseudonyms and removed potential identifying information (like the suburb in which they live or the organisation they work for).

Appendix 2 – Interview questions

Topic/issue to investigate	*Questions*
	Tell me about … /How do you feel about …
Current work situation	Your work tasks
	Your roles and responsibilities
	Your relationships with others
	The place/organisation where you work
	What you enjoy/find satisfying
	What you find challenging/difficult/frustrating
	The control you have over your work
	What you find meaningful
	What worries you in your work/career
Career trajectory	Your work/education history
	How you got to this point
	Your work future
	Your expectations and aspirations
	What you want from work
Personhood/identity	Your skills/attributes
	What kind of person you are at work
	How you have changed through your career
	How will you change in the future
	Your ideals
Work and life	How work fits into your life
Social and economic climate	What the labour market is like in your occupation/area of work
	What is happening to work in Australia today
	How is it changing

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