

BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL - NARRATIVE APPROACH TO CAREER SELF-MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Social construction of reality is the one of the most important and influential theories in sociology in the twentieth century, used in various fields of social sciences. This approach, among others, is a very useful perspective in management in general as well as in career planning and counselling in particular¹. Narrative approach is another useful theoretical frame to be applied in career management. stories². The same lenses can be applied in understanding of knowledge in organization retains mostly in the process of constructing professional's role in an organization. It is particularly important at university education stage as at this period of life one can observe the process of constructing professional role and identity. It is an important part of general social identity which creates the integrity of personality

KEY WORDS: career management, narratives in management, social construction of a workplace, narrative approach

INTRODUCTION

Constructing one's identity becomes one of the major problems of a modern man (Gergen, 1991) who permanently redefines his place in society, over and over again answers the question of who he is and what are his goals. The process of so-called 'becoming [sb]' is the subject of sociological research for some time now as a science on the formation of the social order (Kacperczyk, Konecki 2010). The role of profession is one of the major components of social identification. Professional life, the choice of profession and career development has a decisive influence on an individual's identity, as a profession largely defines man's place in the social structure and answers the question of "Who am I?". Of course there are many other spheres of social life that have a huge impact on the identification of a man – family, being a part of churches or religious groups, local communities and the ones that are associated with spending spare time together (Słowińska 2010). From the point of view of management the professional identity is the most important sphere. Both formation and transformation of a professional identity has a decisive impact on the professional development and achievements of an employee. This process is important both from the perspective an employee and an organization.

Rapid changes, which are a characteristic mark of present times, force many people to change their profession several times in their life (Bauman 2010), and the permanent implantation of a man in the world becomes more and more illusory. As a result, a professional identity is a subject to a change and becomes discontinuous. One has to create oneself again and again, what endangers his ontological security (Alexander, 2005) and defining one's own identity (including professional identity) becomes one of the main goals in life. Two types of

¹ Good example of application of this theoretical perspective is the series of publication about the process of becoming in different professions in the Qualitative Sociology Review like for example: Bielski, Piotr (2009) Rolnictwo ekologiczne jako zawód i powołanie [Organic farming as a job and calling], Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej [Qualitative Sociology Review], Vol. V, No 3 (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/PL/archive_pl.php).

² Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1998) Narrative approach in organization studies, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

identification seem to be significant from the perspective of an organization: identification with the profession and identification with the organization (Ibarra, Barbulescu 2010). Nowadays, both types of identification are subject to major changes. The days when a man performed one job at all times is over. The phenomenon of status transmission, when children inherited profession from their parents is not that common anymore. Today it is harder to perform the same job for the whole life while it used to be the norm not a long time ago.

This paper will be based on the constructivist understanding of the social order (Burger, Luckaman 1967) and social identity (Konceki, Kasperczyk 2010). This approach is also used in the science of management (Czarniawska 2008). Constructivist approach in the understanding of social phenomena is based on the assumption that a person in public life defines, interprets and reinterprets one's place in the social order at all times. This is a process of negotiation, because the interpretation in social life is the result of the process of negotiated (Cichobłaziński 2013).

PROFESSIONAL CAREER – CONCEPTUALIZATION

Erving Goffman was one of the first sociologists interested in the issues of professional career. 'Goffman was mostly interested in [...] changes of subjective feelings of self-image experienced by oneself. [...] The study of culture is to detect recurring or common conditions and problems that are associated with it. There is a difference between the objective line career when an entity is repeatedly facing the problem of adapting, but the difficulties associated with it can be predicted (i.e. if the entity is a student, a doctor or a member of a religious sect) and a career in the subjective sense - the acts of interpretation made by people going through subsequent changes.' (Marshall 2006: 142). According to this understanding, it is important how an employee understands and defines his work and the various stages of his professional development (in terms of an image of oneself as a member of a certain professional group), as well as, the way how other members of the profession and customers understand it. This leads to a specific role and professional career creation. This method is used to understand the process how social construction of a place of work is created (Kociatkiewicz 2007). There is no obstacle in applying it in the analysis of the social construction of a professional career.

The 'sense making' approach can be applied to the above understanding of professional development and career (Weick 1995). According to this understanding it is important what sense the employee gives to his professional career. Does he want to devote himself to move up in the organizational hierarchy in search of ever-increasing range of power, whether it is important to improve the skills, which is typical of the professionals? These examples apparently coincide with the concept of career anchors by Sheine. Giving meaning to work and career in the proposed understanding refers to a system of values of both individuals and organization. The meaning here is rather a synonym to the matter. Giving meaning to professional decisions, a man makes them comprehensible to oneself, and the environment (the organization). If it is possible to give meaning and to interpret it, than it is also possible to reinterpret it. In this context, it is easier to understand the problem of balance between professional and personal life. It happens the meaning assigned to the activities in one area makes no sense in another area. It should be noted that the concept of career introduced by Goffman is broad enough to refer to such social roles as father, mother, husband, wife, etc. (Marshall 2006:142) It is also easier to understand the changes within the 'sense making' approach. The changes may be of radical type, made at different stages of life as they are connected with changes of employee's system of values. These changes cannot be explained with the concepts derived from the models based on the theory of needs, such as Schein's anchor model (Schein,1990).

In the literature of subject one can find the terms Career Management and Career Development used interchangeably. The concept of career development can be defined as follows: 'Career development is a process by which employees take responsibility for developing their potential for the increased contribution to the functioning of the company. This action is to connect personal job satisfaction with the effectiveness in achieving organization goals.' (Sturman 1992, 58) The term 'career', in this understanding, is to take into consideration entity/employee's and organization's perspective. This understanding is about an employee using his individual talents for the benefit of the company as a whole. The organization increases its own potential using the potential of its employees and benefits from strengthening its competitiveness.

Augustyn Bańka pays attention to two important aspects of professional career: 'At first, we should keep in mind that the career is personal, and therefore it is of subject type. It is always someone's career, it belongs to an entity. This is not just a profession, such as a teacher or a lawyer. You can have a career, be a teacher or a lawyer, but it is always a career of your own. Profession of a lawyer or a teacher is just a context and career takes place in this context. According to this understanding, career concerns the unemployed as well - anyone who spends time to work or seek employment acts within one's own career.

At second, career as a subjective phenomenon has both objective and subjective elements. Objective elements include situations such as: posts, specific competences, duties, roles, activities and professional decisions. Subjective elements are the interpretations of events related to work i.e.: aspirations, expectations, values, needs, satisfaction and feelings resulting from professional experience.' (Bańka, 2006) In order to help employees in rational approach to their careers in the inter-organizational dimension there is a need of experienced mentors and coaches assistance. They have the ability to make a synthesis (from a proper perspective) of employee's internal potential and external factors specific in a given industry.

Career planning brings three types of benefits: improves the work of managers and superiors, helps employees to achieve their professional goals and - perhaps most importantly - contributes to the achievement of the objectives of an organization. Thus, employee career planning combines three spheres of management:

- Self-management (applies to both employees and managers)
- Management and administration of people (applies to managers at all levels)
- Management of the organization (applies mainly to top management and managers at lower levels)

CAREER AS A STROY

Narrative is one of the most commonly used ways of organizing the meaning. A narrative is properly presented set of logically and chronologically related events, experienced by the actors. (Bal 2009) The key concepts of narrative theory are as follows: narrator, actor, event and action. The storyteller and an actor is the same person in case of narratives on one's own career. However the formation of the narrative is often affected by other people, such as - to use the terminology of George Herbert Mead (1995) – 'significant other' (i.e. parents of a person who choose the profession) or a "generalized other" (i.e. peer groups). One can assume the narrative is a result of a complex process of negotiation of meanings and values, since it concerns a very important life issue of a professional career (Cichobłaziński 2012). In this understanding a man is not only the author and narrator, but also the main recipient and the main actor in this story. This story must be attractive and convince him. The construction of identity is about creating a story. A man sees himself during his life, including professional life. He goes through the stages, his professional life has a goal and unexpected twists. In order to achieve this goal a man faces adversities and favorable circumstances, he meets allies and enemies. An 'event' is an important part of the narrative. It is the transition from one state

to another. Using the language of organization theory - it is a change. It might be i.e. the ritual of initiation, admission to the organization, as well as gaining important skills or professional title, etc. In order to create certain 'events' one must undertake actions leading to their occurrence. In other words, a person must 'act' (Bal 2009)³. In this sense, the action becomes one of the most important elements of the narrative. This action gives the meaning but the individual actions are understandable only as a part of the narrative. Taken out of context they are incomprehensible.

The use of narrative approach in social sciences and in management has a long tradition. It has been presented well by Barbara Czarniawska (2002, 2004). The author of "Narratives in Social Sciences Research" suggests the following procedure of narrative in the social sciences application (2004, pp 15):

- Watch how the stores are being made
- Collect the stories
- Provoke story telling
- Interpret the stories (what do they say?)
- Analyze the stories (how do they say it?)
- Deconstruct the stories (unmake them)
- Put together your own story
- Set it against/together with other stories

Elements of the above presented procedure are noteworthy, especially the ones which treat on deconstruction of narrative. This is a very important moment of every narrative analysis. This raises the question whether it is indispensable. It seems that it is not. This is because of personal narratives, where one has to answer the question whether the present narrative is functional or not. Ergo, if the narrative allows to reach goals of the person who creates one's own professional path. If so, then deconstructing the narrative seems to be not only useless, but also harmful. Narrative deconstruction methods are used in career counseling (McIlveen, Patton 2007) and they are used to find more effective narrative that allows to achieve the goals. It should be noted that a change of narrative is very difficult and requires a lot of maturity from the one who wants to do this. Sometimes it is necessary to change the narration when the actor sees himself as a victim of so called independent factors which do not allow him to achieve success. Narratives can become traps as Czarniawska presents it (Czarniawska 2012). In some narratives 'events' simply cannot take place, while others are present, although they are dysfunctional. This approach requires the application of a method that can be called auto-ethnography (Gockel, Parry 2004). The deconstruction of the narrative is thawing the knowledge held in this narration. The acquisition of new knowledge is mainly a process of forgetting.

CONCLUSION

The narrative approach in understanding employee's careers presented above implies specific methods. First of all, they are qualitative methods – observation, free interview, narrative interview, focus group interview, discourse analysis are the most common ones (Konecki, Chomczyński 2012). The method, which is planned to use in this study is a compilation and modification of two of the above presented methods: Narrative interview and Focus group interview. In general, the narrative interview is individual, but in this study it will be held in groups. This method has been already applied in studies on organizations (Beech 2000).

³ The distinction between a narrative and a plot is disregarded in this paper as it is too narrow and detailed for this study.

Another modification is the use a narrative approach not to the study of the past, which is usually the case, but for the analysis of events that just took place. The question is how students imagine their professional careers, what narratives give sense to their professional future, how these narrative have been formed, who and what has an influence on this narrative, and how and to what extent these narratives are modified during the studies?

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