EARLY CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: LESSONS FROM A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

This article explores the contribution a social constructionist paradigm can make to the study of career, through a small-scale empirical study of recent graduates employed in New Zealand's state sector. A social constructionist lens denies the possibility of an individualised, generalized understanding of "career", highlighting instead its local, contingent character as the product of social interaction. Our respondents' collective construction of career was heavily shaped by a range of context-specific interactions and influences, such as the perception of a distinctive national identity, as well as by their young age and state sector location. It was also shaped by the research process, with us as researchers implicated in these meaning-making processes. Social constructionism shines a light on aspects of the field that are underplayed by mainstream, scientific approaches to the study of career, and therefore has valuable implications for practitioners, as well as scholars.

Key Words

Careers, social constructionism, young adults, public sector, national identity.

Introduction

While the literature on career and career development is becomingly increasingly diverse, particular ways of conceptualising and researching the field remain dominant. Within the mainstream, there is an assumption that career research (if done well) can produce objective knowledge about the real state of careers, and that this knowledge is generalizable across contexts. There is a prevailing view that career is an individualised phenomenon, something that is experienced by individuals and can therefore be understood by focusing research on the individual as the unit of analysis. Thus, we see a preponderance of research which deploys a questionnaire methodology, typically involving large sample sizes, with the data analysed using sophisticated quantitative techniques to generate reliable and valid findings.

Additionally, much career theory and research takes the perspective of organisations, and takes for granted their interests (Adamson et al., 1998). Thus, the rationale for seeking a better understanding of the dynamics of careers is that this knowledge can be used by organisations for instrumental purposes – to better adapt their career development programmes to account for the changing nature of careers, driven by technological advancements, key economic events, and increased global competition.

These assumptions have been highly productive for the field, enabling academics to become "career researchers" and new journals dedicated to career research to flourish. There is near-consensus that the world has moved beyond the ideal of a traditional, linear career. Careers are now conceptualised as boundaryless, protein, hybrid and kaleidoscope, to name just a few (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). It is a virtuous circle incorporating a strong rationale for why we need career research, an established methodology for how we should generate this knowledge, and a set of appreciative end-users who can apply the findings in practice.

Despite the tremendous influence of this way of thinking about, writing about and taking action in relation to careers, the field has also witnessed the emergence of alternative approaches. Of relevance to our study is work which has criticised the dominant, scientific mode of study for not just failing to examine in depth the experiences of employees (Collin, 1998; Dany 2014; Dries, 2011; King, 2003; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010), but for giving insufficient attention to how these experiences, and people's understanding of them, are the product of social processes that remain hidden from view if the focus of analysis is the

individual and their internal cognitive processes (e.g. Cohen & Duberley, 2015; Blustein, 2011; Blustein et., 2004; Collin, 2007; Flum, 2015; Savickas, 2005).

This article seeks to contribute to this body of work by exploring the value of a particular philosophical approach – social constructionism. We report on a small empirical study of recent graduates in the New Zealand state (or public) sector and use this as an illustrative case of what a social constructionist lens can offer the career field. The impetus for the project came from a personal observation from one of the authors' human resources experience in the sector, and the observation of a disconnect between the way state agencies conceive of careers in the public sector, and how recent graduates working in the state sector gave meaning to their work and saw it in relation to other aspects of their lives. Rather than take the standard approach of a large sample questionnaire, we developed a methodology that focused in depth on the experiences of our participants and, importantly, on the social processes involved in their construction of what career meant to them, at this time and in this context.

In the following section, we provide a brief critical overview of social constructionism and how it has been applied to date in career research. We introduce our empirical study, which was based on a methodological design that enabled us to analyse these collective meaning-making dynamics. We then highlight the myriad of ways in which the context of our participants – their age, state sector location, as well as how their understanding of New Zealand's national identity was implicated in their construction of career. We conclude by considering how our study might contribute to the field.

Career as a social construction

There is near consensus is the career literature that our understanding of career has shifted away from seeing it as "a succession of related jobs arranged in hierarchy of prestige, through which people move in an ordered (more or less predictable) sequence" (Wilensky, 1960, p.523). This notion was characterised by increasing seniority and responsibility over time, and assumed environmental stability and hierarchical organisational structures. Success was "defined by the organisation and measured by promotions and increases in salary" (Sullivan, 1999, p.457). More recently, decentralised organisational structures, globalisation, technological advancements, and the rise in flexible work patterns have all been cited as

contributing factors in a move away from the traditional view (Adamson et al., 1998; Baruch, 2004; Lyons et al., 2015; Sullivan, 1999).

In its place, researchers have developed alternative conceptions of career which come with their own objective statements (or definitions) that seek to explain this changed "real world". For example, DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) define the boundaryless career as "sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of a single employment setting" (p.307). The boundaryless career concept focuses on opportunities across multiple organisations and even multiple professions, where the employee exchanges employability for performance and role flexibility (Sullivan, 1999). This definition has evolved over time to include moving beyond other traditional boundaries such as physical and psychological mobility, profession, ownership, and employment conditions (Clarke, 2013; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Tams & Arthur, 2010).

Whilst these concepts have contributed much to the field, they share in common a set of philosophical assumptions, namely, that there is a "real world" out there from which researchers can produce value-free scientific knowledge through the rigorous application of the scientific method (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). Furthermore, career theory has been heavily influenced by psychology, which focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis. Social constructionism offers a challenge to these conventional psychological understandings. The roots of social constructionism can be traced to Kuhn's (1962) theory of scientific paradigms and to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. It posits a "radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world" (Gergen, 1985, p.267) and aims to understand the processes people go through to, "describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world…in which they live" (Gergen, 1985, p.266).

From the perspective of social constructionism, the kind of career research described above is legitimate, but just one way of generating knowledge to represent what we understand as "career". A central principle of social constructionism, as articulated by Gergen (1985), is that our objects of study make no requirements about how we talk about and understand them, so to be meaningful, a set of agreements is required. Examining the agreements of objects (such as "career") shared within a particular community (scientific researchers) is useful for thinking about how we might generate different insights by sharing a different set of agreements.

So, for instance, rather than seeing the concept of career as an empirically observable object (e.g., people changing their jobs regularly) or as an individually experienced and expressed construct, social constructionism invites us to think about "career" as the product of a relational process. The implication for research is that rather than placing social context in the background, it should be front and centre of our analytical process. Social constructionism understands that "all claims to knowledge, truth, objectivity or insight are founded within communities of meaning making – including the claims of the constructionist themselves" (Gergen, 2001, p.2). In this way, career is a social construction – a shared understanding co-created by groups of people within particular historical and cultural contexts (Collin & Guichard, 2011). This is illustrated in the way career has been defined differently between Eastern and Western cultures, different social class systems, and different time periods (see Claes & Ruiz-Quintinilla, 1998; Collin & Young, 1986; Dries, 2011; Tams & Arthur, 2007). This distinguishes constructio*nism* from construct*ivism*, with the latter more focused on individuals and the cognitive processes that they engage in to make sense of social interactions (Bassot, 2012; Young & Collin, 2004).

Research from a constructionist stance typically works with qualitative data. An increasing amount of career research analyses qualitative data (Stead et al., 2012), but most qualitative studies share the paradigm assumptions of positivism and post-positivism, even when they study processes of meaning-making. For instance, a number of studies focus on the behaviours and language graduates use when describing their career (see for example King, 2003; Lyons et al., 2015; Sturges & Guest, 2001; Sturges et al., 2000). This is done by looking at whether their words and actions identify with a particular definition of career (such as boundaryless), or whether participants (consciously or subconsciously) seek to differentiate themselves from that concept. From a social constructionist perspective, this is limiting because it assumes that recent graduates identify with the concept of career in the first instance. Secondly, it aims to align behaviours and language with a predetermined concept of career. That is to say, graduates apparently both speak and behave in a way that is consistent with the boundaryless career definition, or they do not (King, 2003; Zhang, 2010). This drives findings toward a narrow view of what career might mean to people in particular contexts.

This article builds on an emerging stream of careers literature that adopts a social constructionist stance (Cohen et al., 2004, Cohen & Katz, 2016; Coupland, 2004; Irving, 2009). Much of this literature deals with it an abstract, theoretical level manner, so we seek to contribute by undertaking an empirical study informed by these philosophical underpinnings, which we then reflect on to identify how social constructionism can usefully supplement the more established and dominant scientific study of careers. In the next section, we introduce the empirical study.

Research design and methodology

The context for the study was New Zealand's state sector, which refers mainly to core government departments, being equivalent to what in other countries is referred to as public service and public sector (State Services Commission, 2015). We adopted a social constructionist approach partly because we felt it could produce novel insights, but also for practical reasons. One of the authors matched closely the demographic we were interested in – a young person working in New Zealand's state sector. She was inextricably part of the context, which would raise questions about her objectivity had we positioned the research in the positivist or post-positivist paradigms, which hold neutrality (or value-freedom) as an ideal (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). Social constructionism appealed because it would regard her inside status as a source of insight, rather than as a bias which undermined the quality of the research.

The empirical study involved ten participants who had left university no more than two years prior to the commencement of research, and had been working in the New Zealand state sector during that time. This time period was chosen because the study wanted to explore respondents' expectations of career prior to them commencing work. The sample consisted of six males and four females (a split which approximates the gender representation within the sector as a whole), who were given pseudonyms for the purpose of confidential reporting.

Consistent with social constructionism's assumptions about the intrinsically-linked nature of knowledge and social processes, the research was qualitative and reflexive. A two-step data collection process was designed, with semi-structured interviews of up to one hour with each participant followed by a one-hour focus group. The semi-structured format ensured the same topics were traversed with participants, but provided us flexibility to deviate from set questions, clarify intent or understanding, and probe for more information where necessary

(Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; O'Leary, 2010). A key benefit of this approach was maintaining a logical order in the interview, while the tone was more conversational and participants could describe their experiences and understandings in an informal way. This method aligns well to the social constructionist philosophy as it does not assume common understanding and enables participants to articulate their understanding of a concept. The interviews intentionally used open-ended questions that allowed participants greater control over what they felt was significant as well as "laddering" questions to follow on from one another to help probe information and expand upon important comments (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

We supplemented the individual interviews with a one-hour focus group, which provided us an opportunity to feed back our interpretations of their responses in the interviews, and them an opportunity to reflect and comment on those interpretations. One of the authors was able to draw on her own experiences as a recent graduate working in New Zealand's state sector to prompt initial questions, inform follow-up questions and generally facilitate the discussion in a natural, conversational manner. Thus, the interviews and focus group are best thought of as processes of data construction rather than data gathering, with us as researchers involved in the process. A potential limitation of focus groups is that participants might be reluctant to speak freely in front of a large group of people, especially if their view is not widely held (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This was mitigated by using a small sample size to help build trust faster and overcome any awkwardness or intimidation associated with unfamiliarity.

The data were analysed and interpreted using template analysis, a group of techniques used to thematically and hierarchically organise and analyse text (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2004). We selected template analysis for several reasons. It is a flexible approach which can be tailored to the requirements of a particular study. It is not bound to a particular epistemology, has been used successfully in social constructionist studies (Budds, Locke, & Burr, 2013), and can accommodate both deductive and inductive reasoning, with codes deduced from the literature introduced and modified as a result of themes emerging out of the empirical data (King, 2004). Having generated an initial set of codes from the literature, we then undertook a content analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts to identify ideas and themes that featured prominently. We supplemented this with our own reflections on our interactions with participants. In the following section, we highlight the three most salient themes from

our analysis – a series of shared meanings, or what we call identities, at the generational, sectoral and national levels.

Findings: Constructing the early New Zealand state sector career

Career as part of a balanced lifestyle – the influence of generational identity

A number of studies suggest that young people value freedom and leisure more than previous generations (see Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Gursoy et al., 2008; Twenge et al., 2010), although there is evidence that generational differences are not universal (Parry & Unwin, 2011). The age of our respondents, who were all between 21 and 25, did appear influential in shaping their shared understanding of what a career was for them. Maintaining a balance between work and leisure was important for them, with most keen to ensure that work choices would allow them to pursue other things in life such as travel, having a family, and keeping their weekends free. Unsurprisingly, given that none was currently relying on their income to support a family, their emphasis was on preserving time to do things for themselves, as opposed to for others (such as caring for children). All were driven towards roles they believed would have good work life balance, or away from roles and organisations which they believed had poor work life balance. Several respondents mentioned the collectively-generated and shared expectations of university graduates of their age who are employed by professional service firms.

> Eric: I hoped to be turning up at 8am and leaving no later than 6pm type of thing. And not working weekends. I certainly didn't have any inclination to be working like law firms where, when you start especially, you're working late into the night and that just sounds horrible...I did hope that I'd have a bit more time in the weekends just to go and live and enjoy, have time for hobbies and friends and all those kinds of things.
>
> Fiona: I decided early on that I didn't want to work in a massive law firm. The kind of lifestyle... Massive long hours...

Here we see how different elements of the context overlap. Our participants had commonality by virtue of their age, but this was co-mingled with a shared rejection of the lifestyle afforded by an early career in private sector professional service firms. Intertwined also is a national level-cultural dimension, in that the state sector in New Zealand does not have the long-hours culture associated with law and other professional services. It is to these other contextual elements that we now turn.

Career as aligned with personal values – the influence of sectoral identity

While our participants tended to view work as a means to achieving personal goals, there was a shared agreement that if they were going to spend 40 hours a week working, they wanted it to be something that was rewarding and fulfilling. All participants had a strong desire for their first job to be aligned to their personal values. For many, this involved serving others, working for something beyond profit, and being able to see a positive impact of their work on the lives of others. They regarded these values as being shared by those employed in the state sector.

> Author: What does work mean to you?
>
> Beth: You have a duty to work and contribute to your society...you have to work, you have to do something useful and feel that you're doing something useful...for me, the public service offers that meaning. I'm working for the benefit of everyone, rather than for the benefit of the CEO of a company.
>
> Adam: I was looking for somewhere I could make a difference...be fulfilled by what I do. Where I am, it's all about making people's work life easier and that is kind of satisfying...I like the idea of helping people and making a difference for them, as opposed to making a difference for the organisation.

Other respondents demonstrated these value commitments by talking about the sectors they were driven away from. For example, Fiona was influenced by the perceptions she had about corporate law firms, and the beliefs she had about the type of work they do.

> Fiona: I think part of it is the image that there is around those big firms and I guess I didn't really know if that really lined up with my values
>
> Author: Could you articulate some of those [values]?
>
> Fiona: Lawyers have a really bad image sometimes and I wanted to be the sort of lawyer who helped to break that image... being a highly paid lawyer who does big corporate things... it's different from me wanting to make a difference in some way.

However, no matter how rewarding or meaningful their work was, these respondents nevertheless saw it as work, and never more important than spending time with family and friends. Even Adam, who said work was a priority for him right now emphasised, "I can't ever imagine a job that was so meaningful and interesting that I would want to go to work on a Saturday".

The Kiwi career – the influence of national identity

When participants were asked to reflect on what had influenced their thinking about careers, the most common responses were peers, family, and media. This information was used during the focus group to test which influences might have been able to change participants' expectations about work. This was done by asking how their identified influencers, or others, might be able to positively influence what they expected from their first jobs. The result was an interesting discussion about national cultural identity.

> George: Yea, I think it's just that it doesn't really fit with the New Zealand ethos.
>
> Eric: Yea, there is a kind of romantic notion of starting in a job, putting in the hard yards and working your way up from the bottom.
>
> [Lots of agreement around the room]
>
> Eric: That is almost stronger than anything else and I think that is why there is a general hesitancy to believe things that say otherwise.
>
> Adam: Yea, you don't really want to be "that guy" who got a great first job and life is awesome.
>
> Claire: Yea, like people at [university] career fairs who tell you about how good their first job was.
>
> Eric: I am pretty sure those people were only chosen to talk to us because they are the exception who have a good story to tell.
>
> George: Yea… they don't get people who went into crap jobs to come to those events.
>
> Author: What if job adverts emphasised the work life balance you all desire and things like that?
>
> Eric: I would probably still be pretty hesitant… they are just writing what they think someone will want to read so they can hire good people.

When George raised the idea of a New Zealand ethos, the notion resonated around the room. Their identification as New Zealanders (known colloquially as "Kiwis") was influential in shaping their understanding of work. Being Kiwis, they had expectations about what the start of their journey into full-time work would be like. For this group of people, there was a certain romanticism about starting in a job "at the bottom" and working hard to move up the hierarchy. Participants seemingly wanted their experience to align with that cultural story.

Relatedly, collectively holding this construction of a Kiwi career meant they were highly sceptical about presentations by recently-employed graduates at recruitment events. It seemed as if our respondents filtered in information that aligned to this identity (provided by their peers, family, and media), and disregarded any information that went against the grain of the story (such as the information provided at career fairs, from alumni, or in job advertisements).

This understanding was also echoed in the individual interviews with participants where they discussed their low expectations going into their first job. They explained it in terms such as "administrative", "basic entry level office stuff", "bottom of the ladder stuff", or "potentially...something I wasn't really interested in". These same people were surprised when they entered the workforce and found their work to be rewarding, challenging, and meaningful. For example, Ian talked about how the idea of work was, "Depressing...I wasn't expecting to like my first job much...I didn't have high expectations of it and I didn't think that I would enjoy it". However, when we asked about his experience so far, he said:

> Ian: I enjoy being employed a lot more than I thought I would...Definitely a happy accident. I didn't know that I would have as much power as I do in my role and I didn't know how much I would be able to influence the outcomes of the person calling me up...It can be quite rewarding dealing with different people on a case by case basis...I honestly didn't think it would be as rewarding as it is and I didn't think that I would like it as much as I do.

When participants were asked if this had influenced their responses of what future work would be like, all were decidedly more optimistic than they were during their final year of study, but many followed-up with a statement which seemed to lessen or soften the initial wording. For example, Ian reflected on how his experience had changed his expectations about future roles followed by, "even if it's wrong". Likewise, Jenna talked about her expectations for the future and what she wanted to achieve before saying, "I think that's a bit of a warped perception... perhaps my expectations are a little bit unrealistic". When talking about how work and life interlink, George summarised his plans as being "overly idealistic" and Beth said, "I might just have to separate the two more if I want to make rational decisions in the future", implying that her decisions now are not entirely rational. When probed further about why their current experience had not changed their view of early working life, there

was a commonly held view that they were lucky with this first job, and it was not the norm. This reflects the same beliefs articulated during the focus group about people starting in a job that they are not likely to enjoy, and needing to work their way up. These views were so ingrained that even meeting a group of other people through this research process who have had similar experiences was not strong enough to change their thinking.

A further illustration of national-level dynamics at play was evident in the way respondents discussed their desire to travel.

> Jenna: I think about travel in relation to my career as well but I definitely think travel is going to win out big time because I want to do it.
>
> George: My job should never consume my life or be all of it. It should still only ever be the part where I go to work and earn money in order to support the rest of my life... I have plans to travel overseas...when I think about what I'm going to do for work it's more like where I'm going to be rather than what I'm going to be doing.

Traditionally, young New Zealanders have travelled overseas (primarily to the United Kingdom) following the completion of their schooling or university education – this "big OE" (overseas experience) has typically lasted years rather than months, because of the geographic isolation of New Zealand, and is paid for by work experience abroad (Inkson & Myers, 2003). The "big OE" still holds its appeal for this group of Kiwis.

Discussion: The value of a social constructionist lens

The aim of this paper was to explore the value of a philosophical approach that is underused in careers research by conducting a small empirical study of early career in New Zealand's state sector. Social constructionism invites the researcher to think about careers in a different way, unconstrained by definitions of what a career *is*, which often also implies how they *should* be experienced by people, especially recent graduates starting out on their journey of full-time work.

The findings are consistent with other studies (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Gursoy et al., 2008; Twenge et al., 2010) which suggest young people value different things from their work to older people. In addition to their age, their public sector location was significant in informing their shared understanding of career. The desire to have meaning in their work came through strongly for many participants. This aligns with research which suggests that

public sector employees are likely to value meaningful, interesting, and socially rewarding work more than their private counterparts (Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007; Houston, 2000; Lyons et al., 2006; Ng & Gossett, 2013). Finally, our findings confirm that national cultural narratives can be an influential factor on how people view career (Inskson & Myers, 2004; Thomas & Inkson, 2007).

At this level then, these findings are not especially novel. However, what is more distinctive, is the way social constructionism enables a deeper insight into the importance of context in shaping understandings of career and how people draw on elements of the context collectively to develop meaning (Cohen & Duberley, 2015; McMahon et al., 2014). Career, for our respondents, is a particular, local construction that reflects their youth, their values, their public sector location, and their shared sense of national identity. That is not to deny the existence of other dimensions which contribute to the "tapestry" of multiple meanings of career (Collin, 2007, p.560), such as gender, ethnicity, or religion, but the three presented earlier were the most salient for our respondents.

We are not suggesting that research from a positivist paradigm, which mainly works with quantitative data, is completely ignorant of context. For example, we have mentioned already studies that identify differences between generations in what young people expect from, and value in, their work life, with the young of today typically viewing their work and personal lives more holistically and placing greater emphasis on work-life balance. However, in these studies, where the focus is generating data from a large sample, the meaning of terms such as freedom and leisure tend to be regarded as fixed, rather than open to multiple interpretations by respondents in different situations. A social constructionist perspective aims to problematize, or open to closer examination and scrutiny, these aspects that are glossed over, or regarded as unproblematic in mainstream approaches.

Of course, there are trade-offs involved in adopting any research paradigm. The value of a social constructionist approach is the way it focuses attention on a range of social and cultural processes that give rise of the meaning of career within a particular context. We have explored those processes for a small group of ten young people in the New Zealand state sector. This narrow and deep lens generates insights, but in doing so produces its own limitations, as seen by positivist and post-positivist paradigms. Our findings have limited generalizability across the New Zealand state sector, or across groups of recent graduates in

other countries, except to highlight dimensions that might be important for other young people in similar situations. Our study does not take part in the "quest for the one best way" (Gunz et al. 2005, p.50) by producing the reliable, valid knowledge that many associate with other forms of rigorous research.

However, from within social constructionism, this inability to generate widespread generalizations is not a limitation. If the assumption is that context is critical, then producing findings that are context-dependent makes sense, whereas stripping away context to enable claims of universality to be made would be nonsensical. If the subjectivity of the research process is seen as inevitable, especially in a study such as ours where one of the authors was similar in age, interests and experiences to the respondents, then acknowledging this subjectivity and thinking reflexively about how we, as researchers, are co-constructors of the data that we generate, makes sense. More than that, it is characteristic of high quality research from this philosophical perspective (Weenink & Bridgman, 2017).

Part of the value in thinking about career though social constructionism is to unsettle taken for granted assumptions that become so engrained as to reach the level of "common sense". For instance, the assumption that we can objectively report on the reality of both the changing nature of career and how individuals experience it. This epistemological belief in the possibility of generating truthful knowledge influences greatly methodological decisions about how best to generate these truths. Thus, it is no surprise that scientific methods favour data collection techniques and analytical approaches that focus on the individual and their thoughts and experiences as the unit of analysis – typified by the questionnaire.

While we want to encourage critical reflection on the mainstream scientific study of careers, we do not deny its legitimacy and value. Positivist and post-positivist paradigms generate actionable knowledge about careers. They give insight to organisations about how young people see and experience careers, and provide them with confidence to take action. We do not claim that a social constructionist lens produces better or more truthful knowledge. Our contribution here is best thought of as complementing more established perspectives for understanding career, rather than an attempt to supplant it (Gergen, 2001).

Our paper has focused on the implications for *research* of adopting a social constructionist paradigm. However, we also feel there are useful insights to draw for *practice*. If it is

accepted that understandings of career are heavily context-laden, the most obvious implication for practitioners is to really understand their context. For instance, in the New Zealand state sector, promotion around a long-term career in the state service, a traditional approach, might not have as much salience as messaging that works within prevailing understandings of a national identity. For our respondents, a Kiwi career meant starting in a low level job, putting in years of hard work to get to a more interesting, rewarding, and senior position. When they or others they know had experiences which did not conform to this story, they either ignored them or decided that their own experience had been unusual or lucky. Put simply, organisations have to engage in efforts to genuinely understand their people and tailor their career development approach accordingly.

This might sound obvious, but there is often a temptation to underplay the importance of understanding context, because of the status of "global trends" and "best practice". While the appeal of such knowledge is to suggest that career development phenomena are, to an extent, universalised, our message to practitioners is to resist the temptation of these formulations and prescriptions. Furthermore, it is likely the people who understand the context best are insiders rather than expensive consultants, and in the case of our study, recent graduates themselves, rather than senior managers further removed from the lifeworld of this cohort. Understanding how they think, feel, and construct meaning together will make it more likely organisations have career development programs that resonate.

Conclusion

The seed of this project came from the early career work experience in New Zealand's state sector by one of the authors. It was the observation of a disconnect between the understanding of career that state agencies were basing their career development actions upon, and the insight into how the author's peers gave meaning to their work and its place in their lives. These experiences did not fit easily into pre-existing categories of "traditional" or "boundaryless". This led us to explore the value of social constructionism through an empirical study. We found that a shared conception of New Zealand's national identity was influential in shaping how the respondents made sense of their work experiences. Together with a generational-level construction of an idealised balance between work and leisure, and a desire to do work that aligned with their personal value commitments to the state sector, this produced a tapestry of multiple meanings of career that was overlapping, contingent, and context-dependent. We commend social constructionism as a useful perspective on career for

the way it encourages researchers and practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which the meaning of career and the place of work in our lives is a collective creation.

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