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'Bounded' or Boundaryless Careers? A Critical Review of the Relevance of Career Insecurity Research in Contemporary Nigerian Work Environment

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ABSTRACT

Studies on career landscape have soared in recent years, may be due to major social, economic, technological, and organizational changes that various organizations have enacted as survival instinct. On the front burner of these studies is the concept of career insecurity. This article queries the popularity of career insecurity in the current organizational and management literature. The authors also posit that career insecurity may be studies in few specialized areas that include medicine, journalism, law, and perhaps financial institutions but not placing restrictions on boundary crossing across all careers. The paper began this critique by looking critically at what earlier studies posited about career insecurity. Career insecurity was then placed side-by-side with career boundaries and career boundarylessness to be in proper perspective to appreciate the fact that career insecurity research lost its vibes when careers crossed boundaries and that career insecurity is possible only when Careers are 'Bounded'. It is recommended that individuals should continue to acquire diverse skills-set that will make assets to various organizations and to survive in a precarious work environment.

Introduction

Common search on PubMed and Google Scholar for articles published on career insecurity quickly reveals studies on job insecurity even when it is known that career insecurity though related with job insecurity, the constructs are conceptually different (Höge et al., 2012; Spurk et al., 2016). Existing conceptualizations of career insecurity are ostentatiously borrowed from the much-touted notion of job insecurity as shown in the way that career insecurity construct is defined. For instance, drawing on the pioneer job insecurity article (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984), which defined job insecurity as “the perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation” (p. 438); Colakoglu (2011) stated that career insecurity is experienced when there is “a perceived threat both to the continuity of one’s employability and to the quality of subsequent employment” (p. 48). Colakoglu (2011) subsequently emphasized that perceived career insecurity is a subjective facet of low employability by feeling “powerless to maintain continuous employability” (Colakoglu, 2011, p. 50). As clearly indicated, the definition of career insecurity was presented in almost the exact words that job insecurity was foundationally defined. Scholars merely took advantage of the knowledge provided by job insecurity to conceptualize career insecurity. This implies that career insecurity appears to be somewhat poorly developed. It is therefore not surprising that it took scholars about 27 years after the earliest definition of job insecurity to come up with career insecurity construct (Colakoglu, 2011; Höge et al., 2012; Spurk et al., 2016). More so, Colakoglu’s study which several authors (e.g., Alisic & Wiese, 2020; Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018) have adjudged to be the most influential work on career insecurity was only conducted in 2011.

This current paper is organized as follows. First, it discusses the concept of career insecurity and the emergence of the construct of boundaryless careers. Next is where numerous criticisms leveled against boundaryless careers were highlighted. The paper argued against continued study of career

insecurity with particular attention to the context of Nigeria with special exposition that career insecurity does not apply at the same measure in all environments and to all careers. The paper adopted the motivational lifespan development theory to discuss this paper. Finally, the condition of career in the Nigerian environment was examined. The current paper is a critique against the continued studies on career insecurity, especially without recourse to differences in contexts and without bearing in mind that organizational walls have been broken and careers have crossed boundaries.

Career insecurity and the emergence of boundaryless careers

The traditional career model portrays careers as evolving largely within single employment settings and individual career success is usually defined by promotion, power and income and organizational outcomes such as employee loyalty, commitment, and citizenship behaviors on the maintenance of strong organizational boundaries. In contrast, the proponents of the boundaryless career argue that boundaries no longer set a ‘division between familiar and hostile territory’ (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 372) and should instead be viewed as “permeable membranes to be crossed in career behavior” (Rodrigues et al., 2016, p. 671). Despite these conceptualizations of career, the significant change, which has enabled lifetime employment with one single employer to decline and employees frequently rotate between different organizations and even career fields (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002) has challenged career insecurity construct. This ‘new’ inter-organizational lens that is used to view the nature of contemporary careers (Arthur, 1994) is referred to as career boundarylessness. For organizations to be competitive, long-term linear careers within a single organization have been replaced by boundaryless careers.

However, following the ‘demise’ of the traditional organizational career, the obituaries for the ‘job,’ the ‘career,’ and ‘career jobs’ have continued to be announced in the professional (Cappelli, 1999;

Hall & Associates, 1996) and popular (Bridges, 1994) literatures. Recently, Budtz-Jørgensen et al. (2019) reported that since Jack Welch coined the term 'boundaryless' as a catchword to summarize an understanding of careers and organizations as permeable networks in the 1980s, boundarylessness appears to have dismantled the traditional institutions and the dissolution of organizational boundaries. However, the current turbulent economic realities which resulted in ever-increasing market pressures which have forced organizations to become more flexible to survive has given impetus to the boundarylessness construct.

Building on the generally accepted definition of a career as 'the unfolding sequence of a person's work experience over time' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 6), boundaries are defined as "physical, temporal, emotional, cognitive, and/or relational limits that define entities as separate from one another" (Ashforth et al., 2000, p. 474). Arthur (1994) defined career as that "moves across the boundaries of separate employers" (p. 296). DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) defined boundaryless careers as "sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings" (p. 116). The concept was proposed to challenge how organizational career was conceptualized and defined as a "sequence of promotions and other upward moves in a work-related hierarchy during the course of the person's work life" (Hall, 1976, p. 2). As opposed to traditional careers, boundaryless careers are characterized by mobility not only across organizations but also across occupations, industries, geographic locations, and employment forms (i.e., full-time versus part-time and temporary versus permanent employment) in a non-linear and unpredictable manner (Arthur et al., 1999). Ortlieb and Weiss (2018) argued that careers have become increasingly trans-organisational, self-initiated, and shaped by individuals (protean careers) rather than by organizations and their human resource management (boundaryless careers).

Criticisms leveled against boundaryless careers

The introduction of boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) was radical and it revolutionized studies on career and generated considerable interest even among organizational practitioners. Despite the claim by its promoters that careers and organizations are permeable and flexible, this position has come under heavy criticisms (e.g., Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019; Inkson et al., 2012; Loacker & Śliwa, 2016). For instance, Rodrigues and Guest (2010) raised issue against the disappearing career boundaries to argue that research communities are only witnessing "a redefinition, a growing complexity, and a more subjective perspective on career boundaries" (p. 1170). Loacker and Śliwa (2016) opined that the understanding of contemporary workers either as unrestrained agent of boundarylessness or as hapless victims forced by necessity into precariousness was misconstrued to mean boundaryless careers. Budtz-Jørgensen et al. (2019) argued that boundaries within contemporary career development has become diffuse, indeterminate and ambiguous. They introduced the concept of the liminal career instead to explain what they called lack of clarity in terms of work roles, the criteria for career progression and hierarchical structures. Budtz-Jørgensen and colleagues based their claim on Deleuze (1992) who posits that the traditional boundaries are only becoming unclear.

Furthermore, the boundaryless career concept argues that currently careers operate with porous boundaries, but critics (e.g., Inkson, 2008; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010) argue that this argument lacks empirical validity. The third critique of the boundaryless career concept centres on its impreciseness. As Rodrigues and Guest (2010) emphasize, that the concept is built upon "the core assumption of increasing mobility across organizational boundaries" (p. 1159). This suggests that career boundaries themselves remain but that individuals have become 'border crossers' (Clark, 2000). It has also been argued that the idea of boundarylessness presents several important conceptual and operational limitations (Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Inkson et al., 2012) and shown that the empirical basis for an increase in inter-organizational

career mobility is modest (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). Boundaryless career has been described as a metaphor that aims at highlighting trends in modern careers and is therefore incomplete and simplified explanations of reality (Inkson, 2006). Further criticisms of boundaryless career is encapsulated as follows: 1) the idea of the boundaryless career lacks accuracy (Arnold & Cohen, 2008; Inkson, 2006); 2) the concept overemphasizes individual agency over structure (Inkson, 2006); 3) the boundaryless career, like the organizational career model, ascribes primacy to organizational boundaries (Gunz et al., 2000); and 4) the empirical support for the dominant meaning (i.e. inter-organizational career mobility) of the metaphor is modest (Mallon, 1998; Pringle & Mallon, 2003). Despite all criticisms, these scholars have not considered the environmental differences in relation to careers studies. We argue that there are obvious differences in the reality of career insecurity in different contexts.

Theoretical explanation

The present paper found Heckhausen's et al. (2010) motivational theory of lifespan development (MTD) as relevant in the understanding of the current paper. Heckhausen et al. (2010) posit that individuals' career success rests on their shoulders to carefully choose among several career options and pursue developmental or career-related goals diligently so that these individuals will be in total control over their development. Drawing from earlier theory such as the Rubicon model of action phases (Gollwitzer, 1990; Gollwitzer, 2012), Heckhausen's et al. (2010) proposed in their MTD theory that a "sequential structure of goal-oriented action cycles involving phases of goal selection, goal engagement, and disengagement in developmental regulation" (p. 33). According to them, self-management approaches are very fundamental on issues involving developmental demands. The efficacy of the theory lies on the use of functional approaches that are beneficial in achieving long-term developmental goals and recognizes the opportunities that could obstruct or assist goal accomplishment. Heckhausen

et al. (2010) highlighted three types of control strategies that are useful in goal performance that includes selective primary control which entails the commitment of behavioral resources e.g., effort, time, and ability that are relevant in goal performance. The second strategy is what Heckhausen and colleagues (2010) referred to as compensatory primary control that entails the deployment of external resources e.g., accessing assistance and finally selective secondary control which involves cognitive approaches, such as reducing any other contending goals. The current paper posits that although individuals are motivated toward the lifespan development of careers, the pattern of this development appears to differ from one environment to the other. For instance, it appears that in the Nigerian work environment, lifespan career development is no longer obtainable; this is because individuals' careers have become boundaryless as they can move many times across different careers that match their knowledge, skills, and abilities. This is a sharp contrast of what Heckhausen et al. (2010) advocated.

Does career insecurity apply equally to all environments?

The authors answer to the above question is in the negative. Some examples are cited here to justify why the authors' answer is not in the affirmative. In the academia for instance, individuals in the Western societies face not only high levels of insecurity in the early career phase but also the responsibility of managing their careers by themselves (Alisic & Wiese, 2020). The academic career environment in most European countries is characterized by high levels of uncertainty (Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018). Ortlieb and Weiss succinctly outlined the structural sources of career insecurity in the academic work environment as follows: "short-term contracts, high competition for tenure-track positions, high performance standards, mobility requirements, and difficulties reconciling work and personal life". The system they operate provides opportunity for young scholars to have contract appointment positions, and those who aspire to obtain a tenured professorship or

what is referred to as permanent positions in Nigeria struggle with high levels of competitiveness due to the narrowness of such positions in universities (Harley et al., 2004). The authors agree with Ortlieb and Weiss' (2018) highlight that academic career systems vary from country to country, but an objection was raised when they assert that these systems all share what Van Maanen (2015) called "the psychological atrocities of the tenure system" (p. 38).

When the number of studies published on career insecurity is compared to that of job insecurity it gives one a clear impression that career insecurity is relatively understudied. Numerous scholars (e.g., Colakoglu, 2011; Höge et al., 2012; Spurk et al., 2016; Trevor-Roberts, 2006) lamented that career insecurity has failed to attract wide research attention despite its relevance. The reason for paucity of research on career insecurity tends to lie on the understanding by scholars that the construct may have lost relevance due to the fact that careers have become boundaryless in modern organizations. Inkson (2008) supported this claim by highlighting that many individuals in the low-wage cadre of the workforce have no commitment to a single organization and thus appear to be engaging in a boundaryless career, they are 'bounded instead by crushing structural constraints' (p. 556); a view Colakoglu (2011) also holds that, "the careers landscape has dramatically changed over the last two decades due to major social, economic, technological, and organizational changes. Bebiroglu et al. (2019) found a disparity between the skills acquired in training and the skills needed in the jobs among doctoral degree holders in a more advanced society. Traditional careers associated with rapid, upward mobility in a single hierarchy have increasingly been replaced by boundaryless careers that are relatively unpredictable and disorderly, and frequently involve horizontal mobility across organizational boundaries" (p. 47). Colakoglu (2011) further explored career insecurity in relation to career boundarylessness and subjective career success based on enactment perspectives (e.g., Weick, 1996), which argues that a boundaryless career offers individuals widespread

autonomy and self-determination that largely contribute to career satisfaction. The question before us now is: if boundaryless career provides individuals with almost limitless autonomy, what becomes the relevance of discussing career insecurity in the modern organizational management literature?

Factors that further diminish the efficacy of career insecurity have also caught the attention of the current authors. For instance, it is reported that the development and the utilization of career competencies (Mirvis & Hall, 1996) and career adaptability (Spurk et al., 2016) are expected to play a critical role in decreasing career insecurity one feels when experiencing a boundaryless career. Ortlieb and Weiss (2018) found that willingness to be geographically mobile and attaining an advanced career stage is negatively associated with career insecurity. More so, individuals with extensive knowledge-based and transferable competencies and skills have broad, flexible experience and reduced perception of career insecurity (Kanter, 1989) because such a base is associated with enhanced employability in one's career (Saxenian, 1996).

Career insecurity in the context of Nigeria

For quite some time now, Nigeria's economy has been best described as poor. Currently, unemployment rate in Nigeria stands at 33.3 percent while underemployment rate stands at 22.8 percent (NBS, 2020). The few available jobs are precarious yet as various economic changes sweep across the sector. Given such condition individuals who have been laid off or those that perceive their jobs to be precarious will likely make effort to switch to another career which security is less threatening. Moreover, Inkson (2008) pointed out that individuals that receive low income at work will not show commitment to a single organization and would move on whenever an opportunity presents itself. This view was supported by Colakoglu (2006, 2011) and Ituma and Simpson (2009) when they stated that changes in the careers landscape owing to key social, economic, technological, organizational changes, uncertainties, and insecurity have discouraged individuals from

being absolutely loyal to a single career. These conditions are characteristics of the Nigerian work environment, little wonder the boundaries between careers appear to have become porous. However, due to the ravaging poor economic condition evident in Nigeria, even employees whose jobs appear to be more secured with relatively high income have been identified to move to higher paying careers to evade the pervasive hardship in Nigeria. For example, in Nigeria tenured career in the civil service including career in the university academia are perceived as about the most secured careers in the Nigerian work environment, yet individuals abandon such career that they had invested enormous amounts of resources for greener pastures in other different careers that promise higher wages.

Implications and recommendations

The problem that most African scholars and organizations appear to contend with is a complete dependence on theories and studies that focused on Western-European work environment even when there are clear differences across these two divides such as cultural and economic differences. Most times Nigerian scholars and organizational practitioners often tend to depend on foreign theories to provide explanations on local contents. Although these foreign theories have provided the foundation upon which most of these constructs can be understood but sometimes, they could be misleading, especially when placed side-by-side with the peculiar challenges in Nigerian work context. The counselors have a duty to guide Nigerian scholars and organizational practitioners on the need to take in these theories with a pinch of the salt in trusting them to provide clear-cut explanations or solutions to peculiar issues bothering the Nigerian organizations. It is high time Nigerian scholars came together to begin to develop relevant theories with local contents capable of changing the misfortune that plague the Nigerian work organizations; while at the same time keep but validate the utility of these theories developed in Europe or North America. It is recommended that this could be achieved by

developing interdisciplinary constructs, encouraging mutual respect from scholars across different but related fields of specializations. With this, there is likely going to be new synthesis in the scientific endeavor of Nigerian scholars to produce knowledge with local contents that will likely save Nigerian work organizations from borrowing and superimposing alien theories that may conflict with the aspirations and achievement of goals of Nigerian organizations. More so, since it is becoming increasingly clear that most careers in the Nigerian work environment are boundaryless and since economic downturn has been pointed at as the reason why many people cross career boundaries, the counselors should as a matter of urgency recommended that individuals should broaden their skills set in other to be relevant in different careers and for various organizations. To further cast doubt over career insecurity, and to support career boundaries, Woolston (2021) encourage individuals to receive various professional trainings to prepare them for diverse careers. When this is done, these individuals would find reason to fulfill their aspirations and have meaningful work life.

Conclusion

The conceptualization and early studies on boundarylessness of careers (e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; McDonald et al., 2005; Smith & Sheridan, 2006) revolutionized the studies on careers and by extension may have created a clog on the progress of career insecurity research. This could account for long period of research silence on career insecurity and what is commonly referred to as the most influential career insecurity study was only published in 2011 (Colakoglu, 2011). While many studies have extolled this new trajectory in career research, others have raised critical issues that bothers on conceptual and operationalization problems and have further expressed disappointment about the amount of empirical work the boundaryless career had stimulated (Rodriguez & Guest, 2010; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Although careers may not be absolutely boundaryless as argued by numerous

follow-up studies (e.g., Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019; Dany et al., 2011; Inkson et al., 2012; Ituma & Simpson, 2009; Loacker & Śliwa, 2016); these studies have not in any way neutralized the impact the proponents of boundaryless career have made in the management and organizational literature, especially when context is brought into the milieu. However, research (e.g., Colakoglu, 2006; Ituma & Simpson, 2009) recognized that boundarylessness is a reality in times of change, uncertainties, and job insecurity. The authors submit that career insecurity may not have a place in a society where absolutely necessary changes are open to organizations to survive in an intense business competition. To remain relevant in such society, individuals are disposed to acquire multiple skills-set individuals that guarantees them fluidity and horizontal or inter-organizational movement. In such condition, career insecurity may be null and void because it can only be possible when careers are bounded.

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