Responsible Careers: Systemic Reflexivity in Shifting Landscapes

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Abstract

This article examines responsible careers, in which people seek to have an impact on societal challenges such as environmental sustainability and social justice. We propose a dynamic model of responsible careers based on studying 32 individuals in the emerging organizational fields of corporate responsibility, social entrepreneurship, sustainability and social investing. We describe six career practices—expressing self, connecting to others, constructing contribution, institutionalising, field shaping and engaging systemically. Observations suggest that development of these practices is influenced by four learning dynamics: people's perceptions of 'shifting landscapes' in which they seek to orient themselves, exploration, and both biographical and systemic reflexivity. Our interdisciplinary and empirically-grounded approach, integrating psychological intentions and institutional context, strengthens theorizing about responsible careers. The proposed model depicts responsible careers as continually evolving, sometimes precarious, and as dynamically enacted in relation to pluralist, shifting landscapes.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The corporate scandals of the past decade and growing concerns about the social and environmental impacts of organizations have provoked debates about responsibility in managerial careers amongst academic (Khurana & Nohria, 2008; Waddock, 2007; Walk, 2009) and business communities (Elkington & Hartigan, 2008; Waddock, 2008). In this article, we seek to join these debates by extending theoretical approaches to the enactment of contemporary careers, focusing on individuals who are developing responsible careers.

A frequent starting point for debate is the context of traditional business organizations, with their emphasis on economic objectives and incentives. This perspective problematises the relationship between organizations' priorities and employees' responsible conduct. Accordingly, there has been interest in the enablers and constraints of responsible action in managerial careers. As influences, scholars identify individual differences (Boiral et al., 2008; Brown & Trevinio, 2006; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), behavioural styles (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Brown & Trevino, 2005), and organizational and occupational cultures and norms (Forsberg & Westerdahl, 2007; Gunz & Gunz, 2007).

Despite this extensive literature examining individual responsibility within relatively stable organizations and occupations, there remains a gap in our understanding of careers that respond to wider societal debates through the professionalization and institutionalization of responsible business practices across a variety of sectors and in the spaces beyond organizational boundaries (Roper &

Cheney, 2005; Waddock, 2008). To address this gap, we develop the notion of responsible careers—defined as careers in which people seek to have an impact on societal challenges such as environmental sustainability and social justice through their employment and role choices, strategic approaches to work and other actions.

In contrast to research that examines individual responsibility against the backdrop of organizations' status quo, we situate this inquiry within the context of emerging fields of corporate social responsibility[1] (CSR), social entrepreneurship, sustainability and social investing. These emerging fields are characterised by sector-crossing and socially innovative activities. Their dynamism and complexity raise questions about the practices by which individuals enact new careers (Weick, 1996), the extent to which they can shape contexts (Griffin, 2007), and the forms learning and adaptation within responsible careers might take.

Contemporary career literature can inform our understanding of careers within emerging fields. For example, responsible careers can be described as 'protean'—i.e. self-directed and value-based (Hall, 2004)—in so far as they reflect individuals' conscious commitments to responsible values and life-long identity learning. They are 'boundaryless' to the extent that they require physical and psychological career mobility (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996:6; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), for example when moving from conventional to responsible roles, and moving between sectors. Moreover, the boundaryless nature of responsible careers is accentuated by the rapid proliferation of emerging sectors, cross-sector collaborations and innovative occupational communities.

Beyond these synergies, responsible careers raise attention to previously unexplored aspects of contemporary careers. Whilst boundaryless and protean perspectives recognise interdependencies with personal and relational commitments to family and community, the realm of responsible careers is larger, as they reference wider societal debates such as those about climate change and social justice. Furthermore, our definition refines earlier descriptions of service/cause-related career orientations (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Schein, 1993; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), with the latter not distinguishing whether they are situated within the status quo of society (e.g. public service) or directed at more profound societal transformation. Studying responsible careers requires attention to ways in which work can be viewed by the individual as political, as a form of engaged citizenship and 'action' in the public sphere, outside the realm of formal political governance (Arendt, 1958; Dalton, 2008). This study aims to extend the protean and boundaryless career perspectives by deepening our understanding of the practices, learning and adaptation characterising careers that are intended to contribute to social change.

Next, we review literature relevant to careers in emerging fields. We then discuss how individual responsibility has been conceptualised in organizational literature and evaluate the contributions of an interdisciplinary career perspective. The second part of the article reports findings from a study of 32 individuals who are pursuing responsible careers. We describe six responsible career practices and propose that their development is dynamically influenced by four learning dynamics.

The emerging contexts of responsible careers

Over the past decade, responsible careers have gained more legitimacy as a result of a significant change in public awareness about the social, environmental, and economic responsibilities of business. This trend has been partially fuelled by media and policy maker's attention to ethical business scandals (including Enron's 2001 collapse and the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis). The need for attention to climate change is depicted by many as urgent (Stern, 2006; IPPC, 2007; UNDP, 2007). Business is implicated in issues of global social justice (Christian Aid, 2004). Critical films such as *The Corporation* (2005) and Gore's (2006) *An inconvenient truth*, the activism of music and film celebrities, and debates about ethical consumption are permeating society. As a consequence, responsible career aspirations are no longer the exclusive domain of individuals identifying with counter-cultural movements (Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Turner, 2006), but reflect a wider change in public sentiment (Inglehart, 2008; Ray and Anderson, 2000). Nonetheless, definitions of what is

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[1] CSR involves attempts to integrate attention to environmental and social issues into an organization's policies and practices. It takes a wide variety of forms and is highly contested.

responsible, sustainable, and of social benefit remain indeterminate and politically contested by those representing different interests.

In addition, the emerging institutional fields of corporate responsibility, social entrepreneurship, sustainability, and social investing have opened up opportunities for the pursuit of responsible careers through employment and collaborative projects. This may include responsible roles within large companies or social enterprises. Furthermore, there are roles within the institutions shaping these fields, including: specialist consulting firms, powerful foundations, think tanks, event-organizations, initiatives directed at developing reporting standards, educational programmes, and professional networks (Marshall, 2007; Waddock, 2008; Walk, 2009).

Besides employment, an institutional perspective suggests that the organizations and networks constituting these fields also produce and change participants' common understandings, practices and ongoing relationships with each other through repeated social interactions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Maguire et al., 2004). In emerging fields, members recognise some mutual interests, yet coordinated action among them is limited, with practices being only narrowly diffused and weakly entrenched (Maguire et al., 2004:659). For example, the corporate responsibility field connects its participants by a discourse challenging the dominant business emphasis on economic logic. It promotes practices that integrate social and environmental considerations with economic objectives (Waddock, 2008:30). It often draws on the image of triple bottom line accounting developed by Elkington (1997), and institutionalised by the Global Reporting Initiative (McIntosh et al., 2003). Yet, NGOs and academics have contested these self-regulatory approaches as being inadequate to address the full scale of the current social and environmental crisis (Christian Aid, 2004; Milne et al., 2009). Similarly, the fields of social entrepreneurship and social investing recognise that the provision of social goods is constrained by increased competition for limited public funding, and that entrepreneurial action across commercial, public and non-profit sectors can offer innovative alternatives (Alvord et al., 2004; Weerawardena & Mort, 2006). Yet, fusing contradictory logics such as 'development' and 'business', 'social' and 'enterprise', or 'strategic' and 'philanthropy' is problematic and invites resistance and challenge (Battilana & Dorado, 2009; Roper & Cheney, 2005). Understanding careers within this context requires theorising that spans conceptual boundaries.

Conceptualising responsible careers

The emerging context depicted above problematises the interdependency between personal intention (agency) and institutions. To conceptualise responsible careers in this context, we synthesise psychological and sociological perspectives on individual responsibility in organizations and appraise the contribution of an inter-disciplinary approach to responsible careers.

Individual responsibility in organizational settings

A considerable body of literature on ethical and environmental leadership has anchored responsible behaviour within psychological motives. Concepts examined range from stable dispositions to more malleable values and developmental frames. Consistent with the definition of protean careers (Hall, 2004), ethical leaders are said to show a strong inner directedness; such dispositions as conscientiousness, low self-monitoring and proactiveness; and values endorsing integrity and transparency (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Egri & Herman, 2000; Trevino et al., 2003). They also express relational capacities, such as agreeableness, benevolence, altruism, and fairness (Brown & Trevino, 2006; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Egri & Herman, 2000). Furthermore, developmental perspectives associate individuals working in responsible roles with self-construals that are considerate about the wider moral consequences of their actions (Brown & Trevino, 2006; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), eco-centric (Egri & Herman, 2000), and post-conventional. The latter involves reappraising accepted conventions, considering the complexity and interdependence of problems, and having an interest in both individual and societal transformation (Boiral et al., 2008).

Yet, personal motives, alone, are insufficient to perform responsible roles. Their challenge lies in integrating a personal sense of integrity with effective skills that take account of pluralistic values and approaches (Waddock, 2007; Waldman & Siegel, 2008). Accordingly, responsible roles have been linked with consistent interpersonal and influencing behaviours (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Brown & Trevino, 2005; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Egri & Herman, 2000; Trevino et al.,

2003). They also demand the capacity to view environmental, social and business systems as inter-related and to bridge across multiple diverse stakeholders (Alvord et al., 2004; Ospina & Foldy, 2008; Waddock, 2008).

Literature that situates responsible roles within organizations often conceptualises context as an independent influence upon individual action. Limited scope for personal agency is implied, unless the organizational culture is favourable. For example, several studies suggest that the effectiveness of ethical leaders is facilitated by alignment with organizational culture and priorities (Bansal, 2003; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Egri & Herman, 2000). Gunz and Gunz (2007) argue that individual responsibility is constrained by organizational values and career systems that demand compliance with a narrow focus on economic objectives. Similarly, Meyerson and Scully (1995) depict the personally-motivated pursuit of responsible change agendas in contexts of diverging organizational discourses as characterised by ambiguous identities and tempered action.

In contrast, the institutional entrepreneurship literature acknowledges more scope for responsible action directed at changing institutional fields. Yet, it also suggests a paradoxical positioning for individual agency as being situated at the fault line between established and emerging institutional fields (Garud et al., 2007) and constrained by a lack of legitimacy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). Studies examining institutional entrepreneurship related to responsible practice suggest that its effectiveness is often influenced by entrepreneurs' access to field-level resources arising from external networks (Lounsbury, 2001) and people's capacities to operate politically within a context of competing or hybrid logics (Battilana & Dorado, 2009; Lounsbury & Pollack, 2001; Maguire et al., 2004).

Adopting a career perspective

Career theory extends the above conceptualizations, creating the scope to acknowledge the diversity of purposes from which those aspiring to responsible careers are operating. Four themes in career research summarised by Arthur and Rousseau (1996) are relevant to theorising this phenomenon. The authors suggest, firstly, that career theory should acknowledge that concerns about responsibility could apply irrespective of people's experience, formal position and status within employment settings. Secondly, they depict careers as unfolding over time (Arthur et al., 1989). This creates potential for attending to learning, adaptation and identity development (Hall, 2004), and for superseding prevailing explanations of responsible action in terms of more or less stable psychological variables.

Thirdly, Arthur and Rousseau argue that career theory favours an interdisciplinary approach. This lens sensitises us to the interdependencies between personal preferences and the wider situation in which responsible careers are being enacted—including organizations, relational commitments, occupational communities, the economy and wider society (Arthur, 2008; Mayerhofer et al., 2007). Responsible careers do reference wider societal concerns and ideological commitments—even if these diverge from organizational values (Marshall, 2007; Meyerson & Scully, 1995). They also unfold within wider career communities and institutional fields (Lounsbury, 2001; Waddock, 2008). This positioning across multiple contexts raises questions about how individuals shape responsible careers.

Finally, a focus on careers recognises that subjective and objective aspects are interdependent and that they represent neither exclusively psychological nor solely sociological phenomena (Arthur et al., 2005). With respect to organizational careers, this interdependence has been portrayed in terms of the challenge, individuals face in adapting to institutional career scripts, while also carving out some sense of subjective meaning and agency (Barley, 1989). In established organizational fields, the concept of career scripts offers an analytical frame for examining how institutions define individuals and, in turn, how individuals can change institutional contexts through variations in their enactment of careers (Duberley et al., 2006). If institutional career scripts largely define the objective career, individual preferences are often relegated to the domain of the subjective career.

For careers within emerging fields of responsible business the nature of the interdependence between subjective and objective aspects can be considered in two alternative ways. From a psychological perspective, these fields can be seen as weak situations (Mischel, 1977) because they provide individuals with under-defined and uncertain scripts to guide and incentivise appropriate ways of performing work and developing career paths over time. As a consequence, actions within

weak situations rely more strongly on individuals' abilities to generate intrinsic guides and incentives for their actions. Consistent with this psychological line of reasoning about the interaction between agency and context, Weick (1996) proposes that boundary-spanning, improvisational contexts open up possibilities for individual and collective autonomy and innovation. Individuals have more leeway for enacting careers that correspond with their values and developing them through iterative cycles of trial-and-error. This bottom-up, variety-increasing, enactment of new practices can, through subsequent selection and retention processes, create new structures.

In contrast, institutional sociology suggests that emerging organizational fields present individuals with complex, or even paradoxical situations (Garud, 2007). From this perspective, organizational members need to pay tribute to the career scripts of their current employers, but they also need to reference under-defined and dynamic fields of responsible business practice. Similarly, those in entrepreneurial or self-employed situations face the double challenge of having to follow the scripts ruling the transactional employment markets in which they participate (Barley & Kunda, 2006; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Svejenova, 2005), while also remaining attuned to how the evolution of the wider field influences their business practices, collaborative opportunities, and professional identities.

Irrespective of whether we conceive the emerging contexts of responsible careers as being weak or complex, these perspectives raise questions about adequate conceptualisation of what guides the enactment of responsible careers. Both draw attention to the importance of ongoing learning and adaptation. This applies as much to individuals who are transitioning from conventional roles into those they see as more responsible, as to individuals who are established in responsibility fields but need to position themselves with regards to changing discourses, practices and collaborative opportunities. Given the importance of ongoing learning in changing and complex fields, the objective of this study is to move beyond both psychological explanations and those that favour contextual determination, and examine how people's enactment of responsible careers is dynamically situated within these fields.

Methods

The sample was chosen from people already pursuing responsible careers to generate new conceptual insights into this under-researched phenomenon. Using theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989), we drew on 32 formal interviews (the focus of this paper) and tens of informal conversations. Participants were identified through relevant networks and events in the UK including Net Impact, Business-in-the-Community, The Hub, Pioneers-of-Change, the Global Social Venture Competition, the alumni and student networks of a degree programme on sustainability issues in business (here 'Responsibility Masters') and a Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, and from personal recommendations.

Table I summarises the background of interviewees. They came from a wide range of organizational types, levels and functions. Their diversity is some indication of the proliferating fields of careers that address sustainability and social justice issues. Participants worked for (1) mission-based organizations, for example with a primary focus on social entrepreneurship development; (2) bridge-building organizations providing CSR, sustainability and social investing services to mainstream organizations; and (3) mainstream business or consulting. The sample included top-level executives, senior and middle managers, independent consultants and (social) entrepreneurs. Their areas of expertise included social investment, microfinance, social enterprise development, sustainability, strategy and organizational change, although, many had integrated capabilities defying clear delineation. Their ages ranged from mid-20s to early 60s, and the sample was evenly balanced in terms of gender (53% female).

Table I   Background, gender, and age of participants (n = 32)

Field	Role	No.	Female	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60
Social entrepreneurship development & bridge-building to business							
	Self-employed or small non-profit start-up	8	6	3	2	2	1
		25%	19%	9%	6%	6%	3%
	Management level, mission-based organization	5	2		4	1	
		16%	6%		13%	3%	
	CEO/board-level, mission-based organization	5	4	1	3		1
		16%	13%	3%	9%		3%
CSR, sustainability & social investing services for 'mainstream' clients							
	Self-employed or small consulting	3	1		2	1	
		9%	3%		6%	3%	
	Management level, mission-based organization	5	3		4	1	
		16%	9%		13%	3%	
	CEO/board level, mission-based organization	1	1		1		
		3%	3%		3%		
CSR/sustainability role employed *within* 'mainstream' business organization							
	Management level	2			1	1	
		6%			3%	3%	
	CEO/board-level	3				1	2
		9%				3%	6%
Totals		32	17	4	17	7	4
		100%	53%	13%	53%	22%	13%

The researchers were guided by their longstanding engagement with responsible careers. One author was informed by over eleven years as Director and tutor for the 'Responsibility Masters'; the other by over ten years of participant observation in networks promoting responsible business. Based on this, adoption of an interpretivist approach seemed most appropriate. This stance suggests that social interaction is intentional, yet unpredictable, influenced by people's awareness of themselves, their relationship to others, and the meanings they assign to experiences. Figure 1 presents the questions that guided our semi-structured interviews. The first question asked the participant to tell their story in their own words, to hear how they constructed a career self-narrative (Bruner, 1990). Subsequent questions asked more specifically about their motives and sources of influence. Other questions probed perceptions of the field, activities, strategies, and their learning as these might influence careers. Thirty interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In two cases we took notes due to lack of consent or technical problems. Transcripts were supplemented by notes taken during and within a few hours of the interview, responses to a demographic questionnaire, information about participants' association with professional networks, CVs, biographical abstracts, and, where available, articles written by or about interviewees. The analysis was also informed in some cases by knowledge of participants' career development through our roles as their tutor and fellow network participant.

Figure I   Interview guide

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1. The purpose of this conversation is to learn more about the approach you take to your work and career in the responsible business field… To start off with, I would like to ask you to use the next 15-20 minutes to simply tell your story.
2. How would you describe 'the field' you are working in? (e.g. issues, developments, players)
3. How are you engaging with this field? (e.g. projects, activities)
4. What's your goal in doing this work?
5. How do you go about this work? Can you give an example? (e.g. with whom, resources, approaches, networks)
6. Do you hold any ideas of social change, and of how this happens?
7. What's your interpretation of 'leadership' in this field?
8. How do you evaluate your work? (e.g. successes, failures, emotions)
9. Could you give me example(s) of how you have learned from engaging with activities in this field?
10. What motivates you to do this work? (e.g., are you sometimes accused of being idealistic?)
11. What or who has shaped you in doing this work (e.g. role models, upbringing, religion, earlier work experiences)?

Data analysis was conducted in iterative phases following a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005) that combined dissecting individual accounts across the sample for themes and also attending to the overall gestalt of each individual account. Both researchers individually coded transcripts in successive phases of analysis. Periodically, they compared their analyses, identifying key emerging themes, debating codings and conceptualisations and exploring interdependencies.

Thus the process of analysis was iterate, working between an elicited body of codes and emerging themes, and converging towards a set of meta-level concepts. We noted different qualities of speaking about responsible careers. For example, some aspects of self-narrative appeared coherent, confident and intentional, while others incorporated contradictions, conflicting demands and uncertainties. Noting the reflexivity in people's accounts became a significant theme in our analysis. This led us to distinguish at a meta-level between a set of six constructs describing responsible career practices (i.e. more intentional career management strategies) and four distinct interpretive dynamics that represent the more provisional quality of accounts related to learning and adaptation—perceptions of the field, exploratory learning, and two forms of reflexivity. Once an initial model had been identified, the transcripts were reviewed to saturate emerging themes and identify whether any significant aspects of participants' career stories had been omitted.

Findings
We synthesise our data by proposing in Figure II five meta-level dynamics, and their interdependencies, as a model of ways that people enact and explain responsible careers. At the centre of the model, 'responsible career practices' describe specific career self-management strategies and behaviours. These emerge in interaction with four learning dynamics: people's attempts at orienting themselves vis-à-vis perceptions of 'shifting landscapes', exploration, and two distinct types of reflexive interpretations ('biographical' and 'systemic' reflexivity).

Figure II   A dynamic model of responsible careers
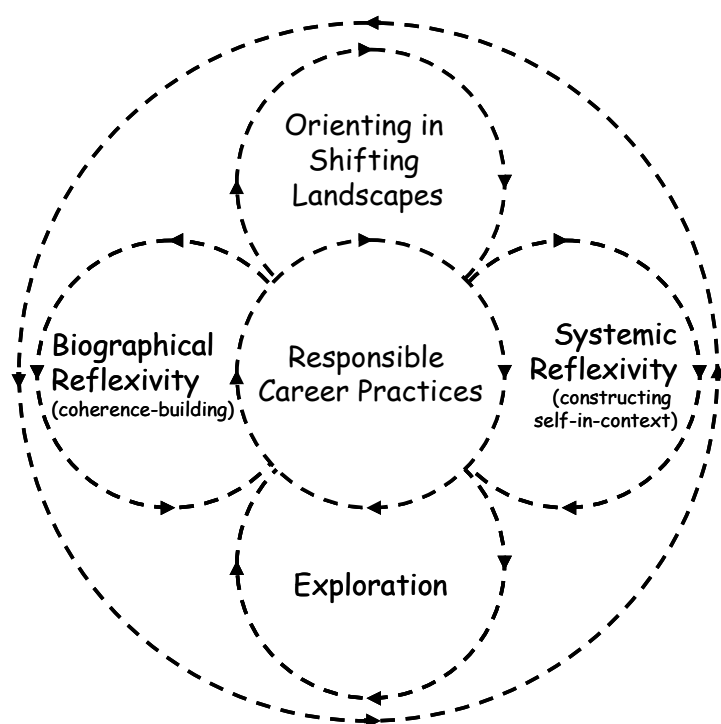
As indicated by the moving circles overlapping each other, the model suggests that the five meta-level dynamics mutually propel each other (in a non-deterministic fashion). For example, biographical reflexivity about the origins of deeply held values can trigger a person's engagement in exploration. In turn, these activities can influence perceptions of shifting landscapes, generating feedback that provokes systemic reflexivity, and the development of responsible career practices that appear most adaptable to one's perceived context. These mutually constituting interdependencies can work bi-directionally, for example a more nuanced and integrated understanding in one dimension (e.g. in the domain of systemic reflexivity) can encourage development in other dimensions (e.g. exploration), leading the individual to re-frame their engagement with their experienced context in ways that give greater consideration to its 'shifting' nature.

Below, we elaborate each dimension of the model. We start with responsible career practices, depicting each one briefly, as these illustrate the range of forms such careers can take. In the closing section of the Findings on 'systemic reflexivity', we give an extended illustration in the story of Dominic and Emma, showing dynamics in interaction.

We identified interviewees' expressed desire to have an impact on society as a characteristic of responsible careers. This rationale underpinned their career choices and was also the reference against which they chose and evaluated their strategies and behaviours in specific roles. Framing career intentions in this way points to the interdependence between subjective motives and concerns about objective organizational outcomes—even if those outcomes diverge from conventional criteria of objective success. Whilst having an impact seems more evident in some of the following sections, it pervades all categories of our data. We return to this aspect, and some of the conundrums it raises, in the Discussion.

Responsible career practices

The identification of six responsible career practices initially emerged from over 50 inductive codes describing approaches to enacting and developing responsible careers. The practices range from those expressing a greater focus on self to those being more context-aware. We observed these practices as potentially complementary and appropriate at all careers stages. Rather than implying a sequential progression, they were often used in conjunction with each other, with many interviewees articulating three or more, depending on their experience and institutional setting.

Expressing self describes career management practices directed at crafting work that is consistent with personal values, such as concerns about sustainability or social justice, and articulates one's unique voice. Work is thus seen as making a statement, with the potential to have an impact in the world. For example, Simon's[2] vision of setting-up a social enterprise that offered an educational community for young, isolated social entrepreneurs from the grassroots drew on his personal experiences. He had grown up in a deprived inner city neighbourhood and established a charity while still a teenager. His story highlights the relational, self-transcending and systemic qualities of expressing a responsible self, which reflects taking a role in wider society rather than being a lonely pursuit. Some people left well paid jobs in large corporations seeking more scope for self expression.

Connecting to others is a central theme in responsible career stories. This involved contact with like-minded people, helping affirm one's vision, purposes and practices. Also, it involved networking—making contacts that would help develop career opportunities or specific ventures. People's accounts were strongly marked by whether they could, or could not, develop relationships.

Stella's connections helped her to craft a career path that is counter-cultural in mainstream business. Following a CSR role for a large organization, she set up both a social enterprise with a friend, and a consulting business focusing on systemic change with two other associates. Involvement in networks including Pioneers-of-Change and the Responsibility Masters alumni community enhanced her development. We came to recognise such career communities not only as sources of information and support, but as reference groups for justifying work activities and career choices in terms of wider societal impact.

Constructing contribution describes efforts to define how one's expertise can be applied to responsible business fields. The latters' emerging nature makes this an ongoing preoccupation, even for those with long 'responsible' career histories.

Constructing contribution was a prevalent theme among those transitioning from mainstream business roles. They needed to identify how they could apply existing competences to new fields. This had been an ongoing concern for Konrad. He started to re-evaluate his career in a prestigious investment bank, having learnt about microfinance from colleagues. He resigned and volunteered for 7 months with a microfinance institution in Peru. But his particular financial expertise was not appropriate to microfinance and credit analysis. Committed to working in poverty eradication, he was therefore exploring possibilities in the international development world that would make better use of his skills.

Our data suggested that finding an appropriate framing of contribution is required before people can proceed to 'institutionalising', 'field shaping', or 'engaging systemically'.

Institutionalising describes activities directed at legitimising and embedding responsible practices within established organizations and institutional fields.

Bill operates within a major management consulting firm. Following a sabbatical as a volunteer business adviser in Macedonia, he decided to stay with his employer but forgo the typical partner track and, instead, with senior-level supporters, established a separate business unit delivering consulting services to the development sector on a non-profit basis. People in such situations explain their career choice of working within mainstream businesses to their responsible career communities in terms of the impacts that can be achieved.

Field shaping practices are directed at defining an emerging field, such as corporate responsibility reporting or sustainable investing, in ways that change established patterns of operating, promote new standards and build a wider ecology for responsible business. Field shaping is intentional and strategic, often involving political activity and coalition building.

For many interviewees, this included participating in forums where representatives from different organizations and sectors discussed developments in their field. Nick, a senior executive with strong personal commitments to environmental conservation, found new meaning for his career and reinforced his organizational affiliation having become his organization's CSR representative. In this role, he joined the Global Reporting Initiative, an international network developing globally

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[2] All names of interviewees have been changed.

applicable sustainability reporting guidelines for voluntary use by organizations. Through such field-shaping activities, he enhanced his potential to contribute towards change in his industry.

Field shaping (like institutionalising) reveals the multi-referenced nature of many responsible careers where individuals are using their organizational positions as platforms for external influencing, and are working to be systemically influential given current configurations of business and patterns of power.

Finally, *engaging systemically* expresses an ontologically different quality of influencing social change, operating from field awareness. These interviewees' accounts were characterised by a deep appreciation of the interdependence, complexity and indeterminacy of 'shifting landscapes.' Based on their experiences or systemic understanding, they favoured 'initiatives' that combined experimentation with acting from integrity and vision. They had concluded that 'protesting against things', 'thinking in opposites' and advocacy were futile. They wanted to operate in enabling and inclusive ways, meeting people where they were. We observed this approach both among some very powerful connected individuals, and those who lack strong organizational platforms.

Karen had held senior management positions with the World Bank, helping create a 'development marketplace' to connect up activities in ways encouraging systemic effects. Now in her later career as Chief Executive of a charity brokering social investments, her language of action is highly relational, emphasising working with people: "Let's think together with them how it can work". Her extensive experience has given her a critical eye for systemic fault lines. Karen uses places on Boards to cross-pollinate ideas. She participates in conversations about setting up a Social Stock Exchange for UK social enterprises, and concurrently works with a large foundation to develop the idea globally. Her quest is always "what contribution uniquely I can make".

In the next sections we explore the other meta-dimensions of our model: the context in which responsible career practices are adopted, and the dynamic processes through which learning and adaptation are enacted.

Orienting careers in shifting landscapes

The notion of 'shifting landscapes' acknowledges people's experience and interpretation of engaging in contexts that are emerging, experimental and often contested. This theme was a preoccupation in many interviews. Participants noted the speed of change and offered explanations for why alternative ideas of business are now being actively considered. Alina identified socially responsible investing as "evolving quite rapidly in the past two years... We know that certain things are just changing the rules of the game and the landscape". Similarly, Neil described support for social enterprise as a "rapidly evolving" field. "There is a sea change going on… a real shift in the business landscape, the cultural landscape, and in… public awareness of this area." The data suggested a range of dimensions to people's perceptions of shifting landscapes and to their attempts to orient their careers within them. Crafting responsible careers is about contributing, as well as being subject, to change.

Some conditions of shifting landscapes were interpreted as opening up highly energizing career opportunities from which interviewees were then benefitting. Other conditions were interpreted as challenges. Career-makers expressed dilemmas about finding suitable roles and making specific career investments in uncertain and changing circumstances. Some identified competition amongst high calibre and very motivated professionals entering these fields as a source of pressure. Those involved in social investing saw their institutional context radically change following the 2008 financial crisis.

A significant challenge resulted from uncertainty about emerging standards. Renee was among the participants who felt that the premises on which she was building her career could change significantly. In the contested space of responsible business, her organization is establishing an interface through which companies can validate potentially ethical suppliers. NGOs are currently challenging them about whether this activity might contribute to driving down standards. Unless the initiative becomes field-defining, alternative approaches may develop, obviating the organization's work and its members' career investments.

Central to our argument here is that careers are not only determined by objective events, but by the ways individuals attend to and interpret contexts. The interpretation of these conditions

influenced how participants positioned themselves in relations to shifting landscapes. To those entering the field and focusing primarily on 'expressing self' and 'constructing contribution', shifting landscapes could appear as a one-way, unsettling influence. Others were encouraging landscapes to shift through purposeful 'field shaping'. And then there were those who 'engaged systemically'. They realised the tension of experimenting with new models while also needing to be continually adaptive.

Exploration

Exploratory learning appeared throughout all stages of people's career development. It was essential for those transitioning into responsible business fields. But it also remained important to those who were already more established, as shifting landscapes require a continual updating in relation to informing ideas, practices, the regulatory context and more.

At one level, exploration was directed at the external field. This was evident for those newly seeking responsible roles. People did so by: pursuing university degrees, attending networking events (such as Net Impact), volunteering, and approaching other people in the field to test out ideas. Exploration combines an attitude of openness with purposeful creation of opportunities. To break in, some individuals worked as freelance researchers for university centres and foundations, using these projects to work themselves into the subject matter and connect to influential players. For example, George used his MBA project as an opportunity to approach a key individual in an investment bank to propose a research project on micro-finance. By graduation, he was invited to join the newly-launched microfinance unit.

External exploration occurred for extended periods of time. Some took several years as project workers before a more permanent position in their area of interest arose. Charlie had plans for setting up a social enterprise, but chose to work with a second-tier organization that was funding and developing social entrepreneurs in order to learn from people he considered role models.

Exploration was also an internal process. Sara's case illustrates the thoroughness of ongoing exploration and life-review that people were willing to undertake. She has been highly successful working in several charities and, following an MBA, is exploring options as a consultant. She sees great potential to be field-shaping by promoting corporate social responsibility in the charities sector. But her scope for contribution is restricted by clients' needs, wishes and potential. Her wide-ranging support networks, in the charities and CSR communities, now seem relatively low density in relation to her future work aspirations. She does not, yet, have clear ways to judge herself or her likely impacts. She is however open to learning, partly through conducting contract research and working with organizations she knows. We glimpsed her at a highly indeterminate stage in her career, having relinquished previous key commitments and now asking important questions. Her ongoing exploration may well provide insights into other people's processes at times of flux and change.

Biographical reflexivity

Making sense of their lives and where they had come from provided many people with explanations for their current activities, values and career choices. Our data did not suggest that particular biographical events explained responsible careers. Rather, people constructed a sense of retrospective coherence through their accounts. Some identified the values prompting responsible career choices as nurtured in their families of origin. Bill started his story by saying that his parents were teachers in a small rural community; Sara referred to her parents' interests in politics and change. Some people noted defining events such as undergraduate education, volunteering and job placements. Alina, for example, remembered having the insight that she wanted to build her career at the intersection of business and social/environmental impacts. This touchstone guided her unfolding career choices.

Some people constructed their responsible career narrative from boundary-spanning backgrounds, expressing how these conferred systemic insights and resilience. People had lived in developing countries, worked in different sectors, combined activism with mainstream business and so on. All identified their multiple perspectives on the world as resources fitting them to their work and aiding them in finding pathways for integrating responsibility into the heart of their careers. Often the expression of biography was translated into a relational sensibility, aware of issues of difference, power and potential disadvantage.

Biographical reflexivity was ongoing and conducted at any age. It could involve a critical re-appraising of an earlier career stage, and an attempt to bring values that had been latent into expression and enactment. For some people this involved a deliberate career change after demonstrating their abilities to be high achievers within conventional criteria of career success. Having accomplished such a move, from engineering management to being an investment manager with a social enterprise incubator, setting up funding and mentoring for senior people in these ventures, Neil expresses a typical sense of newly achieved career congruence: work now "taps something deeper for me, which is that ability to feel connected to having... a positive impact on the society around you".

Systemic reflexivity

Considering how to achieve impact in complex, shifting situations was a preoccupation in many interviewees' accounts. In such radically indeterminate and continually moving fields, precedents for good practice are lacking and only ongoing experience can reveal systemic inconsistencies between intentions and outcomes. We use the term systemic reflexivity to identify this reflective approach to making sense of shifting landscapes and, against this backdrop, articulating one's contribution to change and adopting associated career practices.

We propose systemic reflexivity as an evolving process that is initiated by observing contradictions, incoherence, and uncertainty arising from the shifting contexts in which responsible careers are crafted. For example, participants identified discrepancies between their ideals and 'reality', such as insufficient financial resources, a lack of infrastructure, or a lack of rewards for relational investments. Systemic reflexivity was also characterised by questioning the effectiveness of adopted approaches, considering the wider impact one was having, identifying gaps, and observing inconsistencies or limitations in the paradigms from which one had been operating so far. As a consequence of making sense of perceived contradictions, systemic reflexivity can give rise to more profound adult development, expanding one's capacity for deploying self-in-context. For example, Dominic and Emma work together in the small development organization they set up to support social entrepreneurs in 'tough' regions of the world. Their systemic reflexivity, developed over many years, led them to repeatedly re-conceptualise their contribution. This example shows the interdependencies that were apparent in many responsible career accounts.

Based on 20 years of experience in international development, Dominic and Emma have undertaken successive phases of learning and clarification of their mission. Several times, their ventures were objectively successful, but the couple thought them not radical enough in terms of achieving systemic impact and so chose to move on. Their account shows their systemic thinking—continually reflecting on what is and is not promoting change—and how this led them to develop their practices.

Consistent with the notion of 'expressing self', Dominic identifies an initial phase in his career as "collegiate idealism and zeal". This was soon tempered. He encountered war in the Middle East, "facing life and death", which "dissipated this naiveté". Joined by Emma, he continued work nonetheless, providing higher education in teacher training (i.e. 'constructing contribution'). Ten years later, Dominic reviewed this experience. He "took a short census" of the people who had been positively impacted, realizing that they had all emigrated to the United States, Canada, Europe or Australia. "I realized actually, what I am doing here is contributing to the brain drain. The people that are changed leave, and the intractable problems remain." These systemic insights led Dominic to conclude that 'succeeding' in this way was "not what our lives are about." The couple "stepped into unemployment", and with colleagues started an NGO working with street children.

Again their work was successful objectively, gaining funding from the World Bank and UNICEF. After seven years, they had made a name for themselves as 'field shapers', replacing a focus on institutional growth with a collaborative strategy connecting key players in the development community of their host country. Yet, despite publicly acclaimed 'success', they became dissatisfied that the venture was "driven by expatriates who recognize a social issue in the country and want to address it. But it had turned into a programme." They made the developmental shift to 'engaging systemically'. Their next practical move was to work with local people acting for change. Dominic says: "I was becoming convinced that significant transformation in society has got to be driven by

insiders" who can "take outside concepts, contextualise them for their environment." In this insight they affirmed the importance of values, their own and those of people they work with.

In this cycle of activity they took initiatives, were highly successful objectively in many ways, and again revised their recipe for having impact. The NGO they had initiated became "more formalised, more driven by numbers, more driven by donors' requirements, more concerned about scale, less concerned about contextualised effectiveness". Again, Dominic says, "I realised we actually have a parting of values." Again, they initiated a new venture. Now they describe their work as that of "social entrepreneurial consultants" in areas of the world where people are in desperate need and contextual factors seem too challenging for many aid organizations. Through systemic reflexivity, Dominic and Emma have become critical of programmatic, agency-led development approaches. Conceptually, they now draw on theorising about complex adaptive systems to describe their own approach to change—leveraging local entrepreneurs with their global network of supporters.

We see systemic reflexivity as an evolving process of learning through engagement and questioning implications and consequences of action, as the above account illustrates.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study set out to examine the practices characterising careers within emerging fields of responsible business, and associated learning and adaptation. A key finding is that people enact and interpret responsible careers in different ways. We identify a dynamic model containing six responsible career practices—expressing self, connecting to others, constructing contribution, institutionalising, field shaping, and engaging systemically—and four learning dynamics that underpin the adoption of these career practices—orienting in shifting landscapes, exploration, biographical reflexivity and systemic reflexivity.

Our findings illustrate that careers are interdependently informed by societal dynamics, organizations, relationships, communities, and subjective meaning-making. An interdisciplinary lens enables us to see careers as the nexus where societal and psychological adaptations are worked out. At this nexus, as private and public are interwoven, careers are elevated from 'work' and become, in Arendt's (1958) words, 'action'—an expression of active and engaged citizenship (Dalton, 2008). Our observation that the domain of careers is broadened beyond the immediate organization complements previously disconnected sociological perspectives on late modernity and psychological perspectives on adult development. Individuals are shown as relating to increasingly complex environments in reflexive, differentiating and systemic ways. The domain of careers is broadened to incorporate concerns about one's impact with regards to wider society.

Our terminology is informed by the notion of reflexive modernization, advanced by sociologist Ulrich Beck to suggest that the individualization of modern institutions has contributed to individuals' abilities "to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them" (1994:174). Our study illustrates that such reflection is not a removed and isolated meditation on social conditions, but deeply embedded within the collaborative enactment of careers and participation in shared discourses about the responsibility of business. As well as conscious reflection upon knowledge that appears certain, the context of shifting landscapes implies that careers also involve what Beck (1994) describes as unintentional reflexivity (into which we are thrown) upon the ambiguous, self-endangering, and risk-conscious nature of living in global society.

In turn, it is this arduous and uncertain process of making sense that is most likely to give rise to profound, transformational development. For example, those aspiring to responsible careers may decide that, in inherently complex, uncertain and un-controllable systemic fields, focusing exclusively on strategic 'institutionalising' and 'field shaping' are inadequate interventions, and that 'engaging systemically' may be more fitting. Constructivist-developmental theorists describe adult learning as transformational when it involves a radical revision of how individuals author self vis-à-vis the wider ideological and institutional environment (Kegan, 1994; Rooke & Torbert, 2005). They characterise more evolved adult development by the capacity to attend to ideological paradoxes, contradictions, and opposites; question preconceived notions; develop new creative solutions; pursue profound transformation of institutions and society; and connect across social levels (see also Boiral et al.,

2009). Systemic reflexivity, interwoven with the other dynamics of responsible careers we have identified, has these capacities.

But our findings also extend sociologists' abstract conceptualisation of reflexivity and developmental theorists' description of distinct psychological logics. Our model offers a fine-grained understanding of the ongoing practices and learning dynamics through which people enact careers in pluralistic and contested emerging organizational fields. Consistent with earlier career scholarship, the model suggests that career learning unfolds through an ongoing process of exploration, improvisational enactment, and sensemaking (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Weick, 1996) and that such learning can lay the foundations for profound identity transformation (Ibarra, 2003). It adds to this literature by drawing attention to the role of shifting external fields as a stimulus and context for profound career learning.

Moreover, the findings extend conceptions of the objective/subjective duality of careers which juxtapose institutional criteria of objective success with self-authored notions of subjective success (Barley, 1989; Hall, 2004; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Earlier literature acknowledges some, albeit limited scope for changing institutional career scripts (Duberley et al., 2006). We extend this literature by illustrating how self-authoring careers can be directed at rewriting the institutional and societal foundations on which objective career success is based, for example by innovating responsible practices that are not limited to rational-economic criteria of organizational and career success. In this sense, contexts for responsible careers can be seen as more complex and paradoxical rather than simply weak (Garud, 2007; Weick, 1996). Our observation that learning in responsible careers emerges from dynamic interdependencies between shifting landscapes, ongoing exploration, and biographical and systemic reflexivity further highlights the paradox that subjective and objective success, like notions of impact, remain elusive, as their criteria are in continuous flux. This is partly because the external environment is shifting, but also because career actors are engaging reflexively with this environment. This insight suggests the importance of conceptualising the objective/subjective interdependence of careers in terms of unfolding processes of exploratory participating, enacting, constructing, and reflexive questioning. Analogous to Barley's (1989) notion of career scripts, these 'interpretive dynamics' are intermediary devices in the co-construction of responsible careers.

The dynamic and, potentially, radically destabilising nature of learning implied by our model also extends the focus taken in earlier research on responsible action in organizations on discrete individual differences, organizational norms, and institutional dynamics. While institutional sociologists have emphasised the role of individual agency in emerging fields (Garud et al., 2007; Waddock, 2008), their interpretation has emphasised its strategic intent at establishing legitimacy for innovative practices. In contrast, we suggest a reflexive view of agency that accounts for the interdependence between its subjective/objective aspects. For example, to understand people's response to the objective dynamics of emerging fields, we need to consider their experience and interpretation of shifting landscapes. Taking account of the reflexive nature of human agency, our model helps explain the ongoing refinement of strategies by which leaders, change agents and entrepreneurs engage in emerging fields, intending to bring about social and sustainable innovation. We propose that the intensity of individuals' and groups' systemic reflexivity will determine whether such innovation becomes quickly normalised within the status quo, or contributes to more radical change across institutional fields.

This study has several limitations. The first arises from sampling people professing to a responsible career. Despite our suggestion that responsible careers reflect an emerging trend, we can make no claims about the significance of this phenomenon in proportion to wider working populations and across different cultures. It remains unclear whether our findings are unique to responsible careers, or may also apply to other careers. A second set of limitations arises from the inductive analysis of cross-sectional data. Consequently, our identification of responsible career practices and developmental dynamics permits no conclusions about causal relationships between these factors and their effectiveness in terms of individual career outcomes, organizational impact, and wider societal and environmental benefits. Whether careers that pursue impact have impact, and of what kind, remain open questions – not only for career scholars, but also for the people living those careers.

In conclusion, several directions for further research arise. At one level, the proposed model calls for more fine-grained refinement through systematic analysis of the relationships between sets of responsible career practices and career outcomes. For example, definitions of and interactions between potential objective and subjective markers of career success are especially contentious in responsible career fields, as Dominic and Emma's story illustrates. When having an impact is such a core career aspiration, success, and 'failure', may not be clearly identifiable, and their interpretation will depend on how you see it systemically. Also, as shifting landscapes generate such uncertain economic, environmental and societal contexts for careers, we wonder what determines whether the developmental dynamics described in our model contribute to self-propelled (intrinsic) uncertainty or, alternatively, serve as a catalyst for effective adaptation at individual, organizational, and societal levels.

In a context where organizations' responsiveness to ecological and social uncertainties will remain one of their most significant challenges, we also require a better understanding of how organizations can generate the capacity to benefit from systemically reflexive members. By adopting a career lens, we recognise a fundamental dilemma for organizations: employees may view them, at best, as platforms for wider social action. Accordingly, there is a need for research that examines how organizations can 'manage' employees who see themselves more as society players (i.e. referencing their careers with respect to wider societal debates) than institutional players (i.e. referencing their careers with respect to organizational objectives and career systems).

Finally, with regards to management education and development, this study has implications for research that examines reflexive approaches to developing responsible career practices. Such research needs to address whether development approaches that encourage a proactive engagement with shifting landscapes, exploration, and biographical and systemic reflexivity can stimulate transformative learning, increase personal identification with systemic perspectives, and help develop responsible career practices—even among those who would not voluntarily initiate a responsible career.

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