

## Abstract

The study of careers is significant as they occur at the interface of individual agency and social context. Career transitions, especially when they are radical, non-institutionalized and socially undesirable, need to be negotiated with significant others in an individual's relational context. Anecdotal evidence from India points to one such career transition- the voluntary transition out of employment in corporate careers. In this dissertation, I explore this phenomenon through a qualitative, interpretive study guided by the research question: *'How do individuals account for their transitions out of corporate careers?'*

Recent literature points to the changing nature of careers, from linear careers in large organizations to 'boundary-less' careers characterized by fluidity, individual freedom and adaptability, and frequent career moves that are often multi-directional and radical. However, there is a paucity of research on such non-institutionalized career transitions, especially the subjective realities and experiences of individuals. While much of this research comes from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, an emerging economy such as India forms a unique and novel careers context in terms of growth in and social value attached to corporate careers.

This study adopts a social constructionist theoretical lens where career is seen as constituted by actors through language and social interaction. My inquiry focuses on 'accounting' for career transition i.e. how individuals make meaning of and explain this career move to others. Such accounting is often in the form of 'career stories' that adopt narrative plots and themes available within the culture. Therefore, I use a narrative approach and methodology to elicit and interpret career stories from twelve participants with diverse personal and career histories comprising of an exit from organizational employment.

The findings reveal common themes and shared narratives underlying the career accounts. Participants drew upon common themes to account for their career change- 'drivers' to explain the emergence of the career change intentions, 'enablers' to explicate the resources important for the career change decision, and 'legitimizers' to evaluate their career change decision and action. The main drivers that emerged were 'personal happiness and fit', and 'compelling interest or passion'. The enablers were 'relational supports and permissions', 'financial sufficiency' and 'past credentials and achievements' while commonly used

legitimizers were 'helping others and society', 'new ideology and knowledge', and a 'conducive external environment'.

Additionally, participants constructed their career stories in two distinct ways with the drivers, enablers and legitimizers as building blocks. Two narrative types emerged- 'Discovery' and 'Seeking', characterized by distinct central theme and storyline. The Discovery narrative explains the career change through the serendipitous discovery or revival of a life interest; whereas the Seeking narrative accounts for the transition as intentional search for an alternative career and life, promising greater happiness or fit. Together, the findings represent both the biographic particulars of individual lives and the narrative resources available to the participants within their shared contexts.

This research contributes to the literature on contemporary careers and career transitions through shedding light on non-institutionalized career transitions in an under-researched context. Specifically, it contributes to an understanding of subjective experiences, temporality, context and accounting with respect to such transitions. The findings have broader implications for careers research as well as practice, for career guidance, organizational and individual career management. The trustworthiness of the findings is demonstrated through rich contextual data and cases, explication of research processes and practice of researcher reflexivity.

*Keywords:* career transitions, social constructionist perspective of careers, career narratives, non-institutionalized career change