



SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR STUDYING CAREER IN DEVELOPING SOCIETY: INTEGRATIVE THEORETICAL APPROACH

Azer Efendiev

Professor, Department of Human Resource Management, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

Pavel Sorokin[†]

Research Fellow, Centre for research in social organization of a company, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

ABSTRACT

Sociological research in career has been limited in contemporary social science. However sociological career analysis may have crucial importance for understanding social structure and mobility processes in modern society. Critical analysis of the two leading directions in contemporary sociological research in career (“career fields” and “career mobility”) is presented which is followed by elaboration of integrative theoretical approach aiming to increase the “added value” of the concept of career for sociology and especially for social mobility studies in developing countries. This approach combines theoretical focus on dichotomy “meritocracy - traditionalism” (typical for “career mobility” studies and highly relevant to research in developing countries) with methodological orientation on studying “career fields” on organizational level. Basing on these theoretical ideas we put forward brief research agenda and formulate hypotheses for future empirical research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Career research constitutes probably one of the most interesting fields in contemporary sociology shedding light on the “complex and inconclusive character of social processes, or ‘constant flux’ as Robert Eriksson and John Goldthorpe summed it up” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011). Authors put it that way in the introduction to the special issue of respectful sociological

[†] Corresponding author
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journal “European societies” devoted to “career mobility” reflecting “frustrating” results of the study of career mobility in five developed societies (Sweden, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Germany, and Italy) which showed that “the direct effects of family background are not reduced over one’s career; if anything, they are strengthened.”(Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011). This conclusion rejects hypothesis derived from modernization theory and liberal industrialization theory (Breen and Whelan, 1993) which state that in developed countries individual career based on meritocracy and personal achievement becomes main determinant of social status while the influence of social origins, family background and other not achievement-based factors decreases.

Until now this area of studies has hardly involved research efforts in developing countries. From conceptual point of view this theoretical and empirical gap is important because testing underlying ideas of modernization theory on the field of these societies could bring new arguments in discourse about social mobility.

Although results obtained in the area of career mobility research are large and impressive, methodology used in these investigations has significant limitation (which authors themselves acknowledge): they “fail to consider the overall process of career development, which is treated as a black box” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011). Basing on contemporary discussions in literature we suggest novel methodological approach to analyze individual vertical career mobility with focus on “meritocracy” as central category of analysis. Utilizing some ideas of P. Bourdieu’s theory of social space (and its development in the works of W. Mayrhofer, K. Chudzikowski, etc. (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011)) we elaborate new methodological tools for studying career in organization which is seen as “career field”. The novelty of our approach is in its integrative effort to examine actual factors and mechanisms of organizational career progression basing on theoretical distinction of “meritocracy” and “traditionalism”.

Practically we formulate the same general question as well-known researchers in career and social mobility (R.Eriksson, J.Goldthorpe and others): whether contemporary career mobility is “a meritocratic competition in which individual efforts and skills play a major role?” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011). The important difference of our approach is the focus of analysis: not inter- and intra-generational mobility on the national level but organizational career. Further we expound critical analysis of the state of the art in contemporary career research and discuss key elements of integrative theoretical approach to career study which we propose.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary literature on career is strongly dominated by so called “New career theories” which state that traditional organizational career “is dead” (Hall, 1996) while the new era of “boundariless” (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001), “kaleidoscopic” (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) and “post-corporate” (Peiperl, 2000) careers has come. The main idea of these theories is that individual freedom of occupational choice as well as organizational instability has increased by the end of XX century and therefore traditional organizational vertical and predictable career progression is headed for extinction (Jacoby, 1999).

Sociological discourse is very sensitive and highly critical to this debate (Cuzzocrea and Lyon, 2011) arguing that “New career theories” neglect the structural constrains of career process. This leads away from seeing career as a link between individual agency and social structure which may

be very prospective for sociological research in mobility. V. Cuzzocrea and D. Lyon state that career research in social sciences has moved away from fundamental sociological questions dealing with social structure and social mobility (Cuzzocrea and Lyon, 2011).

However in the last decade there appeared significant attempts for studying career within theoretical schemes of so called “grand sociological theories” (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011): first, studies of W. Mayrhofer and others in “career fields” from Pier Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011); second, research in “career mobility” within analytical frame of modernization theory (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011); and finally, the works of Becker, K. H. and Haunschild, A. in line with Niklas Luhmann’s theoretical views (Becker and Haunschild, 2003).

Literature review showed that two most developed directions of sociological research in career (considering number of articles and other papers published within each of the mentioned areas of research) are: “career mobility” and “career fields”. It is notable that they exist apart from each other and we did not find any signs of their integration basing on analysis of citations in literature.

The first and most respectful (taking into account ranks of journals in which articles are published) direction of research is based on modernization theory and focuses on a “small number of substantive questions concerning the relationship between social origins, education, and occupational destinations, the so-called OED triangle” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011) with the special attention given to ‘direct effects’ of family background. The latter effects “operating over and above the influence of education were supposed to weaken according to modernization theory, whereas the importance of educational qualifications for labor market success was expected to increase” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011). Important limitation of this approach is lack of interest in the actual status attainment process. The rare exception is given in the log-linear analysis of three-way tables representing origin, first and last occupation (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992). Never-the-less “intergenerational mobility has been considered far more than intragenerational mobility” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011). In reaction to critics there appeared new direction of research: “work history” analysis (Blossfeld, 1986; Carroll and Mayer, 1987). These authors tried to look at the individual life course trajectories taking into consideration dynamics of social change across birth cohorts and historical periods in effort to overcome somewhat abstract manner of traditional mobility studies. However, critics of “work history” approach argue that “the heuristic value of the ‘new’ approaches to the ‘old questions’ remains unclear” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011).

Empirical results obtained by researchers in “career mobility” surprisingly showed that “the long shadow of parental background is still there, varying somewhat between countries. Education matters, but not more than decades ago. Occupational careers have, on the whole, not become more fluid and unpredictable” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011). These results inevitably fail to justify a “positive image of career mobility, understood as a meritocratic competition in which individual efforts and skills play a major role” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011).

This conclusion drawn on the empirical material from developed European countries brings fourth doubts about validity of modernization theory’s hypothesis concerning meritocratic pattern of social mobility in modern society. In our view this has special importance for social mobility research in developing countries. There is a widespread opinion that meritocratic principles of

social mobility begin to dominate “automatically” if society develops system of modern market institutions.

Another important direction of contemporary sociological research in career is built upon P. Bourdieu’s theory of social space which was developed and adopted by his followers (W. Mayrhofer, K. Chudzikowski, M. Meyer and others (Iellatchitch *et al.*, 2003)). These authors try to implement the notion of “social field” which is understood as an hierarchical arena in which people struggle in pursuit of desirable and valuable resources using different forms of “capitals” (for example, financial assets (economic capital), qualities (cultural capital), social ties (social capital)). Central idea of this approach is that career promotion may be seen as a “desirable resource” for which individuals struggle. Here it is important to emphasize that hierarchical structure is fundamental characteristic for P. Bourdieu’s “social field” and phenomenon of “career” is a perfect example of the order of dominance that is legitimate and obvious for the agents in particular field.

High relevance of the term “career” for P. Bourdieu’s conception of social space is acknowledged in contemporary sociological literature (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011; Cuzzocrea and Lyon, 2011). Theoretically W. Mayrhofer and others argue that on the macro-level “career field can be considered as a 'super-field', which may be divided into sub-fields, following the interest and the special focus of the research” (Iellatchitch *et al.*, 2003).

However empirical research from this theoretical perspective has been quiet limited and focused mostly on issues of gender discrimination in career process over the life course of the agents (V. Cuzzocrea, D. Lyon). Obtained results show the existence of special logic of dominance based on gender that is reproduced over the course of career progression (Benschop, 2009). This leads to broad view of the career progression understood as almost life-long status attainment process (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2008). On the one hand such approach gives an opportunity to see individual career promotion in the wide context of agents’ life history. On the other hand it leads the focus of study away from organization as a special context of career progression that may be studied as “career field”.

From our point of view it is important to understand that organization provides necessary attributes of individual career promotion as hierarchical growth in social structure (giving to individual agent power, salary and prestige). Therefore (along with other possible ways of implementing the term “career field”) it can be used to studying organization.

W. Mayrhofer and others briefly review organizational settings within the analytical frame of career field. However they suggest seeing corporation as one of four possible types of “career fields”: “company field” (others are “free-floating professionalism”, “self-employment”, “chronic flexibility”) (Iellatchitch *et al.*, 2003). Meanwhile others (Jacoby, 1999) argue that company world becomes a harderto-enter field, but in any case it loses the predominant position which it used to have throughout the industrial era.

In our opinion, it is not only correct but most prospective to see organization as special “career field” within the general frame of P. Bourdieu’s theory of social space. First, it was P. Bourdieu himself who suggested that a single company may be considered as a field because each company has relative autonomy (Bourdieu, 2000). Second, the vast majority of employed population in the modern world is occupied within formal organizational settings. Third, these formal settings usually have hierarchical structures and strictly regulated polices which provide unequal

distribution of power, money and prestige within organization therefore contributing to reproduction of the social order on both levels: the local “career field” (company) and “super-field” (labor market or society as a whole).

Therefore we suggest applying conception of “career field” to studying organizational career to be methodologically correct and promising for further development of the P. Bourdieu’s theory in the area of social mobility studies. Unfortunately this approach has not yet brought profound empirical results in career studies within developing countries. Even regarding developed society empirical efforts undertaken within “career fields” research are few. This is a serious limitation which has to be overcome.

In the previous part we conducted brief analysis of the two main directions of career studies within “grand social theories” in contemporary sociology: “career mobility” studies and “career fields” research. We make special accent on these perspectives of career studies because they have prominent theoretical basis (relying on modernization theory and social space theory respectively) and provide prospective ideas. Unfortunately the representatives of both areas of study do not cite each other in their papers and develop their ideas without intention to integration and mutual enrichment. Meanwhile we consider it highly interesting and prospective to integrate some key theoretical ideas and methodological tools from two directions of research for studying career in developing society.

2.1. Integrative Theoretical Approach: Key Elements

Our general theoretical idea is derived from traditional career mobility research assuming career in the modern society to be “a meritocratic competition” (Barone and Schizzerotto, 2011). We suggest that in developing society (like, for example, Russia) meritocratic mechanisms of career progression do not play major role while ascription-based mechanisms (first of all, social ties of kinship and friendship) significantly contribute to successful career.

To test these assumptions we propose to focus on organizational career which is approached from the “career field” perspective. General “rules of the game” in organizational career promotion process become the main object of sociological inquiry. Research focuses on theoretical distinction of “meritocratic” (based on personal skills, qualification and competence) and “traditional” (based on individual qualities not related to professional efficiency such as personal ties of kinship and friendship) factors of career advancement.

Relying on these theoretical ideas we develop novel conceptual frame for sociological research in career in developing society. This conceptual frame includes several key notions: “organizational career success”, “factors of career success”, “organizational career culture”.

“Organizational career success” we define as formal vertical career promotion of an individual. Practically it means obtaining position in company’s organizational hierarchy that is higher than previous one. This indicator of career success is widespread in contemporary literature (Baron and Podolny, 1997; Ng *et al.*, 2005; Dries *et al.*, 2009). It should be added that formal promotion is usually accompanied by attributes like rise in salary, power and prestige which embody vertical dynamics within social structure.

“Factors of career success” we define as those individual characteristics and qualities which influence organizational career success. Basing, first, on theoretical distinction of “meritocracy”

and “traditionalism” and, second, on empirical results of international research in factors of career promotion reflected in literature we focus on two characteristics: 1) individual qualification and 2) individual possession of social ties of kinship and friendship (with influential people in organization).

Basing on literature analysis (Van der Heijden, 2002; Madero, 2010) we suggest defining professional qualification as combination of work experience and professional education (in the field of present occupation).

Individual possession of social ties is a more complicated matter for empirical research. J. Baron and J. Podolny showed that “individual’s mobility is enhanced by having a large, sparse network of informal ties” (Baron and Podolny, 1997). They defined “friendship and social ties relations” as “person-to-person ties that are unlikely to aid job performance directly” (Baron and Podolny, 1997). We agree with this general definition but basing on literature review regarding developing countries we make special accent on ties of kinship and family relations with managers in the company. In developing countries like Russia, Brasil and others individual connections of this sort are especially important for career. In Chinese society it is often called “guanxi” (Law *et al.*, 2000; Chen *et al.*, 2009), in Russian society - “blat” (Ledeneva, 1998; Yakubovich and Kozina, 2000), in Arabian cultures – “wasta” (Yahiaoui and Zoubir, 2006; Loewe *et al.*, 2008) in Brazilian society – “jeitinho” (Neves, 1995; Duarte, 2006).

Basing on above mentioned literature and other available sources reflecting contemporary empirical research in factors of career advancement we elaborate indicator of individual possession of social ties connected with kinship and friendship: having friendship or family ties with managers in organization prior to employment.

In order to reveal the characteristics of organization as special “career field” we elaborate the construct “organizational career culture” which serves to identify the factors of career success that are considered to be most important for career success in particular organization by the employees. Consistent to P. Bourdieu’s definition of “social field” (presuming existence of shared meanings and notions about the “rules of the game” in particular field) we elaborate the notion of “organizational career culture” as methodological tool for studying the general conception of factors influencing successful career that is typical for concrete organization. Among characteristics of career field we suggest focusing first of all on professional qualification and social ties of kinship and friendship.

2.2. Theoretical Hypothesis for Future Empirical Research

Studying career in developing society basing on theoretical distinction between “meritocracy” and “traditionalism” it would be especially prospective to compare organizational settings of two types: “domestic” business-organizations (with property belonging to owners from the developing society) and “foreign” companies (that are located and operating in developing society but belong to owners from foreign developed countries). Literature shows numerous evidences of significant differences in career promotion factors and other characteristics of organizational career depending on the distinction between domestic and foreign companies. Z. Chen with colleagues compared Chinese domestic and Japanese-owned enterprises (Chen *et al.*, 2004) in this regard, more

contributions came from (Björkman *et al.*, 2007), R. Rose and N. Kumar (Rose and Kumar, 2007) and others (Chowdhury and Mahmood, 2012).

Basing on these theoretical ideas we put forward two hypotheses for testing in future empirical research:

1) In developing societies the influence of social ties of kinship and friendship on individual career success in organizational settings is stronger than influence of professional qualification.

We suggest that social mobility and career in organizational settings located in developing countries (like Russia) has strong dependence on mechanisms typical for traditional society while qualification and competence is underestimated.

2) Career in domestic organizations is less meritocracy-based than in foreign-owned companies.

We assume that influence of management practices of hiring and promotion typical for organizational settings belonging to owners from developed countries would lead to greater importance of professional experience and formal education for career promotion. At the same time the role of non-achievement based social connections (including ties of friendship and kinship) will be decreasing.

3. CONCLUSION

In the present article we tried to contribute to contemporary career studies by elaborating new theoretical ideas and methodological tools for sociological research in career in developing countries. Literature review showed that major part of career studies are developing outside of sociological discipline while career has high potential for sociological inquiry in problems of social structure, social mobility and social dynamics in general. There are two respectful approaches basing on “grand social theories” (modernization theory and social space theory) which provide significant contributions to understanding career as social phenomenon. “Career field” studies (W. Mayrhofer, M. Meyers, K. Chudzikowski and others) elaborate the notions of “social field” and “social capital” seeing career progression as “struggle” between individual agents having different “capitals” (resources or qualities). “Career mobility” approach (C. Barone, A. Schizzerotto and others) implements meritocratic criteria for assessing the social dynamics on macro-level aiming to test the hypothesis of modernization theory according to which career in the modern world becomes “meritocratic competition”.

However these approaches evolve apart from each other while their part integration may be fruitful for future sociological research. Combining focus on particular local “career field” (located within organizational borders) with theoretical dichotomy of “meritocracy - traditionalism” we elaborate new theoretical approach for career study in developing countries. The central ideas of this approach are: 1) definition of two types of individual “career capital” (reflecting, first, qualification and, second, social ties of kinship and friendship) influencing vertical career promotion and 2) the notion of “organizational career culture” embodying the perceptions and opinions of the agents of particular organization (“career field”) about factors of career progression. Finally basing on elaborated approach we put forward two hypotheses for testing in future empirical research in developing countries.

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