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Recent graduates in the aftermath of the Crisis - A struggle between high expectations and crushing realities

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Abstract

Using qualitative interviews with twenty recent graduates, this study explores how participants understand and experience career in the aftermath of the crisis. Overall, this study suggests that several dominant theories and practical storylines surrounding notions of career and career development present a static view that fails to take important contexts into account. We aim to provide a deeper view by focusing on two contexts: Generational and economic.

We outline two primary findings within this study. First we argue that recent graduates struggle between two understandings of career: traditional discourses, where career is seen as static and devoid of private concerns and, another understanding of career, which is more related to the alternative discourses, where career is dynamic, more complex and influenced by more factors than just the individual. Second we believe that these two different understandings are shaped by the discourses surrounding the generation and economic contexts.

Keywords: Career, career understanding, career experience, career discourses, generation, the financial crisis, recent graduates.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

When the global financial service firm Lehman Brothers Holding Inc. filed for bankruptcy protection on the 15th September 2008, a generation who has been taught to aim for the stars in their brilliant future recently entered the job market or finished their university degrees. The bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers resulted in a worldwide panic and chain reaction in the bank loan sector and became a symbol for a period of time that might be called “late-2000s financial crisis” in future history books. Within discourses, layoffs, unemployment, temporary contracts and increased competition on the labour market are seen as results of the crisis (Peacock, 2008; Seasholtz, 2011; Zeit online, 2010). All these results are known to have an impact on the career of individuals. In relation to this many have claimed that recent graduates are the most affected and Stern (2010) even claimed that recent graduates are the “losers” of the crisis.

In this study we explore how recent graduates, graduated from a University between 2006 and 2010, experienced this time and how this shaped their understanding of career. To examine this, we, the authors, did qualitative interviews with twenty recent graduates in four different countries. With these interviews we got a deeper understanding of how the complex career concept is understood and experienced by recent graduates and how they believed the financial crisis affected them.

In traditional discourses career is seen as something static, something which an individual has control over. However, many academics also argue that career and individuals are influenced by historical, social and economic factors (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, DeVoy & DeWine, 2005; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). There are many theories about career and even though it is claimed that career is influenced by different contexts, scholars mainly focus on the individuals’ role in shaping one’s own career. Hereby they neglect to take a deeper look within other contexts. We are in line with the role of the individual within the career concept, but we believe that the understanding that individuals hold about a certain phenomenon, in this case career, can be shaped by other contexts. As career is embedded in complex layers of social, historical, cultural, and political meanings, it does not matter how stable the characteristics of an individual might be, when the environment is rapidly changing, their career will be affected (Young & Collin, 2004; Savickas, 2002).

Our literature research showed us that there was lack of research conducted about recent graduates in the aftermath of the crisis. Furthermore we also found a lack of research in contexts such as when people are born, generation, which influences their perception of career. In relation to our research problem, we decided to go deeper into the contexts that may influence individuals' understanding and experience of the career concept. Our contribution was therefore to add generation and economic contexts to career theory.

We seek to examine how these two contexts, and the discourses surrounding them, are related to the understanding and experiences of career for recent graduates. Our research question emerged therefore as **“How do recent graduates understand and experience career in the aftermaths of the crisis?”** This question includes four major aspects: recent graduates as part of a new generation, the crisis as reason for new realities on the economical market, how these contexts influenced the experience of career and how it influences the understanding of career.

In the following we present the structure of this study:

In chapter two we present our broad review of literature. We present the main views on career theories, such as the career concept and career development. Next to that we discuss that concepts of career and career development were shifting over time by including more complexity within individual agency foreground. We argue that most scholarly and popular representations of career envision it as static and as a rather simple concept by downplaying contexts outside professional life. However, there emerged scholars who note that career conceptualization is socially constructed, fluid and individuals and their private lives should be encountered into the concept. We take up this second perspective and discuss how scholars see the role of individuals within career concept. Furthermore we argue that this individualistic view is both predominant and consequential as it has the potential to downplay contextual and social factors which might shape one's career understanding. Therefore, we nod to two more contexts - generational and economic by outlining a more complex view of career by exploring how a context centred view can provide insight into notions of career.

In the third chapter we explore our methatheoretical and methodological starting points as well as how we conducted our study. We explain our interpretive/social constructionist perspective and outline our research process, sources of data, and our hermeneutical approach to data analysis. Thereby we present our own framework of a hermeneutical triangle. Finally, we

explain how we engaged issues of rigor and trustworthiness and note how we stayed reflective throughout our project.

In chapter four we analyse our data by separating our question in two parts. In the first part we discuss how individuals understand career and its development. In the second part we analyse how the generation and economic contexts influenced these understandings of our participants. Furthermore we present the struggles between two understandings and between the two discourses of the contexts.

In the fifth chapter we discuss the two main findings of our study. The first one is that our participants struggle between two understandings regarding their career and its development. We argue that these diffusing understandings are the results of the discourses surrounding the two contexts; generation and economic. These two contexts and the interplay of their discourses is the second finding of our study. Last, we summarize and conclude the major findings of this study. We include the limitations of our study and point out possibilities for further research in this field of study.

Chapter 2 - Review of literature

Scholars have been interested in the concept of career for a long time. It can be noticed that their conceptualisation of the topic has shifted over time. Most scholarly and popular representations of career suggest that career is static – something that one “has” or “develops”. However, other scholars argue that notions of career and career trajectories are socially constructed and fluid. We take up this second perspective and, with a nod to context, ask how recent graduates understand and experience “career.” We begin our literature review by situating scholars' shifting notions of career. Of importance, we argue that currently scholars focus their notions of career on the individual. This individualistic view is both predominant and consequential as it has the potential to foreground individual agency and downplay contextual and social factors which might shape one's career understanding and path. Therefore we end by outlining a more complex view of career by exploring how a context centred view can provide insight into how generation and economic situations influence individual's notions of career.

Scholars shifting notions of career

As said before, we will first discuss scholars' shifting notions of career. Scholars argue that notions of career and career development are shaped by historical, social and economic factors (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, DeVoy & DeWine, 2005; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). The predominant theories of career represent career as something linked to individuals and see it as rather static. Career is viewed as something that one “has”, implying that it is an object, and something that develops in a rather linear manner. However, definitions and notions of career have shifted over time and are getting more complex. For instance, several scholars argue that career development theories are too segmented, incomplete, inadequate and lack in coherence and comprehensiveness (Patton & McMahon, 2006; Savickas, 2002) which could lead to the assumption that the career concept is much more complex than scholars tend to conceptualise. There are many theories of career development, such as theories of content or of process (Patton & McMahon, 2006). These theories allow complexity, but still link career centrally to individuals, without taking a deeper look into other contexts.

This section will explore notions of career and career development. In the first part, we unfold two primary views of career. First, the traditional view, which ignored contexts outside

individuals' professional life and the second view, which besides the professional life, also encounters the private life of individuals and makes the career concept more complete, but also more complex. In the second part we look at the two views of career development. The first view is predictable and unfolds in a linear manner and the second view of career development is multidirectional and grounded in individual agency.

How do scholars understand career?

Scholarship predominantly view career as a static concept, something that one owns and controls. This conceptualisation is rather simplistic as it ignores contexts outside the professional life. However, there are also scholars who take a more complex view of career by including a socially constructed perspective and merging individuals' private and professional lives within the concept. In relation to the goals of our study, it is important to look at these two primary discourses as this shapes how we view and understand career. In the following we first discuss the static, but rather simplistic view on career and second we elaborate the view that career is more complex and based upon factors outside ones professional life.

Traditionally scholars ignored contexts outside of work/ professional life in order to understand the concept of career. Career conceptualization was rooted only in individuals' professional life by separating it from private life. Scholars defined career as something where individuals have to fit the job and have to advance within this job in order to be promoted and earn more money. Later on, the definition was broadened by including concepts of time and other occupations which are necessary to enhance one's professional life and chances for advancement (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989, cited in Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 8) defined career as "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over the time". Super (1976, cited in Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 20) proposed a definition of career as "the sequence of positions, jobs, and occupations that a person occupies and pursues during the course of a life of preparing to work, working, and retiring from work". The concept directed to the occupations and to the significance of sequences, such as learning and developing within one's professional life.

However, during the last decades, the alternative view, that career is more than just an occupation or professional life emerged. Individuals live their lives in a more holistic way than as it was discussed traditionally, therefore scholars are advised to take one's professional and

private life into account. Scholars started to broaden the concept by including voluntary work and other aspects within the life of individuals (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Moreover, Young and Valach (2004) argue that not only work contributes to a long term and broad life meaning, but also connections and actions. These authors broadened the career concept with actions such as parenting, illnesses or life of crime. Furthermore, besides professional and private life, some scholars also nodded to other influencing factors which exist within the lives of individuals and affects career. Patton and McMahon (1999, cited in Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 170) define career as “the pattern of influences that coexist in the individual's life over time”. Overall, scholars started to look at the career concept in a more complex way and the split between private and professional life started to blur. Career metaphors, such as story (Inkson, 2010) or the life journey of individuals (Baruch, 2004) became broader and concentrated towards individuality and diversity. We can see that scholars nowadays conceptualise career more as a lifestyle which is influenced by one’s subjective understanding.

To sum up, the conceptualisation of career by other scholars was shifting over time and two main discourses shaped how we view career. The first view is that traditionally most scholars separated notions of work from one’s private life. However, this split caused those studies to be incomplete stories of career, as individuals live their lives in a more holistic fashion. Therefore scholars must take both professional and private life into account to understand notions of career. This is done in the more recent studies on career. Nowadays most scholars take a deeper view of career by including one’s private life and subjectivity. Career is conceptualised as a part of individuals' lives and not just as work anymore. It is a life story which is created and influenced by individuals and their subjective understanding. Scholars often cite Huges' (1937 cited in Baruch, 2004, p. 58) definition of career: “the moving perspective in which persons orient themselves with reference to the social order, and of the typical sequences and concatenation of office”. However, they typically nod just to individuals and the closest contexts which influence them, but ignore wider contexts. By focusing just on the individual, one may neglect the deeper complexity of the career concept. The complexity lies not only within the individual but also within other contexts and as discussed, by pointing just to the individual as reason for complexity, scholars tend to downplay other contextual and social factors. These other factors are of importance as they might shape one's career understanding and path. We believe that one has to include both the individual and wider influencing contexts when examining the

understanding of career and this is exactly what we do within this study. Therefore next we will discuss two views of career development.

How do scholars understand career development?

Most scholarly and popular representations of career within the career concept also include a discussion on how career can be developed, how that development looks and how it can be influenced. Therefore, as discussed above, in connection to scholars' perception of the shift within the career concept, the career development concept also shifted over time and two main discourses influenced our view. In order to unfold these views, we discuss two primary conceptualisations of career development provided by scholars – linear and multidimensional. We discuss that existing economic, social structures and logical positivism epistemology were influencing theories and the development of one's career was seen as linear or envisioned as a ladder. However, with ongoing changes and social constructionism, the career development concept became more dependent on individuals and was perceived as multidirectional.

In the beginning of the 20th century the dominant view of career development was rather simplistic. It was seen as a linear climb upwards. In other words, career development was conceptualised as a ladder, because historically stable structural approaches, organizational anchoring of processes and logical positivism epistemology dominated scholars and other people's intellectual climate (Young & Valach, 2004; Blustein et al., 2005). The industrial age was rationality and objectivity reigned. Theories were rooted in assumptions of stability of personal characteristics, behaviour and secure jobs in bounded organizations (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck & Van Vianen, 2009). This had a major impact on the work of scholars about the meaning of career and career development. Logical positivism theories were constructed to identify and explain differences between individuals that would affect career planning and career exploration (Blustein et al., 2005). The main metaphor within literature was the “fit” between individuals and their job. Concepts such as career planning, career stages and development were used by scholars to predict the adjustment of individuals to work environments. Baruch (2004, p. 60) argues that “the nature and notion of traditional careers was based on a hierarchical, highly structured and rigid structure. These career models had a clear, one-dimensional or linear direction of prescribed “advancement”, which meant promotion. In other words, the stability of the organizational hierarchy structure was the

ladder to climb on and this was seen as a fixed sequence of stages in which scholars explained clear career paths. Another metaphor which Baruch (2004, p. 61) uses when talking about linear career is a “journey of mountain climbing“, with different high hills for the climbers and a single direction for promotion. However, Baruch (2004, p. 60) calls a linear career as the “past”. In a vein, Bujold (2004, p. 471) argues that despite the “trait-factor approach is, and will remain, useful from a theoretical, research, and applied point of view, it obviously does not take into account all the complexity of career behaviour.”

The recent shift of career development representation in the work of scholars is less orderly, less linear and brings individual agency into the concept. New social and cultural shifts bring a new psychological discourse to the work of scholars, where career development is rooted in the context of the individual (Blustein et al, 2005). As an example, Bujold (2004, p. 471) discusses that career development is a creative multiple decision process which cannot be predicted, because “of the individuals' unique ways of dealing with obstacles, unforeseen events, various circumstances, chance and inner conflicts.” Because of individualism, career development is now mostly conceptualised as multi-directional and multi-levelled (Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 6). Savickas et al. (2009, p. 241) discuss that career is now seen not as a meta-narrative of stages, but as individual scripts or stories and argue that “we can no longer speak confidently of ‘career development’ nor of ‘vocational guidance’”. Rather, we should envision 'life trajectories' in which individuals progressively design and build their own lives, including their work careers”. This new multi-directional shift comprises a variety of options and possible directions of development (Baruch, 2004). Scholars argue, that people can experience many different ways of career success, such as change of direction, organization or sideway moves. There is no single way of success and it depends on an individual's inner satisfaction, life balance and other measures of self-perception (Baruch, 2004). In a vein with centrality of individuals, in the late 20th century, new concepts, such as the ‘Protean career’ and the ‘Boundaryless career’ emerged in the work of scholars. In both of them, the focus is on individuals is noticeable. As Hall (1976, cited in Baruch, 2006, p. 201) states “The protean career is a process which the person, not the organization, is managing”. The boundaryless career theory also relies on individuals, but this concept is more focused on physical and/or psychological mobility across the boundaries of separate organizations, broken structural constrains and hierarchical advancement principles (Tams & Arthur, 2010). DeFillippi and

Arthur (1996, cited in Tams & Arthur, 2010, p. 116) define the boundaryless career as a “sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings”. Scholars argue that, rather than remaining with one organization, individuals manage their careers by choosing new opportunities. Scholars indeed outline that the choices of individuals depend on their values and beliefs (Cheramie, Sturman & Walsh, 2007). Briscoe and Hall (2006) argue that boundaryless careers cannot be constructed just on individuals and independently of contextual constraints and boundaries, such as employment settings, labour market intermediaries and industry fields. We take this view seriously as many scholars still tend to neglect this complexity.

To sum up, scholarship has provided us with two primary views of career development – linear and multi-directional. Linear career development is simple, rigid and career success is conceptualised as the move upwards in the hierarchical structure. On the other hand multi-directional career development is less orderly and career success depends on the subjective understanding of individuals. Career success is not only moving upwards, but also, as an example, moving between departments, the same occupations between organizations and even moving down the hierarchical structure if the occupation does not fulfil the personal dreams of an individual.

Overall we see that there are two views in both the conceptualisation of career and career development. We see a shift in these concepts and we believe that this shift is caused by historical, social, cultural and economic contexts. In both concepts the first view is more traditional and simple, while the other view is more recent and complex. In the career concept, complexity is embraced by merging individual's professional and private life into conceptualisation. In the career development concept, complexity is given by emphasising the role of the individual. Even though scholars acknowledge in recent views that there are more factors influencing career, they do not deeply consider all the influential factors which may influence career and career development. We believe that they neglect other contextual and social factors and base the complexity of career just on the individual. With this in mind we elaborate in the next part how scholars give responsibility of career to individuals, how they tend to perceive how individuals subjectively influence their career choice and development and which individual and social factors scholars tend to outline.

Scholars give responsibility to individuals

As discussed above, most scholars used to separate professional and private life within career concepts and used to isolate career from other contexts. However, nowadays there is a shift towards a socially constructed perspective of career. This made scholars look at individuals and the contexts around them in a more complex way. Therefore, we discuss how scholars outline individuals by giving them the responsibility of their career choices and outlining the factors which influence career. Moreover, as we already argued, scholars also tend to discuss the closest factors influencing individuals and therefore we elaborate to which influential factors in social relationships scholars tend to nod.

Career choice

In order to discuss the socially constructed career development concept, scholars usually discuss why and how individuals make career choices. Searching for a job can be seen as a process with a variety of influencing factors regarding choices. However, while looking through an individual perspective, scholars still tend to see career choices as static. In order to show the static view, we are going to review how scholars discuss how individuals choose career and job by looking for perfect matches.

When talking about choosing and building a career, scholars tend to come up with models and suggestions how to build a perfect career. As an example, Neal (1999) developed a model including two essential matches regarding job search: employer match and career match. According to Neal (1999) this two-stage model yields an optimal job search strategy, with the first stage for the worker to find a career and then to find the perfect employer in the second stage. In other words, workers are not only looking for perfect companies, but also for their perfect occupation as long as they have not found their perfect career match. Neal (1999) points out that it seems like workers are using on the job experience to gain information regarding their perfect career match. Sullivan (2010) points out that over the course of their careers, individuals choose how much education they obtain, which occupation they choose and how often and for how long they move between different firms.

Overall, scholars give the career choice and development responsibility to individuals. And while they argue that individuals are different and their career depends on one's subjective

understanding, scholars still tend to see career as a static phenomenon and neglect other influential contexts. We see from the example above that scholars tend to come up with models in which individuals are the managers of their career, and their career success is the rigid match regarding occupation and employer. Scholars usually argue that it is the individuals' choice how to manage their career. However, this view is quite simplistic, as their choices are usually influenced by many contexts. In the next section we elaborate the most discussed individual and social influences. Moreover, later on we take a wider view of career and nod to other contexts – generation and economic.

The role of individuals

As discussed before and visible in the career choice literature, scholars nowadays include complexity by including a focus on individuals' subjective understanding. In the beginning of the 20th century scholars saw career development as the responsibility of organizations (Baruch, 2004). However, Patton and McMahon (2006, p. 6) discuss that we are now in the era of “do-it-yourself career management”. Scholars argue that individuals are responsible for their own career and discuss that nowadays individuals are challenged to construct their own career paths. Workers have to act as “free agents, developing personal enterprises and marketing personal skills” (Patton & McMahon (2006, p. 6). Therefore, we look at the factors that scholars tend to outline, as the ones that may influence individuals' career understanding, development and cause this shift to individuals as the ones responsible.

Scholars point out that individuals influence their career through factors such as identity, values, attitudes, internal needs, career competencies, skills, expertise, capabilities and so on (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). Scholars pay a lot of attention to identity and discuss that career development and success depends on one's identity (Young, 2009). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1163) write that “Identity is viewed as central for issues of meaning and motivation, commitment, loyalty, logic of action and decision-making, stability and change”. One's identity or self-perception influences the expectations for success, which in return influences one's career choices. As an example, Savickas, Briddick and Watkins (2002) discuss that there are two types of individuals: norm-favouring and norm-questioning. Norm-favouring individuals usually have firm attitudes, rational decision making and stable career patterns. On the other hand, norm-

questioning individuals may have late stabilisation, career discontinuity and high job-hopping (Savickas et al., 2002).

Moreover, Wilson and Deaney (2010) discuss that career understanding, development and choices depend also on self-efficacy and self-esteem. Bandura (1977) and Creed, Patton and Prideaux (2006) argue that self-efficacy reflects the confidence individuals have in their behaviour or actions to choose, start or change a career. Fieldman (2003) and Young (2009) also outline, that high self-efficacy is very important for young adults, because it is related to career goals setting, higher aspirations, challenges and lower career indecision. Therefore self-esteem deals with the evaluative dimension of the self-concept and feeling of worth (Wilson & Deaney, 2010). Fieldman (2003) and Young (2009) argue that individuals who have low self-esteem have higher career indecision and are linked to procrastination. Especially in early career, young adults with low self-esteem are not so engaged in job search. Therefore scholars argue that individuals, who see themselves as self-efficacious and have high self-esteem, may believe that they are sufficiently competent to achieve the career or occupation they want, they are the main variables in career development.

Furthermore, Yamaguchi (2010) argues that career and career development depends on individuals and their subjective understanding as career specific human capital determines the probability of career changes, since individuals with a lot of accumulated human capital do not want to lose it. In other words, Yamaguchi (2010) and Pavan (2010) argue that workers are not willing to give up their know-how and skills, which they have acquired throughout their job life, since general experience is according to Yamaguchi (2010) by far the most important factor for wage-growth for college graduates. However, this does not discourage workers to change their employer as long as they can stay in their career and as Yamaguchi (2010) and Sullivan (2010) suggest, college graduate may change employers throughout their first working years to increase their wages. Scholars argue that individuals are responsible for their careers as they decide their career development by the value of their human capital. However, this also neglects the fact, that contexts, such as the economic situation may influence human capital value in the market.

In addition to the causes why the individual is the one responsible for his or her career, Nauta (2007, p. 165) argues, that “career-related behaviours may be influenced by personality traits”. He discusses factors, such as high extraversion which could boost high mobility and job-hopping. On the other hand, high neuroticism may inhibit exploration (Nauta, 2007).

Furthermore, scholars argue that individuals work values, vocational interests and body-based influences, such as race, gender, age and sex, influence their career understanding and are the variables in the complexity of the career. As an example, Fiedman (2003) and Savickas et al. (2002) discuss, that early career individuals tend to have high career indecision and that it needs several years in work force to truly discover own strengths, weaknesses, and preferences for vocations.

In general we see that scholars give career responsibility to individuals by suggesting a lot of factors which may influence one's career. Individuals' identity, traits, skills and capabilities may be factors influencing their career choices and understanding. However, what lacks in scholarly representations is that individuals do not exist and develop their identity outside the surroundings and may be influenced by many factors themselves. Scholars do not isolate individuals and tend to discuss some contexts, however, these contexts are usually just the closest ones to individuals. The most widely discussed contexts are social contexts, therefore we look next at how scholars tend to discuss influential factors such as: family, school and other social relationships.

The role of social relationships

Even though scholars tend to mainly focus on the role of the individual, they also pay attention to the closest social factors, which may influence the individual and his or her understanding of career. Young and Collin (2004) and Savickas et al. (2009, p. 244) argue, that "an individual's knowledge and identity are the product of social and cognitive processes taking place in context of interactions between people and groups as well as negotiation between them". Therefore, we are going to review how scholars discuss social contexts by outlining how individuals are informed by societal factors, such as culture, family, background, class.

Hartung, Fouad, Leong and Hardin (2009) discuss that career development and understanding depend on the cultural background. Individuals with a background from countries with individualistic cultural patterns differ from those from countries with collectivistic cultural patterns, in a way that collectivists gives primacy for social integrity, in-group norms over personal goals and needs (Hartung et al., 2009). Scholars argue that individuals' career development is influenced by social factors. Collectivists as example maintain work values based on group goals and plan career to enhance communal, family wealth and expectations.

Individualists, on the other hand, maintain career to meet their personal goals and attitudes (Hartung et al., 2009).

Moreover, Wright and Perrone (2008) and Nota, Ferrari, Soldberg and Soresi (2007) argue, that individuals' career and career choices are also influenced by family issues. Write and Perrone (2008, p. 88) outline, that "children, individuals are first exposed to the world of work by observing their parents and other adult role models". Besides that, scholars argue that individuals understand and learn about career through their early familial relationships, parents' own job insecurity, involvement and support (Wright & Perrone, 2008; Nota et al., 2007; Hadkinson, 1995). Moreover, Hadkinson (1995) adds, that families, through their social networks can help individuals to find a job. Furthermore, scholars argue, that even the income of can influence career choices, since this may depends education level and quality (Fieldman, 2003). Therefore, when discussing career through a socially constructed reality prism, scholars tend to outline that parents have a huge impact on individuals' career decision making and career path choice.

Furthermore, scholars also outline, that the career of an individual may also be influenced by their educational background. They argue that college graduates are less likely to change their career, while rather lower educated workers potentially more often show the pattern of complex career changes. Scholars explain this difference through the possibilities that college graduates can find out what their perfect career is throughout their education. They say that there is a strong connection between early career jobs and the major subjects of study in college (Joy, 2006) and Yamaguchi (2010) argues that college graduates have to a certain extent learned about their comparative advantages on the labour market throughout their studies. Moreover in Yamaguchi's (2010) study, it is outlined that college graduates are less likely to search for jobs across careers compared to high school graduates, since they do not want to lose their human capital. To clarify this term Unger, Rauch, Frese and Rosenbusch (2011) refer to Becker (1964), who defined human capital as the skills and knowledge that individuals acquire and accumulate through school, college and on job training.

Overall, in scholarly representations individuals are seen as masters of their career paths. It is argued, that individuals success understanding, career decisions, mobility or job-hopping depends on their identity, values and other individual influential factors. Therefore, even though the main focus is on individual, scholars tend to discuss, that there is a necessity to take social

and other influential factors into account, as individuals, their identities and values are influenced by social, economic, cultural and other factors. However, scholars still primarily focus on social factors, such as family or class. We do agree that individual and social factors have huge influence in career development. However, there are many more contexts which should be encountered. Therefore we will look at career in a more complex way by nodding to two more contexts – generation and financial crisis.

Generation and the financial crisis; contexts which influence career

As the literature review has shown, scholars extended their conceptualisation of career by looking at it with a socially constructed perspective. The main discourse in the career theory is that individuals are in control of their career. However, we have a richer view of individuals and the interplay of contexts within the complexity of the career. As Young (2009) sums up, career and career development depend on the interplay between the individual and the situation. Savickas et al. (2009, p. 240) argue, that “human behaviour is not only a function of the person but also of the environment”. Individuals construct their understanding and self-concepts through the specific experiences they have had in their environment. Career is embedded in complex layers of social, historical, cultural, and political meanings and no matter how stable the characteristics of an individual might be, when the environment is rapidly changing, their career will be affected (Young & Collin, 2004; Savickas, 2002). In our case we are taking two contextual factors into account – generational and economic, which is seen as both a “time of soaring expectations and crushing realities” (Twenge, 2006, p. 2). The financial crisis was a rapid change in the environment which might have caused specific experiences for a generation. Therefore this part will discuss both generation and the financial crisis as the two influential contexts of this study.

Generation

Twenge (2006, p. 2) says that “the period you were born dictates the culture you experience” and encounters, that generation is a useful proxy for the socio-cultural environment of different time periods. Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman and Lance (2010, p. 1120) describe a generation as “individuals born around the same time who share distinctive social or historical

life events during critical developmental periods”. Each generation is influenced by broad forces, for example, parents, friends, media, popular culture, the economy and social events. These forces are strongest during one’s childhood and adolescence. Indeed, forces create common value systems, which are useful indicators of an individual’s decisions, actions and their motivational factors, which can influence individuals’ career and career understanding. This study will focus on “Generation Me”, as recent graduates belong to this generation and this is the generation which is most affected by the crisis, according to the media discourse.

Research shows that there are many generational differences in personality traits, attitudes, mental health, and behaviours (Twenge et al., 2010). Indeed, the largest psychological shift of the Generation Me is their focus on themselves. The research was conducted in the USA, however Twenge (2006) argues that many of the trends most probably could be applied to other Western cultures and argues that the main feature of the Generation Me is that the individual comes first. This generation has been taught to believe, that everything is achievable and self-belief is essential for success. The members of “Generation Me have been taught to aim for the stars when planning their future” (Twenge, 2009, p. 400). Twenge (2009) points out that data show an increase in self-satisfaction, high expectations, materialism, confidence in future performance, and a desire for leisure. However, in a vein, the researcher argues that recent generations became too ambitious, overconfident and narcissistic. Many of them were setting goals that might not be right for them (Twenge, 2009).

Overall, scholars argue that the time you were born can dictate and shape one’s culture, traits and behaviour. Our participants are a part of the Generation Me, therefore we assume that they may have high self-confidence and high expectations. They are very likely ambitious and because of overconfidence, they may not be prepared to have difficulties in experiencing competition and unexpected economic situations, such as the financial crisis.

The Financial crisis

As discussed before, career conceptualisation may be more complex if scholars would add more contexts. We see the recent economic crisis as an influential context in career conceptualisation. It is acknowledged that the understanding that individuals hold about a certain phenomenon can be changed by the economic situation and the stories which surround that situation. Fuchs and Graf (2010) discuss that the dramatic discourse about the financial crisis is

widely acknowledged and highly discussed in the media. In a vein, we are going to look at the dominant discourses about the impacts of the crisis on labour market and particularly on recent graduates.

Significant impacts on the labour market were widely discussed. Media, such as the prestigious German newspaper 'Die Zeit' (Zeit online, 2010), 'Der Stern' (Stern, 2010) and Peacock (2008) discussed the rise in unemployment and temporary contracts. Because of growing unemployment, there was a growth in competition on the labour market (Seasholtz, 2011). Companies could choose between more applicants and were not afraid to offer them just temporary contracts. Since companies had such a variety to choose from and people were eager to take any job, it is mentioned that people work below their educational level. In relation to this situation, the media reported that there is dissatisfaction, depression and decrease in motivation under workers. The reasons can differ, but no recognition, no salary rise or perspectives to get a job within the field of studies are mentioned. (Elsing, 2011; Jobat, 2011; Rampell, 2011).

Recent graduates were seen as most affected and were even called 'the losers' of the crisis (Stern, 2010). Experience became a prerequisite in the job market (Whitmell, 2010; Zeit online, 2011) and indeed, while companies were looking more for experience than for education, young individuals had difficulties in entering the job market or getting a job in general. In a vein, because of no opportunities to work, there was an increase in higher education (Zeit online, 2011). The Telegraph stated that there was "panic" on British campuses as researchers claimed that graduates were having the worst job prospects for 20 years (Paton, 2009).

Overall, the crisis discourses showed a negative image of the situation for recent graduates. They were called losers of the crisis while they were finishing universities, there was a decline in the labour market and high competition demanded experience which recent graduates usually do not have. As a result, these discourses may influence the perceptions and behaviour of individuals. In a vein, this may impact the experiences and perceptions about career that were gained before the crisis.

Being aware of the socially constructed career conceptualisation and taking these two contexts into account, we guess that the career concept may be influenced as the clash regarding the expectations of the Generation Me with the reality could be significant. As Whitmell (2010) argued, graduates have to see reality and that the time of getting automatically into an interesting

and well paid job is swept away by the recession. In a vein Twenge (2006) argues that Generation Me enters the world in which good jobs are hard to find. In addition graduates have too high expectations when it comes to their first job and the financial crisis may have caused these expectations not being able to come true. We argue that career concepts should include some additional contexts, such as economic and generation, which could have a significant impact on how career could be conceptualised. Therefore we are aiming to explore how recent graduates experience and understand career in the aftermath of the crisis.

Chapter 3 - Method

In this section we present our methatheoretical starting points regarding epistemology and ontology. Furthermore we explain our interpretive/social constructionist perspective and outline our research process, sources of data, and our hermeneutical approach to data analysis. Thereby we present our own framework of a hermeneutical triangle. Finally, we explain how we engaged issues of rigor and trustworthiness and note how we stayed reflective throughout our project.

Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

“It is not methods but ontology and epistemology which are the determinants of good social science” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p.8). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2002) highlight that the outcome of qualitative research will be seriously affected if a researcher fails to philosophically think through the relationship between theory and data. Understanding the philosophical connections is essential to clarify a research design.

Scholars view ontological and epistemological understandings as determining factors as to how social science research should be conducted. Epistemological and ontological considerations describe and determine how we understand the world and the nature of reality. Easterby-Smith et al (2002, p. 31) define ontology as “assumptions that we make about the nature of reality”. Creswell (2007) highlights that researchers have to consider that every individual has his or her own reality and points out that ontological considerations in research embrace the idea of multiple realities. Furthermore, Bryman (2008) argues that ontological considerations determine whether researchers see the social world as something external to social actors or as something that is fashioned by people.

Epistemology is defined by Easterby-Smith et al (2002, p. 31) as “a general set of assumptions about the best way of inquiring into the nature of the world”, something that Creswell (2007, p. 47) describes as “philosophical assumption for the qualitative researcher” to address the relationship between researchers and their study subject as something being interrelated. Schön (1995) summarizes that epistemology is related to what knowledge actually is and how individuals acquire this knowledge. Qualitative researchers are therefore encouraged embedded themselves in the research process and to conduct their studies in the field.

In this study we adhere to the view that reality is socially constructed, which means that reality is not objective, but is given its subjective meaning by humans. From an ontological standpoint, reality is therefore determined subjectively and collectively by those who live in it and from an epistemological standpoint we consider knowledge as based on the interpretation of subjective social constructions. We therefore agreed with Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) who argue that objective facts do not exist. Instead, they are value loaded and influenced by individual's pre-understanding as well as other contextual factors. We also agreed with Creswell (2007, p. 20) who emphasizes that "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of the experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things".

Method

Easterby-Smith et al. (2002, p. 31) define methodology as a "combination of techniques used to enquire into a specific situation," which are embedded and inevitably linked to the epistemological and ontological starting points.

Our methodology is built upon our epistemological and ontological considerations, which influence and determine the methods we use to conduct our research. The concrete wording of our research question emerged during our research process. However, throughout this interpretive process our focus was always centered around the question of how recent graduates experienced their first years at work in the aftermath of the crisis. Recent graduates in the context of the crisis is an area that needs to be developed. Finding out "how" this context influences the experiences of early career workers and their understanding of career, is an aim that can be solved through a qualitative research study.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) describe qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" and "it consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible". These practices are ways to transform the world and turn it into a "series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos"(ibid, p. 3). Creswell (2007, p. 37) points out that "qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem".

An open attitude and flexibility towards social phenomena are main attributes of qualitative research, since it informs about plurality in truth regarding voices and meanings. Benoliel (1984) and Myers (2000) argue that there is no single reality and reality has to be studied independently in its context. Myers (2000) points out that because of the changeable social nature of phenomena, it is not possible to separate the context where phenomena occur. What might be considered as true in one situation might not be true in another, which leads to the problem of generalizing phenomena. Alvesson (1996) sees this as an advantage since plurality and tolerance for complexity enables the researcher to achieve deeper and richer descriptions, to let the reader grasp idiosyncrasies of situations.

A common assumption in qualitative research is that data guides researchers to understand specific phenomena and take it as the foundation for the development of new theories. Qualitative interviewing is one way to produce or gain data for knowledge production.

Miller and Glassner (1997, p. 103) see the goal in qualitative interview studies to accomplish and achieve “deeper, fuller conceptualizations of those aspects of our subjects’ lives we are most interested in”. Our field of study was how recent graduates, a term that will be defined in the following point, have experienced the crisis and its aftermath. Based on our epistemological and ontological considerations our goal is to explore their inner world, which includes their feelings, beliefs, attitudes and emotions during the years at work after graduation.

Participant selection

Our research design can be best described as a qualitative interview study. We conducted twenty interviews with recent graduates. We defined this group as graduates who finished their university degree between 2006 and 2010 and accumulated some work experience after graduation. To acquire participants, we contacted alumni clubs from four different universities in Europe. Since not all researchers in our group were able to speak Swedish, we decided to take research trips to our home countries of Lithuania, Austria and the Netherlands; to conduct the interviews in our mother tongue and that of our participants. In the hopes of getting a deeper understanding and to avoid scarring off potential participants, we saw this as an advantage for our study.

Sampling techniques in qualitative research are based on purposeful selection. To get as many participants as possible in a limited time period, we chose two steps to recruit them. First

we contacted the Vilnius Gediminas Technical University in Lithuania, the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria in Austria, the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and Jonkoping international business school in Sweden. Their alumni clubs provided us with email lists of graduates to contact. Once we made contact with participants we used snowball sampling methods to learn of other potential participants. For example, if the receivers of the emails were willing to participate, we asked them whether they knew of other recent graduates whom we should contact. Lindlof (1995) argues that the advantage of this method is the efficiency to find individuals whose characteristics are central to the research problem.

Research process

Our research process was divided into several phases. The first phase was to define our concrete research area and to begin acquiring access to participants. In this email we told the possible participants that we were conducting a research study on recent graduates and we asked whether they would be willing to participate. Interviews were conducted during a three-week period at the end of March and beginning of April 2011.

In order to give us an initial direction, we started our study with two pilot interviews that we conducted in Lithuania. We developed our interview guide based on these interviews and literature research and took both scientific as well as popular literature as the foundation for our semi structured interview guideline (see Appendix A). We offered our participants the opportunity to choose the location of the interviews and attempted to create an open and trusting atmosphere by first asking participants to tell us about themselves. This summary was also a first indicator for us to learn how far we could go with our questions. It also gave us the opportunity to become more familiar with the participants and to use this information later in the interview. After asking questions related to their current job, we asked questions about careers in general, before discussing participant's views about the economic crisis. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and one hour. All three researchers experienced a similar pattern that the last interviews took longer than those conducted in the beginning. This could be explained through our increasing interviewing skills.

Sources of data

The transcripts of our 20 interviews became our data. After we transcribed them from German, Lithuanian or Dutch into English, we had around 180 pages of English interview text.

In Appendix B we give an overview of the 20 participants including the name chosen by them for the study, their age, occupation and how they were sampled into the study.

Data Analysis

With this material we conducted our hermeneutic analysis, where we became engaged in a conversation with the interview text. This means we not only attempted to understand the literal meaning in the text, but also the subtexts and subtleties that arose when we posed questions back to the interview text. As a framework for this process, we utilized our own hermeneutical approach, inspired by Alvesson and Skoldberg's (2009) basic version of the hermeneutic circle. In the following paragraph we elaborate on this process and the relevant hermeneutical concepts.

To analyse the data gained from the interviews, we looked at the interviews from a critical reflexive perspective and interpreted them in a hermeneutical way. Kvale (1996, p. 46) defines hermeneutics as the "study of the interpretation of texts" with the purpose to "obtain a valid and common understanding of the meaning of a text". Such texts can for example emerge from conversations in the form of qualitative research interviews. In the context of social sciences Kvale (1996) points out that hermeneutics is double relevant for interview studies, since it first illustrates the dialogue where the text is produced and then in a second step subsequently interprets this text. Kvale (1996) emphasizes that there needs to be three reservations made regarding the hermeneutical approach considering the differences between literary and interview texts. First, hermeneutics is traditionally treading with finished texts, yet interview texts need to be generated first, which secondly happens in a certain interpersonal situation. This means that a transcribed interview provides incomplete information about the wealth of meanings expressed in the interview situation and thirdly that interviews are often rather vague and repetitious, but both Kvale (1996) as well as Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) highlight that a hermeneutical mode of understanding allows a legitimate plurality of understanding. We achieved this plurality of understanding, by becoming engaged in a conversation with the text, framed by our utilized approach, which can be envisioned as hermeneutical triangle and was inspired by Alvesson and Skoldberg's (2009, p. 104) basic version of the hermeneutical circle.

Our first process step was called “pattern of interpretation” and referred to the overarching set of interpretations of our texts. This meant that we were looking for the coherent whole of partial interpretations, with the two contexts, crisis and generation in mind. By interpreting parts of texts, we attempted to make individual details of the text understandable and tried to let these partial interpretations grow. As an example we could mention the new significant value of education. One of our facts found through interpretations, was that our participants are very aware of the importance of education. However, with the entire picture in mind, we could connect this finding with our context of the crisis. Due to increased competition in the labour market the educational level increased and with this fact in mind, we could yield a deeper understanding of this part of the text, far beyond what we immediately understood by reading it the first time.

In the second process step called “text”, we interpreted our texts. What was important in this step was that we did not see our text as facts. Instead we had to let emerge our facts as a result from the interpretation of our texts. Therefore we saw our text as meaningful signs that can be interpreted in various ways, depending on the entire research-sociological situation. We were aware of the fact that this determined what we conceived as facts and how we treated them. Throughout our iterative process, new facts emerged and old facts disappeared. One example of this process was the transformation of the image of career.

In the third process step “dialogue” we posed questions to our texts and tried to listen to them. Regarding posing questions to the text Kvale (1996, p. 211) points out that a hermeneutic question-answer dialogue “is not only a matter of the questions the reader poses to a text, but also of an openness to the questions with which the text confronts the reader”, which means that an interpreter’s presuppositions can enter to the questions posed to the text and co-determine the found meanings in the text. Therefore our questions emerged from our pre-understanding regarding certain issues and were continuously transformed throughout the process. This meant that we went back and forth between how we determined issues or facts with our pre-understanding and the new understanding for it. One example of this was that our pre-understanding regarding how often recent graduates wanted to change their job was transformed throughout the process. In the beginning our understanding was that they actually were very positive towards changing their job, however within the analysis we saw that this was not the case and we changed our understanding. The assumption of the positive attitude towards job

changing became consequently our pre-understanding. At the same time we were aware that it was important for us to discuss arguments and counter-arguments for our readers, by letting theoretical and factual aspects interact.

Validation and Reflection

According to Angen (2000), the validity of qualitative research has become the most controversial issue in the debate of legitimacy of this kind of research between those who prefer qualitative research and the proponents of quantitative research.

However, from a qualitative point of view, qualitative or interpretive work must be judged by different standards when it comes to issues such as reproducibility, rigor, validity and trustworthiness. Creswell (2007, p. 206) considers validation in qualitative research as “as an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” and sees “validation as a distinct strength of qualitative research” and argues that “the account made through extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of a study”. Angen (2000, p. 387) highlights that “the term validation rather than validity is used deliberately to emphasize the way in which a judgement of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research is a continuous process occurring within a community of researchers”. Angen (2000, p. 379) states that “when judged by the validity criteria of experimental procedures, interpretive work is viewed as being too subjective, lacking in rigor and/or being unscientific and, consequently, denied legitimacy”.

In our study we chose an interpretive approach and based on our epistemological and ontological considerations, we chose the substantive validation approach by Angen (2000) to evaluate our research. Creswell (2007, p. 206) describes the meaning of substantive validation as “understanding one’s own understanding of the topic, understandings derived from other sources, and the documentation of this process in the written study”. In other words, self-reflection will contribute to the validation of our work and is therefore a central objective of our research.

Reflexivity and in particular self reflexivity was a central aspect of our research process, something that Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009, p. 269) define as “thinking about the conditions for what one is doing, investigating the way in which the theoretical, cultural and political

context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched”.

One of our main reflections throughout the whole research process regards us as a team of three researchers. As discussed above, qualitative research is subjective and all three of us researchers are influenced by our pre-understanding. All of us were raised in western capitalistic societies and this has influenced our interpretative stance regarding issues such as career. With fellow researchers from different cultures, where career is rather seen as a way to fulfil the basic human needs, we would have had different views on concepts like career than in a culturally homogenous group.

During meetings with our supervisor and within group discussions, we talked through dilemmas and subjectivities that occurred throughout the process. These dilemmas evolved due to the time and resource constraints in this project, but with some coordination among the researchers we were able to solve these problems. However, we must say that to a certain extent the time constraints limited the breadth and depth of our research. Looking back, we see it as a strength that we conducted the interviews with three different researchers. As a result we questioned issues of subjectivity of statements and their underlying value three times. Furthermore, despite having a semi structured interview guideline from the beginning of the regular interviews, we reflected on our interviews and gave our colleagues feedback in which direction they could navigate their interviews. Also throughout the analysis process we stayed reflective by using techniques such as ‘doublethinking’ (El-Sawad, Arnold & Cohen, 2004), which is analyzing contradictions within interviews.

Chapter 4 - Analysis

This analysis is divided into two major parts. In the first part we analyse how recent graduates understand career and career development. In the second, we analyse the two contexts that may influence the understanding of career. Overall, the first and second sections show the struggle between the two understandings: the one they are socialised in and the one they gained through their experience.

Career understanding

We witnessed a substantial amount of struggle within the stories of our participants. Participants tended to change their story around career and career development depending on whether they were tapping into “ideal” social narratives (predominant understanding) or their own experience (experienced understanding). We will unpack three stories which show struggle, the first being whereby a career was predominantly seen as a static concept and just related to professional life. However, when participants were talking about their own career, the split between private and professional life diffused. Moreover, there was a struggle between the understandings of an ideal career in general and the participants' own ideal career. Furthermore, participants struggled to see how they are responsible for their own career and career development. On the one hand they noted that career in general depends on individual. On the other hand, they were also talking that career depends on contexts. In the following three sections we will elaborate these twists.

Professional/ private split

We noticed in the statements and stories of our participants that their predominant understanding sees career as static and rather simple complex. However their understanding based on their own experiences sees it as fluid and complex. One of the common views in career understanding is that there is a split between professional and private life. However, when our participants talked more in depth about career, we saw mismatches and struggles in their stories since they actually see career related to private life.

Career is a term which everyone can relate to and our interviews showed that there is a

predominant understanding about the career concept as related to an individual's professional life with advancement. Participants tended to split professional and private life, by separating "job" from "home". As an example, when Kristofer talked about career in general, he said that career is: "how an individual pursues his or her professional life". The same understanding we saw in many other statements of our participants when they were estimating which part of life is more important – career or private life. Sven said: "Maybe sometimes you first need to sacrifice free time in order to actually get a good career". In a vein, Carla argued:

I mean I think to make a career is good, but I am also afraid that I will forget everything around me, like family, friends etc. Most of the times you have to sacrifice your leisure time for a good career and I don't want to do that deal.

The answers of Carla and Sven about sacrificing leisure time showed us that they draw a line between career and other parts of their lives, however by considering balance, they actually describe it as overlapping as the answers indicate that a good career will affect your private life.

The professional/ private life split within participants' predominant understanding of the career concept tended to struggle with their experienced understanding of career. As an example, we saw a private/professional life split struggle when our participants tend to consider family within the career concept. Many participants were talking about family without even being asked when they were thinking about their future career. They were considering family within their career. However, there was a tension when they were trying to "fit" family into career concept. Participants tended to separate family concept from the career concept as they tried to separate "job" from "home". As an example, Bettina said:

I think that I am career oriented, which is of course for a woman more difficult since I want children. This step is not really fitting to a career, since in Austria it is not possible to combine career with family.

This answer also indicates that there could be a gender issue in the general career understanding as Bettina outlines that women have more difficulties.

Moreover, in the answers of our participants we noticed that within their career concept they include more than just their job. As an example, Ronald said: "I also think that career is recognition". Gabi stated that she defines herself to a certain degree around her work. We therefore assume that career means recognition not only in professional life, but also as pride in private life and status in the society. Moreover, participants related career to the self-realisation

and fulfilment in their lives. They tended to mention happiness and hobbies within the concept of career. As an example, Eva argued: “I think career should be a hobby, it should be something you like, because career is supposed to be that you do something you like.” Christoph is in line with Eva and argued that:

Work has to be for me fun that is essential, if you have no fun at work you can not develop yourself and you get frustrated. And you need goals and if you do not have them it will not work.

Bettina described her understanding of her ideal career in the following way:

It shouldn't take so much time from me as it takes right now. A colleague from me recently said that one should work only as much to get around, but spend the rest of the time for other things. Life is to beautiful to not just only work. There are so many other things were you can spend time on! Not only working! That's why I in the long term think that self-employment is interesting for me. Then I can schedule my time on my own. How much of my day do I invest in work. And when do I work is important. Do I work in the night and take advantage of the day for other things. As employed I do not have this freedom.

These answers indicate that career is not only about the job anymore and that professional and private life overlap.

Overall, our participants are caught between two different discourses. They are navigating the tension between competing discourses whether a professional/private life split exists or not. The discourse that says that there is a professional/private split is perhaps stronger and more publicly debated. Participants realise that there is no split, yet they often do not include their private life within their predominant understanding of career. When they conceptualise career, they tend to relate it to professional life, however, when they are talking what career brings to them and what they want from it, they tend to broaden the concept by talking about their private life. The confusion regarding different understandings is also seen in their understanding of ideal career and its success.

Tension between an “ideal” and “their” ideal career understanding

We asked our participants the question how they see an ideal career and as a follow up question we asked them if this is actually also how they see their personal ideal career. Thereby we noticed that the image between an ideal career in general and their personal ideal career understanding differed. We saw a predominant image of career success as leading position in an

international company and new narrative of career success as having fulfilment in their lives. As a result, we saw our participants struggling for cohesion.

From our participants' answers we felt, that individuals tended to have an image of career success which is dictated by their socialisation. When our participants talked about career success, they tended to relate it to leading positions in prestigious international companies. As an example Marie said:

I think about big names and money actually when thinking about career, but for me it is important to be happy with my job and to enjoy it, it would be nice to make career, but as businessman it is different than for a journalist. You cannot compare that.

She mentioned big names and differences in professions, which indicates that her understanding of an ideal career shaped by the society is related to big and prestigious companies, and that she probably had a certain image of a businessman, when she explained the career concept. The same ideal career related to international companies can be seen in Doris' answer. When she was asked how she understands an ideal career, she said:

A career person is attending a great school, was abroad, is capable in English and also in other languages. Then he starts a great program at a respected university. Has a good relation to all the professors, has perfect grades. Besides studying he is doing a lot of internships to get experience and is member in many associations. []After graduation some years working abroad, probably to Zurich to one of the world leading companies in its area.

Interesting, that both female participants described general ideal career related to male image. Doris used a male pronoun, when she described the ideal career. It seemed like she completely embodied herself from this description and later on in this interview she claimed that her experienced and, to a certain extent, admired career looks completely different. The same is valid for Marie, who also envisioned a businessman, when she described the ideal career.

When our participants explained ideal career, we noticed that they were struggling to merge the predominant image of an ideal career with their own ideal career. This can already be seen in the Marie's answer above. Participants tended to mention that their own ideal career is related to happiness and what individuals want to achieve in their lives. They were usually finding themselves in different career paths, professions, industries or situations than envisioned in their understanding of an ideal career and this influenced their personal career success conceptualisation. This trend showed that understanding of their own career success is really

based on individualism and depends on one's values, goals and needs. As an example to this, Martin described an ideal career as:

Ideal career? For me is that if one him or herself knows what one wants. If someone wants a high position with a lot of responsibilities, but bad work life balance or on the other hand a job with fewer responsibilities with more leisure time. I am not sure what I want, but for me the ideal job is [] middle management with time for leisure and a good work life balance.

To sum up, our participants had an ideal image of career often as a male person leading a big international company. This kind of leader image regarding career success could be dictated by popular representations and media and/or also by generational contexts like high ambitions. Participants usually compared their own career with this image and refused this image to a certain extent by arguing, that career success depends on their lives fulfilment, on their individual goals and values.

The role of individuals vs. the role of contexts

We saw from the answers of our participants, that they usually mentioned that career depends on the individual. However, there is a tension within their stories which makes us believe that in practice they struggle to make sense of how they are responsible for their own careers as it also depends on all kind of contexts.

It seems that individuals are socialised with the idea that they have to be their own career "builders". They usually mention, that career and its development as well as the career paths we take depend on the individuals. As discussed in the literature, scholars nowadays tend to look at career through individual agency and give career responsibility to individuals. It seems like the discourses described by scholars have influence on individuals understanding as one's own responsibility of career was mentioned several times in the stories of our participants.

However, when our participants started to talk more deeply about career, we noticed the struggle that our participants had within the understanding that individuals are the ones who are responsible for their career. As an example, when Paul was asked about career, he said:

Well, just as life you are your own builder regarding your career. Of course, what can I say about career...depends on the person. Dumb people can be lucky to lead something, but time shows everything. I can say, life is so unpredictable. [] in one organization, if there will be a chance, you will show what you can, you will be noticed and will go up the ladder. But in another organization, there will be no chances, no opportunities to show or to climb even if you are talented... if you are working

in one company for a long time, where all people are relatives, you can be a manager of the department, but you will never have chance to be in a higher position like a director. But it really depends on context. Context is really important. Of course, you have to show everything by yourself. If you won't make an effort, you won't reach anything.

There was a clear contradiction when he said that career actually depends on contexts, but he still argued that individuals build and are responsible for their own career. This dilemma clearly envisions the struggle between the understanding of career shaped by the society, where everyone can achieve everything and his understanding through his own experience, where he saw that there are actually factors that work against the understanding shaped by the society.

We saw the struggles within our participants' stories when their predominant understanding did not match with their experienced understanding. Our participants grew up with the idea that they influence and control their career. However, their experience showed them that there actually are contexts that influence them and their environment, and have just as much control as they do.

Overall, we saw our participants caught in between the understanding shaped by the society and the understanding they got through their work experiences. They understand that career is not just a professional life, but they still tend to conceptualise it like that. Participants tend to see career success as a male leader in big international company, but they hurry to deny this career success with their own individual needs. Furthermore, participants understand that their career is not only in their control. We saw the same pattern of struggles in the way our participants understand career development and will elaborate this in the next section.

Career Development understanding

When we talked with our participants about career, we also talked about career development and how it looks. One of our participants' main dominant views was that they tended to mention career as growing or as something to build up, regardless of how important this is to them personally. As an example, Marie said: “Well it is not important for me to actually ‘build’ career, but it is important for me to be happy and satisfied within my work”. This example shows clear struggles between the understanding of career development shaped by the society and how our participants understand career development due to their actual experiences at work.

We understood from the answers of our participants, that they are socialized into an

understanding that the ideal career development is conceptualized as quick advancement in the form of promotions, something that is envisioned as a ladder. Paul said: “you will work, and show what you can do and you will get promoted”. Our participants tended to understand, that these promotions are static and everyone can achieve them. As an example, when Doris talked about how she understands career development, she said that career development is when individuals: “Works a lot. Learn a lot. And gets promoted every second year”. Moreover, some participants tended to understand that if one’s career is not growing upwards it is not valuable. As an example, when Ronald was asked if career should move upwards, he said: “Yes you always strive for something better. If you are not taking your opportunities I do not believe you are a real career person.” Most participants tended to agree with a ladder image, however, there are struggles within their stories. As an example, when Lisa was asked how she sees career development, her answer was that she sees it “like a ladder”. She argued that career development steadily grows upwards: “up in the hierarchy into a better position with more responsibilities. Other projects and of course also in a financial context”. From her answer we could see that maybe not only promotions, but also projects could be understood as career development. There is a tension in her answer, because getting new projects may not be seen as moving upwards in the hierarchy. Instead it could also be seen as personal development.

We noticed, that despite individuals have that image as a ladder in mind, they tended to argue against it to a certain extent. As we saw from the answers of our participants this image of a ladder discourse is usually created by society, schools and media. When Eva was confronted with the image of a ladder in the interview, she said:

I think this is the common picture, but not necessarily. I think we are brought up to go up in the ladder, in our education we learn to go up in the ladder, but I think people should stay where they are comfortable with.

Moreover, when Kristofer was asked if career development should always goes up, he answered:

Not necessarily, it depends what 'up' means. If up is from the perspective from what you think the society has, than it is always going upward in the hierarchy, in an organization, or going up hierarchy wise from the point of view of the society or culture that you live in. But it depends on what is being perceived as a high level by society, is it being a manager, is it being a boss, or being a police chef, that is just one way of looking at a career. Actually career can also be from your point of view, if you want to become a specialist or if you want to have this very specific type of job, like if you want to be a specialist but you don't care about the salary you just want to work with these specific things and

you want that kind of responsibilities, than that may be a career you will be working for a long time. In the end you will get that specific position, but it does not necessarily means that you are in a high position hierarchy wise, looking at the societal side of it, or that you make a lot of money or actually are in a high position, so it is differs really. [] But yes generally the view of career in society there is a strong bottom to top advancement.

We noticed that individuals tend to have this common understanding of career development but argue against these general discourses due to their experiences. Both Kristofer and Eva argued that understanding differs between individual and social context as our participants saw the difference between cultures, societies, professions or schools which they attended. Hence, as Kristofer argued, there are a lot of influences in conceptualising career development, where the ladder image may not be applicable.

We recognised that the ladder image was usually applied just within the first years of our participant's career development, but due to individual and contextual reasons, participants crafted a new image. As an example, when Doris was asked how she plans to build her career, she said: "I can move upwards and also into new directions". So her career development could be seen as moving up the ladder, then just changing to another ladder or moving horizontally within the same level but with different tasks. On the other hand Gerd's ladder image could be destroyed by changing the direction and instead of moving upwards, he may move downwards. When he was asked about his career development, he said:

Of course I rather see it as ladder, where I steadily go up, but I think there will come steps back. []
Right now I have the goal that it goes up for two or three steps and then I would also take one step back if necessary.

We saw from the answers of Gerd and Doris that they see career development as something that should go upwards, but they are aware that there could be factors influencing that linear career. Throughout our interviews, our participants mentioned several factors that might influence their career development such as family and children, a change in personal interests or their personal surrounding.

Taking the ladder image for career development it is up to the individual to decide how high they want to climb. The predominant understanding of career development tells us that climbing up to the top of the ladder is the result of an ideal career. But our participants told us that they are not willing to pay every price for that and mentioned that there are several reasons

why this is not admirable for everyone. As an example, Doris stated: “I mean I want to get up of course, but I am not paying every price for it. The straight line up can also be a bit flatter”. Sandra stated that career development has not to go all the way up and can go down, but this does not mean that career is not successful:

If someone would give me the job that I do not like [] if they would promote me to that position and I wouldn't like that, I would come back to be an administrator, so I do not think that it is falling in career, in that ladder. I think it is a choice of the person. But it is also a career step.

We saw the same pattern regarding the struggle between the predominant understanding and experienced understanding of career also in the concept of career development. The notions that career development is something that one builds and something that can be envisioned as climbing up a ladder is still the discourse our participants rely on. Yet, they struggle to make sense of dominant story line as their personal experiences and values showed them that this ideal image may not be possible to achieve for everyone, due to a variety of factors. If the two understandings were too divergent our participants started to struggle and did not see themselves on the perfect track, shaped by the society anymore. In the next section we will elaborate why our participants may experience this struggle between these two understandings.

Great expectations, crushing realities – Generation Me in the aftermaths of the crisis

In the first part of the analysis we showed that the predominant understanding recent graduates have regarding career and its development is shaped by society and differs from their understanding gained of their actual experience. Therefore, there is a struggle between these understandings. In this part we bring in contextual factors which influence recent graduates and discuss how they struggle between two contradicting discourses of the two contexts: generation and economic. We argue that there is a clash of the generation context and the economic context in form of the crisis, which caused recent graduates to struggle between high expectations and crushing realities. In the first sub-part of this section, we discuss discourses about their generation and in the second sub-part we present discourses regarding their experiences in the crisis and its aftermaths. In the third sub-part we show how our graduates experienced the clash between the discourses of the two contexts.

Great expectations

As earlier discussed, our participants belong to the generation – “Generation Me”. Twenge (2009, p. 400) says that this generation “has been taught to aim for the stars when planning their future” and claims that the expectations, self-confidence, ambitions and self-satisfaction are higher than in the generations before. We noticed these trends also in the stories of our participants. In particular, we noticed that they have high expectations and ambitions caused by high self-confidence and individualism. In addition we recognised that our university graduates were highly aware of their human capital.

According to the literature, Generation Me is known to have higher self-confidence than the previous generations. This high confidence is caused by various discourses they grew up with. For instance, in school, university or family recent graduates were taught that everything is achievable for them and they can reach the stars. As an example of high self-confidence, we could look at Vaidas’ statements, who told us that he trusts himself and was not afraid of not being able to find a job. He said: “I believe that I could learn everything in this field... I am not afraid to risk because of this... I trust myself.” Ronald is also a good example for the high confidence under recent graduates. He even stated that most of them actually know from themselves that they have high confidence. He said: “I am pretty arrogant and I always believe that I am doing my work perfectly”. Throughout our interviews we only had very few moments where participants actually admitted that they were overestimating their skills and capabilities. One moment was when Doris admitted the following:

I had to work on Saturdays and Sundays to get rid off my work load. In the beginning I was only responsible for the product management and then after a colleague was fired I also got his parts and was responsible for all the administrative stuff and the partner management. I mean I thought I studied a broad subject, but the tasks became too complex. Furthermore the working atmosphere was not good at all. There was a lot of pressure on us and we had to work under pressure all the time. As I said a lot of extra hours. The complex work load and the resulting stressful atmosphere were the reasons why I left after ten months. I was not longer capable to accomplish all the tasks. I know one should at least stay for a year at a job, but i could not do it any longer.

In her statement Doris tries to justify herself for resigning before working at the company for less than a one year period, which is a discourse for the shortest period of time at a company, that she has heard in the media/colleagues and from her upbringing. Furthermore she indirectly admits

that she overestimated her skills from university and later on in the interview she also states that the university gave her wrong signals which led to a very high self-confidence. She described this by saying “The University gave us the feeling that it was the best programme and that we will be really needed”, however this assumption was not met at this particular job.

This story also shows that individuals in schools and universities get in touch with the discourses such as that by studying they can get any job they want. Thereby they get tapped into the discourse that they are in control of their own success regarding career and its development. Vaidas for example chose his study direction “because when we were choosing our studies at that time everybody was saying that it will be easy to find a job after the subject that I was studying”. According to Yamaguchi (2010), recent graduates gain high awareness of their human capital throughout their studies and they are not willing to give it up. Especially college graduates are aware of their skills and want to improve them even more. Doris who could not handle the whole work load of her first job after graduation pointed out that she still thinks that she obtained life-long working benefits. Despite her young age of 25, Doris was the only participant in our study who has worked at four different jobs for a period of around one year each. After leaving her first job, Doris went to Spain to work as a tourist guide, something that did not fit to her education at all, but she argued that this was an investment for her future, since she wanted to learn Spanish and get work experience abroad. We could interpret this as a step taken back on the envisioned career ladder, but also as a conscious step to invest into her human capital.

Martin, Andreas and Anita argued that the general education level in the society has increased during the last years and that this process will continue. When asked whether it would have been easier for him to graduate five years earlier Andreas argued:

Well I have to say regarding advancement opportunities within my current job it would have been easier, since more and more university graduates came within the last years. If you compare that to five years ago I would say that the average education has clearly increased.

All of them argue that they want to invest into themselves through further education, whereas Anita will soon finish her second master degree. One step ahead is Gabi, who recently completed her second master studies and explained this step in the following way:

I have done the MBA since I always want to qualify myself better, I do not want to be left behind. I want to do something for my brain. That was one point. The other point was this probably would enable me to work abroad. That I can also get positions. I don't know if I stay here forever. I have

chosen my subjects for the MBA with my job in mind, something that I can use at work. Like PR for my marketing and strategic management.

In general she concluded that she wants to upgrade her qualifications throughout her life and mentioned that she could imagine starting a PhD program at the age of 35. Gabi was very concrete and confident regarding her own value on the labour market and stated:

I am top regarding my value on the labour market, since I am younger than 30, which is a top age. The 25-35 year olds are ideal and quickly get a job. I have experience, but that is a job experience that is affordable. If someone works more than 10 years in a company, a company has to pay quite a high salary. And I am still affordable and have a good education.

If our graduates felt like they cannot apply or accumulate more knowledge and skills they started to think about a new employer. Lisa works within marketing and found her career match at her first job, however she recently was overloaded with work that according to her did not suit her work portfolio. She claimed that she felt over-qualified for the new tasks and is therefore thinking about changing the company, since she felt her learning capabilities were not moving forward. Bettina already changed employers as her first job was neither her perfect career match, nor her perfect employer match. However, her first job taught her what she actually wants to become and she used this knowledge while searching for her second job.

A further trend of the generation of recent graduates is that they are linked to individualism and everybody should look for things that are beneficial just for them. A good example which showed individualism is Ronald who argued that when he would start his own company he would take his contacts with him and in this way not think about what this would do for his current boss or colleagues. Recent graduates expect that they can do everything by themselves like finding a job and building a career.

To sum up, we see two important discourses under our recent graduates regarding their generation: individuals can reach everything they want and they are in control of their own career success. This leads to awareness of their human capital, high expectations, individualism and a huge self-confidence. After the generation discourses shaped by the society, we present the discourses which emerged due to the crisis in the next section.

Crushing realities

We saw that the participants' understanding of career was influenced by their actual experiences at work. The crisis caused a new understanding of career. This section presents discourses regarding the crushing realities our recent graduates experienced.

When it comes to the stories which are told by the participants we saw that they mention discourses, such as a long search for a job, layoffs, fewer hours, salary decrease and less training as on how people may be affected. Gabi gave the example of her boyfriend as an example of how somebody could be affected, she said:

My boyfriend had to work fewer hours for some periods. They also cut the budget for training and they fired people, however my boyfriend not. Another friend works in the wood industry and they fired people and were not allowed to do business trips.

Our recent graduates showed a significant awareness of the value of their human capital. However, the value of their human capital decreased by the crisis, since suddenly more people were competing for less jobs. As a result people tended to invest more so than ever in human capital, college education, second degrees etc. Eva said that she heard "a lot about academic inflation, that your education is now more flat, so that people who are more qualified, will get less qualified job." Margriet mentioned that some of her friends were affected and that they could not find any jobs, instead they would do a second master program, since then they would at least get money from the government. Gabi agreed and was the first of our participants with a second master degree and with Anita another participant is soon following. This is related to what has been said at Zeit Online (2011), which claims that people invest in their human capital by completing greater tertiary qualifications when they are not able to find a job. However, the more people who have substantial tertiary qualifications the less value this has. Our participants were clearly aware of their education and that this is an investment in their own human capital. However, to some extent they expected this investment to create more value than it actually did in the aftermaths of the crisis.

In relation to this, we noticed that within surrounding discourse recent graduates experienced the need for experience, rather than the need for education. This goes against the discourses from generational contexts which say that you can reach everything with a university degree. The job market became very competitive and experience became more important than

education, again this caused a decrease in value of their human capital. This experience is captured in an answer from Ronald who said:

As many people lost their job, there are a lot of people available with experience and I think companies would prefer to take them before a new kid that has no experience. Again I was lucky I got my first job and got the experience there that was needed to get my current job. If I would not have had my first job, I think I would not have got my current job then they probably would have taken somebody else with experience.

Despite not being affected of it, Ronald assumed that the problem of recent graduates was their lack of experience. This problem can be linked to the discourses in the aftermath of the crisis, where more people competed for fewer vacant positions and the recent graduates also had to compete with established employees. This competitiveness is also mentioned by some of our participants as an effect of the crisis. Vaidas, who worked in a bar as a result of not being able to find a job in his profession, said: “Nobody wanted ‘green’ [fresh graduate, without experience] students. So I had to work with something else, not by my profession”. This shows that many of our participants experienced that the reason for why people could not find a proper job, was because new graduates did not have the experience which was wanted at that time, in other words they had not the right human capital. As a result we recognised the trend that graduates tried to start networking with companies already before graduation and gained experience through internships. This was a way for Anita, Christoph, Gabi and Lisa to find a permanent job directly after graduation, without applying for other vacant positions if there were some.

Even though they believe they can do everything themselves, we saw from the answers that there is a discourse that close relationships are important to the individual and also that they need others to enhance themselves. A good example is the need of private contacts when finding a job. Besides that we found that the most important discourse and experiences came from close relationships, which shows that individuals are interested and care about others. We noticed that several of them did not find their first job through a traditional job search process, but used their personal relationships, networks or internships as ways for a first job. As the job market was more competitive, social networks became more important in finding a job, especially for those without any prior work experience. Complementary or voluntary internships throughout a college program are therefore valuable possibilities to determine relevant occupational areas and to get started in a company. Gabi argued that she never really searched for a job on the normal

job market, since she did an internship at her current employer in the last year of her studies. Even though she applied for this internship, she thinks that she does not know what real job searching looks. Doris, Martin and Margriet gained employment through personal contacts, like Martin due to the boyfriend of his sister. However, all three of them tried to avoid going this way and started to search for a job on the regular job market, but when not succeeding, they accepted the job through the contact. Margriet pointed out “I got that job through a friend of my dad, but I really hated the job and was doing job applications all the time”.

Overall, we see tensions between discourses recent graduates hear from the generational context and the ones they hear from economic context. Therefore, we discuss these tensions in the next section.

Clash between expectations and reality

After presenting the discourses of our two contexts in the sections above, we elaborate how these discourses clashed and which struggles and tensions this created. First we present the clash which was outlined by our participants. Second, we argue that even if they claim they are not affected by crisis, to some extent they still are affected by the discourses. Furthermore, we elaborate the interplay between salary, job security and the balance between private and professional life which was caused by the tensions of the two contexts.

Our participants outlined the tension between the discourses of the two contexts. As an example, Doris stated the following:

My self-confidence crashed when I was searching for a job. I was probably too enthusiastic after my studies and I think the university was giving us wrong signals. They gave us the feeling that it was the best programme and that we will be really needed. Yes my self-confidence was really affected during this time. I mean 6 months of job search was hard, I knew I didn't want to do everything. After my studies the job should be relevant to it and also challenging. Well then it became an even bigger challenge, but if there would have been more job offers it would have been better.

Doris regards to the discourse which was elaborated in the generation part. She thinks that she had a too high self-confidence directly after her graduation and claims that this was actually the university's fault. However, the discourses of the crisis gave her a different view and created a tension. We could see the discourses of the generation as the reason why Doris did not want to take every kind of job and that despite her awareness of the lack of vacant positions in the job

market. High self-confidence may create unrealisable ambitions which enhanced higher struggles between two contexts. After graduation individuals expected to directly get good jobs, because this is said in the discourses of the generation context. They believed that their ambitions are achievable and they would not settle for less. For example Ronald mentioned that: “I do want to get higher and I believe I will get higher, in a couple of years I should earn at least the half more of what I am earning now”. These high expectations and ambitions may be the reason why several of our graduates claimed that they got under qualified jobs after graduation.

Since the ambitions and expectations of recent graduates are already high before graduation, one may find oneself ending up somewhere they did not expect. If their understanding told them that they can get any job they want after graduation, as in the case of Vaidas, it was of course rather disappointing when they could not get the job they had in mind. This may result in recent graduates seeing this job as under qualified as in comparison to the job they actually wanted, however this other job may not be under their qualifications at all. In relation to this, it can be argued that recent graduates may be too “picky” when it comes to finding a job and this may result in not finding a job at all. This in its turn can cause the idea that it is hard to find a job, but in reality they are looking too narrow as they are too specific in what they want within their career. Doris, who was searching for a job for several months therefore stated: “I was so naive to think that it will be easy to get a job after graduation. I thought I will finish my studies with a good thesis and then easily get a job”. Some recent graduates mentioned that they actually did not look outside their study direction when it comes to finding a job, therefore they struggle to find a job. Here we can see a tension between the discourses of the two contexts. The generation discourse says that they can find any job after their studies, however the crisis discourse shows different reality.

There were some participants who claimed that they were not affected by the crisis itself, however, we noticed in their stories that they were all affected by the discourses of the crisis. Moreover, we saw that there was a tension between the crisis discourse and the generation discourse. As an example, Christoph said that he was not affected at all. He found his first and current job due to an internship, which led to a permanent contract. When asked if his company was affected by the crisis Christoph agreed and stated:

No our company did extremely well. It was financially very good equipped. We were actually profiteer. Since the oil price decreased we felt that and since we were financially so good equipped we went very good through the crisis and could take advantage of the Crisis. We even expended in our

plant since it was much cheaper to buy machines during this time. So we are very well prepared for the coming years.

As a follow up question we asked if the crisis was actually an advantage for him and his company and Christoph replied with a sarcastically undertone:

Well the revenue decreased quite a lot and the whole industry had minus 30%. If I would be mean I would say it would have been good for our company if the crisis would have taken one year longer, since some competitors had really problems and might have gone from the market. Then we would have more revenues now!

This sarcastic statement can be interpreted in several ways. If we would think away the sarcasm we could classify him as a person who shows a rather individualistic attribute, which is linked to Generation Me discourses. We are aware that this statement is provoking, but on the other hand it could also mean that Christoph really cares about his company or that he just wanted to show us that he and his company are more successful than others. We see a clash between crisis context and generation context within his answer. This shows that our participant is aware of the discourses of these two contexts and that they influence his understanding.

Another interesting tension dictated by the two discourses is between salary and job security. Christoph is one of the few people that we could characterise as someone, who found his perfect career - and employer match at their first job according to Neal's (1999) job search model. Christoph, as a marketing executive at a smaller company, said that he sees himself as the typical employee of his company, which he described as a "down to earth kind of guy, compared with our competitors very honest and someone who works hard for the company." Despite job offers from other companies, which would have doubled his monthly wage, he decided to stay loyal to his company and showed no plans at all to change the employer. He told us that he received job offers via the social network Xing and when we asked him if he considered these he answered: "Yes once! They asked me for my salary wishes. I told them the double salary from right now and they said yes. But it didn't take it." After being asked why he did not take the job he stated:

Because I felt like it was only a temporary job for 2 or 3 years, where I would have worked in Romania and other Eastern European countries. To build up the market, what I felt was impossible. At the moment I feel very confident at my job and that the fluctuation in my company is extremely small, because there is an extremely good climate in the company.

Christoph struggled between having a permanent contract and thereby job security or having a significant increase in salary. In the end he chose security over money, which indicates that there is an unknown factor that worries Christoph to make this decision.

A further tension is between salary and the balance between private and professional life. Gerd, who also found his perfect career- and employer match at the first job, had similar experiences, when he got job offers via Xing that would have increased his salary explicitly, but also his working hours. However, since he enjoys working for his current employer, he refused the offer. The decisions of Gerd and also Christoph can be interpreted in several ways. Both of them have found their perfect employer match and are very happy with their work. Both of them claimed that they were not personally affected by the crisis, however both of them stated that their offered jobs probably would not have been as secure as their current job and that it would have meant a decrease in the quality of their work-life balance for them. We therefore assume that salary, alone is not enough to change jobs for early career graduates. Here we can see the tension between the generation discourses and crisis discourses. Even though the generation discourses claim that recent graduates should have high salary, we see that our graduates actually value job security and a well-balanced private and professional life. We therefore also assume that Christoph is actually not as cool as he claims to be, after he saw how people in his industry lost their job due to crisis.

To sum up, the time they were born and the discourses around them seems to make our graduates believe career is something which is necessary and important within their life – the higher, the better. The discourses around them gave the impression they could “reach the sky”. However, we see from their actual experiences that this is not the case. Therefore, they are struggling between these two discourses. We also argue that because the crisis is a recent happening, the socialisation of career did not catch up with reality yet. In the next chapter we will discuss our main findings of this study: that there is a difference between the predominant understanding shaped by the society regarding career and its development and the understanding shaped by the actual experiences of our graduates.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

In this chapter we elaborate the main findings of our study in two main parts. First we discuss our findings regarding the understanding of career and second we discuss how the tensions between the discourses of generation and economic influenced the understandings of our recent graduates.

One of our main tasks within this study was to explore how recent graduates understand career in the aftermath of the crisis. We noticed that there was a struggle when individuals tried to explain their conceptualization of career. They were caught inbetween two different understandings, one shaped by society and one gained through their actual experiences. We saw that our participants tapped into career by the discourses they heard when growing up. These discourses conceptualize career in a rather static and simple way. When we were asking to describe career, our participants tended to connect career rather to professional life with the possibility of advancements up the hierarchy. They envisioned career success as a leading position in prestigious international companies. Moreover, they tended to describe career development as a quick steady climb up the ladder and that just individuals are responsible for their own careers. However, when they started to talk about their personal careers, their image of career as static and simple started to fall apart. This struggle can be explained by comparisons and tensions in their stories about career and its development.

Firstly, when participants were conceptualizing career, their predominant view was directed to professional life. However, when they were talking about their career, they mentioned that from career they expect responsibility and happiness, which is related not only to professional life, but private life too. Their stories about career started to look like a life trajectories plan. This is in line with the two discourses from the work of scholars, where first career conceptualization is simple and static, and the one recently emerged is broader and socially constructed. It seems like the predominant view of career as a simple concept still dominates in our society. The reason for this could be that in the time in which this generation grew up the more recent view of career as a broader concept just started to emerge. Therefore our participants were socialized into the discourses about the predominant concept which they absorbed from their environment. In other words, as it was discussed by Hartung et al. (2009), Wright and Perrone (2008), Nota et al. (2007) and other scholars, individuals are socialised by

the culture and society they grew up in and are influenced by family, friends and education institutions. Indeed, Twenge et al. (2010) discuss that these influential factors are the strongest during individuals' childhood and adolescence. Therefore, the world view of individuals is strongly influenced by discourses they hear from the environment they were growing up. However, when individuals start to experience their personal career and try to explain their own career, these discourses usually make them struggle and they start to argue against them. This especially became clear when our participants discussed the career development concept as this concept is more practical.

From the stories of our participants we understood that the ideal career development image – envisioned as a ladder - strongly influences individuals' minds. However, in many of these stories this image is used just as a tool. When our participants were trying to explain ideal career development, their first answer was usually signalled towards steady moves upwards or steady linear promotions. However, their following answers led to a multidirectional and multi-levelled career development concept. From their answers we saw that the participants themselves are still influenced by this ladder image discourse shaped by society, however they also talk about factors that are actually arguing against this image. A good example is Kristofer, whose story about career development was discussed in the previous chapter. This participant expressed his opinion that we are socialised in ladder as career development image discourse, however he goes against this image and tells that there are a lot of contexts influencing this image. Interesting to note was that if they could not achieve this image themselves, they tried to find excuses. It seemed like they felt they have to justify themselves for that.

The commonality in career development of our participants was that the first few years of a career should include quick and steady move upwards, but then the ladder image starts to blurry and takes many different directions. Many argued that these directions and the time to move to another direction are determined by individuals. However, even here we saw some struggles as participants had difficulties to decide what influences career development more – they themselves or various contexts. This can also be explained with the fact, that from their childhood they heard that they are the ones responsible for their career. However, with some experience they noticed that contexts can be as strong as they are or even stronger. Coming back to the works of scholars, we can see that the static and rather simple discourse as well as the multidimensional and individually shaped discourse have influence on career development. On

the one hand, in society there still exists a simple linear career image which is explained as one way moving up in the hierarchy. On the other hand, individuals see career as something that can take many directions and they are the ones responsible for their own career development. These discourses result in struggles, since individuals first have to deny the ladder career development image and second, they feel caught in between individual agency foreground and contexts centred view.

In sum, our findings show significant struggles between individuals' understanding shaped by the society and the understanding they get through working experiences. This difference can bring a lot of drawbacks for participants. One of the main drawbacks is that the struggle between understandings can bring confusion and devastation. The static view of career and career development brings discourse about particular views of career success and people may get depressed if they do not reach that particular career success. As an example Sven told a story how one employee from his company got depressed, because the person was attempting to climb the corporate ladder, achieve a more satisfying, challenging occupations. It appears this employee tried to fit to the understanding with which he was raised. However, this understanding destroyed his self-confidence and brought depression, which influenced his life. Moreover, Sandra's story about a colleague, who was pushed by the people around her that she has to climb the ladder and reach a particular position despite her lack of adequate skills and education, showed, the strong impact the society has on individuals. This influence, if it is experienced as negative, can destroy individuals' confidence, self-esteem and happiness in life.

Our second finding is that individuals also struggle between the tensions of the two career context discourses: generation and economic. We argue that the generation context and the economic context in form of the crisis clash against each other. We see these two contexts as reasons why our graduates struggle between these tensions and this influences their career understanding. The generation context shaped their understanding how an ideal career should look like, while the crisis and its aftermath influenced their experiences at the labour market, which as a result shaped their understanding of their actual career. Especially those of our participants who got off their perfect career track, shaped by the society, due to the crisis started to struggle between the tensions of the discourses. Vaidas envisions these struggles best, since he moved from Lithuania to Norway to work as a waiter, despite his university degree in mechanical engineering. His high expectations after graduation clashed with crushing realities

and his ideal career was not achievable from the very beginning. On the other side we have Christoph, who actually saw himself as a winner of the crisis and sarcastically mentioned that he wanted to last the crisis even longer.

It seemed like that our graduates gained a lot of self-confidence and high expectations throughout their studies. In general it seemed that they were very confident of their accumulated human capital value. However, we saw struggles since those who competed against a lot of well qualified and experienced people in the aftermath of the crisis realised that their human capital was actually devalued.

We saw the trend to lifelong learning among our graduates. Even those who claimed not having been directly affected by the crisis have to some extent reflected their high expectations and are aware that besides work experience also further qualifications in form of courses or additional university studies are prerequisites to further climb up the imaginary career ladder. Several of our graduates have already or will soon finish their second master degree and all of them agree that they will take further investments into their human capital. They saw the crisis and its aftermath as confirmation for this trend and we therefore see the crisis as stimulating factor for further investment into one's own human capital.

All these stories showed us that recent graduates struggle between two understandings of career. Moreover, the crisis as well as the generation have to be considered as contexts that influenced and shaped the understanding of our recent graduates.

Our suggestion for schools and universities, who are in competition for the best brains, is that they should not "brainwash" their graduates with unachievable expectations. Instead they should focus more on fostering critical thinking and bringing a critical discourse regarding career. Thereby they keep in mind all the factors that contribute to the happiness of an individual. We saw that universities and schools contribute to wrong expectations, because as we saw and scholars argue that individuals are mostly influenced by discourses which comes from their close environment in their childhood and adolescence.

Moreover, recent graduates should also be critical and reflect about what they actually want to achieve. The image of a leading position in an international company as result of an ideal career development might be too ambitious and is only achievable for the fewest. From their own stories we saw drawbacks of this ideal image. Critical thinking and reflection would encourage a more critical conversation with the discourses shaped by the society.

Furthermore, practitioners, together with scholars, should more carefully encounter contexts as playing an important role within career and career development concepts. We see struggles in our participants when they are trying to think that career is in their hands, but notice that it is not true. Practitioners tend to outline self-confidence and high ambitions which give individuals the feeling that they can reach everything. Scholars also tend to discuss career by giving responsibility to individuals' hands.

Conclusion

By exploring how our recent graduates understand and experience career in the aftermath of the crisis we found out that there is a struggle between two understandings: a predominant understanding shaped by the society they grew up and the understanding they got through their own experiences. Our second finding is that discourses surrounding two contexts – generation and economic, have influenced the understanding of our participants. In relation to this we argue that the clash between discourses of those two contexts is a reason for the struggle between both understandings.

We noticed that the predominant understanding that recent graduates have about career is rather static and simple. This is caused by various discourses within our society claiming that career is something which one owns, controls and is related rather to one's professional life. This is related to the traditional view of the career concept. However when going deeper into the interviews and when talking about the actual ideas and experiences of our participants, many showed an understanding which is more dynamic, complex and relates career to other contexts within one's individual and private life. We argue that this understanding is closely related to the alternative view of the career concept and shaped by their actual experiences. Their socialized understanding is more based upon their general idea of career while the other understanding is based upon their own actual career. The image of a manager in a leading position in a prestigious international company as ideal end of a successful career development envisions the great expectations that recent graduates created during the time they were brought up, while their actual career experiences are the determined by crushing realities caused by the crisis.

The crisis and its discourses influenced the experience of recent graduates and in return this experience influenced their predominant understanding of career. The great expectations created due to their socialized understanding where crushed by reality and caused them to create

this new understanding. The clash between the generation context and the crisis context is a reason for why recent graduates are in a struggle between understandings, where one understanding represents their socialized ideal career and the other their actual ideal career. We believe that recent graduates do not fully realize the effect of the crisis yet and therefore need some time to get out of the struggle between the two understandings. We therefore assume that they eventually will completely shift from their predominant understanding towards their new understanding of the career concept if we assume that the aftermath of the crisis continues to last.

Limitations

We acknowledge that we have gained relevant and interesting information for our study in our interviews. However with more resources, especially regarding the time period of this study, we feel like we could have taken a further step in this study. But since this study was done in a period of approximately three months, we can recommend to other researchers to actually explore these further steps.

Our study only included recent university graduates as participants. Therefore, we cannot assume that this study is valid for the whole peer group of Generation Me.

Future studies

As we feel that the understanding of recent graduates is still changing because of the experience of the financial crisis, we believe that it would be interesting to do a similar or a follow up study in a couple of years, to explore whether their second understanding actually crushed their initial understanding shaped by the society. Within such a follow up study researchers might also explore changes within the characteristics of the Generation Me.

In relation to the generation context, we wonder if there are differences within the understanding and experience of career between different generations. This study only focused on one generation, Generation Me, and it could be that other generations have different understandings and experiences of what career actually is. Since this study only focused on two contexts, which may influence understanding and experience, it could be a recommendation to also look deeper within other contexts. One may think about contexts such as culture or field of studies.

A further research area could be a comparative study between graduates who felt affected by the crisis and graduates who were not.

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Appendix A – Interview guideline

Part 1: History of the interviewee

Can you tell me about your last 3-5 years?

Talk about hobbies, interests...

What did you study and why?

Tell me about the occupation of your parents! (How was their working life? Did they support you with your choice of study?)

Part 2: Career

a. Job hunting

How did you experience to look for work? // length of search, how did they find it...

Was it easy to find a job?

b. Current job

How did you get the job?

What are you doing there?

Is it relevant to your studies?

What does your working contract look like?

Do you feel challenged?

Do you feel over/under/qualified for the job?

Do you feel motivated?

How many hours do you work per week?

How do you explain your career to other people?

Do you check job ads?

How is your work life balance?

Can you tell me about your job highlight from last week/month...

c. Career as a concept

Describe what you think is the ideal career?

Do you see your career as a ladder?

You have changed your job x times... why?/ You have worked for one company after graduation, could you image to stay there for ten more years?

What should a company offer you to get you as new employee?

Would you move to a new city or area for a new job? What are important factors considering a new location?

Part 3: Crisis

Would it have been easier for you graduating five years earlier?

How did you experience the Financial Crisis?

Were you affected?

Where have you heard about the crisis?

Was your company affected?

Were your friends or family affected?

Keeping the Crisis in mind, would you study the same subject again/would your career have been different?

Where do you see yourself in five years?

Appendix B – Overview of participants

Number	Name	Age	Occupation	Sample
1	Vaidas	24	Quality Engineer	Vilnius Gediminas Technical
2	Justina	25	Senior Administrator	Snowball
3	Martin	27	Sales Engineer	University of Applied Sciences
4	Christoph	27	Marketing Executive	University of Applied Sciences
5	Anita	29	Marketing & Sales Executive	University of Applied Sciences
6	Bettina	26	Project Manager	Snowball
7	Lisa	25	Marketing	University of Applied Sciences
8	Doris	25	Product Manager	University of Applied Sciences
9	Gabi	26	Marketing Executive	University of Applied Sciences
10	Gerd	25	Business Analyst	Snowball
11	Andreas	24	Engineer	Snowball
12	Margriet	28	Account manager	University of Groningen
13	Ronald	27	Logistic manager	University of Groningen
14	Marie	25	Freelance journalist	Snowball
15	Sven	29	Project manager	Jonkoping University
16	Carla	23	In-house consultant	Jonkoping University
17	Eva	24	Accountant	Jonkoping University
18	Kristofer	29	Self employed	Jonkoping University
19	Paul	24	Entrepreneur	Vilnius Gediminas Technical
20	Sandra	25	Administrator	Snowball