International Career Habitus – Thick Descriptions and Theoretical Reflections

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1. <u>Introduction</u>

Agency and structure, their mutual relationship as well as their relative importance for explaining individual behaviour are a core theme in theorising about organisations and careers. In organisation theory, the whole continuum of possible viewpoints can be found. A number of approaches, mainly coming from a psychological angle, emphasise intra-personal processes and factors, thus favouring the agency point of view. They call attention to factors such as needs and motives, values, attitudes or more composite concepts such as character or personality. Other concepts underline the importance of contextual factors for behaviour of and in organisations. These include organisational structure, culture or the relevant environment, thus paying attention to the structure argument (for an overview see, e.g., Staehle, 1999: 151 ff.). Of course, many of the approaches in one way or other recognise the importance of both aspects. However, only few concepts avoid a theoretical preference for one side or the other. Examples include the very general behavioural formula of Lewin (Lewin, 1936: 12) or the elaborated circular relationships within structuration theory (Giddens, 1984).

In career theory, the problem of agency and structure is central, too. Located at the „intersection of societal history and individual biography" (Grandjean, 1981: 1057), careers link micro- and macro-frames of references (Schein, 1978) which traditionally have been regarded as indissoluble (Hughes, 1937; Barley, 1989; Gunz, 1989). Both structure and agency have an established place in theorising about careers. In empirical research, however, there is a clear dominance of studies using theoretical frameworks that implicitly or explicitly favour an agency perspective. Less frequent, studies use a structure perspective. Two recent examples include Lichtenstein and Alexander (2000) studying promotion opportunities in public sector organisations using relational demography theory or Bielby and Bielby (1999) analysing the importance of structural characteristics of one's home organisation for career opportunities.

This paper takes into account the structure as well as the agency aspect. It conceptualises both the structural context of careers and the actors' strategies in line with Pierre Boudieu's theory of capital, habitus and field (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). In other words: The paper focuses on the interplay between career fields and career habitus.

Career fields are the social context within which individual members of the work force make their moves. We suggest four different fields of careers (Mayrhofer et al., 2000) resulting from an interplay between two dimensions, tightness of coupling (Orton & Weick, 1990a; Weick, 1969, 1976) and stability of configuration (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967) between actors: Company world, free floating professionalism, self employment, and chronic flexibility. Career habitus is understood as a frame of thinking, perceiving and acting within career fields. It is both a product of a social field's structure (*opus operatum*) and a main force of (re-) structuring these fields (*modus operandi*) (Bourdieu, 1992: 281). Career field and career habitus are linked in a circular relationship (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer & Meyer, 2003). Their career habitus and the way in which it shapes the perceptions, motivation, and actions disposes the players towards recognising and playing the rules of the career field in the first place. At the international level, international careers cut across these 'national' career fields requiring and producing a specific career habitus ({Mayrhofer, 2004 #6371}).

Using qualitative data from interviews with business school graduates from three age cohorts belonging to different career fields and comparing them with a group of highly mobile

individuals pursuing an international career, this paper presents preliminary and exploratory results concerning two main questions:

- How do individuals, relating to habitus-based perceptions in different national and international career fields, construct their subjective careers and career strategies and to which factors do they attribute their success or failure in different career fields?

- Which forms of career capital – economic, social, and cultural – are perceived as crucial for career success in different national and international career fields?

The first question focuses more on career habitus, the second more on career fields. Overall, the paper aims at contributing to more systematic insight into the structures of national and international career habitus and the rules of these career fields via 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of ideal types of career habitus and career fields. Aspects such as the rules and structures shaping agency within career fields, the formation of actors' habitus through these structures and, vice versa, the contribution of strategies and actions to the development of the structures of the fields are addressed.

2. Theoretical framework: Career field and habitus perspective

Most career scholars would agree that theoretical career frameworks are especially fruitful if they, among others, allow for multi-level analysis, offer a reflexive relationship between action and structure, go beyond the organisation as main point of reference, avoid the selective bias or one-sided choice of objective vs. subjective career or micro vs. macro level and include neglected areas like power distribution, social inequalities etc. The work of the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu provides a basis for taking into account these points. It avoids a choice between objective or subjective careers and a macro or micro perspective and strengthens or re-introduces themes like multi-level analysis, simultaneous action-structure view, combining 'objective' and 'subjective' perspectives, power distribution, social hierarchy and thus social inequalities into career research. Field, habitus and capital are major elements of this concept that can be used and applied to the area of career (for a more detailed view see Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer & Meyer, 2003).

2.1. Career fields

For Bourdieu a social field is a patterned set of practices which suggests competent action in conformity with rules and roles as well as a playground or battlefield in which actors, endowed with a certain field-relevant capital, try to advance their position. As such, they constitute a network of positions, a playground where actors try to follow individual strategies. Playing according to the rules of the game as defined by the specific set of capital most valuable for holding power within the field contributes to the reproduction of the fields (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986).

Career fields are the social context within which individual members of the work force make their moves. They are equipped with a specific portfolio of field-relevant capital and try to maintain or improve their place in the given and unfolding network of work related positions. This is done through a patterned set of practices which are enabled and constrained by the rules of the field and, in turn, contribute to the shaping of these rules. Career fields have a dynamic quality. This reflects the focal relationship between work and time (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989). Careers themselves are not a field, but unfold within a field and are the sequence of positions that is the result of work related efforts.

Mayrhofer et al. (2000) suggest four different fields of careers resulting from an interplay of two dimensions: coupling and configuration between actors (see Figure 2).
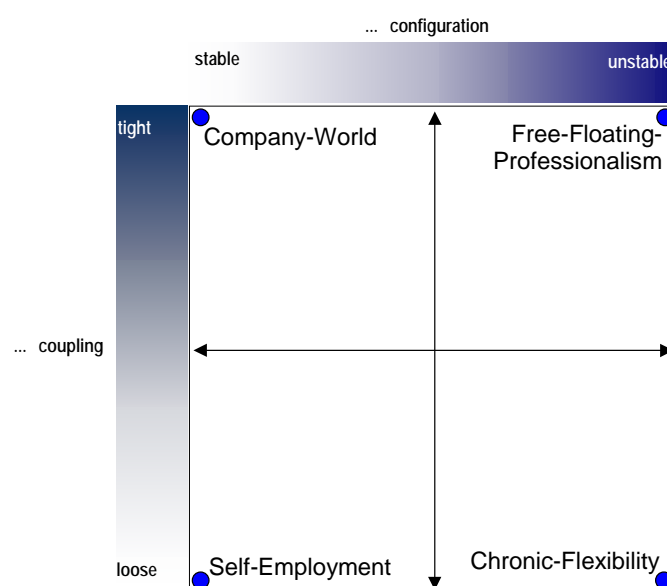

Figure 1: Fields of career

The *coupling dimension* focuses on the closeness of relationships and the degree of mutual influence between the focal actor and the other actor(s) in the field (e.g. Orton & Weick, 1990b; Staehle, 1991; Weick, 1976). Tight coupling means that the actors are closely intertwined in their decisions. On the other hand, loose coupling stands for a type of relationship where the decisions of one actor have very little consequences for the decisions of the other. Thus, in a tightly coupled relationship the decisions of one partner reduce the other's degrees of freedom much more than in a loosely coupled relationship.

The *configuration dimension* focuses on changes over time in the configuration of relationships between the focal actor and other relevant actors. A stable configuration implies that neither the social environment nor the tasks of the focal actor change rapidly and frequently. Conversely, an unstable configuration means that there is a frequent change in the configuration of actors and/or work-related tasks. This dimension refers rather to the rate of change in the configuration than to the number of actors relevant for the focal actor. Combining these two dimensions into a matrix results in a simple typology with four ideal types of careers that can be labeled as follows (see Mayrhofer et al., 2000):

- *Company World (CW)* stands for the field of the traditional organisational career. It refers to the structure of jobs in an organisation where there are few points of entry other than at the bottom. It is defined in terms of the two dimensions by tight coupling and a stable configuration between an individual actor and other actors (in most cases represented by an employing company).

- *Free-Floating Professionalism (FFP)* can be defined as the field of specialists. Individuals work closely with one customer, but only for a limited time, which results in tight coupling but an unstable configuration.

- *Self Employment (SE)* is the field of career with individuals working outside organisations. Typically, these are either self-employed professionals or entrepreneurs, who work in a rather stable and limited field of expertise. This sort of occupation typically results in comparatively loose coupling between actors, but a stable configuration.

- *Chronic Flexibility (CF)* may appear quite similar to Free-Floating Professionalism, since those careers are also characterised by frequent job changes. The fundamental difference lies in the disappearance of the boundaries of a domain of expertise. This means that changing from one job to another may imply not only a change from one organisation to another, but also from one industry to another, from being employed to self-employment, and so on. These loosely coupled and unstable relations are the key definition of that field of career.

2.2. Career habitus

For Bourdieu, habitus is an ensemble of schemata of perception, thinking, feeling, evaluating, speaking, and acting that preformates all the expressive, verbal, and practical manifestations and utterances of an actor (Krais, 1985). It definitely has a corporal dimension, being the embodied history, the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product (Bourdieu, 1990b). Through habitus, regular action patterns over time which are neither the product of external structures nor of mere subjective intention can be explained. The habitus is continually adjusted to the current context. Although the primary socialisation is of great importance, the development of habitus cannot be restricted to that period. Habitus is constantly reinforced or modified by further experience, i.e. by positive and negative sanctions during a whole life. Habitus and field are linked in a circular relationship. Involvement in a field shapes the habitus which, in turn, shapes the actions that reproduce the field (Crossley, 2001). In order to understand and explain the action of players in the field, one needs information about their dispositions and competence – their habitus – and about the state of play in the game as well as the players' individual location in the field. The actors' logic is shaped both by their habitus and by the requirements and logic of the game as it unfolds.

While the general habitus can be regarded as a durable but evolving system of dispositions potentially actualised, the career habitus is more confined. Career habitus is a habitus which 'fits' to a particular career field. It is specifically related to a career field and may be defined by the dispositions which tend to be actualised 'automatically' within this field. A particular career habitus ensures that an actor acts, perceives and thinks according to the rules of the field, and his movements within the field of career appear as "natural". He acts „intentionally without intention" (Bourdieu, 1990a: 12; Bourdieu, 1987). The idea of progression and a desire for growth is central in career habitus. This dynamic quality may take different forms depending on the field's rules: climbing the hierarchical ladder, increasing reputation or level of expertise etc.

2.3. Career capital

Bourdieu differentiates between three basic types of capital: economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

- Economic capital appears, above all, in the form of general, anonymous, all-purpose convertible money from one generation to the next. It can be more easily and efficiently

converted into cultural, social and symbolic capital than vice versa (Postone, LiPuma & Calhoun, 1993).

- Social capital involves relationships of mutual recognition and acquaintance, resources based upon social connections and group or class membership.

- Cultural or informational capital appears in three forms: (1) incorporated, i.e. durable dispositions of habitus, (2) objectivised through cultural products like books, paintings, machines etc. and (3) institutionalised through academic titles and degrees, which are relatively independent of the actually incorporated cultural capital.

As a fourth type of capital, symbolic capital is closely related to the respective fields. The rules of a particular social fields specify which combination of the basic forms of capital will be authorised as symbolic capital, thus becoming socially recognised as legitimate.

Career capital is the particular sort of capital valued within the fields of career. Every individual within a specific career field has got a unique portfolio of capitals. The genetic disposition when entering life, the social context one is born into and the interplay between these two provide a starting point for the development of capitals in general. Through personal, educational and professional development processes, an increasing portfolio of career field relevant career capitals evolve. From a different theoretical perspective, "knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom" have been identified as components of career capital linking the individual and the collective level (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999).

Career capital has two sides. Looking at it from the career field, it is symbolic capital recognised by other actors and the rules of the field as legitimate, valid and useful. From the outside perspective of the economic system the process of recognition reflects the this system's assumption about the usefulness of career capital in economic terms. The following figure illustrates this (see Figure 2).
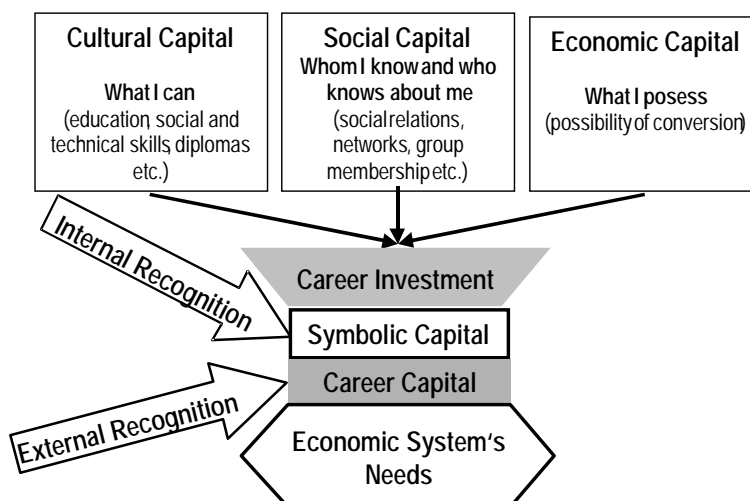

Figure 2: The making of career capital

3. <u>Method and sample</u>

Data for this study were obtained from the Vienna Career Panel Project (ViCAPP) following the career patterns of business school graduates and analysing influencing factors 'real time' from 2000 on (see www.vicapp.at). ViCAPP consists of three cohorts of business school graduates of a large Austrian university as well as from a well-known Austrian polytechnic: Early, mid and late career. This corresponds to the graduation years 2000, 1990 and 1970.

For the graduates in all cohorts, extensive questionnaire data is available. It includes, among others, income and number of subordinates as frequently used objective success measures, a number of person related variables, e.g., social background, personality structure, and various elements of organisation related opportunity structure variables, e.g., size of organisation, membership in crucial decision making bodies, sectoral characteristics, and position in the organisational life cycle.

In addition, selected members of the three cohorts have been interviewed using a semi-structured form of interview. The interviews lasted between one and 3 hours and covered various aspects of personal background, career history and current career, work and life situation. The national data used in this paper comes from the transcriptions of 20 interviews with business school graduates.

At the international level, similar data from highly mobile individuals (n=9) pursuing an international career and coming from the chronic flexibility field are analysed. The individuals in this group – 4 males and 5 females – with an age range between 30 and 38 on average have 11.5 years of professional experience, are coming – with one exception (Australia) from seven different Western European countries. All of them had several employers (median/modus = 5) and an average time of employment per employer of 1.8 years. The interviews were either conducted in German or in English. The following table gives more detailed information on the interviewees (see Figure 3).

	Late career (1970)	Mid career (1990)	Early career (2000)	Total
Gender – female/male	2/3	9/7	4/4	15/14
Company world (f/m)	1/1	1/1	2/2	4/4
Free floating professionalism (f/m)	0	1/0	1/0	2/0
Self employment (f/m)	1/1	1/2	1/0	3/3
Chronic flexibility – national (f/m)	0/1	1/0	0/2	1/3
Chronic flexibility – international (f/m)	--	5/4	--	5/4

Figure 3: Sample description

In analysing the interview data, several methods were used. Primarily, qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 1990) and elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA, Wodak & Meyer, 2001) were applied. Results presented in this paper are based on qualitative content analysis using the following categories: social comparisons, metaphors, causal and final attributions, concepts of career and career capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic).The data was processed with NVivo.

4. <u>Results</u>

This section deals with the two major questions relating to career habitus and career fields. The four career fields are used to structure the results. In the chronic flexibility field the results for the national and the international sample will be discussed separately.

4.1. Careers, career strategies and career success

When looking at the interview data focusing on the way individuals construct their subjective careers and career strategies and explain their success or failure in different career fields, the following picture emerges.

4.1.1. National sample

Company world

Conceptualisation of careers. In the company world career field, individuals have a clear point of reference: the traditional normal career in Western industrialised countries with money, upward mobility, getting into top positions by sacrificing other elements like leisure time as key characteristics. Given this point of reference, they construct and evaluate their own career. In doing so, individuals do not solely focus on their professional careers. Other aspects like family or leisure time play an important role in their work and life concept. Careers are linked with performance, achievements, knowledge and competencies. Correspondingly, promotions because of social networking, politicking etc. are devalued. The members of this group often come from a lower to middle socio-economic background. Because of their university education and current job, they have accomplished inter-generational upward mobility: Compared to the family of origin, they have improved in terms of social and economic status. Self-employment is not highly valued and no member of the family context is self-employed. Perceived job safety in large organisations, on the other hand, is of great importance. Characteristically for members of the early career cohort (2000 graduates) is the high job insecurity. Fear of getting or retaining a job is, unlike in the other cohorts, an important theme. Related to this, social networks and supporting relationships are highly valued by members of this cohort, self-marketing – *"One has to learn how to sell oneself."*[1] – is regarded as inevitable.

Career strategies. Individuals in the company world career field see neither themselves nor their career strategies as typical. They regard their careers – in the sense of emergent strategies – not primarily targeted on 'objective' success. In the eyes of the individuals, career success in this field is tied to political networking, sacrificing private interests and, especially for women, to 'old boys' networks'. None of these has a positive appeal to the individuals. Successful career strategies are not primarily linked with knowledge and performance: *"You become a director because you have the connections, but no idea about the real issues."* Compared to the graduates of the mid (1990) and late (1970) career cohort, the members of

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[1] As all of the interviews in the national sample were conducted in German, a direct citation does not make very much sense. Therefore, we use direct citations from this part of our material indicated by italics only rarely and in a way that captures the 'spirit' of the quote. In the international sample, most of the interviews were in English which allows a more 'generous' use of direct quotations.

the early career cohort (2000) face a tough labour market. Therefore, additional qualifications beyond the normal educational career – school, university – become increasingly important for realising career strategies. Differences between male and female graduates surface in various aspects. Most important, the obstacles during careers are perceived to be greater for women than for men. Likewise, nearly all of the females interviewed have jobs in public sector organisations whereas all men work in private sector companies.

Career success. Individuals in the company world career field see several crucial success dimensions in the career field they are in. Cultural capital, i.e., a good formal education, is of great importance. This is especially true in public sector organisations where the promotion to a certain level sometimes is linked – formally or informally – with the acquisition of certain certificates or graduation levels. Harmonic relationships to other actors in the field as well as members of one's social network such as peers, subordinates or family also contributes to the picture of success. Likewise, good collaboration with people in the work environment fits in here. In terms of the relationship between one's own contribution and the role of environmental factors for career success a certain amount of ambivalence can be observed. On the one hand, one's own contribution to achieving the current position is emphasised: *"One has to work hard to achieve something."* On the other hand, the importance of contextual factors is strongly emphasised. Luck and coincidence, being at the right place at the right time or the situation on the labour market is identified as strongly contributing to the results of one's career.

Free floating professionalism

Conceptualisation of careers. Individuals in this field describe their careers in terms of progress and development in a continuous process of 'falling and standing up again' and as a constant struggle to reach win-win situations. Although the concrete activities differ, the aspect of continuity is emphasised: Careers for individuals in this field do not have a patchwork quality. However, there is a constant drive towards proving oneself, one's social environment and one's business partners that one can perform well. In turn, this leads to self-recognition. Especially in comparison to individuals from the company world career field, some differences emerge. Defining one's own challenges and the importance of one's own performance is clearly more important. Likewise, career success is not linked to promotion, but to personal and professional development. This includes getting to know new things, proving oneself that one 'can make it': *"One has to prove oneself over and over again that one is above average."* In addition, performance is the key career success indicator and clearly differs from 'career games' in the company world: *"Careers [in organisations] are always linked to politics …. Politics are not fun."*

Career strategies. For individuals in this field, self assertion and pushing through one's ideas and visions is of great importance for the career strategies chosen: *"I have always felt mediocre, and I said to myself, no, I'm gonna prove it to myself."* This requires a significant amount of self-centeredness and the connections to some 'power nets' to get interesting jobs. Other people in this field are seen as bright and competent. Indirectly, this leads to an increase in value of the own self.

Career success. For free floating professionals, career success is largely detached from any kind of promotion comparable to the company world career field. The own initiative, setting goals for oneself, technical and social competence are crucial determinants for career success. In terms of career outcome, fun and satisfaction at work as well as achieving self-defined goals are key issues.

Self employment

Conceptualisation of careers. Compared to individuals in other career fields, classic careers do not exist in this field. More precisely, individuals in this field reconstruct their work history without using the career concept. Rather, they relate their work history to the acquired output, achievement and technical know-how. Classic career success definitions linked to organisations are completely absent. Positive feedback for technical know-how, achievement, self-realisation and increasing one's personal degrees of freedom are part of the continuous process of creating a career. In a way, individuals in this field develop a 'counter-picture' to the company world career field: Responsibility, little dependence, no pressure created by others, the lack of ability to work in teams and submit to others, the independence of status symbols that are often perceived as necessary in an organisation or the higher discretion about the type of social networks one links into are mentioned. Politicking is not brought up as a theme, social networks are different from other career fields and seen as 'clean resource'. To be sure, some negative aspects of the chosen career field are mentioned, too. Among others, the high financial pressure that is felt immediately and the tough times during the start up phase (*"There were some breakdowns, but I am still moving uphill."*) are underlined.

Career strategies. Individuals' career strategies in this field are closely related to the basic drivers for choosing self employment: the realisation of one's own interest, a vocation-like calling, the rejection of subordination and the high esteem for technical knowledge. Other people in this field are described as having similar preferences in their career strategies.

Career success. In this career field, success is not attributed to luck, coincidence or the external context. On the contrary, one's technical competencies and gifts are regarded as crucial. In contrast to free floating professionalism, social competence, team work and knowledge of human nature are secondary – being a good boss is deemed more important than integrating oneself into a team. Dimensions of success include the self-perpetuating cycle of customers coming from their own initiative because of the good image so that little marketing has to be made, the way in which one deals with the scope and quantity of the work that has to be done and the constant worry – or the lack of it – about future contracts and orders and the financial situation.

Chronic flexibility

Conceptualisation of careers. Individuals in this career field constantly monitor their own careers in comparison to other fields. Even if career does not play a major role in terms of concept, it has some importance: The issue of non-acceptance and insufficient acknowledgement by others is a constant theme. For individuals in this career field, work is an important part of their life. During their studies, all of these individuals have worked at least part-time. At work as well as during their studies they have shown good performance. While monetary motivation is not of primary importance, other issues are: Independence and freedom, especially through working alone, is a major theme. Likewise, individual and customer satisfaction play an important role in terms of personal goals.

Career strategies. The basis for career strategies in the chronic flexibility field is a broad spectrum of knowledge, complex thinking and being a generalist. In addition, hard work and high competence is essential to survive and realise one's strategies.

Career success. From the perspective of individuals in this career field, they struggle with a perceived image as 'losers' compared to people in other fields. Although 'objectively' quite

successful in terms of money earned, customer satisfaction, freedom and spare time, they suspect that peers in other career fields have a more negative image of them. In addition, sometimes a feeling of restlessness occurs. Beyond the necessary technical and social competencies to succeed in this career field, the role of circumstances is acknowledged: *"Some things also just happen."* The monetary dimension of career success is visible. However, money is not the primary measure: interesting new tasks, enjoying what one does, recognition by successful people, satisfaction of the customers, the mere survival at the beginning of the career in this field or being recommended by one's customers illustrate the great variety of possible success measures.

4.1.2. International sample

In the career field of chronic flexibility at an international level, we will follow the same structure of analysing the interview material.

Conceptualisation of careers.

Five major aspects describe crucial elements of the conceptualisations of individuals' careers in the international sample.

First, careers contain a strong developmental aspect. Individuals consciously reflect on their professional careers and deliberately try to re-create and further develop themselves – the 'project of the self'. For example, in the moment of crisis or turning-point, one respondent reported: *"In March 2001 I had a poor performance review in which I was told I was not building enough relations with my colleagues or with my clients. That was pretty severe in the world of business of consulting. ... So I took myself apart and I rebuilt myself in that period of time. ... I really wanted to take a break, focus on me, on what's important in my life. And now I know myself better."* Another respondent emphasises the developmental aspect when talking about leaving a well paid job for a 6-month development-aid project which is difficult to harmonise with other obligations: *„It would have been so easy not to go, especially now. But I want to do it, because when I come back I will probably live the same life again, live in my house, be with Jeff and probably even work for the same company again, but it will be different up here* [points to her head] *and that's why it is worth-while going."*

Second, seeking adventure is a common theme. Being spontaneous, courageous and open for those new experiences that an unknown environment contains are often mentioned. One of the respondents compares it to a film he once has watched: *I started to get really enthusiastic for languages I think when I watched films on foreign languages. The first French film I ever watched was 'Jean de Floeret'. That is a classic French film with Gerard Depardieu. It is about a guy who comes from a big city to the countryside to make money or whatever and struggles through life there. It is a great film and really got me going with my passion for going abroad and all these kinds of things."* Adventurers look to the future and not to the past and hardly regret things that they have done. They see the latter as a valuable source of experience. Being different from others is part of their self-definition: *„I have done a lot of things I think – compared to a lot of people. Especially in a place like Portsmouth, you come across people who have not been over the water, you know* (laughs) *other than the Isle of Wight, and you think 'Oh my God'."*

Third, some of the respondents clearly indicated their desire to be part of more artistic efforts and environments. As one person put it: *"And I would* [emphasised] *like to be in a more creative environment. Cause that suits me as a person. That's where my interest and my*

passions are. And I couldn't ever feel passionate about what I do. ... And I think I will study history of arts again in September, because I at least want to feel that side of myself outside the career. But I can't see myself working in an artistic environment again unless [emphasised] *I could go back to college and retrain as a teacher, which is what I would quite like to do. But at the moment there is no chance."* However, the tension between a well paid job and the uncertainties linked with a stronger focus on arts is clearly seen by the individuals.

Fourth, being and becoming a person of high integrity is a crucial element of career concepts. They not only simply say so – „*I do admire people who have integrity in what they do and say.*"– but also let it become obvious in their actions: „*I think it is respectful to stay with a company when they pay for your studies. Also some time after my course finished, one or two years after that. That's my principle, I want to stay in the company and show them that I didn't use them to get my course done.*" People of this group do not see themselves as ego-centred free agents pursuing simply their own benefits. On the contrary, the benefit of others is highly valued.

Fifth, the conceptualisations of careers are based on significant self-confidence in one's abilities. Although at times doubts and anxieties set in, in the long run positive self-reliance dominates: *"Yes, they kicked me out. For myself I thought like yea, this may be the opportunity. Because I always wanted to go abroad ...."*

Career strategies.

It is remarkable that individuals in the international career field of chronic flexibility emphasise a certain degree of lack of ambition: „*I have a little bit of a competitive spirit but not too much. Meaning, that, when I play a game, I play it to win, but not absolutely– you know what I mean? I like the competition, but if I lose, it's ok as well. I mean, we just play. I think most of the time motivation in work are more people than ambition or money. I don't care too much about my salary. You know what I mean? I don't really care. As long as I am fine in my job, it's ok. Colleagues are very important for me – more than ambition. In fact I don't have a personality to be a manager for example. I am too soft for that.*" It is important for individuals to have different options in different areas. In addition, little long-term strategies for pursuing goals exist. Many of the respondents are conscious of the role that luck and contingency plays. Keeping things flexible allows them not only different career moves. It also reflects a certain degree of unwillingness to commit oneself to one option for fear of risking one's own development: „*The first twelve month was probably the most exciting, with lots of things happening in the sort of stock market at that time, during 2000. But things sort of started to dry up and the work sort of became much more tedious and I felt I was not developing my career by staying. I was thinking about leaving, had enough of it.*"

Career success

For individuals in the international realm the classic career success measures do not play the primary role. Asked about whether it is important for him to get promoted, one interviewee responded: *"No. I prefer to have knowledge about things. Now I am a recruiter but I don't want to do this too long. I could for example become a specialist Comp&Ben. You know, to touch different fields and ... but not to be more successful and to move higher up."* Objective career goals that 'usually' count do not mean much to this group of people. Although money is an issue, it is not the sole or primary mover: „*But I would emphasise that both times, although I had said that financial rewards were a reason for moving, it was not the most important reason.*" Beyond that, respondents mention a number of career goals that constitute

success measures for their careers. One can mention independence and freedom, a balanced relationship between work related aspects and private life, looking for challenges and looking for responsibilities.

4.2. Career capital

Regarding the use and development of career capitals in different career fields, the national and the international sample are discussed in turn

4.2.1. National sample

Company World

Both knowledge, competencies and social networks are perceived as crucial for success in this career field. This finding is unsurprising. Beneath the surface, however, causal maps of career capital look slightly different: As for **cultural capital**, broad knowledge and social competencies are more important than specific expertise. But this is not sufficient. **Social capital** seems to be the most important factor for career success, especially in the perception of those who regard themselves as 'not at the top': social networking and politicking makes the difference between those at the highest hierarchical level and those below. Whereas these insight came ex-post (and too late) for the members of the older cohorts, the graduates of 2000 already see the importance of social capital, of their parents' social embeddedness and the usefulness of 'old boys' networks' – and they do not hesitate to invest much effort into it. Nevertheless CW individuals still trust in the importance of knowledge and competencies, thus justifying their heavy investments: Most of them have achieved PhD degrees, speak more than one foreign language and spent considerable time abroad.

Economic capital is a matter of explicit importance: Interviewees are proud of the material wealth acquired, it is nice to *"afford something"* and to be provided with the essential status symbols (car, mobiles, offices) by the company. Financial security is valued highly: Acceptance of one's work and career success is directly measured in terms of salary (*"payment must be adequate"*). According to this, those working in the public sector are highly dissatisfied. Whereas the 70ties and 90ties graduates try to improve their work-life-balance, the early career cohort is fully committed to job and company, thus dealing with increasing job-insecurity.

Many of the components mentioned are converted into **symbolic capital** by the CW-field, and thus act as indicators of social status: university degrees, cars, expensive taste in clothes. Surprisingly, social capital has not the expected symbolic reference. Memberships in clubs (Rotary, Lions) or political parties are never mentioned. Instead it is the company itself which provides its members with prestige. Some organisations cannot make it, as it is stated acridly in the public sector. In CW, individuals steadily monitor the formation of their prestige by the way they are perceived by relevant others.

As for **social origin**, the older cohorts mostly come from lower middle class families which did not provide them with economic capital or social networks, but with a strong faith in knowledge and achievement orientation. They consequently attribute their considerable wealth and social status to their own efforts and are very proud of it. Academic degrees are also a sign of this intergenerational social advancement. This does not apply to the 2000

graduates in CW who do not descent from lower-middle-class and do rather disregard academic degrees' value.

Free Floating Professionalism

Compared with CW, **economic capital** is an uncommon topic in this field: Individuals trust in fair exchange relations, they are convinced to make good money, but we learned little more about their economic situation. Status symbols are of minor importance, too. Financial security is never mentioned, for individuals trust into their competencies and market value.

Specific forms of **cultural capital** are much more important: university degrees, permanent education and training of specific competencies and skills. Professional identities are mainly based on expertise, individuals are fascinated by the task itself, they *"burn the midnight oil"* and perceive career transitions as a chance to improve their expertise and soft skills. The latter get more important as teamwork spreads in FFP-field.

Generally **social capital** is observed critically: *"One must know the rules of the game"* but prefers to stay distant from power politics within organisations. When talking positively about social networks, individuals mainly think of personal relations beyond organisational borders, or – most generally – *"acting with people"*.

Generally, we have little information about **symbolic capital** in FFP: It may be supposed that academic degrees are important, and the sequence of attractive jobs and challenging projects in different organisations contributes to professional identity, image and prestige. Individuals come from lower middle class and received only little economic and social support from their parents. Both our female FFP interviewees told us that it is a male field with many disadvantages for women.

Self Employment

In this career field, **economic capital** is not only a result and measure of career success but its' prerequisite, too. More than in other fields it directly influences success. Our interviewees were financially supported by their parents at the beginning of their career. Compared with CW they lament to be disadvantaged economically: they have no regular income, their employees must be paid.

Among the components of **cultural capital**, expertise and academic degrees are necessary, but not sufficient for career success. Most competencies essential for self employment are not and cannot be taught at university, *"you must be a natural born entrepreneur"*, or at least *"learn it from the cradle"*.

In the SE-field, **social capital** is quite different from CW and FFP: Social origin is crucial. The friendships and relations inherited from the parents are fundamental for entrepreneurial success. Most of our interviewees are deeply embedded in networks not directly linked with business (sport clubs, theatre, schoolfellow). Besides, *"friends become customers and customers become friends"*. On the one hand, they enjoy it to *"deliberately choose their contacts"*. On the other hand, relationships with professional colleagues are important and must be cultivated (conferences etc.).

As for the transformation to **symbolic capital**, there are some distinctive manifestation in the SE-field: Academic degrees are basic, at least in the sphere of the classical professions, where

prestige also depends on the employees' education. The core symbolic capital is coined by the profession itself. It is (still) prestigious to be a lawyer or a tax adviser in Austria, as it is with entrepreneurs.

Self employment is often inherited: Most of our SE actors have fathers or mothers which are/were self employed, too. And most of them belong to upper middle class and upper class – and transmit not only economic capital, but also social relationships and "entrepreneurial attitude".

Chronic Flexibility

There are many similarities between CF and SE, but also some differences: Like traditional self employed, individuals often have self-employed parents. **Economic capital** is less important for start-ups, nevertheless financial help of parents is sometimes required. Costs are lower, because individuals in this field are mainly one-person-employers. Anyway income is mostly insecure, fear of existence is omnipresent in a day-to-day business.

Within **cultural capital**, expertise, commitment and experience are rated high. Academic degrees, however, are not so important. The interviewees started their jobs during their studies, thus graduation made little difference. Achievement orientation has been surpassing at all times.

CF-interviewees are anxious to separate between private and professional **social capital**. But this boundary often perishes. Cultivation of business relations is very important. Nevertheless one-person-employers often suffer from solitude. Although CF activities are sometimes regarded as a transitory state, individuals are reluctant to enter CW, because they abhor politicking and machinations. Thus interviewees deprecate lobbying and political bargaining, too, although it would be helpful to get new business.

Our interviewees suffer from CF's bad image. Compared with the other fields, there is clear condensation point of **symbolic capital:** neither an attractive company (CW), nor the sequence of prestigious projects requiring specific expertise (FFP), nor a well-defined profession which conveys high social status (SE). Effective status symbols are both longed-for and devalued at the same moment: *"If you have neither an impressive office nor employees, people will think your work is of minor quality."* On the one hand CF people enjoy flexibility, e.g. with regard to vacation and leisure time, on the other hand they the are anxious to stay without orders during this time. Generally, *"prestige and reputation are part of the game"* – but hardly available in CF.

4.2.2.   International sample

There is no clear indication that for the individuals in our sample **economic capital** is of primary importance. Of course, money plays a role for achieving a desired life style: *„I work because I need money; I want to go to nice restaurants and so on."* Nevertheless, money is no primary driver. Although individuals see the necessity of a sound economic basis and the problems that sometimes are linked with international chronic flexibility, economic resources do not pose a severe restriction. In one way or other, they manage the economic side of their life.

In terms of **cultural capital**, respondents express strong views about the skills and qualifications necessary for successfully coping with the requirements of the career field they are in.

The overarching theme is the importance of portables skills and qualifications which can be transferred and applied to a great variety of career fields and concrete settings. At the heart is a *„desire to learn, … a skill which is … very important today, this adaptability and ability to learn new skills“,* as one respondent put it. It is expressed in concrete activities to start learning processes in all types of different living and working situations: *„After six to eight months I was comfortable with the job, still learning. The electronics industry moves very quickly so that was very rewarding, but I spent more and more time teaching myself other skills. I started to learn web-design."* These learning processes not only cover the current job requirements, but go beyond that anticipating potential future career fields or jobs that individuals want to enter: *„I think I am gaining such valuable things at the moment, transferable to other companies, and I definitely see myself progressing. I don't say that I will necessarily stay in an HR type of role, rather project management. … I am always thinking about portable skills now."*

The ability to market oneself to different employers and in different career fields is also seen as one of the crucial cultural capitals that on has to acquire if in the international career field of chronic flexibility. Being aware of one's profile and how one is perceived by potential employers becomes important: *„But you know I am gaining much more focus. I am much more focused on how I would be to external employers. And that's my reaction to being self-employed and people saying, well, what can you do?"* An employable qualification profile and good self-marketing activities lead to positive results: *„A number of headhunters started contacting me. This is the first time in my career that headhunters started to come onto the scene. And when you are young and you go to an interview and headhunters are calling you you start to get actually quite proud of who you are. And obviously I had my own website and somehow they found my CV on my website and they where quite impressed by that and on what I had to say on the CV. And so I went through a couple of different headhunters proposing to put me forward for jobs at a couple of big five consultancies and big IT firms."* These positive results lead to a strengthened conviction about one's ability to survive in the career field and live a self-determined life: *„I would say it is that I have my own money, my own life, that I am able to take care of myself."*

Individuals in this group are also aware of the importance of technical know-how as part of the cultural capital. Two related aspects emerge. First, technical know-how constantly has to be adapted to current trends and future requirements. It has to be broad, coming from a variety of disciplines. Second, the aspect of transferability is important. This leads to a tendency of spreading the learning content over a broad area – *„Nothing specialised. I did not want to specialise."* – to avoid the risk of becoming too narrow: *„I was trying to spread my sort of long-term risks by studying a second degree in a different area."* Thus, they move towards a diverse portfolio of skills and qualifications: *„I am more a generalist than I am a specialist. I prefer to touch a little of everything and not go too deep into one detail."* Being able to see the whole picture and react accordingly seems to be essential: *„I am more interested in that* [the overall picture, WM et al.] *rather than in one particular area. I have got to see how all the pieces fit together. When you read a newspaper you can try to predict what the outcome is going to be. There is always a reason why and I want to get behind that."* Nevertheless, individuals do not spend most of their time and energy on the acquisition of technical know-how: *„Technical knowledge is something that comes easier than the soft skills. The soft skills I think – now, after one year of having been away I am moving around and think I have come*

a long way and learn something new every day, but yea, the soft skills are probably the ones I am spending most of my energy on at the moment."

When analysing the respondents' view about their **social capital** and its value for pursuing international careers, a number of interesting points emerge. None of the respondents sees building personal relationships closely linked with professional reasons. It seems to be a value per se and not something that is instrumental for professional promotion. Likewise, the potential use of social capital for professional purposes is seen ambiguously. The respondents do not see any reason to be proud of their social capital. On the contrary, they emphasise that their career advancement is due to competencies, effort and performance and not based on personal relationships. Nevertheless, the usefulness of having the 'right' personal relationships is also acknowledged, even if in the end the own efforts are most important: *„I have always tried to have a good relationship with co-workers. I care about my reputation amongst people, focused on career right now. And if things are changing it is because people are developing a personal interest. My managers, I had two managers who sort of said I want to help you, I want to mentor you and I want to help you to move on and do this. That was two managers ago, but she has been saying this to the right ears, saying Jane Smith, you know ... And with the direct result of that I have this job now. But of course it was the result of hard work."* In nearly all cases, being linked into a network is something reciprocal, a give and take ideally in balance. In addition to its professional relevance, social capital also has some identity building function. Network relationships clearly contribute to a sense of identity and to identifying strengths the individuals themselves rarely see: *„I think, again, she* [the mentor, WM et al.] *also thought that I was very courageous. I didn't see myself as a courageous person at the time but people kept telling me that I was courageous. ... I need to have people show that they appreciate me. If they don't appreciate me I lose completely my confidence."* The crucial role of social capital is especially true in moments of personal crisis where one's own identity is questioned and new roads to the professional and personal future have to be sought: *„I think that goes back to the sort of complete change of life I had two years ago that had cut across personally, career-wise, love-life, friends, family, everything. I think because of going through a period of loss. And I was trying to develop new friendships in absolutely every area of my life. It is something I'd probably never tried to do when I was married."*

Symbolic capital is hardly explicitly mentioned by members of this international sample. While the symbolic element is always there in the work environment, it is clearly visible that – unlike the frequently mentioned symbolic elements in the national sample – this is not an explicit topic in the international career field.

5. <u>Discussion</u>

When looking at the results of the national sample, several themes emerge. They cover aspects linked to career habitus, career field, career capital and the interplay among them.

First, the topic of discretion about one's own career seems to be an important element of the subjective reconstruction of careers. To what extent one has to submit to external conditions, buy into manifest and latent rules of working together, or take part in micro-political games is a recurring theme in the stories of the interviewees about their careers. Individuals in different career fields clearly tell different stories in this respect. People in the company world career field see a strong influence of the organisational environment on their careers, limiting the scope of their discretion about career decisions. Individuals in the other three career fields take a different angle. While accentuating different aspects, they all underscore the

importance of freedom, variety of tasks and jobs and self-determined career course for their chosen career field.

Second, it turns out that constant comparison of one's own career with some 'benchmarks' is an ongoing theme for all individuals. In the light of the ambiguous quality of careers and career outcomes, this is no great surprise, although worth noting. However, two interesting patterns emerge. First, individuals compare themselves primarily with people in their own career field – with the exception of members in the chronic flexibility career field. They are insofar atypical as they rarely use peers in their own field. To evaluate their career strategies and outcomes, they rather compare themselves with individuals from other fields. Second, the dimensions as well as the evaluative component of the comparison differ across career fields. Individuals in the company world career field frequently come to a negative evaluation of their own person. In a similar way, chronic flexible individuals also come to a negative conclusion, although they – see above – compare themselves not with people from their own field, but from others. Within free floating professionalism, the evaluation is in the great majority positive, mostly because of a basic conviction: only 'good' people dare to join this career field. In self employment, there is no clear evaluative trend. However, in benchmarking themselves, these individuals clearly focus on the level of technical expertise.

Third, there are different career capitals at stake in the four career fields. Economic capital is the core measure for success in company world. Within free floating professionalisms it is regarded as fair reward. In the self employment field economic capital is experienced as fundament and prerequisite for success, and it is mostly wayward in the chronic flexibility field. Social capital is perceived as important in all fields, but is mostly looked upon disparagingly in company world and free floating professionalism. Supposedly the experience of tightly coupled relationships causes scepticism and forces mental reservations. It is valued ambivalently in the chronic flexibility field and even positively in self employment. Apparently loose coupling allows for the illusion of handpicking social relationships. Within cultural capital, a broad spectrum appears. Expertise is essential in free floating professionalism and chronic flexibility – perhaps to keep individuals grounded in an unstable field. In company world and free floating professionalism cultural capital serves the individuals as source of independence from the organisation.

Fourth, the way symbolic capital emerges differs clearly between the four fields. In company world, the organisation endues the symbolic capital of its employees, not only via status symbols like company cars or hierarchical positions. Our interviewees' prestige and self-perception is closely linked to their company's image. In the free-floating-professional-field individual's reputation is coined by expertise which condenses in prestigious projects and successfully accomplished tasks. In the self-employment-field, personal prestige emanates from the professions' reputation. There is no specific way of generating symbolic capital in the chronic flexibility field, what is presumably linked with the permeable borders of this field, its transitory status and the lack of 'benchmarks' within the field.

Fifth, the transmission of career capital between generations differs between the fields: In company world and free floating professionalism individuals mainly learn achievement orientation from their parents. They consequently attribute their success to their own efforts. In self employment and chronic flexibility individuals receive an entrepreneurial attitude in early childhood. Besides, they are more or less supported financially from there parents.

Looking at the international sample and comparing it with the results especially from the national career field of chronic flexibility, some points can be made.

First, the individuals in the international career field of chronic flexibility seem to be more self-reliant and less tempted to constantly compare themselves with individuals in other fields. While in the national sample individuals constantly monitor their own careers in comparison to other fields, this is no big theme in the international realm. Possibly because of the great demands of such a career only those individuals choose this field that have a very robust self-regulation and do not *in extenso* need a constant comparison.

Second, in terms of career strategies there is little difference between the national and the international sample. Although the topic of lack of ambition came up, it is clear that also in the international sample a broad spectrum of job options as well as a high degree of flexibility and lack of long term plans belongs to the core elements.

Third, in both samples the classical career success measures only play a minor role. Individuals value alternative measures like independence or freedom. However, unlike their 'national peers', individuals in the international sample by no means have doubts about their self-value and or fear of being looked at as losers. On the contrary, the general impression is that they are quite content with what they have achieved.

Fourth, individuals in the international sample have a very clear and differentiated view on various forms of career capitals. Especially culture capital is highly valued and the need for constant acquisition and adaptation is underscored. It seems that people in this field have a heightened sensitivity for the necessary fit between their culture capital and the requirements of the field. One possible reason could be the combination of being in a chronic flexible career field and, at the same time, be in an international environment. Both factors point into the same direction and could re-enforce each other.

Overall, and at a more theoretical level, the data and the analyses support a dynamic mutual relationship between career habitus and career fields. Given the socio-economic and biographical background of the individuals interviewed, it seems quite obvious that the career habitus acquired over time plays an important role in the choice of the career field. What one sees as 'normal' in one's family of origin, the social strata one comes from, the educational experience and the kind of social networks one is linked into constitute important factors for the choice of the career field. In other words, specific elements of the career habitus and their interplay have an important role in these decision processes. On the other hand, the characteristics of the actual career field are not only anticipated criteria for one's choice. They also constitute an important factor in reinforcing and modifying the career habitus. Through the rules and processes in the field specific experiences are made. In turn, these shape the perception of the career field as well as elements of the career habitus like career aspirations, causal explanation patterns for career success and adequate career strategies or subjective measures of career success. Thus, the closely interwoven and dynamic relationship between career habitus and career field as representations of the agency-structure-dichotomy becomes obvious.

6. <u>Concluding remark</u>

Beyond the concrete results, the findings of this paper hopefully contribute to current international career knowledge in at least three ways. First, it adds 'thick' descriptions to theoretical concepts. In this way, often called for qualitative data is not only produced in an exploratory way but tentatively linked with existing theoretical concepts, thus enriching and modifying them. Therefore, not only empirical, but also theoretical advancement is hopefully at least partly achieved. Second, the data and its analyses expand an area still not very well

researched. Although a number of already classic works on the issues of the new careers exist (e.g., Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999; Gratton & Hailey, 1999; Peiperl, Arthur, Goffee & Morris, 2000), new careers and their differentiation from more traditional forms of careers is still in its infancy. Careers cutting across different boundaries and resulting in highly volatile career trajectories are not very well understood. Using qualitative data and developing theoretical concepts and models with the ability to cover different types of career fields can contribute to empirical and theoretical advancement. Especially the career fields of free floating professionalism and chronic flexibility can be mentioned here. Third, 'thick' descriptions are especially well suited to generate new questions and hypotheses. Given the richness and the depth of the material, the results can lead to new directions – or at least: facets – for future research in the area of careers.

Two aspects seem to be especially important. On the one hand, an even more detailed picture about free floating professionalism and chronic flexibility at the international level is waiting to be developed. Second, at the theoretical level the mechanisms for the interplay between career habitus and career fields, while being broadly outlined in the theoretical concept, have to be refined. Therefore, the call for more research is not surprising and more than timely.

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