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CULTURE AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT FOR CAREERS(U)  
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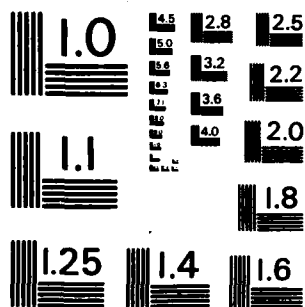
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## SUMMARY

Cultural factors influence career patterns in a variety of ways. Societal, occupational, and organizational cultures influence the structure of the external career, prestige associated with given careers, the legitimacy of certain motives underlying careers, success criteria, the clarity of the career concept itself, and the importance attached to career vs. family and self development. How career occupants view their careers and the degree of variation in such views within given societies, occupations, and organizations is also culturally patterned. Both managers and career researchers must become more familiar with these cultural influences.

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## Culture As An Environmental Context for Careers

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Much has been written recently about the concept of "career," but relatively little attention has been given to the cultural context within which careers occur. Yet even the idea of what a "career" is depends on the culture in which it is embedded. We know that in different countries different notions exist about how one should pursue careers, how much emphasis one should give to career versus family concerns, and what makes careers legitimate. Moreover, there is growing evidence that organizational cultures also influence careers in specifying what is expected of career occupants (Schwartz & Davis, 1981; Schein, 1983; Dyer, 1982; Pettigrew, 1979).

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*In this paper I would like to explore several facets of culture as an environment for careers and to demonstrate that career research is inevitably culture bound. I will draw primarily on my own consulting, clinical, and research experiences to analyze some of the issues that culture raises for career research and career development.* Three separate areas will be discussed:

1. Cultural influences on the concept of career itself;
2. Cultural influences on the importance of career relative to personal and family issues; *and*
3. Cultural influences on the bases of legitimacy of managerial careers.

## CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON THE CONCEPT OF CAREER

The focus in this section is to distinguish what "career" means to the members of a given culture from the meanings the word has come to have for career researchers. I was not aware of the issue until I encountered it in labeling some of my own work. My interest in career research began over 20 years ago with the application of the concept of "coercive persuasion" to the problem of organizational socialization and management development (Schein, 1961). In the early 1970's I began to pull this research together into a book designed for the practicing manager and was searching for a title. A number of my colleagues advised me to avoid putting the word "career" into the title, on the grounds that the word itself connoted only those professions and "higher" occupations in which clear hierarchical progress was intrinsic, and in which membership implied middle class origins and advanced levels of education.

The sociological notion of ANY set of role transitions being, in a sense, a career, such as the "career of the mental patient" (Goffman, 1959), was only gradually taking hold in our own society, so careers remained associated in the minds of many with middle class success syndromes. Use of the word would imply disinterest in lower occupations where a rise in rank could never be expected, as in the occupations of taxi driver, janitor, semi-skilled production worker, and prostitute. It is only recently, in other words, that the concept of career has been applied to all occupations as a neutral descriptive term such that we can now talk of linear, steady state, or even spiral careers (Driver, 1980), and think of a career as being a morally neutral vehicle for describing occupational progress, or the lack thereof (Van Maanen, 1977).

This experience made me aware of how dependent we are on the culture in which we live for definitions of even simple everyday terms like career.

Cross-cultural variations were brought home to me when, in 1975, I was asked to attend a conference on "career planning and development" sponsored by the International Labor Office. Participants were drawn from the U.S., Western European countries, and Socialist countries such as the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union. In constructing a summary presentation for this conference, differences in the cultural connotation of the word "career" between the socialist and non-socialist countries became apparent. For the socialist countries, career implied personal ambition above and beyond what might be justified or good for the system, and "careerism" would, therefore, be viewed as a personal fault in the sense of a display of excess ambition (Schein, 1976). We have a similar connotation in the U.S. when we say to someone, "don't make a 'career' of it," implying don't put excess effort into it.

One of the major cultural variations in the concept of career, then, is the extent to which it implies only personal ambition to rise in the occupational structure. In societies where such personal ambition is not valued, the concept of "career" would have a very different meaning, or might not exist at all as a shared concept.

From the researcher's point of view, we need not only to distinguish between the various cultural connotations of "ambition" and "motivation," but also whether we are viewing career events from the perspective of the society or from the perspective of the career occupant. Thus, we need to distinguish what we have called the "EXTERNAL CAREER," which is the socially defined set

of steps and requirements for fulfilling a given occupation, as well as the degree of prestige associated with that occupation from what we have called the "INTERNAL CAREER" which is the individual career occupant's view of his or her own steps and progress over time, as well as his or her own views of the importance of that career (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Cultural variation, then, should be studied with respect to both the external and internal career concepts, and may show up most dramatically in the interaction between the two as will be noted below.

To illustrate the distinction, the actual steps to becoming a doctor, as well as the prestige of being one (the external), involving such matters as going to medical school, fulfilling internship and residency requirements, taking specialty examinations, and working in various combinations of private practice and hospital staff, differ to some degree across cultures. Such differences in the external career would then also show up in the internal career in how an individual felt about being a doctor. The individual's own motivation, i.e., whether it was primarily altruistic, technical, or economic, would be judged against what the society and the occupation judged to be "legitimate" criteria for being a doctor, and that judgement would, in turn, influence how successful the individual felt.

The occupational structure of every society evolves to fulfill the functions needed in that society. To the extent that those functions are different across societies, we can assume variations in how external careers are structured, how internal careers are perceived, and the nature of the interaction between the two. Beyond these societal influences it is clear that organizations also influence how careers are to be structured and how

members feel about those careers. Organizations will reflect the broader culture in which they exist, but it is clear that they develop cultures of their own as a result of the personal biases of their founders and leaders, and their own histories (Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1981; Schwartz & Davis, 1981).

Companies vary in the degree to which they explicitly define career paths, the steps required for each path, the kinds of motives considered legitimate for pursuing them, and the prestige attached to them (the equivalent of external careers), leading to variations in how career occupants in those organizations perceive and feel about those careers (the equivalent of internal careers).

For example, in one company I work with there are three well defined career paths or ladders -- a hierarchical one, a technical specialist one which includes the concept of "individual contributor," and a less formally defined path toward inclusion and influence where one's "centrality" can increase even if one's rank does not (Schein, 1971; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). People have a sense of being on or off the path, of being on time or off time with respect to rates of movement (Lawrence, 1983), and clearly expect the company to manage major career movement.

In contrast, within another company in the same country, careers are defined as being "owned" by individual career occupants. Top management announces loudly and clearly that there are no special paths, steps, or sequences, and that anyone can be fired at any time for non-performance or if they are found to be redundant. Individual career occupants have a sense of moving hierarchically, along functional and/or technical paths, and toward the center

of the organization, but those feelings are subjective and are not reflected in any expected or acknowledged external career events.

In summary, countries and organizations differ in the degree to which they specify explicitly the external career paths which are to be followed by members of a given occupation, the kinds of motives and ambitions which are considered legitimate for pursuit of careers, and the degree of prestige which is attached to different paths. Organizational cultures will reflect, in part, the broader societal cultures, and in a sense mediate between the larger culture and the occupational structure experienced by the individual. These differences strongly influence the way people feel about their careers, the kind of motivation that is considered to be appropriate for a career, how successful people will feel, and even how explicitly they experience having a career. Individual reactions, what we have called the "internal career," are, therefore, a joint outcome of broad societal forces, specific occupational or organizational forces, and each person's own experience.

#### CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON THE IMPORTANCE OF CAREER

The next issue is how members of a society or organization set their priorities between the demands of a career and other areas of their lives. Again, we must distinguish between the structural external issues such as the culture's view of work, the stage of economic development, the kind of occupational structure that exists, and the particular culture of the employing organization from the internal career issues of how much emotional energy and commitment a given person chooses to allocate to his or her career versus other life experiences.

We have argued previously (Bailyn, 1970, 1978; Schein, 1978) the utility of distinguishing three settings or domains that draw the individual's attention and commitment — 1) the occupational setting; 2) the family setting; and 3) self oriented settings.

Self oriented activities refer to those hobbies, sports, friendship relations and other activities that are pursued primarily for purposes of self development and which sometimes take as much or more time away from family as does work (Schein, 1978). These three settings exert independent pulls on the person, but in practice they overlap, and it is the degree of overlap that is under the control of the individual role occupant.

At the external structural level, cultures differ in the extent to which they separate self, work, and family. In some of the Eastern cultures, for example, there is more unity to the concept of self, even though the physical domain where work and family are pursued may be totally non-overlapping (Redding & Martyn-Johns, 1979). Americans, on the other hand, clearly segregate these domains, as symbolized by jokes about "leaving one's work at the office" or "bringing one's work home." There is a clear conceptual separation between work/career activities, family activities, and self-development activities. Time is viewed as a limited resource that must be allocated to one or another of those activities. Combining them, as when the spouse is taken on a business trip or a child is taken to the office on a Saturday, is viewed as creative and non-routine.

To some extent such separation is the result of industrialization. Factory work and urbanization produce more segregation of roles than does rural

village life. But even within industrially advanced societies there are differences between, for example, Japan and the U.S. in the degree to which the domains are conceptually segregated. Furthermore, certain occupations structurally stimulate more or less segregation, as can be seen if one contrasts fishing, forestry, and the military with running a store or restaurant (Kanter, 1977).

Culture also affects career commitment in that societies, occupations, and organizations develop norms and values about the degree to which work is expected 1) to be seen as intrinsically satisfying vs. instrumental only, 2) to be separated from family, and, beyond that, 3) to take priority over family (England, 1975; Hofstede, 1980). In his survey of one major multi-national company, Hofstede found that employees differ tremendously in how important it is that work leave enough time for personal and family life. For example, employees in Singapore, Hong Kong, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru placed little value on having enough time for family and personal life, employees in Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines were in the middle, while Australia, New Zealand, and Canada were at the high end.

If we think of occupational norms in the U.S., we can think of examples such as the military where it is expected from the outset that long periods of separation from family are part of the career, and that career assignments must always take precedence over family issues. On the other hand, wherever possible, military organizations enable families to move and create family enclaves on military bases to provide compensatory structures.

In the U.S. there are many occupational careers where two sets of norms



pertain to this issue. One set of norms may clearly specify that career occupants must treat career demands as higher priority than personal and family demands. Examples one can think of are medicine, the military, airline pilots, and police, occupations where public safety and welfare are priority concerns. On the other hand, strong U.S. norms of individualism and individual choice support any given individual if he or she decides to leave such an occupation for "family or personal reasons." In other words, it is alright in our society to refuse careers which require too much personal and family sacrifice, but if such a career is accepted we expect full career commitment.

In fact, one of the most salient aspects of U.S. culture is its ideology of an open occupational structure where, in principle, everyone has equal access to any career, limited only by lack of talent. By the same token, everyone has the right to limit their career involvement so long as they are willing to take the consequences if the organization considers their involvement insufficient. In some older, more structured, and class bound societies in the world, one sees, in contrast, early tracking systems where career choices have to be made early in life and, once made, are relatively more binding. The degree of commitment to the career is then, itself, culturally constrained, and easy exit from the career for either party, employer or employee, is prevented by social pressure.

Given these external career considerations, one can formulate the hypothesis that variation within the internal career will be greater in those societies that have norms supporting freedom of entry into and exit from occupations and organizations. In other words, one might expect within a given occupation a

greater range of work involvement in a country like the U.S. than in a country like Japan. Similarly, one might expect within the U.S. greater variation among organizations in the degree to which their organizational cultures demand high levels of work involvement.

Societies such as Japan, Korea, China, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan become especially interesting to study because they are rapidly developing economically, yet have very different norms about work vs. family commitment. In the Hofstede survey, employees in Singapore and Hong Kong placed less value on time for personal and family life as an important characteristic of a job than did employees in Japan, Taiwan, and the Phillipines. Such variations remind one that not only are there huge cultural differences within what is often labelled "Eastern" cultures, but also that one cannot easily determine the different effects of cultural, economic, and organizational forces. Are the reported attitudes reflecting cultural differences or do they say more about variations in the treatment of employees in these different countries even though they are employed by the same company?

We have noted above that in some societies family relations are more honored than they are in our own, suggesting that work might be considered less important in those societies. On the other hand, if they make less of a separation between work life and family life in the first place, and if family norms support a strong work ethic, then an individual's commitment to family does not necessarily conflict with strong commitment to work and career. Such conflict is much more likely to arise in the U.S. where the work ethic has been challenged, where self development and family development are posed as counter to the demands of work, and where the dual career family with two

fully work-involved partners is becoming increasingly legitimized, if not yet very common.

What data we have on internal career indexes such as "work involvement" (Bailyn and Schein, 1980) shows that certain careers, such as being a professor, an entrepreneur, a manager, or a consultant, do stimulate more work involvement than others, such as being a staff engineer or accountant. But there is considerable variation among individuals within a given occupation, reflecting both their personalities and the organizational culture in which they work. Some companies are clearly better able to elicit higher levels of work involvement among all of their employees than others. The identification of such cultural factors within companies has become a major preoccupation of organizational researchers (Ouchi, 1981; Pascale and Athos, 1981; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Pfeffer, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982).

One sees work organizations in the U.S. adapting to this broader range of individual resolution of career vs. family vs. self conflicts with gradual changes in personnel policies on such matters as maternity and paternity leaves, part-time instead of full-time work, more time off, joint employment and rethinking of the nepotism rules, job sharing, extra support in helping spouses find work, supporting moves when necessary, and daycare for children (Schein, 1978; Bailyn, 1982).

In summary, cultures will differ in the degree to which the career is defined as clearly separate from personal and family life, and in the degree to which career commitment is expected to supersede personal and family commitment. Cultures will also differ in the degree to which the choice of an external

career has to be made early and is considered binding on the individual. In those societies, and in organizations where choice can be made late and even re-made in adulthood, the more relevant cultural factors are the norms and values which pertain to how much one is supposed to value work vs. family vs. personal development. In the U.S. there is evidence that the basic assumptions about work, family, and self may be in transition, particularly as more issues are surfaced around the management of dual careers.

#### CULTURAL VALUES AS BASES OF LEGITIMACY ORGANIZATIONAL CAREERS

Cultures and organizations vary in what they regard to be acceptable and legitimate motives for entering a career, and in how success in those careers is measured. This issue was made salient to me by my own research on "career anchors" (Schein, 1978). A career anchor is defined as the emerging self-image around which a person organizes his or her career decisions, integrating the self-perceived talents, motives, and values which the person recognizes during the first 5 to 10 years of a career. Career anchors can be elicited during workshops by pairing participants and having them conduct careful career history interviews of each other. Following such interviews we typically survey the workshop participants to determine how many people fall into some of the major career anchor categories such as 1) security/stability, 2) autonomy/independence; 3) technical/functional competence, 4) entrepreneurial creativity, 5) general management competence, 6) service or dedication to a cause, 7) pure challenge, or 8) total life style integration.

It was during the tabulation of such results in different countries that I became aware how culture affects what people consider to be "legitimate" career anchors. For example, in contrasting workshop results in Australia and

the U.S. with comparable groups of managers, I found opposing biases in what people are willing to report. In the U.S., managers admitted in private that they had security concerns, were thinking about early retirement, were losing some of their ambition, and were turning increasingly toward family and self concerns. But if asked to state publicly what their career anchors were, they tended to claim loudly that they lay in the managerial, entrepreneurial, or autonomy areas. They claimed to be motivated to continue rising to the top, admitting that if they did not publicly express such ambitions their careers would be compromised.

The Australian experience was the mirror opposite of the U.S. experience. In five consecutive workshops, done in different parts of the Australia in the summer of 1980, the same phenomenon occurred. In reporting results, managers were quite vocal in claiming to be security/stability oriented and publicly denied any desire to increase their power or to continue climbing to the top. At the same time, I would be told informally after the meetings that what Mr. So-and-So said when he claimed to be "just security oriented" was "laughable" in that he was seen as one of the most ambitious and ruthless men in the organization. But it was clearly understood that in public one had to deny power motives in Australia, just as one had to deny security motives in the U.S. So, if one listened only to the public statements of career motivation, one would overestimate the number of ambitious power seekers in the U.S. and underestimate the number of leveled off security seekers; in Australia one would overestimate the number of security seekers and underestimate ambition. What these managers believed about the values associated with the external career was, for many of them, incongruent with their internal career picture

and, therefore, deliberately concealed. It was not "legitimate" to have certain motives or feelings in a given cultural context.

These anecdotal findings suggest a whole area of cultural research that needs to be pursued concerning the bases of legitimacy for occupational activities, quite apart from one's actual underlying motives or career anchors. What kinds of reasons are accepted as valid "apologies" or "excuses" for what one is doing, and how do these vary by country and by organization?

I have already described the variations in apologies offered for personal ambition. In different societies, and in different organizations within a given society, norms develop around legitimate reasons for ambitious behavior, ranging from the U.S. extreme of pure personal drive and "get ahead," "succeed," "make a lot of money," "gain power or position," to, at the other extreme, "serve society," "do what is expected of one by the employer or the peer group," or, as the Australians so nicely put it, "one must do one's job, but one mustn't be a tall poppy," because "tall poppies will be cut down." Similar metaphors suggesting that individuation in the career arena is not acceptable can be found in China and Japan, presumably reflecting the basic assumptions of those cultures about the overarching importance of the group relative to the individual (Inaba, 1970).

In the context of daily work behavior, one can study what are taken to be acceptable excuses for absence or not getting one's work done. Personal illness has always been an acceptable excuse in the U.S., but it is interesting to note, also, the cynicism toward such excuses reflected in our educational system where written notes from parents, nurses, or doctors are

required as validation. One wonders whether such cynicism also operates in work organizations, in that the excuse is accepted but treated as a lie, as when an employee admits to using some "sick leave" days to take a vacation, the boss knows that this is happening, and yet condones it. It would be interesting to conduct a comparative study, either across organizations or countries, on the validity of illness as an excuse for not working, and on the degree of documentation required that one is ill.

Family crises, death or illness in the family, needs of spouses and children, are the next category of apologias to consider. At one extreme, we have societies and organizations where time off is granted immediately for any reasonable indication that an employee's family needs attention. At the other extreme, I once encountered a company on the west coast of the U.S. with such a strong work ethic that an employee went through the suicide and funeral of his wife without missing work, and without telling anyone at work about it, because he believed it would not be considered appropriate to intrude his "private affairs" on the company. Whether or not this person's behavior reflects his organization's culture or his own extreme paranoia is, of course, important to consider, but I have certainly encountered other U.S. organizations in which it is considered a sign of weakness not to have one's family affairs completely under control and in order. "If he can't manage his own family, how can he manage a department?" is said often enough in some organizations to make employees aware that family problems are not a legitimate excuse. The dual career couple faces issues like the above around child care. Does a given organization consider it legitimate for an employee to stay home or go home if a child is ill "because the spouse cannot get time off?"

Legitimate reasons also have to be developed around "refusals" — refusal to accept a geographic move, a promotion, or a particular assignment. Health and family reasons have always played a role in such refusals, but the behavior one observes in dual career couples reveals another layer of cultural norms which may vary across societies and organizations. For example, when a company proposes to a manager that he or she move to another location, and the move is refused on the grounds that the spouse is in a job or profession that would be disrupted by it, does the company accept this as a legitimate excuse or not? U.S. companies vary in the degree to which they would 1) coerce a decision by threatening to withhold future promotions unless the manager managed his or her own family situation somehow or another and moved as requested; 2) negotiate a settlement by offering to relocate the spouse and attempt to find equivalent employment in the new situation; or 3) capitulate and find an equivalent promotion possibility for the manager in the original location, thus permitting the spouse to continue his or her career uninterrupted.

What is interesting to consider, however, is to what extent the manager really could not go because of the spouse, or simply used the spouse as a culturally acceptable excuse. A similar example is the use of children's age and/or school location as a reason for not moving. In either case, the clear possibility exists that the individual personally did not want to move, but that the only reason the company would accept was "the kids are in high school and should not be moved." We know virtually nothing about the attitudes of different companies, industries, or countries toward the personal reasons people give in their efforts to negotiate with organizations, what kinds of reasons are respected, and how such areas of respect are culturally patterned.



A third way of getting at cultural definitions of legitimacy for organizational careers is to investigate criteria used for success. Often such criteria are parallel to what is considered legitimate motivation for entering the career, but sometimes they reflect additional cultural norms which need to be identified. We can infer success criteria from knowing the wider assumptions and values of different cultures. For example, U.S. managers are more likely to succeed if they are individualistic, ambitious, and result oriented, and Japanese managers are more likely to succeed if they are group oriented, respectful, loyal, and result oriented. But beyond case studies we have little systematic data on such criteria, except from several surveys of multi-national companies where company culture is, to a degree, held constant in order to study variations in national culture.

One recent survey done by Laurent (1981) in the European branch of a U.S. based multi-national company provides some provocative data. In this company, among other things, managers were asked to rate 60 different items on their importance in determining career success. These data revealed that some items were judged as "most important" by virtually all managers who answered the survey, regardless of the country in which they worked: ambition and drive, leadership abilities, achieving results, skills in interpersonal relations and communication, being labeled as high potential, managerial skills, hard work, and ability to handle interfaces between groups.

In addition, virtually all managers agreed that the following items were "unimportant" in determining career success: opinions of colleagues, number of assessors, national differences in using evaluation criteria, rumors about individual's reputation, opinions of subordinates, and seniority.

These lists, then, can be thought of as the consensus on what is important for success in the organizational culture. It should be noted that the U.S. origin of the company shows up in the item bias toward individualistic achievement criteria. If a company from another culture were studied, one might expect the list to look somewhat different.

When Laurent looked at individual country data, he found that criteria for career success differed across countries.

U.S.	"Achieving results" was checked significantly more often, even though everyone gave it a high rating in the first place, and no items were checked significantly less often.
France	"Adaptability to organizational change" was checked more often, while "self confidence" and "creative mind" were checked less often.
Germany	"Creative mind," "age," "health," and "company policies about career development" were checked more often, while "job visibility and exposure," "being labeled as having high potential," and "knowing how to please management" were checked less often.
United Kingdom	"Assessor's subjective judgement" was checked more often, while "development opportunities within job" was checked less often.
Netherlands	"Type of educational background" was checked more often, no items were checked less often.

These data suggest that in each country particular features are valued more as criteria of success and that the career is perceived somewhat differently by managers in each of these countries.

#### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

I have tried to illustrate in each of three areas how culture serves as an environmental context for careers, and how all career findings are essentially culture bound. We cannot infer from one culture to another what the structure of external careers will be, nor can we infer how people will feel about their own careers.

The most important implication is that in the management of people it is crucial for managers to learn how to decipher the culture in which they are operating. However much a company may try to standardize its career pathing and career development programs, such standardization is doomed to failure if it does not take into account 1) what a career means in the first place in a given country, 2) how important work and career are, 3) what kinds of reasons are acceptable for certain kinds of work and career behavior, and 4) by what criteria career success is judged.

Secondly, it is essential to recognize that, within a given country, occupations and organizations also vary along these same cultural dimensions within the cultural envelope provided by the broader societal culture. Such variation will occur, especially in what kinds of occupational choices people will make in the first place, how they will view their internal careers, how work involved they will be, what kinds of career anchors they will develop, and what kinds they will espouse. Such variation will be especially

significant in countries like the U.S. the external career structure is governed by cultural norms of individual choice, equality of opportunity, and free mobility throughout life.

Finally, the kinds of variations described above present the career researcher with a whole new agenda of comparative research. Not only must we become more competent in describing the relevant cultural dimensions of societies, occupations, and organizations, but we must systematically compare career variables across cultural units to sort out whether observed regularities in career events reflect societal, occupational, organizational, or personality patterns.

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