How other people shape our careers: A typology drawn from career narratives
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ABSTRACT
From a constructionist perspective, we examine how non-managerial employees make sense of the part played by other people in shaping their careers. Taking as our starting point the methodological limitations of existing research into career shapers and arguing for a perspective that starts with actors’ situated understandings, we use a life story method to develop a new typology of career shapers. Grounded in our data, we distinguish and contrast the shaper categories of adviser, informant, witness, gatekeeper and intermediary in terms of their perceived impact on individuals, including their career aspirations, career enactment, and their career worldview and career self-concept. At the level of practice, locating themselves within this framework will enable line managers, human resources staff and professional careers advisers to be explicit about the career support they can offer, and to identify other potentially valuable career shapers.

KEYWORDS  career counselling ■ career development ■ career guidance ■ career management ■ mentoring

Introduction
People talk about the crucial role of their bosses, colleagues, and professional and personal contacts in shaping their career paths. Advisers and self-help books exhort their clients and readers to use their contacts to explore and
seek opportunities. Yet analysis of how individuals make sense of such contacts is sparse. In this article we focus on this under-researched area. Based on a study of non-managerial employees’ accounts of career help, we propose a typology of career helpers that we argue offers insights into such experiences from the perspective of individual career actors themselves. It also has practical applications for careers advisers and others who have a role to play in career development practice.

Previous studies have touched on this issue by investigating helpful interventions in career guidance interviews (Wilden & La Gro, 1998), career guidance services (Wilson & Jackson, 1998), mentoring (Kram, 1988; Shapiro & Farrow, 1988), career discussions (Kidd et al., 2003) and career planning (Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1981). Our research was triggered by the methodological limitations of these studies, on the premise that the methods used affect the findings generated, and are thus central to resulting frameworks for understanding. We have four main concerns. First, most studies are located in the context of either human resources (HR) or career guidance, and rarely relate or integrate classifications across disciplinary boundaries. In our view, such approaches provide fragmented understandings that fail to reflect adequately the lived experience of individuals who construct their careers using their learning from encounters in different contexts. Second, previous investigations have tended to focus on encounters purposefully designed to support and enable individuals’ career development, rather than those arising spontaneously or for non-career purposes. In other words, they are defined and delimited by researchers rather than participants. As a consequence, these researcher-constructed categories might not adequately reflect the constructs used by guidance givers and receivers. This relates to our third concern, that existing studies typically explore specific events, relationships or encounters in isolation from the context of an individual’s whole career, which we see as limiting participants’ opportunities to recall other significant people or encounters, and how these encounters relate to their unfolding careers. Finally, in most research the participants have been managers, professional staff or students whose career development needs and experiences of career shapers might differ from non-managerial groups. Studying this latter group might elucidate aspects that have been absent from other analyses, but are nevertheless relevant to managers and professionals.

The purpose of our research was to identify and understand the part that non-managerial employees perceive others playing in shaping their careers. In so doing, shaping encounters are described and contextualized. Unlike most other related studies, we i) synthesize work from both the career guidance and organizational literatures, ii) explore the careers of
non-managerial employees, and iii) adopt a life story approach enabling participants to include informal encounters. We propose a typology of career shapers that extends existing analyses of career development, and guidance and career theory.

The human resources–career guidance divide

In our view, the tendency to locate studies in either HR (Kidd et al., 2004; Kram, 1986; Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1981) or career guidance (Wilden & La Gro, 1998; Wilson & Jackson, 1998) limits the flow of knowledge and learning from one field to another. While the HR literature tends to focus on career development within the confines of a particular employing organization, with its structural limitations and possibilities, career guidance studies are more inclined to highlight ways of supporting and enabling individual action and agency, and give less attention to structural constraints. Furthermore, organization- or occupation-bounded study does not sit easily with notions of the boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994) or predictions about increasingly diverse career patterns (Jackson et al., 1996). Workers whose occupations or jobs change and those who move across employment and occupational boundaries are likely to draw upon diverse formal and informal sources to make sense of their careers. Guidance workers charged with helping individuals in this endeavour need to understand influences on careers from within and beyond the workplace.

Adopting either a guidance or human resource perspective leads to the development of a distinct terminology applicable only to the discipline from which it sprang. Job or role titles such as careers adviser, counsellor and coach are largely confined to the guidance community, while career manager and even the more inclusive concept of career developer (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Higgins & Thomas, 2001) are readily applicable only in workplace settings. Both sets of titles signal a relationship constructed with the intention that one party will receive and the other will give some form of career help; neither is sufficiently broad to include other people who informally provide career help. To address this gap we propose the concept of career shaper – a concept that can be applied across disciplinary and contextual boundaries and reflects the range of people who provide an individual with career support, advice and access to development opportunities, with perceived consequences for the individual’s career. Career shapers might be perceived as facilitating career development, or hindering development if they fail to provide career support when they could have done so. The term embraces colleagues, friends and family who might incidentally or
intentionally shape individuals’ careers, line managers and HR staff who have some responsibility for career development, as well as professional careers advisers.

A related terminological limitation is the absence of a sufficiently comprehensive term to describe career shapers’ activities. Mentoring, for example, although a relatively broad concept with multiple meanings that can be applied in different contexts, is restricted by the implication of an ongoing relationship. Activities and competences associated with professional guidance identified as informing, advising, counselling, assessing, mentoring, coaching, enabling, advocating and giving feedback (NCDA, 2003; UDACE, 1986) might be too specific to formal careers interventions. For this reason, we introduce the concept of ‘career help’ as shorthand for a range of actions and activities that can be performed by anyone and are construed by recipients as positively shaping their careers. The ordinariness of the term reflects the contributions of a range of helpers and the everyday encounters of lived experience – a perspective that is central to our epistemological stance (described in the method section).

Related to the previous point is the lack of research that specifically investigates how individuals perceive the role of informal career helpers in shaping their careers (Arthur, 2002). This gap is significant in the light of increasing diversity of career patterns that makes it difficult for individuals to identify or predict career routes (Arthur et al., 1999; Hall, 2002), base their careers on established patterns or follow career scripts (Barley, 1989). In seeking to self-manage their careers, people seek help from many different sources, formal and informal (Greller & Richtermeyer, 2006; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kidd et al., 2004). There is increasing recognition of the value of ‘relationship constellations’ (Kram, 1986: 170), developmental networks (Cummings & Higgins, 2006; Higgins & Kram, 2001), friendships at work (Rath, 2006) and effective informal career discussions (Kidd et al., 2003). An investigation that intentionally seeks to include informal career helpers is therefore timely.

**Design limitations of existing research**

We argue that although the key studies we have identified make a valuable contribution to understanding career shapers, their specific aims, methods and populations limit them. In this section we develop this point, starting with studies located in the HR literature, moving from Kram’s (1988) study of mentoring through to work on the broader concept of career discussions (Kidd et al., 2003). Next, we consider two studies located in the career
guidance literature, before closing with a summary of the limitations of the group of studies.

Kram (1988) sought to understand how individuals’ career histories, current situations and organizational circumstances shaped the characteristics and evolution of relationships between mentors, protégés and peers. Her study involved interviews with 18 junior managers and their senior mentors in large public utilities in the US and 25 pairs of individuals and their peer mentors (people of same age and level) in large Fortune 500 companies. All participants were managers or professionals. Kram’s research contextualized career helpers in people’s career stories and as such contributed to our understanding of mentoring functions that enhance the individuals’ growth and advancement. However, the findings might not be readily transferable to other populations in different contexts as they might have different career concerns. In addition, the focus was on significant relationships and did not extend to spontaneous one-off encounters that might have had an impact on individuals. Furthermore, the study was confined to workplace mentors rather than inclusive of non-work based career help.

Adopting a broader definition of mentoring, Shapiro and Farrow (1988) collected quantitative data from 140 senior executives working in a range of industries in Florida, USA. All respondents were around 40 years of age. They were asked to select – from a list that included superior, parent, spouse, colleague/peer – up to four people who had been most significant in their career development or advancement. We have two key concerns about this study. First, the use of a predetermined, researcher-derived list of possible helpers might have resulted in the omission of some significant people. Second, the focus on career advancement, as opposed to other forms of career change or development, might serve to restrict the analysis to i) ambitious people in mid-career, and ii) forms of help related to promotion in a hierarchy.

The third key study was a pilot in which Leibowitz and Schlossberg (1981) interviewed hourly and weekly paid workers in the US. They were asked to identify particular incidents when their managers had been effective in helping them with their careers, and incidents when they had been ineffective. Similarly, supervisors and managers were asked to recount occasions when they had been effective and when they had been ineffective or had impeded an individual’s career. Data collection concentrated on employees’ current organization and their relationship with their existing line manager or supervisor, rather than being contextualized within the employee’s own career story. Thus there is little sense of how such encounters impacted on employees’ careers as they unfolded over time.
The last of the HR studies explored effective career discussions, defined as those individuals perceived as having a significant positive value (Kidd et al., 2003). Participants were employees of large companies or public sector organizations that had well-developed career management processes, and most were managers or professionals. Semi-structured telephone interviews were used to obtain detailed accounts of one or more effective career discussions; some also described particularly ineffective ones. Seven categories of personal qualities and behaviours associated with effective career discussions were identified. However, as the researchers acknowledge in a later article (Kidd et al., 2004), the nature of participating organizations and interviewees limits transferability to a wider population. Also, here again the data collection method decontextualized discussions from individuals’ career stories and limited the number of encounters participants identified and the perceived impact of those encounters.

A similar limitation is apparent in the career guidance studies, primarily because the role of others in individuals’ careers was not central to their research aims. Wilson and Jackson (1998) sought to understand adults’ perceptions and requirements of institutionally-provided guidance services, including those provided by professional career guidance services, employers and colleges. Data were collected from 16 focus groups. Participants included lower-paid workers and unemployed or unwaged individuals as well as executives. Drawing on a wide population base might strengthen claims of generalization. However, the aim and purpose of the study as well as the decontextualized nature of the investigation limits its contribution to understanding the role of individual career shapers.

Similar concerns about research purpose and the problems of a decontextualized method apply to research on the helpfulness of interventions during a career guidance interview (Wilden & La Gro, 1998). The six participants were career guidance clients aged between 14 and 42 years with different education and employment status. Each was asked to view a video of their guidance interview and to identify and comment on whether different interventions increased their understanding or helped them to make better sense of themselves in relation to their situation. This micro-level study generated a useful typology of interventions, but is constrained by its focus on the guidance situation, its relatively narrow definition of helpfulness, and the very small sample size.

In summary, with the exception of Kram (1988), researchers have rarely situated helping encounters in individuals’ life stories, even though this approach might facilitate participant recall of significant encounters and their role in shaping their career, as well as enhancing researcher understanding. Studies have focused on relationships and encounters purposefully
constructed to shape an individual’s career, at the expense of spontaneously arising encounters and the unintended impact on careers of encounters designed for a non-career purpose. Managers and professionals are commonly (though not always) the population of primary interest. The career development needs and encounters that non-managerial employees perceive as shaping their careers might differ from other groups previously studied. None of the existing studies explicitly explores non-managerial employees’ perceptions of career shapers from an individual perspective, using life story to set encounters in context and taking account of spontaneously arising encounters and informal relationships. Methodological limitations are likely to have consequences for the types of career help identified, and for the overall contributions of these studies.

What changes as a result of career help?

As well as considering the different helping activities that can be carried out, we also need to consider the target of those activities. A starting point here is the distinction introduced by Parsons (1909) between knowing oneself and knowing about occupations. Regarding self-knowledge, we will use the term career self-concept. This is an adaptation of Super’s occupational self-concept (1990), which he defined as an individual’s picture of self in a work role, situation or position and performing a particular set of functions. Like Super, we regard the self-concept as dynamic and temporal but for us the prefix ‘career’ connotes breadth in a way that occupation does not. Career self-concept is not just about occupational identity but about how a person sees him- or herself in the more dynamic picture of the sequence of his or her employment-related positions, roles, experiences and activities.

Regarding occupational knowledge, we decided that it was necessary to extend Parsons’ concept, so we introduce the term career world-view. Referring to individuals’ commonsense understandings of how careers work, the concept extends and expands the notion of occupational knowledge or knowledge of different lines of work (Parsons, 1909). As described by Parsons, and as subsequently used in much careers research, this includes the work content and entry routes associated with occupations, but does not take account of the informal ways that people might access opportunities and progress, or tacit knowledge about informal social structures. Our construct of career world-view does include personal theories about process, and casts individuals as ‘career-development theoreticians’ (Law, 1996: 65). Extending Law (1996) and Parsons (1909), we are therefore using the term career world-view to refer to an individual’s perception and interpretation of jobs,
occupations and, crucially, how careers unfold. Given its likely salience in providing a conceptual foundation for people’s understanding and action, we see this as a significant omission from most past careers research. Career world-view makes explicit the notion of individuals having their own career theories that are based not only on their personal biographies, but on encounters with others and vicarious learning about other people’s careers. Unlike career self-concept, career world-view is a construct that emerged from our data analysis. Consistent with our view of career as socially constituted practice, career world-views, while articulated by individuals, reflect shared understandings. Thus career world-views might be similar among groups with similar experiences, backgrounds and characteristics, though within any group individuals’ views will differ in some respects because of their personal experiences and interpretations.

Important though career world-view is, it does not in itself include the opportunities actually available to a person, nor does it describe the direction a person’s objective career takes (though, of course, it is likely to influence the latter, and possibly even the former). Whilst internal psychological states are valuable and important in themselves, so is access to jobs, occupations, training, etc., that facilitate the achievement of personal goals, including income and status (Nicholson & de Waal-Andrews, 2005). Indeed, there is every reason to expect that most people who seek career help want that kind of tangible outcome. We therefore also include these more directly observable aspects of career in our analysis. To some extent, career self-concept and career world-view are precursors (as well as outcomes) of the observable routes a person’s career takes, and much career counselling is designed to change them (Kidd, 2006). However, the objective career is also potentially influenced by social structures (Roberts, 1977) and by powerful people within them.

**Categories of helping activity**

Cross-study comparison both within and between disciplines is inhibited by differences in focal concerns, and units of analysis, and the absence of a common framework. To develop our understanding of disparate categories and their value to our understanding of career shapers, we analysed the literature cited so far in order to identify the range of helping activities they discussed. In doing so, we endeavoured to transcend the different terminologies used so that we could arrive at descriptions that are readily understandable. We also sought to identify the main way in which each type of help might shape careers. Here we recognize that the impact of career...
shapers largely depends on how individuals receiving career help perceive, interpret and act upon it. Our observations are displayed in the left and centre sections of Table 1.

The distinction between career self-concept and career opportunities as potential outcomes of career help maps quite closely onto Kram’s (1988) distinction between career and psychosocial functions of mentoring, and many of the helping activities fall quite clearly into one or the other. However, some types of helping, we suggest, impact partly or primarily on career world-view: that is, the way the person thinks that careers work. We believe that this demonstrates the added value of the concept of career world-view. For example, ‘challenging individuals’ views’ might affect career world-view as well as career self-concept if the challenge relates to (for example) an individual’s perception that (s)he is too old for a particular kind of work. Note that in Table 1 we have indicated the main direct impact we discern of each helping activity. Clearly, these direct impacts are likely to lead to indirect impacts on the other areas described in Table 1. Hence, although we list ‘giving feedback’ as potentially impacting upon career self-concept, changes in self-concept might then lead the individual to seek a different kind of career opportunity. Having established the set of career helper activities, later in this article we will return to it, in order to map our typology onto it and to discuss the right hand section of Table 1.

To sum up, no previous studies have explored the role of others in shaping non-managerial careers from the perspective of the individual receiving career help, or in the context of their life story. Indeed the design of previous studies suggests that the categories of career help they generated might not be readily applicable to non-managerial employees. Examining those categories reinforced our view that insufficient attention might have been given to the distinctions between career self-concept, career world-view, and career opportunities. Through the study that we outline below, we sought to address these limitations.

**Method**

Focusing on actors’ situated understandings, we used a constructionist approach, taking as our starting point a view of our social world not as a fixed reality, but as constructed by people through their social interaction. In the introduction to their special issue of *Journal of Vocational Behavior* on constructionism and social constructionism in careers, Young and Collin (2004) outline what they see as the key tenets of a constructionist approach: knowledge as socially constructed through social practice; individual
Table 1  The potential impact of career helper activities on career self-concept, career world-view and career opportunities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career helper activities (derived from previous research)</th>
<th>Potential impact on:</th>
<th>Career shaper category (derived from this research)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career self-concept</td>
<td>Career world-view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling visibility = creating opportunities for individual to demonstrate their competence</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting, e.g. taking responsibility/acting as a buffer</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role-modelling, e.g. demonstrating valued behaviour</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching (in job specific skills)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsoring or advocating = speaking on individual’s behalf</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling access to jobs and developmental assignments</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brokering = linking individuals who might help one another with careers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career helper activities (derived from previous research)</th>
<th>Potential impact on:</th>
<th>Career shaper category (derived from this research)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career self-concept</td>
<td>Career world-view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career direction/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-judgmental listening</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboratively clarifying goals</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and steps to achieve them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting and confirming =</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>providing support, respect and admiration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging individuals’ views</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of self and the barriers they face</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving feedback on personal</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strengths, weaknesses and potential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving information, e.g. about</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jobs, progression within an</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising, e.g. suggesting appropriate action</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
meaning-making as mediated by social interaction; researchers’ interest in accessing individuals’ world-views; and insights into context as crucial to accessing and interpreting meaning. Central here is the view that meaning-making is a negotiated process in which certain interpretations are privileged, and others eclipsed, thus reinforcing, challenging or sometimes transforming what is seen as ‘natural’ and ‘real’. From such a perspective, career is seen as social practice, constituted by actors themselves in and through their relationships with others, and as they move through time and space. It is an iterative and on-going process.

As Cohen et al. (2004) suggest, we need methods that illuminate the dynamic and sometimes contradictory social and cultural contexts in which careers are enacted, that elucidate the power relations played out between actors in these settings, and more generally that shed insight into the relationship between individual agency and the social structures in which they are situated. In their view, story-based research enables such understandings. As Cohen and Mallon (2001: 65) put it: ‘Narratives provide insights into individual sense-making. Through such insights, the story-based researcher can build a rich, complex, multi-faceted, and integrated picture of career phenomena from the perspective of situated individuals.’ Likewise in this study, our life story method enabled insights into participants whose voices had, until this point, been eclipsed within the literature on career helpers, providing access to their understandings of how others had impacted on their careers, and more generally eliciting their tacit and implicit theories about this process (Jones, 1983).

A total of 28 participants from six organizations based in the Midlands of England were selected using purposive sampling (Polkinghorne, 2005). Participating organizations offered internal development opportunities and some form of career help to their employees. A small hotel (a member of a chain); a pharmaceutical company; a general hospital; a car manufacturer; a weighing machine servicing company; and a small precision engineering company agreed to help us to recruit participants. We invited volunteers who had experienced career help from people in their workplace and had opportunities to develop their careers through projects, or lateral or vertical moves. This leads to an important observation: although our respondents did talk a lot about people who helped with their careers, there were also some references to i) those who tried to help but failed, and ii) those who could have helped but chose not to, or didn’t spot the opportunity. Therefore, although most of our data are about help (and we sometimes refer to help in our commentary), for the most part we use the term shapers, as defined earlier. This is in recognition that these people were perceived to have influenced the course of our respondents’ careers, for better or (occasionally) worse.
At the time of the interviews, participants were employed in a range of occupations including nursing, engineering, hospitality, administration, personnel, manufacturing production and scientific experimentation. Their job titles included Engineering Technician, Health Care Assistant, Hotel and Conference Steward, Production Operative, and Clinical Trials Management Systems Co-ordinator. Participants were aged between 18 and 50. Four were less than 20, 11 in their 20s, nine in their 30s, and four in their 40s. Sixteen were men and 12 were women. The sample included one member of a minority ethnic group. We aimed for diversity in terms of age, organization and occupation, and approximately equal numbers of men and women. Our assumption was that this would maximize the likelihood of accessing variation and highlight any common core of experience more than a homogeneous sample would (Polkinghorne, 2005). In turn, this would promote external validity of the findings and theoretical propositions. Ethnic diversity was not among our sampling criteria: ethnicity would add a dimension worthy of specific investigation beyond the parameters of our study.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews averaging about an hour elicited participants’ accounts of their careers from school-leaving to present day. Describing encounters with helpers in the context of preceding and subsequent events enabled participants to recall and identify significant career helpers and the role played by helpers in shaping their careers (what was seen by participants as ‘shaping’ will be discussed in the following section). The interview provided an occasion to reflect on the meaning of encounters with career shapers (Polkinghorne, 2005). Participants were assured in writing and at the beginning of the interview of their anonymity, that quotes would not be attributed to them by name and that any reports to their employing organization would be generalized. Pseudonyms are used in the results reported below.

When qualitative interviews are used to gather data, internal validity is heavily dependent on the interviewer’s skill. In this study interviews were conducted by a qualified careers adviser (the first author) with experience of interviewing in a wide range of guidance and research contexts. The interviewer took steps to establish rapport with participants, paid attention to body language and explored, rather than made assumptions about, language and meaning. Open questions and probing techniques were used as appropriate. She sought to verify her interpretations during the course of each interview by offering tentative summaries and inviting participants to challenge or confirm her understanding.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. For each participant a narrative account or career story was constructed so as to highlight ongoing
relationships and specific encounters that participants perceived as shaping their career aspirations, direction or action. These accounts preserved the integrity of the career stories and highlighted and contextualized key themes. Interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic approach to identify common and/or recurrent career shaper actions and interactions as they were described within and between different career stories. It is important to reiterate that, consistent with our constructionist perspective, our concern here is not about what shaped participants’ careers in some objective sense, but rather what they described as consequential for their careers in the course of telling their career stories. Thematic analysis began with total immersion in the transcripts, and then involved: identifying, grouping and classifying meaningful statements; listing and describing focal themes; describing and refining categories; allocating codes; and generating a master list of codes. Data were revisited throughout the process in order to check, clarify and refine the categories. Internal validity of data analysis was strengthened by the use of constant comparative method (Silverman, 2000). Categories and concepts were progressively extended and refined (Reason & Rowan, 1981) by starting with small sections of data and moving to progressively larger ones in order to test emerging categories and theoretical ideas.

The process of developing the categories empirically involved initial analysis of the first five interviews conducted, highlighting data segments referring to career shapers and influential encounters, and the construction of a tentative list of themes. This list was progressively developed and refined, and early transcripts revisited as additional transcripts were analysed. Once all transcripts had been analysed in this way, all statements pertaining to each theme were grouped and read as a body to confirm or disconfirm common features and to distinguish between categories. Some statements were then discarded or re-categorized and initial categories refined as overlapping and obsolete categories were identified. Some initial categories were later amalgamated because we concluded that they exemplified a shared theme. For example, initial categories included sponsor, advocate and conduit, which were later amalgamated and then relabelled ‘intermediary’ to encapsulate the source data.

Final categories were derived through reiterating this process and by revisiting the interview transcripts and narratives to clarify meaning and contextualize statements. The interviewer discussed a number of interview tapes and transcripts with a second researcher to gain a different perspective and to debate interpretations. To promote external validity, we identified consistencies and differences in findings, interpretations and constructs from other studies (Hartley, 1994; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Reason & Rowan, 1981).
Results and empirical development of the typology

We identified five categories of career shaper: adviser, informant, witness, gatekeeper and intermediary. Participants typically reported encountering at least one person who shaped their career in different ways, and they appeared to value different categories of career shaper. Consistent with Kram (1986), some reported having a constellation of helping relationships. In some instances the same person featured in different categories at a single point in time, sequentially or in the context of an ongoing relationship. Several participants expressed regret at the absence of helping relationships at particular times, or a wish for specific types of helping relationships with their line managers or with experts in their occupational area.

Below we describe each of the five shaper categories in turn using data segments to clarify and illustrate. These are contextualized to show participants’ perceptions of their career at the time of the encounter and their interpretation of the impact of the encounter.

Advisers

We applied the label ‘advisers’ to shapers who offered opinions, suggestions or recommendations that participants reported as having shaped their careers. The adviser group includes professional career advisers, managers, colleagues, family members and friends who participants saw as helping them to clarify their career direction and/or take action in pursuit of a career idea or aim. Advisers had considerable impact on participants’ career-world views but seemingly little on their career self-concepts. Their impact was profound in some cases. Belinda, who had left an unsatisfactory job as a trainee accountant, approached an employment agency for help in finding temporary auditing work while trying to decide whether to pursue a teaching career:

I needed to work for most of another year and I went to see this lady and I think it was really her who sort of put it for me that if I had sort of skills like typing and word processing I’d pick up a job really quickly [. . .] I’d keep myself employed. And I think it was really on her advice that I did do that.

Subsequently, Belinda ‘changed direction completely’, funded herself through a secretarial course and started temporary work through an employment agency. She seems to have acted on her adviser’s interpretation of labour market contingency, rather than being attracted to the work per se.
That is, the employment consultant played a part in changing her career world-view and her actions, but left her career self-concept intact. According to Belinda, following this advice initiated a chain of events that led her to a responsible permanent position in a company where she had previously been a temporary worker. From an external perspective, it seems likely that many other factors contributed to her career path, not least her interest in and aptitude for the work, and her willingness to take advantage of opportunities.

However, encounters with advisers were not always perceived as guiding participants in a satisfying career direction, particularly when their recommendations did not resonate with a participant’s self-concept. Prakash, a production operative, regarded the careers interview he had at school as pivotal in shaping an unsatisfactory career trajectory:

He [the careers adviser] was saying that [. . .] that I should apply for a technician engineering place [. . .] I wasn’t really into my maths and science. I was more like business roles and you know like marketing and stuff [. . .] that was the crucial point [. . .] If I’d made the right choice then, maybe I’d be a lot happier with what I’m doing now [. . .] I was guided the wrong path . . .

Prakash followed this advice, but after struggling with the work, left and successfully completed a business studies course. Rather than continuing his studies or persevering in his search for employment in his preferred line of work, Prakash was lured by the high wages on a car assembly line where he felt frustrated and unhappy. From Prakash’s perspective, this negative outcome was a consequence of acting on the adviser’s career world-view without being able to relate to that view or changing his career self-concept.

While adviser impact on career direction was often associated with times of choice, participants also described encounters with advisers who enabled them to take action in pursuit of their already preferred career direction. Based on their knowledge of specific occupations and organizational contexts, advisers suggested how participants could expand their work experience, improve their skills and develop appropriate job search techniques. For example, Gayle, an outpatient health care assistant, aspired to qualify as a nurse but first needed experience of working on the hospital wards. Her line manager suggested that she did this by supplementing her day job with agency work. By following this advice, Gayle was able to sample work on different wards and secured a full-time job in orthopaedics while she sought funding to train as a registered nurse.
As in the case of career direction, not all advice about career action was positive. Neil, a production operative, reported being discouraged by college staff when he enquired about extending his qualifications:

I did make enquiries about HNC, ONC [UK educational qualifications] and the people I talked to at the colleges were saying, [. . .] ‘it will be a long, drawn out affair. You know it’ll take you up to at least when you’re 40’ and this was when I was 32 [. . .] so that initially put me off [. . .] I thought, ‘okay. I’ll see if I can work my way in at the company I’d just joined’.

In this case, Neil retained his self-belief and this career self-concept and he later registered for a degree course in engineering.

Informants

Shapers categorized as informants provided information about job vacancies and insight into occupations without intentionally promoting a particular point of view or seeking to influence participants. Consistent with our constructionist approach, this is not to deny the possibility that informants had hidden agendas, or to claim that informant knowledge is neutral. Informants were commonly friends, family, managers, colleagues and training staff. Only a few professional careers advisers were mentioned in this role.

Within the context of participants’ career and life stories, the impact of securing a new job was sometimes perceived as far-reaching, affecting participants’ career, occupation and even their personal lives. Ron, an engineering technician, described how a professional contact had drawn his attention to a vacancy at a time when his marriage was under strain because of long working hours and absences from home. Although he was not looking for a new job, timing and good employment conditions encouraged Ron to apply for the post, with successful outcomes in career and marital terms. Derek’s career was characterized by a series of low-skilled jobs. Whilst suggesting that his job choices were influenced by the disadvantage of dyslexia, Derek also attributed his frequent job changing to his mother and his friends who kept him informed of vacancies, which served to perpetuate his ‘transitory’ (Driver, 1982) or ‘cycling’ career pattern (Marshall, 1989).

However, in the stories we heard, insights into occupations seemed to have a greater impact on participants’ careers than vacancy information. The richest and most illuminating descriptions were of encounters with informal shapers who had first-hand knowledge of an occupational area or workplace.
In some cases an opportune encounter with a helpful informant initiated a turning point in a participant’s career – in particular impacting on the ways in which they saw themselves at work. Two examples show how the information provided during such encounters were seen as shaping participants’ career self-concept and subsequently their career direction. While considering her post-school direction, Sally encountered a family friend who introduced her to work in physiological measurements:

I wanted to be a policewoman. Either a policewoman or working in television as a sort of engineer. So it all sort of got changed [...] I actually got into this work because my parents knew the cardiac consultant at [...] and he happened to mention would I be interested in this sort of work [...] I had my eyes opened because I just really thought hospitals was doctors and nurses because that’s all that we’d ever been told at school.

After a week of ‘shadowing’ a physiological measurements technician, Sally decided to apply for training in this area.

Similarly, at a time when he was feeling frustrated by poor pay and his limited prospects as a veterinary nurse, Peter gained an understanding of animal technology from a friend and former colleague:

One of the girls in particular that I worked with as a veterinary nurse [...] she left to go and work [...] as an animal technician. We were very good friends and probably in that next sort of two and a half years I learned an awful lot more about the type of work that she did and knowing the type of person she was as well as, you know, the type of person I was, realized that, you know, I could probably enjoy that type of work as well . . .

Through his friend Peter found out that he would earn more and have better prospects as an animal technician. More importantly perhaps, he revised his view of animal technology and, partly because he could identify closely with his informant, revised his career self-concept. Subsequently, Peter secured a job as an animal technician and embarked on the training required for the role.

Witnesses

The term ‘witness’ is derived from Young and Rodgers (1997) and refers to shapers who communicate their perceptions of participants’ skills and
personal qualities, both their weaknesses and their strengths. Witnesses were commonly managers, although education and training professionals, colleagues, family members and HR personnel were also mentioned. These shapers conveyed their views of participants in relation to careers and played a part in shaping participants’ career self-concepts, which in turn affected participants’ career direction and/or aspirations. For example, participants raised their career aspirations as a result of greater belief in their capacity to take on unfamiliar roles that often provided challenges to their former career self-concept.

Hal, frustrated by his lack of advancement at work, began to consider a career in IT after being described by his tutor as a ‘star student’. Having ‘retired’ at the age of 40 from a job as a bank cashier, Pauline accepted a post as a temporary events administrator in a hotel and later a promotion to the position of wedding co-ordinator after her managers spotted her potential:

I mean obviously people recognized something in there that I probably don’t recognize [. . .] it was with the customers and my relationship with the customers that came over [. . .] she [the hotel manager] quite soon recognized that I would probably be good with weddings . . .

Hal and Pauline illustrate how positive feedback opened up new perspectives, challenged participants’ career self-concept and suggested different possibilities. They also show the importance of timing, occurring as they did when participants were receptive to new ideas and seeking or feeling ready for change.

Unlike other career shapers, witnesses could also have an impact on the level of the recipient’s career aspirations. Jill, who described herself as lacking in confidence and ambition, was encouraged by her line manager to apply for a more responsible post.

. . . I think she [line manager] saw something in me that I didn’t see myself. So really I’ve got her to thank for that because she [. . .]. Encouraged me to see probable qualities that I couldn’t believe were there [. . .] She very much wanted me to move forward [. . .] she gave me confidence [. . .] and said, ‘you know, you can do this. I know you can do this’. And that’s all you ever need to hear, isn’t it, if you’re lacking in confidence.

Jill began to see herself in this light and described how she then progressed ‘naturally’. Positive feedback also motivated participants in their
existing jobs and gave them the confidence to take on greater responsibilities. For example, Belinda reported working ‘very hard’ for her line manager who:

... thought I was really, really good. He thought I was the best secretary he’d ever worked with and he... always used to think that I was perhaps a bit too intelligent to work in the role I was in, which I’m not saying is actually right, but I think I have a lot about me that perhaps... a lot of potential that could have been tapped. I think he thought I should have been doing something more of a graduate standard and it wasn’t.

Her line manager’s ‘witnessing’ made Belinda much more aware of her strengths, and served to bolster her self-confidence – stimulating a marked change in her career self-concept.

Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers are distinguished from other categories of shaper by their power to provide or deny access to jobs, internal promotions or developmental opportunities. Proactive gatekeepers approached participants with offers of jobs, promotions or developmental tasks, and were commonly associated with shaping participants’ career direction. Responsive gatekeepers acted positively (or negatively) to requests for help in accessing jobs, promotions or developmental opportunities and were associated with shaping career action. Gatekeepers provided opportunities for participants to test and revise, or pursue their career self-concept. Jill was working in a shoe shop when a friend invited her to be the director of field sales in his newly formed company. Through her experiences in this new job, she began to see herself in an administrative role and to question her ability as a saleswoman. In other words, she began to revise her career self-concept.

Many participants identified gatekeepers as enabling or denying access to developmental opportunities that provided challenge and/or new skills. The most striking were stories told by Belinda and Yvonne who credited their managers with playing a significant part in their career success. Belinda said of one boss:

He was always trying to push me into doing different things. [...] any opportunities that came up in the department

When her boss left and was not replaced, Belinda was without a job until the intervention of a deputy director who (apparently) circumvented equal opportunities and conventional selection procedures in order to recruit Belinda:
I was headhunted by the Deputy Director of the site, who – I’m sure it was a move that was perhaps not exactly kosher, but he basically side . . . sort of moved his secretary to another role and he put me in her job.

This move – presumably in combination with Belinda’s abilities – resulted in rapid promotion from departmental secretary to a senior secretarial position in which she supervised 35 secretaries.

Yvonne, an HR coordinator, claimed to have secured five of her 14 jobs through gatekeepers who invited her to join their organizations. For example:

. . . then one of the guys who I’d worked for at the first firm was then setting up a firm of solicitors together with a colleague of his and I was contacted to say, you know, ‘Would you fancy coming and helping us set it up?’ So I thought about it and I thought, Hmm, well, you know, that’s another angle that you don’t really get much of an opportunity to do . . .

Responsive gatekeepers enabled career action that led to a change of direction. For example, when Karen wanted to transfer from hotel housekeeping to reception, the hotel manager arranged for her to be a supernumerary member of the reception team:

Got me a job on Reception really! I got on there because I’d done all the training at first and there was quite a lot of staff in Reception at that point. So I wasn’t really needed there. They didn’t really need an extra person, but he got it so I could actually go in and work in there full-time.

As suggested above, participants also reported encountering ‘hindering’ gatekeepers who failed to respond or reacted unhelpfully to requests for career help and were perceived as blocking progression or development. For example, reporting on the last of several unsuccessful attempts to secure a promotional job, Hal concluded:

I was confident to get it [supervisor’s job], but there’s just this one stepping stone [. . .] the monitor on the zone where the job is coming up was very, very pally with the manager, who sits in on the interview. Now if that manager wants that person, he has that person. And I know for a fact he didn’t have his NEBS [another relevant qualification].
Rather than questioning his abilities or revising his career self-view, Hal attributed his lack of success to managerial power. He replaced his previously held career world-view in which appointments were meritocratic – dependent on personal ability and qualifications, with the view that progression was political – dependent on social networks from which he was excluded.

**Intermediaries**

Intermediaries exerted their influence with another person (usually a gatekeeper) on the participant’s behalf. Unlike gatekeepers, they lacked the power to enable or deny access to opportunities. Their influence was derived from their social or organizational position and they usually exerted their influence using informal social systems to circumvent formal ones. Many participants expressed a generalized belief in the role of intermediaries, with rather fewer describing actual experiences of intermediary action. This suggests that intermediaries were a feature of participants’ generalized career world-view. Most intermediaries were identified as managers, although colleagues and family members were also mentioned.

Intermediaries were credited with shaping participants’ career direction and career action. Fred described how the intervention of a former colleague had resulted in a significant change in career direction:

> ... he rang me up completely out of the blue and said, ‘Do you want a job?’ ... If you want to, I’ll arrange for an interview and get the area manager to have a talk with you if you’re interested.’ ... I wasn’t looking for a move, but it was attractively put to me that, you know, if you come you’ll get a better area, you get a better car, you get better wages, there’s more chance of progression, supervisor’s role, area manager, this and that.

By accepting this offer of help, Fred secured a new job with development opportunities and came to be recognized as an ‘unofficial expert’. This single interaction with an intermediary did not alone secure the post for Fred. Other events, along with Fred’s qualities and skills, his subsequent interactions with colleagues and customers and the company’s situation are all likely to have played a part in his career path.

More commonly participants expressed the *belief* that someone had promoted their interests but lacked the evidence to support their beliefs. Richard, an engineering technician, suspected that his uncle (who was also a line manager and department head) helped him to secure a permanent job in the Machine Tools department at the end of his apprenticeship:
I was moved into Machine Tools. I don’t exactly know why. I think maybe my uncle had had some influence in it because this – well there’s always rumours going about – that they want me to take over and do some design work like what [his uncle] does because he’s – I think he’s only got about five years left till, you know, he might come up to retirement or choose early retirement or whatever.

At the time Richard wanted to work in another department where he believed a job had been earmarked for him, and he was concerned about the prospect of working in the same department as his uncle. As he came to enjoy his new job, identify possibilities for career development and to value his uncle as a role model, Richard began to see his uncle’s intervention as ‘a big favour’. In Richard’s case, as in the others, intermediaries were perceived as playing a part in easing entry into new career contexts, sometimes ones that participants had not particularly sought. In so doing, intermediaries offered participants the opportunity to review and revise their career self-views.

The absence of intermediaries to influence and negotiate formal recruitment and development systems was identified by several participants as a constraint on their career progression. The nuances of the influencing process were implied rather than explicitly expressed, possibly because the subtleties were unclear to the participants themselves. For example, Neil talked about how he was transferred to a new coal mine where he lacked family contacts and started ‘from the bottom again’:

With the Coal Board [...] it’s not what you know, it’s who you know. [...] at the time it was all families [...] my family were all in the coal mines and generations and generations and generations of them. Then as I moved to another pit, my family wasn’t there and I hadn’t got all the contacts . . .

Others referred to the ‘buddy buddy system’ and the need for ‘... connections ... somebody who can pull a few strings for you’. In other words, intermediaries could facilitate participants’ entry to new career contexts and progression towards fulfilment of their career self-concept but the lack of shapers in this role acted as a constraining force.

**The typology of career shapers**

Based on these findings, we have developed a conceptual framework or typology (Ackroyd & Hughes, 1992) of career shapers that has practical
applications for careers advisers, individuals and workplace staff who wish to play a part in helping others with their career development. The typology of shapers distinguishes between the categories in terms of action, relationships with individuals and social structure. By social structure we mean: ‘... characteristics of the society or organisation, including its members, that limit access to or opportunities in the occupational and/or organisational environment’ (Fitzgerald & Betz, 1994: 107). We contend that social systems can enable as well as constrain agency. An individual’s position in a social structure affects his or her power, access to particular career opportunities (on behalf of self or others) and, at the level of meaning-making, his or her career world-view. The typology is summarized in Table 2.

The typology shows how different shaper categories affect individuals’ career self-concept and career world-view; and their career aspirations, career direction and career action. As in Table 1, we are highlighting the most direct effects: we acknowledge that these might well subsequently lead to other changes. The categories can be broadly defined and distinguished by their roles in providing: suggestions (advisers), knowledge (informants), feedback (witnesses), opportunities (gatekeepers), or by intervening with others (intermediaries). Career shapers played a part in shaping participants’ career self-concepts and career world-views. This is not to suggest a direct causal link in which a single encounter initiates a change in the participant’s conceptual framework. Rather, participants perceive, interpret and construct their own understandings of the world from their encounters and interactions. Importantly, we stress that encounters do not always result in revisions to career self-concept or career world-view, but might instead reinforce existing ones.

Advisers conveyed their career world-views of organizations, occupations and the wider world of work, which participants rejected, accepted and/or deployed to revise or confirm their career world-views. Revised or reaffirmed career world-views then shaped participants’ choice of career direction and pursuit of expression of their career self-concept. Although the terminology might suggest a similarity, our adviser category cannot be easily compared with Kram’s (1986) mentoring functions or Shapiro and Farrow’s (1988) general helper functions, in part because the participants in those studies held managerial positions, had clear career goals and valued mentors who facilitated progress towards those goals. Rather in our study it was help with their actual career direction that some of our participants valued. Indeed, our participants were more reminiscent of those participating in the career discussions conducted by Kidd and her colleagues (2004) who valued directive advice and reported that career discussions helped them to clarify future career direction, and of the planning roles identified by Leibowitz and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shaper category</th>
<th>Impact on:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adviser</td>
<td>Considerable impact. May reaffirm or prompt revision of individual’s career world-view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informant</td>
<td>In some cases initiated a revision of career self-concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness</td>
<td>Reinforces or challenges career self-concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeeper</td>
<td>Enables individuals to test and revise their career self-concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediary</td>
<td>May encourage reflection on career self-concept, although this is not explicit.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Schlossberg (1981). In both cases, suggestions about accessing unfamiliar career contexts enabled individuals to pursue a career idea or aim. However, in neither of those two studies is there a focus on participants’ underlying understandings of career, nor on their self-concepts as career actors.

Informants differed from advisers in that they conveyed knowledge about the content of job vacancies, organizations, occupations and the world of work, rather than providing insights into how career development happens. Their immediate impact on career world-view was therefore confined to the Parsonian notion of knowledge of occupational requirements, and not how career processes work. Participants’ perceptions of the temporal and personal relevance of such information affected their consequential action. In some cases new occupational knowledge introduced participants to the possibility of new career self-concepts, and encouraged them to revise their career self-concepts and their career direction. The primary role of informants and advisers was to convey knowledge of the social structures to which they had access. Interestingly, frameworks for understanding frequently conflate advice and information (e.g. Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1981; Wilson & Jackson, 1998). However, the helping encounters our participants described distinguish between information and advice. Given our critique of researcher-defined and imposed frameworks, and our interest in participants’ situated understanding, this is a salient distinction.

Witnesses offered general feedback on participants’ work, and specific feedback about their skills and personal qualities. The emphasis here is on the interrelationship between witness and participant, with the relationship between witness and social structure being less marked. Witnesses reinforced and challenged participants’ career self-concepts, stimulated ideas about different career self-concepts, and raised, affirmed or subdued their career aspirations. In contrast to studies of mentoring (Kram, 1986, 1988) and appraising (Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1981; UDACE, 1986), our conceptualization of the witness is more explicit with respect to the link between witnesses and receivers’ self-concepts. In addition, our participants spoke at some length about the contribution of informal witnesses who were familiar with their daily lives, not just their work.

Encounters between shapers and participants are central to the adviser, informant and witness categories described above, whereas the relationship between shapers and social systems comes to the fore in the gatekeeper and intermediary roles. Gatekeepers and intermediaries used formal and informal systems to enable or deny participants’ access to new career contexts. By exerting their power, gatekeepers facilitated or obstructed access to jobs, promotions and development opportunities. Notably, writers taking a careers guidance or counselling perspective (Rogers, 1951; Wilson & Jackson, 1998),
have tended to neglect this political dimension. Access to new career contexts enabled participants to test and revise their career self-concepts, or to pursue their career self-concepts. Proactive gatekeepers were commonly associated with shaping participants’ career direction and responsive ones with shaping career action.

Intermediaries were seen to use their influence to intervene with powerful gatekeepers on participants’ behalf. Notably, the influence of intermediaries was commonly perceived to be covert. Intermediaries facilitated participant access to new career opportunities, which might have encouraged reflection on their career self-concept, although this is not explicit. They played an indirect part in shaping participants’ career direction and their career action in pursuit of their career self-concepts. Both gatekeepers and intermediaries appeared to shape not only how participants saw themselves at work, but also their career world-view, especially their understandings of the rules of the career game. Notably, these two roles are rarely delineated in the literature. However, in our accounts the differences were salient. Although both were associated with political dimensions of career building, gatekeepers generally acted from positions of status, in which their power was formally ascribed, while intermediaries tended to exert influence through much more covert, informal networks. In the stories we heard, being able to distinguish between people who can confer opportunities and those who are in a position to facilitate access to opportunities might affect people’s career strategies and their choices of people from whom they seek help.

How do our shaper categories map onto previously identified forms of career shaping activity? In the right-hand part of Table 1 we present how each of the activities derived from existing research, is (or is not), reflected in shaper categories. Naturally, some of the mappings are very straightforward – for example, witnessing often provides acceptance and confirmation. However, there are three more subtle points to be made. First, it is notable that both the ‘soft’ non-directive counselling end and the ‘hard’ coaching end of helping activities are less evident in our shaper categories than they are in the list of helping activities derived from past research. This might signal that people in non-managerial occupations are less often offered these relatively labour-intensive forms of help than people higher up the occupational hierarchy. It might also mean that our respondents did not perceive such activities as relevant to their career, and therefore did not mention them in interview.

Second, and related to the first point, much of the help our respondents described was of a very practical kind. It did not emphasize long reflection, and was often quite directive. This is rather contrary to much formal careers guidance practice that frequently takes a non-directive approach. Our data
do not demonstrate that this is unhelpful, but they do serve as a reminder that people often perceive directive, practical activity to be helpful. Third, some helping activities are more prominent in our shaper categories than in past research. Most notably, the rather unglamorous activity of giving information is just one of 14 helping activities we identified in existing research, but on its own it formed one of our five shaper categories. This alerts us to the danger of over-complicating analyses of career help. A significant part of it is the giving of information, sometimes in passing during a casual conversation.

Discussion

Our study offers four key contributions. The first three relate to our understanding of how others can shape our careers, and the fourth concerns implications for practice. First, we argue that our typology serves to bridge the gap between organizational and career guidance perspectives. In their stories, our participants identified a whole range of career shaping encounters from the most formal organizational and guidance settings to the most informal, personal and domestic ones, and they situated them within their ongoing career development. With the exception of Wilson and Jackson (1998), other researchers have not developed categories based on interactions with a range of shapers. Particularly notable in our analysis is the important role played by informal shapers, who in the literature tend to be eclipsed by their more ‘official’ counterparts. By taking a story-based approach, our research went beyond formal, designated ‘helping’ activities, to those shaping encounters with workers, friends, family members, and so forth, that emerged as part-and-parcel of participants’ lived day-to-day experiences. Furthermore, in the course of their accounts they reflected on the significance of these encounters as their careers unfolded, both in terms of their pictures of themselves at work (their career self-views), and also their tacit theories about the rules of the career game more generally (their career world-view). Because individuals use their theories as the basis for action, understanding them should enhance the provision of effective and valued career help. We see this capacity for elucidating, as Musson puts it, ‘the culture system of shared meaning in which the individual is located’ (1998: 10), as one of the strengths of story-based careers research.

Our second contribution relates to the fact that the life story method allows full attention to agentic, relational and structural aspects of careers (see Cohen & Mallon, 2001). While some of the encounters participants identified (with advisers, informants and witnesses) were described in terms
of personal relationships between the participants and career helpers who helped to shape individual action, others (with gatekeepers and intermediaries) were valued because of their perceived access to significant social structures. Thus, our data highlight how shaping encounters served as a vehicle through which participants negotiated with and navigated through the structural environments in which they were situated.

Third, our focus on non-managerial employees has provided insights into the experiences of people who have rarely been considered in research and their perceptions of the role of others in career development. This has not necessarily resulted in the identification of new and different shaping categories, but rather alternative ways of making sense of existing concepts. The adviser category is a case in point. Whereas there are similarities between this concept and, say, Kram’s (1986) notion of mentoring, her interest was in how mentors can help managers achieve their career goals. However, what emerged in our data was the important role advisers play in helping participants to reflect on their career direction. The key point here is that we cannot assume that how relatively privileged and high status career actors make sense of experiences of career help can be extended unproblematically to other groups.

Finally, turning to implications for practice, our typology offers a framework that can be used by careers advisers, line managers and others charged with (or simply concerned about) the career development of clients, staff, colleagues or friends. We believe that our fairly simple five-fold categorization is more generalizable, easier to understand, and more parsimonious than other analyses. Drawing on the typology, shapers can elicit the constellation of possible helpers, identify their own contribution and its boundaries, consider which type(s) of shaper an individual most needs, and guide their search for those in their professional and social circles who might be able to fill gaps. Careers advisers might use this approach to review their current practice, to consider whether they might extend their work to provide other forms of help including the possibility of networking with other potential shapers. Key questions for reflective practice might include: how might I access my clients’ career world-views? Which category(ies) of shaper do I perceive myself to be? Do I categorize my role in the same way as my clients and other stakeholders? How might I address conflicting expectations?

Limitations and future research

Some of the limitations of this study are common to many research projects, particularly those using ideographic method. First, being dependent on access to organizations, the goodwill of HR staff to enable access and the
willingness of individuals to volunteer, limited our control over those who participated. For example, we would have liked more participants employed in low-skilled jobs. This might have generated a wider range of stories, introduced more or different shaper categories, and strengthened claims about transferability.

Second, expectation, selectivity of recall and attribution style might have played a significant part in the data we gathered. For example, expectations that are disappointed (or exceeded) are likely to be more emotive and therefore more memorable than expectations that are merely met. Participants might have recalled only shapers whose role was consistent with their career story (Beike & Landoll, 2000), or whom they found credible (Bosley et al., 2007). Other shapers whose roles did not fit that particular account might have been forgotten. We do not claim that particular encounters or individuals definitely initiated specific changes in participants’ careers, but that participants explained their unfolding careers in the way that we have described.

Third, we acknowledge that our list of shaper categories reflects what our interviewees experienced, not necessarily the full range of possibilities. Possibly missing from our categories is one that reflects the kind of non-directive, active listening activity advocated by many counsellors. We certainly do not claim that this is irrelevant to career help just because it did not feature in our typology.

In suggesting future research, we return to the theme of diversity by proposing similar studies with two specific groups of participants: first employees in jobs requiring low levels of skill and second members of minority ethnic groups. Such studies might generate accounts of different types of helpful experiences grounded in different cultural contexts and contribute to an expansion or review of the shaper categories identified in the current study. Future research might also seek to identify more specifically the role of others perceived as having a detrimental effect on individuals’ careers.

Conclusion

The typology we have proposed illustrates our view of careers as shaped by the complex interplay of career world-views, career self-concepts, internal processes, agency, interactions between individuals and shapers, and between shapers and social structure. We contend that individuals’ abilities and personal qualities, their engagement with career shapers, and their
interpretation and responses to opportunities are all crucial in shaping careers. In other words, we do not intend to present a deterministic career world-view or to imply that individuals are passively moulded by the actions of others. Our typology is distinct in that, unlike other studies in which categorizations are imposed on (typically relatively privileged) research participants, ours was derived from our non-managerial participants’ lived experiences, articulated through the stories they told us.

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