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The protean career: A quarter-century journey[☆]

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Abstract

This is a review of the development of the author's ideas on the protean career. The origins include both personal experience and scholarly inquiry. I first applied the adjective "protean" to careers in 1976, in *Careers in organizations*. It described a career orientation in which the person, not the organization, is in charge, where the person's core values are driving career decisions, and where the main success criteria are subjective (psychological success). This paper traces the link between the protean concept and the context of growing organizational restructuring, decentralization, and globalization. Current research related to the protean concept is discussed, and quandaries to guide future research are presented. The paper concludes with a suggestion for examining situations where people are pursuing their "path with a heart" with the intensity of a *calling*, along with some questions to help researchers self-assess their own career direction, with an assist from Yogi Berra.

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1. Introduction

One of the real treats for me in receiving the Hughes Award last year was having it presented by my dissertation advisor and role model, Ed Schein. In a similar way,

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being introduced by such a good friend and former student, Sam Rabinowitz, also makes this a very personal experience. The sense of “academic family” that we have in our work and community here is a wonderful kind of connection that we all have. It’s always great fun when colleagues get together and play academic genealogy—who is whose father or grandfather, sibling, or cousin, in this small academic world of ours! In this case, Ed would be my “father” in the field and Sam’s “grandfather.”

Also, on another personal note, I’d like to say how much Everett Hughes’ work has inspired me, especially at the beginning of my career. For my dissertation I wanted to study professional socialization, and Ed Schein lent me a copy of Hughes’ and his colleagues’ classic study of medical students, *Boys in white* (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961). That work became my bible, and it required many reminders on Ed’s part to get the book returned after I finished my dissertation! It wasn’t just Hughes’ work that inspired me, but also the way he developed and influenced and collaborated with so many students and colleagues.

2. Lessons about career from my parents

As I thought more about this family metaphor, I realized how important family experiences and family relationships have influenced my thinking about careers. As I think about my ideas on the protean career (that is, a career that is self-determined, driven by personal values rather than organizational rewards, and serving the whole person, family, and “life purpose”), I realize just how much of that thinking came from what I observed and learned from my parents.

My father was trained as an engineer and spent his early career in big organizations in various technical and managerial positions. In his 40s he was doing very well financially in a management consulting firm. However, his main project, with a big US auto company, required that he spend most of his time in Toledo, OH, living at the Toledo Club and coming back home to his family in New Jersey every second weekend. He usually flew home on a flight whose main stop was in Philadelphia, continuing on with a near-empty plane to Newark. In the process he came to know the crew quite well, in their many chats during that quiet Philadelphia-to-Newark leg. One Friday he had to work late and missed the plane, so he took the overnight train, the Red Arrow. He returned home that Saturday to the news that “his” flight had crashed Friday night between Philadelphia and Newark. The only people on board, the members of the crew, had all died.

After that, he quit his job. He restructured his life around the family. He set up a business in technical sales and consulting that he could run out of the house. I remember some summer days when I was a teenager when he would come to me and ask what I wanted to do that day. At first, I’d say that I’d probably play baseball with my friends, but then he’d press me and say, “No, what would you do if you could do anything at all?” To which I’d say something like, “Well, I’d really love to take the boat and go down to the shore and go fishing for the day.” To which he’d say, “Let’s go!” This didn’t happen all the time, but he did give me many days like that.

And my mother had started her career as a nurse at New York's Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in a high-powered neurological research unit. She loved her work and colleagues there. After I came along, when we had moved to a small town in New Jersey, she took a part-time job in a local doctor's office, so she could be home for me after school. And later she stopped working altogether, although she would always identify herself as a nurse.

As part of the career self-assessment process in my courses, I like to ask students to reflect on the messages about work and careers that they received early in life from their parents and families. For myself, these messages from my parents were several:

- Work is an important part of your personal identity.
- You make your own independent choices about what you do; we trust you to have freedom and to be responsible. "Fight your own battles" was an expression I heard a lot.
- You can reinvent yourself and reshape your work and career around family priorities.
- The success that matters is subjective, how satisfied you feel with your life and work, not necessarily how much money or power or fame you have. (They knew then what John Lennon discovered decades later: "Life is what passes by when you're busy making other plans." Or, as my college chaplain, William Sloane Coffin told us at freshman convocation, "Remember, if you choose to enter the rat race, even if you *win* the rat race—you're still a rat!")

I realize now that, not only did these messages lead me to a career in academe (the closest thing I've found yet to being self-employed and still getting a regular pay check), but also they are the original models for me of the protean career.

With this as background, what I'd like to do today is tell you more about my personal journey with the protean career—what the context was when I first wrote about it, where my research took me after that, and where we are now in research on the topic.

3. The need for protean careerists in an ethically challenged business environment

But first, let me say a bit about the need for people to be more protean in our current business environment. While I don't want to diminish the importance of more honest and effective audits of businesses today, in this era of the Enrons and the WorldComs, I think we also need more honest, self-reflective "personal audits." We need individual employees at all levels to have a strong internal "compass" in an ethically challenged business climate. And to empower individuals to be able to act on their values, we need people to have the resources and capability for taking charge of their careers, when the employer doesn't help. And, finally, as a society, we need for all members to grow, achieve, and contribute to their full potential, in ways that serve others, as there are so many needs to be met and so much work to be done. (As I learned from two of my first O.B. teachers, Chris Argyris and Doug McGregor, it *is* possible to integrate the needs of healthy individuals and the goals of effective organizations.)

4. The view from 1976 and the context

My first writing about the protean career was at the end of my 1976 book, *Careers in Organizations*. In the final chapter, I had a section titled, “An emerging view of careers: The protean career.” Other current or emerging issues that were mentioned there were dual-career couples, equal opportunity in careers, the generation gap, the changing definition of success (psychological success), and the need for personal and organizational flexibility.

I described the protean career (vs. the traditional career) as one in which the person, not the organization, is in charge, the core values are freedom and growth, and the main success criteria are subjective (psychological success) vs. objective (position, salary). This protean profile is summarized in Table 1.

What was the environmental context for careers in 1976? Although the prevailing view of careers was still something out of *The Organization Man* (Whyte, 2002), with the stress on upward mobility in organizations, there were the beginnings of a reaction, a counter-trend. There was a strong counter culture (e.g., Reich’s (1995) *The Greening of America*), and the post-war baby boom cohort were just starting their careers, wanting freedom, personal choice, and values expression in their work. The theme of change was definitely in the air. Robert J. Lifton wrote about the “protean style of self-process” as “one of the functional patterns of our day” (Lifton, 1968, p. 17, quoted in Hall, 1976, p. 291). The first edition of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (Bolles, 2003) had just been published in 1970 and was picking up steam. Eugene Jennings was writing about the “mobicentric manager,” and *Psychology Today* had lots of articles about careers. In fact, a companion magazine was introduced to the market, *Careers Today*.

My own consulting work involved helping large organizations (such as A.T.&T., NASA, Mobil, and the large public accounting firms) create self-assessment and career planning processes to enable employees to assume more control over their careers. Even an archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church sponsored a study that Ben Schneider and I did to help give greater voice and control over assignments to parish priests (Hall & Schneider, 1973). (In fact, I’ve wondered recently if these attempts to increase the personal freedom and work satisfaction of priests had been more widespread and more successful whether we might now be seeing a healthier climate in the church.) Thus, the time was one of growing interest in career self-determination and striving for psychological success.

Table 1
The view from 1976 (*Careers in organizations*) (Hall, 1976)

Issue	Protean career	Traditional career
Who’s in charge?	Person	Organization
Core values	Freedom growth	Advancement
Degree of mobility	High	Lower
Success criteria	Psychological success	Position level Salary
Key attitudes	Work satisfaction professional commitment	Organizational commitment

5. What happened after 1976?

The 1980s saw the beginnings of a massive restructuring of the US and world economies. Starting with the recession triggered by the second Mideast oil embargo in 1979, we saw rapid downsizing, restructuring, and layering, in an effort to trim costs and increase efficiency. (I worked on a consulting project to help a US auto company's workers find new career paths, as the firm's hourly work force was cut in half between 1979 and 1980. Ironically, this was the same company where my father was working as a consultant when he quit his job.) As companies in industrialized countries moved jobs to countries with low labor costs and looked for new markets overseas, the process of globalization began. Technology and technological change became a household experience, with the introduction of home computers in the early 1980s. The issue of staying in or leaving an organization became very central. In fact, according to a literature review by Chartrand and Camp, the most frequent topic in research on careers in the 1980s was organizational commitment (Chartrand & Camp, 1991).

In this business environment a protean orientation was a smart adaptation for the individual. Handy (1989), in *The Age of Unreason*, captured this new flexible world of work in his model of the "shamrock organization," with its three clusters of workers (core, part-time, and temporary).

My own research journey paralleled these changes in the economic environment. In the 1960s and '70s my focus was on describing how career processes worked in organizational settings, as the field of organizational careers was just emerging. Then later in the 1970s I was doing more work around career self-assessment, inspired by Shepard's (1984) wonderful work on career and life planning, as well as work on women's career roles and dual-career couples.

In the 1980s, related to the restructuring trend, my work centered on career plateauing. However, by the 1990s it became clear that those who had plateaued were the *fortunate* ones, from an organizational perspective—they had survived. (But in a more holistic life satisfaction sense, one could argue that those who exited and were forced to become more protean were in fact better off.) Thus, in the 1990s much of my writing dealt with changes in the career contract, how groups such as the baby boomers were dealing with unmet expectations, and how employers were managing through and communicating about the "new deal."

And here we are now in the 2000s, and I am studying protean career processes and ways of measuring the protean orientation.

6. What some research is saying about protean careers

Where, then, do we stand in our current understanding of these new career processes? Rousseau (1995) has documented the changes in the employment contract, with the move from a longer-term relational understanding to a shorter-term transactional arrangement. Fascinating empirical data by Arthur, Inkson, and Pringle (1999) show how workers in a rapidly transformed economy (New Zealand) have taken charge and transformed their careers. An interesting comparative study in

France by Cadin, Bender, De Saint Giniez, and Pringle (2001) showed the important ways in which the environmental context affects the way these career processes play themselves out (e.g., more traditional organizational career patterns in France; more self-directed and mobile careers in New Zealand).

Using data on internal and external labor markets, Cappelli (1999, 2002) makes a compelling case for the increase in the free agent model, with companies investing less in education and training and using technology to make internal markets more efficient for employee and employer alike, through tools such as electronic job boards. Higgins (2001) shows us how relational influences, such as career networks—the emergent form of mentoring—are serving as key resources for protean employees. And Gratton, Zaleska, and de Menezes (2002) caution that we still have some organizations, and some individuals, with the traditional organizational career model. And certain groups (such as young males under 40) may be experiencing more freedom and mobility than women and other groups; she also finds that coaching and mentoring help these less advantaged groups.

In an interesting exploration into the nature of protean career changes, Mintz (2003) conducted a study of 25 successful men who made major midlife career transformations. Their goal in making these changes was to achieve “more authentic definitions of self and success,” and “success” was assessed by both the reports of outside evaluators and subjective reports of the participants.

One would assume that people who had made such major career transformations would, as a group, possess a high protean orientation. And, in fact, Mintz’s sample scored significantly above the population mean on a new instrument to measure the protean orientation ($p < .01$). (This instrument is described in the following section.) This group of career-changers was also quite high on a measure of individuation, as well as on several “Big Five” personality measures—extroversion, openness to new experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The biggest differences, comparing this sample to population means, appeared to be on the openness to new experiences dimension. This is consistent with the notion of the protean careerist as one who is a continual learner, always open to new possibilities, viewing the career as a series of *learning cycles* (Hall & Mirvis, 1996).

In the work that my colleagues and I have been doing we are finding that there are two career “metacompetencies” that help equip individuals to be more protean: adaptability and identity (or self-awareness). For example, Briscoe and Hall (1997) have found that the current stress on competency models in many companies may be misplaced, as the world changes too fast for companies to assess people and develop them against a fixed set of competencies. Rather, it is better to develop greater adaptability and self-awareness, which we call “metacompetencies,” as they will equip people to learn from their experience and develop any new competencies on their own.

It is critical, however, for a person to develop *both* of these metacompetencies. Either one without the other can be a problem. If the person has high adaptability and low self-awareness, this is pure reactivity or “chameleon” behavior; the person is not following her own path, but someone else’s. (Herb Shepard’s wonderful story of the lessons of the cormorant provides a good illustration of this condition.) Or maybe, as we go through our life stages, we may not be aware that what was *once* a good fit between identity and

Table 2

Interactive effects of two metacompetencies: Adaptability and self-awareness

<i>Behavioral Responses</i>		<i>Adaptability</i>	
		HI	LO
<i>Self Awareness</i>	HI	PRO-ACTIVITY; “SMART” PERFORMANCE;	Paralysis; Blocking; Avoidance
	LO	Reactivity; Chameleon Behavior	RIGIDITY; PERFORMING TO ORDERS

*(In collaboration with Jon Briscoe
and Robert Schwartzman)*

life/career choices is no longer that, as our identities and lives evolve in different directions. As one middle aged woman put it in a career planning seminar, “Oh, no! I just realized—I let a 20-year-old choose my husband and my career!”

The opposite combination, high self-awareness with low adaptability, could be an example of self-analysis paralysis, where the person is avoiding taking action. And, of course, if the person is low on both, we have a state of rigidity, performing to orders. (See the matrix in Table 2 to illustrate these combinations.) For a full discussion of these ideas, as well as a model of how people become protean, see Briscoe and Hall (2003).

7. A measure of protean orientation

To get at these issues, Jon Briscoe and I are developing an instrument to measure the protean orientation, the Career Orientation Index.¹ In on our preliminary

¹ For people who are interested in using this instrument for research purposes, if they are willing to share the data, a copy may be obtained from Jon Briscoe at Jpbriscoe@aol.com or Douglas Hall at dthall@bu.edu.

analysis we have found two main factors in this measure. One factor (“Values-Driven”) describes the extent to which the person’s career decisions are driven by personal values (e.g., choosing jobs that let a person express important values or be “one’s own person” at work), as opposed to extrinsic factors, such as money, promotion opportunities, or outside job offers. The second factor reflects the extent to which the person feels independent and in charge of his or her career. (One colleague described this attribute as being analogous to sailing, with tacking and other adjustments as personal goals and conditions change, as opposed to moving on a train, with a preset track.)

We have also found that a person’s career orientation appears to be unrelated to gender. In addition, the protean orientation is correlated with relevant experience data, such as job and organizational mobility. And the best single predictor appears to be the number of countries that the person has been in.

Since there has been interest in the relationship between the protean orientation and the boundaryless career, we also developed a scale to measure the person’s perceptions of boundarylessness. We called this the “Boundaryless Mindset.” There was a moderate positive correlation ($r = .34, p < .01$) between the Boundaryless Mindset and the Protean Orientation, suggesting that they are related, but separate, constructs.

8. Some quandaries

Here are some of the questions about the protean career that I have been puzzling over recently, and which I hope we might find some empirical answers to in the next few years.

1. *What is the best way to study protean careers?* Part of this involves the matter of how we operationalize the concept of “protean.” A big part is the old issue of how to study change—or should we even try to? Are in-depth retrospective and cross-sectional methods preferable? Or will there be multiple ways, with methods to be determined by the questions asked?
2. *Is “protean” a trait or a state?* Are people born protean? Or do people become protean as a result of life and career experiences? Or are people born with a certain predilection, which is then shaped by experience? My hunch is that it is both and that people are capable of becoming more protean as a result of learning from career and life events.
3. *How can people experience major career changes and still stay connected to their identities?* Going back to our 2×2 matrix for identity and adaptability, it may often happen that people learn to make major changes in their careers, but they may not change their view of themselves. How can people be helped to make these changes fully protean, so that the new behaviors are also consistent with their personal identities?
4. *What kinds of trigger events create major changes in a career marked by multiple learning cycles?* If careers now unfold in a series of short (3–5 years) learning cycles (Hall, 2002), as opposed to a lifelong career cycle, as I had proposed years ago

(Hall, 1976), what causes the person to move out of a comfortable routine and start explorations that may lead to a career change? What are the *trigger events* that cause a transition from one learning cycle to the next one?

5. *What can organizations do to help people make these protean career changes?* If we are in fact becoming a society of free agents, there may not be that much that an employing organization can in fact do. To keep things simple, I would propose that the critical organizational leverage points are:
 - 5.1. Challenging job assignments,
 - 5.2. Developmental relationships (e.g., career dialogues with a boss, peer, or career coach),
 - 5.3. Formal training and education, and
 - 5.4. Information about future opportunities (e.g., electronic job boards).

9. The protean career and the path with a heart

My favorite article on careers, and the one that probably best captures the spirit of a protean career is Shepard's (1984), "On the realization of human potential: A path with a heart." I was delighted to see that this paper is still reprinted in the latest edition of the Osland, Kolb, and Rubin OB reader. And I felt really honored to see that the reading following "A path with a heart" is the paper that Jonathan Moss and I did on the new protean career contract (Hall & Moss, 1998).

Herb got right to the point in his first paragraph:

"The central issue is a life fully worth living. The test is how you feel each day as you anticipate that day's experience. The same test is the best predictor of health and longevity. It is simple... (Shepard, 1984, p. 175)."

The secret is finding your unique genius, your talents that you love to develop and use. Here's how Shepard defined your genius:

"These are the things that you can now or potentially could do with excellence, which are fulfilling in the doing of them; so fulfilling that if you also get paid to do them, it feels not like compensation, but like a gift (Shepard, 1984, p. 180)."

One way of being protean, which I have been studying in New Zealand with my colleague Marjo Lips-Wiersma, is pursuing one's path with a heart with the intensity of a *calling*. When is your work a calling?

- When you *see* your work as a calling (an invitation to which you choose to respond),
- When this work serves a *community* (not just self and family),
- When career decision involves *discernment* (listening, deep reflection, prayer), to know the right path,
- When it engages your quintessential self or "genius," and
- When you are using your gifts ("charisms") as a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (Weiss, Skelley, Hall, & Haughey, 2003).

Or, as Buechner (1973, p. 95) described it, your calling or vocation is "... the place... where your deep gladness and the world's hunger meet."

What Marjo and I are doing in New Zealand is examining how protean career processes operate in a changing societal context. In today's world we can't ignore the role of the environment in the career, and New Zealand is a sort of natural laboratory because of the fundamental transformation of the economy in the last decade and a half, from a planned, socialized economy to a free market economy, driven by Britain's shifting ties from the Commonwealth countries to the European Union. In this study we are looking at the causes and effects of changes in career adaptation or identity in an organization that is trying to do the right thing in the area of employee career development. In particular, we are examining when there is alignment between the core self (calling, values) of the person and his or her role behavior.

What are we finding? Here are some tentative themes from our initial interviews:

- Personal alignment and protean orientation seem higher for younger workers than for their older colleagues.
- Self-confidence appears critical for personal alignment and protean orientation.
- Established career routines are hard to break.
- But, hard as it is to make career changes, adaptation seems to be easier than identity change.
- Growing up in a culture with New Zealand's value of self-sufficiency and a "do-it-yourself" attitude seems to facilitate protean change for all age groups.
- The main source of development appears to be not organizational but relational (the team leader).
- Peers and customers are seen as the main sources of support for change and recognition for successful change.
- The main organizational influence on development appears to be novel job assignments (e.g., cross-functional secondments as key trigger events).
- Formal organizational programs for career development do not seem to be viewed by employees as developmental (but rather as "requirements" or "rewards").

Several of these themes are found in the career experiences of Jane, who entered the organization 16 years ago as a Data Entry operator. When she very quickly became bored in her first assignment, she approached her team leader and asked for a change of position. Thus began a confidence cycle that has filled her with a "go get it" attitude. She now admits to needing a change of environment every few years so that she doesn't become "stale," and she has since had 5 or 6 changes of position, in many different units. . . until today, as Team Leader, she is positively brimming with motivation, confidence and enthusiasm and an absolute belief that she will be supported by the organization with any future changes that she undertakes. (Jane's experience is a good example of the model of careers as a series of learning cycles.)

In another project with Ayse Karaevli we are looking at the ways that this variety in career experience can affect not only the individual's career but also the organization, as well. In particular, Ayse is proposing in her dissertation research (Karaevli, 2003) that when organizations pursue a strategy of selecting executives with an eye for difference in background (as well as high potential for performance), this will create a cadre of executives with varied career histories, as well as more diverse top management teams (TMTs). As a result, there will be a higher information processing capability (wider breadth of knowledge, skills, and perspectives) in the top management

team, which will in turn lead to a higher level of organizational adaptation. She is also predicting that these relationships will be strongest in a highly dynamic environment. (This study is another attempt to look across levels in careers research.)

10. Conclusion: Yogi and the flatlanders

In closing, let me appeal for your contributions to research on processes that are counter to the expedient, bottom-line-at-all-costs behaviors that have been dominating our recent headlines. We've heard enough about the "bad guys" who are being led out of their offices in handcuffs. Let us study the "good guys and good gals"—the Meg Whitmans and Herb Kellehers—who exert leadership that brings out the best in people. Let us understand better how people can grow in their awareness of themselves and of the larger community in which they live and work. Let us discover what triggers people to positive change, to generous self-determination. Let us pursue the "path with a heart," in our research and in our lives.

For starters, we can reflect on where we are in our own personal matrix of adaptability and self-awareness (cf., Table 2). Are we in the "chameleon" quadrant (highly adaptive but not thinking so much about how our work reflects our personal values and identity)? Or are we quite self-aware but a bit resistant to change? Or do we make changes where appropriate in ways that are true to our personal sense of self?

To help us with these self-assessments, we might apply what we know about influences on development and ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Have I been undertaking varied projects and assignments over the last few years?
2. Do I have a network of relationships that both challenge me and support my growth?
3. Have I been consciously seeking learning opportunities?
4. And, finally, have I been getting "up on the balcony" and engaging in personal reflection processes (through a journal, a learning log, a diary)?

This last question represents the easiest and cheapest way to pursue your own path with a heart. As baseball legend Yogi Berra pointed out, "You can observe a lot by watching." He went on to explain the wisdom behind this "Yogiism":

"The thing is, I always observed a lot. Even Casey [Stengel] used to call me his 'assistant manager' because I was always observing everything... As a catcher you do a lot of watching. You're the only player who faces his own teammates. You observe the mannerisms and tendencies of opposing hitters and the actions of your pitcher. Observing is learning. If you pay attention, you can learn a lot." (Berra & Kaplan, 2001, p. 66)

The link between this personal development and the development of a healthier organizational environment was clearly stated years ago by Herb Shepard. The "happy little secret" here is that we get a multiplier effect when we support individuals, at a very tender age, in pursuing their own paths with a heart:

"The human infant is a life-loving bundle of energy with a marvelous array of potentialities, and many vulnerabilities. It is readily molded. If it is given a supportive environment, it will

flourish and continue to love its own life and the lives of other. It will grow to express its own gifts and uniqueness, and to find joy in the opportunity for doing so. It will extend these talents to the world and feel gratified from the genuine appreciation of others. In turn, it will appreciate the talents of others and encourage them, too, to realize their own potential and express their uniqueness (Shepard, 1984, p. 175)."

Wouldn't it be satisfying to see empirical proof of such a "virtuous cycle" reported on the front page of the *New York Times*?

But when you stand back and think about what all this means about our choices and our everyday lives, pursuing the path with a heart really *is* simple, as Herb Shepard said. Here's how Jimmie Dale Gilmore of the country group, The Flatlanders, sums it up. This is from his song, "My wildest dreams grow wilder every day":

"I wake up in the morning, and
I go to sleep at night.
Somewhere in between the two
I swear I'll get it right."

Thank you very much for your company in these thoughts—and best wishes for pursuing your own path with a heart!

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