Africa: An Absent Presence in Career Studies

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Chapter 1

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that the context in which an individual operates significantly influences their career development. Consequently, there has been an increase in scholarly interest in the influence of culture and national context on career enactment. Despite this recognition, career dynamics within the African context have received limited attention. This book aims to address this gap by providing a concise review of career literature and arguing that the institutionalist approach is better suited to studying career dynamics in Africa

compared to the culturalist approach. The institutionalist approach is particularly relevant in the study of career dynamics within and across national contexts. It emphasises the role of formal and informal rules and regulations in shaping individual career outcomes. Therefore, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of how career dynamics operate in the African context. This book calls for greater attention to the institutionalist approach to studying career dynamics in Africa, which would contribute to the advancement of career research in this underrepresented empirical site. Overall, this book aims to stimulate further research on careers in the African context, which is a vital yet understudied area. We hope that our contribution will inspire future scholars to explore the nuances of career dynamics in Africa and advance our understanding of this important subject.

Keywords: Career dynamics, Career research, Africa, Institutional theory, Culturalist perspective

Introduction

The domain of career studies has witnessed significant evolution and has become increasingly important in the realm of management research. The descriptive nature of this field encompasses various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, labour economics, anthropology, history, geography, and allied fields, making it a multidisciplinary subject. The interdisciplinary approach of career studies offers scholars the opportunity to acquire comprehensive knowledge from an array of subjects and make valuable contributions to their respective fields. As such, this field has been the focus of much research and policy attention, indicating its expanding significance in the academic and business landscape. Numerous academic disciplines have highlighted the influence of contextual factors and interactions in shaping individual careers (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022). To account for the evolving career landscape, scholars have introduced various terminologies to describe and explain the changing nature of careers. However, the term 'career' is generally defined as "an individual's work-related and other relevant experiences, both inside and outside of organizations that form a unique pattern over the individual's life span" (Baruch and Sullivan, 2009, p. 543).

Over the past five decades, the career literature has flourished, resulting in a broad range of research articles, book chapters, edited volumes, and handbooks that explore a diverse range of approaches within this field. Many scholars have documented the progression of career literature (see McDonald and Hite, 2014; Baruch et al., 2015; Gunz, et al., 2020; Modem et al.,

2022), and therefore, it need not be reviewed here. Nevertheless, this is an opportune moment to reflect on the advancement of career studies, its present status, and future directions in Africa.

Over time, both qualitative and quantitative approaches provide distinct perspectives on the diverse aspects of careers, enhancing our theoretical and empirical comprehension of this complex phenomenon (Richardson et al., 2022; Schreurs et al., 2022). Qualitative research, despite being historically marginalised in the discipline, has become an important addition to career scholarship. It challenges the dominance of positivism and quantitative approaches (Stead et al., 2012). Qualitative research acknowledges the intricate character of individual work experiences, revealing the socially constructed aspect of reality and highlighting emic viewpoints (Cilesiz and Greckhamer, 2020). Over the years, various important topics have emerged in the field of career research. These include career success (e.g. Guan et al., 2019); career shocks (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2021); career sustainability (Schweitzer et al., 2023); women's careers (e.g. Ryan and Morgenroth, 2024); career transitions, adaptability, and change (e.g. Garbe and Duberley, 2019); career calling (Chen et al., 2023); global careers (e.g., Ramsey and Lorenz, 2020) and job loss (e.g. Shepherd and Williams, 2018). These themes have been explored by different researchers and their findings have contributed to our understanding of careers. However, quantitative research design continues to be widely used, particularly in areas like career choice (e.g. Wang et al., 2024) and perceived employability (e.g. Decius et al., 2024), where standardised scales and measures are important for strengthening the relationships within the careers domain (Gore and Minami, 2008).

Historically, career studies literature has been anchored in two primary perspectives. The first, rooted in psychology, posits that "people make careers," focusing on individuals' subjective interpretations of their career circumstances (Derr and Laurent, 1989, p.454; Lent and Brown, 2021). This psychological viewpoint explores how personal values, interests, and skills shape career decision-making and outcomes. Foundational topics explored within this realm encompass vocational personalities, work environments (Holland, 1997), self-development (Gallos, 1989), career anchors (Schein et al., 2023), and career self-efficacy (Hackett and Betz, 1995). In contrast, the sociological perspective, stemming from the Chicago School of Sociology, views careers as "social constructions," suggesting that "careers make people" (Barley, 1989; Edgell and Grantner, 2020). This lens emphasises discernible job patterns and the choices individuals make within institutional and occupational frameworks. While career research draws from diverse theoretical perspectives, these two dominant views have

traditionally framed discussions. Some scholars, such as Savickas (2013) and De Vos et al. (2020), advocate for greater integration and cross-referencing between these perspectives to address their respective individual limitations.

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have become increasingly interested in careers and its implications for various stakeholders, including employers and policymakers. First, this surge is fuelled partly by deep interconnection of global trade and finance, aided by internet-based data sharing and international business travel and migration (Smith and Favell, 2017). Social, organisational, and personal life are becoming increasingly complicated and dynamic because of these new experiences (Syrett and Devine, 2012). The current historic peak of global interdependence demands a rethinking of careers. Mayrhofer et al. (2020) have outlined three foundational pillars for career studies in response to this globalised reality. These include highlighting the contextual integration of careers, prioritising comparative studies across diverse settings, and recognising the influential role of multinational firms and global NGOs in shaping career trajectories. Second, the COVID-19 epidemic has further revealed careers' dynamic character, presenting new challenges and opportunities. Scholars and practitioners are using career shock, resilience, and sustainable career research to navigate the resulting turbulence (Lawrence et al., 2017; Van der Heijden, 2024). Sustainable careers emphasise shared responsibility between individuals and organisations, taking into account lifespan, social circumstances, individual agency, and meaning (De Vos et al., 2020). The emergence of these new career models (e.g., boundaryless, protean) reflect the growing centrality of individuals in managing their careers through self-management activities and indicates a shift away from conventional hierarchical and organizationally constrained careers towards more responsive, flexible and adaptive ones (Tomlinson et al., 2018). Such studies advocate a shift towards greater mobility, voluntary job changes, and preference for subjective interpretations of career achievement (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Tomlinson et al., 2018).

There is also a notable trend in career studies that involves a thorough analysis of careers from cross-cultural or comparative viewpoints (Thomas and Inkson, 2017; Lazarova et al., 2018). This shift signifies a growing recognition that careers are deeply intertwined with broader cultural, economic, and political structures (Khapova et al., 2011; Zafar et al., 2021). As a result, there has been a substantial increase in research on careers that focus on specific countries and compare different nations. This is driven by the understanding that many socioeconomic factors at the macro level have an impact on career outcomes. Nevertheless, despite the current progress, there remains a substantial disparity in the focus given to careers

in countries outside of the Anglo-Saxon world, particularly in the developing African nations. Although there are a few outliers (e.g., Ituma and Simpson, 2009; Parry et al., 2015), the majority of research on careers has primarily concentrated on Western and Anglo countries that share similar economic conditions and cultural values. As a result, our comprehension of career dynamics in different African countries is currently weak, which significantly hinders the advancement of knowledge and theory, particularly in regard to emerging career paradigms and evolving work relationships. The gap mentioned is of utmost importance due to the substantial differences in institutional infrastructures between emerging and industrialised economies (Bu et al., 2024). Studies suggest that Africa's distinct institutional contexts have a significant impact on individual behaviour and organizational management practices (Kamoche et al., 2015; George et al., 2016). The various contextual factors, such as economic uncertainty, political instability, and governance issues, have a significant impact on individual behaviour throughout the continent. This underscores the need for further exploration and understanding of career dynamics in Africa.

Amidst the ongoing globalisation of the world economy, there is a pressing need to deepen our knowledge of career dynamics on a global scale, particularly in regions like Africa that remain relatively understudied. Comprehending career dynamics in the African context is crucial due to its unique characteristics, stemming from its vast political, economic, historical, and societal diversity across 54 independent countries, making it the second largest continent globally. Exploring career studies within Africa holds immense promise for both organizational human resource management and individual career development. Organizational career management (OCM) plays a key role here, encompassing various efforts by companies to nurture employees' career progression, including promotions, salary increments, and leadership transitions (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000; Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012). A robust career management system, integral to human resource management, covers a spectrum of activities such as selection, socialisation, training, and rewards, offering immense benefits for African organizations. As evidenced in comparative career and HRM literature (Bagdadli and Gianecchini, 2019; Zhao et al., 2022), local cultural nuances have substantial impact on management practices, enabling organizations across Africa to tailor career management initiatives to suit their workforce. Through tailored career counselling, succession planning, and career planning workshops, organizations can engage employees in meaningful discussions about their roles, skills, and aspirations, fostering career development and talent retention. Moreover, effective career management systems aid in attracting and retaining top talent, a critical aspect for

organizational survival and competitiveness. Blindly adopting Western-developed career management systems in Africa risks suboptimal outcomes, underscoring the importance of contextual relevance (Barnes et al., 2021). Conducting career studies in Africa offers insights into culturally appropriate career management systems, interventions, and programs, crucial for optimising organizational performance and fostering employee well-being in the region.

From an individual perspective, careers are crucial because they improve people's lives. They can boost social standing (Arnold and Cohen, 2013; Autin et al., 2017), achieve personal goals and aspirations (Barhate and Dirani, 2022), build human capital (Winterheller and Hirt, 2017), and help people grow (Miller, 2023). Career studies assist people understand their career self-concept and make decisions that match their goals. In regions like Africa, where civil service and entrepreneurial organisations are common (Langer et al., 2019), career studies can help people examine their professional motives, values, interests, and abilities. Such self-awareness is important because career self-concept congruence with the work environment is linked to job performance, contentment, and retention, whereas incongruence leads to unhappiness and high turnover (Lau et al., 2020). Clarke (2013) describes the new career orientation as employees taking charge of their careers while receiving career management support (Grimland et al., 2012). Traditional employer-employee relationships have been helpful but shifting competitive dynamics and work values have raised worries about their durability (Rodrigues et al., 2015). Independent career orientations now make it difficult for companies to attract and retain excellent talent. Protean career orientations prioritise work-life balance and job satisfaction, while boundaryless career orientations shift power from organisations to individuals, increasing talent attrition and complicating career management (Rodrigues et al., 2015). In Africa, where hierarchical structures and deference to authority are deeply ingrained in cultural norms, the evolution of career management practices must navigate the delicate balance between tradition and autonomy. As the continent strides forward to catch up with global advancements, there is a critical need for firms to blend traditional organizational hierarchies with initiatives that empower individuals to chart their career paths independently.

Collectively, the African context emerges as a significant yet often overlooked terrain that holds potential to enhance the global discussion on careers, given its distinctive geographical, political, economic, and cultural attributes. Consequently, this book zeroes in on career development within the African context, aiming to furnish a more nuanced and contextually specific understanding of career dynamics in the region. Exploring career dynamics within Africa not only carries profound theoretical implications but also offers practical utility. Such

insights are poised to advance theoretical frameworks while informing the design of contextually appropriate career interventions and programs. Moreover, they serve to disentangle the multifaceted influence of various factors and variables on career trajectories in Africa. The following sections will provide a concise examination of the two dominant theoretical approaches in studies of careers at both the national and international levels.

Key Theoretical Approaches

We begin this section by examining two primary theoretical frameworks—the culturalist and the institutionalist—which hold considerable sway in elucidating disparities in career development at both national and cross-national levels. These influential viewpoints have greatly shaped modern investigations into career dynamics, particularly in non-Western settings, thereby enhancing our comprehension of this domain. Through a proper delineation of these frameworks, we aim to lay the groundwork for future explorations into career development within the African context.

The culturalist approach

The culturalist perspective in career studies relies heavily on theories of national culture differences, treating culture as the primary explanatory variable for understanding how context influences career development. Drawing on seminal works by Hofstede (1980), Triandis (1972), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), and House et al. (2004), this approach views culture as an all-encompassing factor intertwined with economic, legal, and political dimensions (Schwartz, 2013). Within this framework, research frequently adopt either an etic or emic approach. The etic perspective, examining cultural phenomena from an outsider's viewpoint, seeks to identify universal principles across different cultures using standardised measures and quantitative analysis (Leong et al, 2024). Conversely, the emic approach focuses on understanding how indigenous values shape careers within specific cultural contexts, using methods like participant observation and qualitative analysis to gain deeper cultural insights (Galperin et al., 2022). Cross-cultural career studies (e.g. Ramaswami et al., 2014; Briscoe et al, 2021) are good illustrations of this perspective. While this viewpoint has enriched our understanding of careers, it has faced criticism. Ferner and Quintanilla (2002) caution against oversimplified explanations based solely on abstract notions of national cultural values and norms, urging deeper exploration of historical institutional arrangements. Similarly, Savickas (2005) warns against the culturalist perspective's tendency to overlook individual agency and evolving career paths, placing excessive emphasis on cultural determinism to the detriment of

other influential factors. This critique underscores the need for a more balanced consideration of broader institutional influences, prompting the rise of alternative perspectives such as the institutionalist approach that we described below.

The institutionalist approach

Institutional theory is "a theoretical framework that explains the evolution of social structures and processes (rules, norms, etc.) of both individual and organizational actions in society" (Coccia, 2019, p.1). Rooted in two main traditions, it explores the impact of institutional environments on organizational practices and behaviours. Early institutionalists focused on "institutional effect" and isomorphism (Scott, 2004), while neo-institutionalism emphasised institutional change and the role of agency (Scott, 2008). Coccia (2019, p.1) defined institutional change as "the evolution of institutions, considered as rules and/or expectations that govern human interactions for socioeconomic development of nations". Although institutionalists vary in terms of their emphasis, scholars within this framework argue that organizations operating in similar environments seek legitimacy by adopting prevalent practices, processes, and structures. For instance, Xia et al. (2024) demonstrate how Chinese universities navigate HRM reforms influenced by multiple institutional logics such as socialism, market, and corporation to achieve ambidexterity. This general proposition has been the foundation on which a number of institutional mechanisms have been conceptualised The tendency of organizations to seek homogeneity is explained by mechanisms such as coercive (laws and regulations used for control), mimetic (adoption of success formula) and normative isomorphism (professional norms and standards) as proposed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Expanding upon this seminal work, Scott (2014) suggests that institutions consist of cognitive (shared perceptions), normative (norms and value systems), and regulative (rules and regulation) pillars, which shape individual and organizational actions.

While culture and institution are not viewed as irreconcilable, with culture considered a subset of institutional analysis, Giorgi et al. (2015), in their examination of the relationship between culture and theorizations of identity, institutions, and practices in organization studies, argue that the close association of these three dimensions with culture often results in conceptual slippage, as evidenced by debates in the existing literature. In essence, culture and institutional perspectives are viewed as intertwined but distinct frameworks through which to understand organizational phenomena. While culture emphasizes the shared beliefs, values, and norms within an organization or society, the institutional perspective focuses on the formal and

informal rules, regulations, and practices that shape behaviour and structure within institutions. However, the proximity of these dimensions often blurs the boundaries between them, leading to conceptual ambiguity and theoretical challenges. Scholars grapple with delineating the influence of culture from that of institutions, recognizing that both play critical roles in shaping organizational behaviour and outcomes. Moreover, culture and institutional perspectives are seen as complementary, with the actions of individuals and organizational policies and practices contingent on particular national institutional arrangements, which encompass cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts. Although culturalist perspectives have dominated research on country-level differences in career development, with very few notable exceptions (e.g. Ituma and Simpson, 2009), this paper advocates for a shift towards an institutionalist approach in understanding career dynamics in Africa, which offers a broader perspective to accommodate diverse contextual influences and cross-cultural differences in career development. This shift is essential as the institutionalist perspective provides a richer framework for understanding the impact of context, aligning with contemporary calls for attention to wider institutional factors in career studies (e.g., Afiouni, 2014; Yao et al., 2020).

Over the last ten years, there has been a significant increase in research dedicated to studying career dynamics, especially in different national contexts, with a strong concentration on Western countries. However, there has been relatively little focus on examining career studies in Africa. In the age of globalisation, where multinational corporations and global non-governmental organisations hold considerable sway, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the ever-changing nature of careers, emerging models such as boundaryless and protean careers are gaining traction. These models reflect the increasing importance of individuals taking charge of their own careers through self-management activities. Within African nations, where cultural norms strongly emphasise hierarchical structures and deference to authority, it is crucial for companies to combine traditional organisational hierarchies with efforts that enable individuals to independently shape their own career trajectories. Hence, it is crucial to broaden the range of career studies beyond conventional Western settings and explore the complexities of career dynamics in other global regions, with a special focus on Africa. Recognising the significant need for both theoretical and empirical research in this emerging discipline, it is crucial to prioritise the investigation and development of career dynamics in Africa in order to achieve equal understanding of career phenomena across different regions. This book endeavours to offer insights that can stimulate more research efforts in the field of African

career studies, ultimately promoting a more nuanced comprehension of career phenomena on a global scale.

Summary of Contributions

This book aims to contribute to cross-cultural research on the subject of career dynamics by offering an African perspective. The subsequent chapters of this book employ a wide range of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence to clarify various aspects of career dynamics. In the upcoming chapters, readers will explore the unique circumstances across a wide selection of African countries, uncovering historical developments and contemporary practices in guidance and counselling, human capital investment, and entrepreneurship. In addition, the book provides a critical analysis of the social dimensions of minimum wage policies and the complexities of flexible work arrangements within workplaces. It illuminates the gender inequalities in leadership and career advancement, with a specific emphasis on the factors that support or hinder the career success of women in countries like South Africa and Nigeria. This text explores the crucial role of knowledge workers in propelling intellectual capital and economic growth in Africa. The book also evaluates the evolving challenges and opportunities within Africa's tourism labour market, providing valuable information on upcoming patterns and job chances around the continent. The book concludes by reflecting on the current state of career research in Africa. Drawing upon insights gleaned from preceding chapters, the last chapter (Chapter 13) proposes a future research agenda to inform both academic interest and policy making in the careers domain. Through its interdisciplinary approach and empirical analyses, this book serves as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, educators, and practitioners who want to understand and navigate the ever-changing field of careers in Africa.

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