

Understanding careers as translations: the importance of Bruno Latour  
for the study of careers

Peer-reviewed author version

VAN DEN ABEELE, Hannelore (2024) Understanding careers as translations: the importance of Bruno Latour for the study of careers. In: Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management, 19 (2), p. 117-131.

DOI: 10.1108/QROM-09-2023-2595

Handle: <http://hdl.handle.net/1942/42809>

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

**Understanding Careers as Translations: The importance of Bruno Latour for the study of careers**

Structured Abstract

**Purpose** This paper argues that Bruno Latour’s work on translation provides an alternative to dominant anthropocentric, individualistic, and managerial approaches in career studies, by considering careers as precarious effects of networks instead of the implicit assumption of individual strategic career actors in extant career research paradigms.

**Design/methodology/approach** The article first compares the three main current approaches in studying careers-structural functionalist, interpretivist and critical-illustrated by three exemplary empirical studies. Subsequently, three concepts from the sociology of translation that are relevant for the study of careers are introduced: career making as translating interests, careers as effects of networks, and career action as dislocated and overtaken. Taken together, these three concepts allow us to conceive of careers as practices performed by human and non-human actors. Finally, an example from an ethnographic case study in the field of contemporary art illustrates how a Latourian approach can be used.

**Findings** Latour’s work on translation provides conceptual and methodological tools to investigate career processes and practices in an era of unpredictability.

**Originality/value** The paper introduces Bruno Latour’s work on translation to the study of careers.

**Keywords** Bruno Latour, career studies, translation, paradigm, structural functionalism

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Contemporary labour is defined primarily by uncertainty and complexity. Non-standard forms of work and organization, such as contingent and part-time work, multiple job-holding, project-based forms of organizing, outsourcing and network organizations, have increasingly displaced stable full-time employment in formal organizations (Barley et al., 2017).

Moreover, algorithmic technologies (Fleming, 2017; Curchod et al., 2020; Bartosiak and Modlinski, 2022), platform-mediated work (Gandini, 2019; Pignot, 2023), and remote work (McDonald et al., 2022), etc. have made decision processes more distant and invisible for workers. The increasing flexibility, uncertainty, and impact of technology have had a strong effect on how people develop a career (Sennett, 1998), commonly understood as “the evolving sequence of work related experiences over time” (Arthur et al., 1989: 8). As a result, current career research focuses on how contemporary workers navigate uncertainty, risk, and opportunity towards building *sustainable* careers (Smith, 2010; Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017; Baruch and Sullivan, 2022), stressing individual agency in career experiences. In contemporary career research paradigms, it remains difficult to fully grasp the “turbulent unpredictability” (Smith, 2010) in careers, despite some attempts where unpredictability has been conceptualised as career shocks (Akkermans et al., 2018) or as proximal events (Cohen and Duberley, 2015). Career scholars have pointed to the need to incorporate contextual issues such as change and social space (Collin and Young, 1986; Mayrhofer et al., 2007; Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011; Cohen and Duberley, 2015; Forrier, 2023), factors which are overlooked in most predominant structural functionalist approaches based on a positivist paradigm (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017; Richardson et al., 2022; Forrier, 2023). This approach foregrounds individual strategic human actors, understanding careers as resources for achieving goals. It is criticised as decontextualized, dualistic, and blind for power dynamics, by interpretivist (e.g. Collin and Young, 1986; Cohen et al., 2004) and critical (e.g. Grey, 1994; McKinlay, 2002) approaches within career research. Still, even these approaches adopt anthropocentric individualistic perspectives, rendering them overly agentic, and unable to assess the full complexity in which contemporary careers develop. For this reason, present paper foregrounds a new paradigm based on Latour’s work on translation that is able to account for uncertain contexts, career processes, and the inclusion of non-humans in career research.

Three concepts from Bruno Latour’s work on translation are particularly useful for developing a new paradigm to study careers. First of all, career making can be understood as

*translating interests*. This highlights the ongoing, negotiated, complicated work that needs to be done, as well as the risk of being contested. Secondly, understanding action as an *effect of a network* rather than a cause reveals how career actors are made by many others. Thirdly, understanding action as *dislocated and overtaken* explains how other human and non-human actors speak for a career at distance, which can entail unintended surprises. These insights are grounded in a relational, processual, and performative ontology-epistemology, and radically challenge the dominant perspective of an individual strategic career actor. Moreover, the translation approach provides an impetus for thinking “beyond the human” (Gherardi and Laasch, 2022). Here, the individual as main (or even sole) actor is relegated to the background, in order to come up with new and more diverse ways of studying careers.

In the present paper, I will start with a brief overview of the current paradigms in the study of careers, comparing three empirical examples of studying how sustainable careers are navigated. Secondly, I review the main ideas of Latour’s work on translation, in order to assess its relevance to the study of careers. Thirdly, the concepts will be applied in an exemplary ethnographic case study about an important career event in the field of contemporary art. Fourth, the example is discussed as promising for how Latourian concepts and methods can be used in the study of careers. The paper concludes by stating that this new approach can better understand how people navigate sustainable careers in times of increasing flexibility, uncertainty and technology.

**Current paradigms in the study of careers**

Careers have long been studied by sociologists (Hughes, 1937; Becker, 1952; Becker and Strauss, 1956; Hughes, 1958; Barley, 1989). Yet, as a research domain, career studies have developed within the confines of management and organization studies, which is an interdisciplinary field constituted of psychologists, sociologists, and organization scholars. In this field careers are commonly understood as “the evolving sequence of work related experiences over time” (Arthur et al., 1989: 8). Sustainable careers are defined as “the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015; De Vos et al., 2020). This grounding assumption has led to the dominance of a structural functionalist paradigm in the discipline (Alvesson and Deetz, 1997; Symon and

Cassell, 2006; Primecz, 2020). However, since the 1980s this approach has been challenged for its reductionism, dualism, and its overlooking of power dynamics by interpretivist (e.g. Collin and Young, 1986; Cohen et al., 2004) and critical scholars (e.g. Evetts, 1992; Grey, 1994; Fournier, 1998; Savage, 1998; McKinlay, 2002; El-Sawad, 2005; Bristow et al., 2017). They understand careers as constructed, rather than as given. The role of career constructions is differently assessed by the two approaches. The interpretivist approach focuses on individual sensemaking, and understands a career as a construct that makes sense of one's or others' working lives (Cohen et al., 2004). The critical approach, by contrast, focuses on power issues in careers, and understands the concept of career as a discourse to discipline individuals.

The structural functionalist paradigm focuses on progress, rationality and individualism in its understanding of careers (Gowler and Legge, 1989; Savage, 1998; McKinlay, 2002). Thus, most career research supports modernity's virtues of effectivity, productivity, and performance, and ultimately aims to fit individuals into organisations. Career is considered as something that is 'given' (not constructed), as something that people 'own' (a resource), and thus as something 'reified' (a real thing) (Evetts, 1992). The structural functionalist approach mirrors the model of natural sciences, and is based on positivism. This entails, an objective ontology (i.e. reality is assumed to be objective), an objective epistemology (i.e. knowledge creation is based on objective assumptions), and an objective methodology (i.e. methodology is based on objective assumptions) (Alvesson and Deetz, 1997; Symon and Cassell, 2006; Primecz, 2020). The assumption is that individuals, organizations, and social phenomena are stable entities that exist 'out there', and can be known and measured. Therefore, careers are in this perspective understood as entities that exist 'out there'. In most empirical studies based on this approach quantitative methods are used to search for statistical relationships between variables. The individual, strategic human actor serves as the unit of analysis. In its practical outlets, human resource management and career counselling, the structural functionalist approach can be normative and prescriptive, enhancing efficiency and productivity, while maintaining the status quo.

The study Kelly et al. (2020), for instance, investigates the relationship between leisure and sustainable careers, starting from the question whether investing extra time in leisure either enhances or hinders career sustainability. The research is based on the assumption that proactive agentic individuals would look for ways to preserve and generate career resources for achieving that sustainability. As career sustainability itself cannot be directly measured,

two career resources which impact sustainable careers, namely resilience and self-efficacy, are measured with validated instruments. The researchers tested several hypotheses with different variables on a sample of 129 individuals in a multi-wave survey study (3 times in 7 months). They concluded that more time spent in leisure is positively related to work-related self-efficacy, when moderated by two variables, i.e., seriousness and work-leisure similarity. A positive relationship between the independent and the two dependent variables is therefore only found when leisure activities are high in seriousness, and low in work-leisure similarity, or low in seriousness and high in similarity. The assumptions on which this model is based point at an objective onto-epistemology, although this is not explicitly expressed by the authors (which is common for studies using the dominant paradigm in a field). This study is exemplary for a structural functionalist approach in career research, for a number of reasons. Concepts such as sustainable career, leisure, self-efficacy, and resilience are operationalised in clearly defined variables, which can be measured with validated instruments. They are stripped of their context: leisure is for instance equated to time spent in leisure, as well as reduced to resources, such as self-efficacy and resilience, which can be acquired and conserved by a strategic actor. Leaving the context out or reducing it to a few variables makes general statements about the impact of leisure on careers difficult. Despite measuring the different variables at three different times, the study's cross-sectional research design furthermore makes it tricky to draw conclusions about the evolving interplay between leisure and sustainable careers. To sum up, by reducing contextual and processual aspects of leisure in the construction of sustainable careers and by disavowing that theoretical concepts such as that of 'sustainable career' are constructed rather than given, the study displays some of the limitations of the structural functionalist approach

Interpretivist and critical approaches, by contrast, do recognise the importance of context in the study of careers. The interpretivist approach can be situated within poststructuralist culture studies, and emphasizes multiplicity and ambiguity. It is grounded in a subjectivist ontology (i.e. reality is assumed to be subjective), a subjective epistemology (i.e. knowledge creation is based on subjective assumptions), and a subjectivist methodology (i.e. methodology is based on subjective assumptions) (Primecz, 2020). Moreover, career is understood as a (social) construction, rather than as a universal concept which can be measured as a variable. Interpretivist studies focus on how people experience, narrate, and use careers to make sense of working lives. This type of study is mostly qualitative, analysing emerging themes in respondents' discourse, and using them to build typologies. An example

of this approach is Sturges and Bailey's (2022) study about 'latent callings'. This research challenges the current negative thinking about unanswered callings and retirement, to highlight instead the emancipatory potential of latent callings that re-emerge later in life.

The study consists of a narrative inquiry of the lived experiences of 32 retired individuals, who resumed a latent calling in music. An inductive method is used, in which themes are allowed to emerge out of the empirical data, rather than starting from (pre-defined) constructs, applied from the researcher's particular theories. Ontology, epistemology, and methodology are subjective: a calling is understood as something dynamic (i.e. not a given) and local (i.e. the reality of the interviewees). Careers, callings, and life histories are constructed within the interviews. The study's focus is on the sensemaking of retired people, who reflect on their personal lives, and construct their own stories. Employing the method of life histories, the study delves into processes and contexts, which are all observed through the eyes of the respondents. The researchers were not present at the career events and career decisions. In so doing, an interpretivist approach recognises that careers are performative. They make sense to career actors and are thus constitutive for career making. However, this approach is not without limitations. The researchers were not present at the career events, and career decisions are only described by the interviewees, making it hard to come to 'objective' conclusions. Moreover, the study does not incorporate anything beyond language (e.g. music and emotions) and humans (e.g. music instruments and rehearsal rooms).

Since the 1990s some researchers have been focussing on power inequalities, oppression, exploitation, and injustice in careers (e.g. Grey, 1994; Townley, 1994; Legge, 1995; Fournier, 1998; El-Sawad, 2005). This critical approach originated in Foucauldian, poststructuralist discourse analysis, and aims to uncover the ideology inherent in the concept of a 'modern career' (Savage, 1998; McKinlay, 2002). Career is understood as a discourse, a grand narrative, and even as a disciplinary device (McKinlay, 2002). Unlike structural functionalist and interpretive approaches, the critical approach foregrounds dissensus, and often explicitly envisions change in society. Similar to interpretivist perspectives, critical approaches emphasize the role of language and cognition. Unlike interpretivist approaches, however, it decentres individuals from the centre of research, giving power to discourse as an abstract, non-human agent. The study by Fernando et al. (2019) about the gendered profession of engineers in the UK serves as an example for a critical approach. Initially, the researchers were interested in understanding why women engineers left the industry. However, in corpus of fifty qualitative interviews with women engineers from 3 enterprises in the UK, the theme

of sexualized visibility emerged. This means that women's sexual attributes tend to overshadow and obscure their other attributes and values. The study uncovers power inequalities and how they are reproduced. Gender is not regarded as an essential category, but as something that is reproduced in practice. The study's findings are context-dependent, since the use and success of strategies employed by the women engineers depended on the career stage they were in and on the power balance within the organization. The relationships between these dimensions, must moreover be positioned within wider social and cultural demands on women. This exemplary study also reveals some limitations of the critical approach. While it is aware that careers are constructed (reproduced) within power contexts, it still does not adequately incorporate the non-humans in its findings.

All three existing paradigms in the study of careers have difficulties in taking context, process, and non-humans into account. However, precisely these three aspects are necessary to understand the 'turbulent unpredictability' that also determines careers. Not only do they persist in looking at context as a set of factors, which can be handled by intentional actors, they also do not follow a longitudinal research design. As a result, a thorough processual approach that takes into account the process of career making is missing. This is all the more bizarre, given the very temporality inherent in the concept of career. Finally, because most career research is based on self-reported data of respondents, non-human actors are left out of the equation. In what follows, I will argue that Bruno Latour's work on translation provides underpinnings for such an alternative approach.

### **The study of careers through the lens of translation**

The sociology of translation<sup>1</sup>, of which Bruno Latour, along with other scholars such as John Law, Michel Callon, Madeleine Akrich and Annemarie Mol, is one the most well-known spokespersons, offers a different onto-epistemology. This allows us to foreground other aspects, and can thus offer a solution to the shortcomings of the three paradigms discussed above. First and foremost the ontological reversion proposed by Latour and others-action comes before actors-provides access to context (what is done by whom?), process (how is it done 'in-the-making?'), and materiality (focus on material and spatial practices). This is very

---

<sup>1</sup> Also known as ANT or Actor-Network-Theory and advocated in Latour (2005).

relevant to the study of contemporary careers. Three concepts are especially relevant: translation, actor-networks, and dislocated action.

### *Career making as translating interests*

Translation is the key concept in the sociology of translations (Callon, 1984). It explains how and why things get organized. Latour uses the concept of translation in a geometric, rather than a linguistic meaning (Latour, 1987: 117). Every translation is always a combination of displacement and mobilisation. Others need to be convinced, or mobilised to spread ideas or innovations. Translating is a slow process of negotiations. It takes many little steps to translate something, and to convince others to see things in that way. Inscribing or referencing the translation is important, because it links the interest of the translation with what already exists and what will exist. In controversies and “trials of strength” (Latour, 1987) disbelievers challenge what is presented as the truth, and face the spokespersons with the translation. Both spokespersons and disbelievers are representatives of the network for which they speak “in one voice”. They “tell the visitors what to see” (Latour, 1987). The concept of a mediator takes it one step further: “Mediators transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour, 2005: 39). Only when a translation is accepted as a given—in Latour’s words “blackboxed”, in others’ words ‘reified’—and no one questions the status of the translation, a translation can be performative. In order to achieve this, actors need to come up with a simple story and hide their composition of contingencies (Callon and Latour, 1981: 299). In this way, enduring ideas and innovations need to be deployed, blackboxed, repaired, and maintained, rendering them inherently more complicated, nuanced, and resistive rather than planned (Latour, 1991).

Starting from these ideas careers and career making can be conceptualised as respectively translations and translating interests. It is “by stating what belongs to the past, and of what the future consists, by defining what comes before and what comes after, by building up balance sheets, by drawing up chronologies, [that] it [the actor] imposes its own space and time” (Callon and Latour, 1981: 286). People try to impose a temporality and spatiality about their and others’ working lives upon others, and strive to present these temporal and spatial constructions as given (blackbox). However, the permanence of this blackbox is never achieved. Careers can be contested, with disbelievers attempting to open the blackbox and reconstruct the networks in which the career unfolded. The winner of this “trial of strength” is

the one who is able to associate the largest number of irreversibly linked elements (Callon and Latour, 1981). The concept of translation is useful for the study of careers because it shows that career making is about adapting a temporal-spatial construction, and about enrolling allies. It shares with interpretivist and critical approaches the view that careers are (socially) constructed, and that these constructions serve individual and collective sensemaking and societal status quo. Yet, it differs from these approaches in its focus on the practices of career making, i.e., on what is done, how it is done and why it is done.

### *Careers as effects of networks*

The sociology of translation takes a radical stance on agency and action by portraying an actor not as the cause of action, but as the effect of a network. Agency is not defined in terms of intentionality, subjectivity, and identity, but in terms of actions or effects or in Latour's words, action "is not a coherent, controlled, well-rounded, and clean-edged affair. Action is borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated" (Latour, 2005: 46). For Latour, an actor is a list of effects which are not always planned and are only noticed afterwards; there is also not always a mastermind. Latour's approach to agency takes away the privileged role of humans. The origin of the action is in the network or in other words, an actor is an actor because of the network. As Latour stated it: "an actor is what is *made* to act by many others" (Latour, 2005: 46). Therefore, actors are considered as actor-networks (Callon and Latour, 1981; Latour, 2005), and if we speak of an actor, we should always include the large network of attachments making the actor act.

Applying this radically different understanding of action on the study of careers, provides us with a less anthropocentric, individualistic, and managerial approach. Translations are not made by individual career actors, but by actor-networks, which are precarious assemblages of variously distributed human and non-human materials. Careers are precarious because career actors need the ongoing work of translating to persist, and to ensure that a career is accepted as given by others. The more a career has been blackboxed, the more powerful the career actor becomes, and the more differences s/he/it makes upon the world. The conception of actors as actor-networks—giving up the commonly assumed link between actors and intentionality (managerialism)—enables us to understand that careers evolve unpredictably and in a complex manner. Career action is an effect of unexpected incidents, and a career actor is a list of effects that only becomes clear belatedly. This radical relational approach—

“attachments are first, actors are second” (Latour, 2005: 217)—shows how others, including non-humans, such as artefacts, spaces, and technology can be involved in career practices.

### *Dislocated and overtaken action*

The role of spokespersons and mediators in translating interests is not limited to humans alone. In *Science in Action* Latour introduces mobile, stable, and combinable means that “transform whatever people do, sell and buy into something that can be mobilised, gathered, archived, coded, recalculated and displayed” (Latour, 1987: 227). Artefacts, such as maps, stabilize organizational activities and make domination at a distance feasible. Action is dislocated from the initial explorer to a map. As “immutable mobile” a map blackboxes social processes, and in that sense becomes performative, as it enables people to travel. Yet, dislocated action in mediators is not always under the control of the initial actor. It can be overtaken and can be betrayed and thus be a surprise (Latour, 2005). “The image of a human being at the helm manipulating inert objects to achieve ends through the intermediary of ‘efficient action on matter’ appears increasingly muddled. Technologies belong to the human world in a modality other than that of instrumentality, efficiency or materiality” (Latour, 2002: 248). Artefacts are never just tools (Latour, 1991).

Career action is often dislocated. Employees are often absent in discussions and decisions about their recruitment, promotion/demotion, and redundancy. In this sense, they are thus dependent on spokespersons who need to explain how to read, and understand their careers. Mediators translate others’ careers, so that people fit into their projects and organizations. Career action is dislocated in documents as well. Working lives become documents, such as curriculum vitae or LinkedIn pages, that perform careers; they establish, stabilize, and reproduce careers. Often, they serve as the first and only spokesperson. A curriculum vitae ‘brings back’ relations and processes of one’s past and gives it a history (Czarniawska, 2007). Materialised in accounts careers become measurable against standards and values (Law, 1987). This view resonates with the critical approach in career research of career as a disciplinary device. Dislocated career action can also be overtaken, and spiral out of control. A curriculum vitae can be distributed and used by others in an unexpected way. The idea of dislocated action, especially when it is dislocated to non-humans, is absent in structural functionalist approaches. Likewise, it is underexposed in the interpretivist and critical approaches because the unit of analysis in these approaches is almost always the individual.

Therefore, unpredictability and loss of control remain underexplored in the study of careers.

In this approach, performativity of careers is more prominent than in the interpretivist and critical approaches.

The sociology of translations not only challenges the current approaches in career studies, but also provides an alternative approach to understand the complexity of contemporary careers. First, it offers an alternative perspective that views reality as multiple and performed through different practices. Whereas Kelly et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between leisure and work by hypothesizing relationships between variables, a Latourian ethnographer would follow people in their leisure and work activities, and focus on what is done and how it is done. They would foreground the network in which these practices are done and also pay attention to the non-human actors in the network. Second, a Latour-inspired approach also challenges the interpretivist approach as a merely epistemological perspective. It goes beyond social constructivism by saying that reality is not only discursively, but also materially assembled into being (re-assembled). The interpretive study of Sturges and Bailey (2022) draws on narratives that expose how individuals experience resuming latent callings. The study foregrounds human agency by prioritizing how individuals explain, and interpret their lives. Concentrating solely on narratives that yield coherent, linear career stories overlooks the contingencies inherent in the process of resuming a calling. The upstream movement approach of Latour (1987) would pay attention to the practicalities and contingencies of that process. Furthermore, it would also consider the role of non-humans in the loss and the resumption of the calling. Third, the Latourian approach conceives of careers as a domain of struggle and negotiation, but does not conceive career as a stable entity. Rather career is co-constructed by evolving actors. This aligns with the insights from the critical study of Fernando et al. (2019) which shows that gender stereotypes not only constrain the careers of women engineers, but also that the women engineers themselves reproduce the stereotypes. However, whereas Fernando et al. (2019) focus on what women engineers reported about their experiences, a Latourian approach would observe the practices, and pay attention to the role of non-humans in these practices such as the lack or limited number of women's restrooms or visiting a strip club as a group activity.

The resulting conceptualisations of career—career making as translating interests, careers as effects of networks, and dislocated and overtaken career action—can provide an impetus for an alternative paradigm, which may provide a more fine-grained understanding of careers in an era of turbulent unpredictability. This entails viewing career as a temporary construction, a

1  
2  
3 situated practice, and as a practice that is beneficial for some and disadvantageous for others.  
4  
5 In the following section these insights will be used in a case study of career practices at the  
6  
7 opening of an exhibition.  
8  
9  
10

### 11 Career practices at the opening of an exhibition

12  
13  
14 The sociology of translation not only provides an impetus for a new paradigm in the study of  
15  
16 careers, but it also provides new methods to study careers. Empirical work starts ‘in medias  
17  
18 res’ (in the middle of things), pointing out controversies or “trials of strength”, as a tool to re-  
19  
20 open blackboxes (Callon and Latour, 1981). In archival and ethnographic studies, actors are  
21  
22 followed, in order to explain how things become stabilized (blackboxed) by describing the  
23  
24 network (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979/1986; Callon and Latour, 1981; Latour, 1987;  
25  
26 Latour, 1999). Actors can be followed either ‘upstream’ or ‘downstream’ (Latour, 1987). The  
27  
28 ‘upstream path’ goes back into the conditions of an innovation, a project, a person, and  
29  
30 explains how an actor became powerful. The downstream path follows the actors’ actions,  
31  
32 revealing how a powerful actor affects others. I employed this approach in a case study of  
33  
34 artistic careers, and for this paper, I will focus on one significant career event in the field of  
35  
36 contemporary art: the private opening of a solo exhibition. Solo exhibitions offer artists the  
37  
38 opportunity to showcase their work exactly as they envision it. In order to do this, they create  
39  
40 documents, performances, and a specific scenography. During such events and especially  
41  
42 during openings, careers are both constructed and reconstructed.

43  
44 The private opening of the solo exhibition *No Life Lost* by Berlinde De Bruyckere took place  
45  
46 28 January 2016 in the lower Manhattan exhibition space of Hauser & Wirth Gallery. My  
47  
48 analysis is based on my detailed observation of this event. Hundreds of people, dozens of  
49  
50 artworks, stories, and senses, ... came into view. The large exhibition space was bathed in  
51  
52 artificial moonlight, and only slowly made the artworks visible: monumental, assembled casts  
53  
54 of trees, animals, and skins. These works are about loss, suffering, death, and compassion,  
55  
56 and they evoke strong emotions. The darkness and elusiveness of the artworks invited people  
57  
58 to remain silent, and to come closer to the artworks and each other. The visitors gradually  
59  
60 filled the space for the program of the day: a press tour, a dance performance, a lunch at the  
bar, the exhibition, and a dinner at a restaurant in town. At the reception desk, visitors could  
take 3 leaflets, an information sheet, a press release and a leaflet on the dance performance,  
but since it was too dark in the exhibition space, they could not read them. Then the dance

performance started. Something which initially looks like a hunk of meat on a pile of salt (referring to De Bruyckere's new works inspired by hides from a slaughterhouse) turns out to be a naked human body making animal movements and sounds. After forty minutes of silence, the audience left the room in a subdued mood to go to the bar where they were invited for lunch. People shuffled around, and whispered. I caught some words and fragments of discourse: "There should be a story behind this cruelty"; "She probably started to make a sculpture and thought it is easier to..."; "Très macabre (gruesome)". Before and after the opening of the exhibition, speeches were given to a selected group of people: the artist to journalists and the Vice-President during dinner in a restaurant to a select group of curators, collectors, artists, the artist's assistant, guardians of artist's estates, family and friends.

The space was brimming with references to Zurbaran, *Cripplewood*, Venice Biennale, Ghent, wax, slaughterhouses, hides, and war. Allusions to West European (art) history and global issues of humankind circulated throughout. References were expressed by those present, and also embodied in the artworks (building upon previous work), the scenography (moonlight), the documents (artworks, artists, places), and the food (European). Each artwork, each name of an artwork, each document, each person as well as the scenography was a "list of traces" or a web of references (Latour, 2005). The shared name of two artworks and the exhibition (*No Life Lost*) is an example of such a reference: "I think that is very beautiful to give the works the same name as the exhibition because it then is part of the story. The exhibition becomes a story and those works will be forever linked to that exhibition" (interview with artist). In this quote the artist points at how a name stabilizes a connection. Other examples of embodied references are the lunch in the bar with European food (cheeses, tapas, charcuterie) and drinks (wine and Belgian beer Stella) which refers to the shared European origin of the artist and the gallery and the scenography which refers to the painting *Agnus Dei* by Zurbaran in the Prado of Madrid, the installation of *Cripplewood* in the Biennale of Venice and the skin trade workshop in Brussels which inscribes De Bruyckere in Western art history.

These lists of traces were inscribed into existing stories, as for instance "darkness evokes pain and compassion" or "Berlinde De Bruyckere is a European mid-career artist" or aligned and assembled into new shared lists or stories, among others "this is the 9<sup>th</sup> exhibition of Berlinde De Bruyckere at Hauser & Wirth" or "a dancer who modelled for Berlinde De Bruyckere is the performer of the dance performance". These (re)constructed stories reduced the uncertainty about an exhibition by an unknown artist, and confirmed the interdependency of the storytellers. The stories were made coherent and explicit. As an ethnographer, I was able

to observe how these stories came into being as a series of translations. Take for instance the leaflet for the dance performance, which was a collaborative work of the studio manager and the gallery's press office. The making of it showed tensions which were resolved through a compromise: the studio wanted to frame the exhibition and the exhibited works within an artistic context. This was done by narrating the artworks' origins: how they were produced and how they were inspired or influenced by other artworks and events. The gallery, on the other hand, wanted to justify why a relatively unknown artist in New York deserved a solo exhibition in one of the largest exhibition spaces in town. They used the longevity of De Bruyckere's career, her passage through major art institutions, and her collaborations with the other artists from the gallery as arguments. I observed a dispute between the studio's manager and the gallery's press office about what references to include in the leaflet, in order to impose a certain story on the guests. The drafts went back and forth several times. The final compromise was materialised in leaflets and press views.

The openings of exhibitions in galleries can be understood as 'trials of strength' (Latour, 1987). Believers and non-believers of (the work of) an artist gather to meet the artist and her work. On this particular night, the artist and her work needed to withstand the critics in order to ensure their lasting significance. Translating an artist's career entails creating and reshuffling lists of traces of the past and the future, and "enroll[ing] other wills by translating what they want and by reifying this translation in such a way that none of them can desire anything else any longer" (Callon and Latour, 1981: 296). A multitude of interests was represented that night. The gallery tried "to get Berlinde [De Bruyckere] a museum show, try to place it in the best possible collection, try to get the New York Times to review her show" (interview with the Vice President Hauser & Wirth). The artist wanted to continue making artworks; visitors wanted to discover something new, or to have a night with friends, or to be part of the artworld. Curators were in search for a next exhibition for (their) institutions. Collectors were in search for acquisitions for their collections.

Artefacts play an important role in trials of strength. The moonlight, the food and drinks, the dance performance, and the material artworks affected the visitors. The materiality of the artworks and the space in which they were shown played an important role in how people experienced the artworks. Most of the visitors did not realise that the sculptures were not real trees, real horses, real hides, but instead wax casts of trees and hides and polyester casts covered with horse skin. The materiality evoked a sense of fascination and ambiguity, as described by three young visitors when questioned about their experience: "brutal, but in a

good way. It is not easy to look at. The tree is nearly human”. Lastly, the food and drinks in the bar created an atmosphere of celebration and made people stay longer.

What is more, artefacts perform careers because by calling a specific sequence a career, that sequence becomes a career. Artistic careers are established and maintained by documents: texts such as biographies and lists of works, but also images. An exhibition view or a photograph of an artwork ‘in situ’ (i.e. an artwork in a scenography in an exhibition space) is such an example. It is a photograph of the artwork as the artist wants it to be seen and preserved. Whereas artworks disappear in crates after the exhibition, exhibition views can travel to places away from where it was taken, retaining the artist’s design. An exhibition view can act upon others with neither the artwork nor the artist in the vicinity. It can be published in newspapers, it can be filed by curators and collectors, and it can be used for organizing new exhibitions. A photograph is “something that lasts, [that] keeps on communicating” (interview with the photographer). It is a clear example of what Latour calls an “immutable mobile” (1987) and “dislocated action” (2005). The photograph may perform from a distance in line with the artist, but that action may also be overtaken, which can result in effects that were not planned by the artist.

That opening night the trial was temporarily shut settled down. The career of De Bruyckere was re-constructed by a heterogeneous network consisting of human and non-human actors. One translation was agreed upon and became dominant: De Bruyckere is a European artist with a longstanding career and innovative work exhibiting for the first time in an American gallery and for the ninth time with Hauser & Wirth. That temporary dominant list of traces was inscribed in extant lists of those present. Journalists took the press views to their offices to write their critics in line with the style of the newspaper and magazine, American visitors added the exhibition to their lists of European artists.

The effects of the (re)constructed career became clear by following actors downstream. Curators who attended the opening of the exhibition organized new exhibitions in Reykjavik, Kyiv, and Aarhus and an American collector in Kentucky even bought the masterpiece of the exhibition. Despite the exhibition being considered macabre and Americans reacting strongly to it—either rejecting or understanding it—, it can be considered successful.

## **Discussion – Towards an new paradigm for the study of careers**

This empirical illustration shows an episode of a career-in-the-making. The focus on the actions (practices), rather than on actors, reveals the establishment and maintenance of a career. The illustration not only demonstrates how careers are constructed and reconstructed in light of important career events (in line with interpretivist approaches), but also that careers are not neutral (in line with critical approaches). Moreover, it reveals the contingency of career practices, which often fades into the background in career research based on surveys and interviews, since people tend to make coherent stories when asked for. Career thus emerges as the effect of a network, rather than as a deliberate plan that is realized. Finally, the point about the leaflet also makes clear how career action can be dislocated (and overtaken) by artefacts. The relevance of the findings from this case study goes beyond the field of contemporary art. As this field is a volatile world in which careers are unpredictable and complex (Menger, 1999; Smith and McKinlay, 2009; Alacovska et al., 2022), as well as a world fully entangled with material practices and spaces (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017), it can be of interest for other non-standard and technology-mediated work. Other professions and other sectors also have career events where careers come up for trial: job interviews, promotion talks, networking events, and social media.

In line with Latour's work on translation I investigated a career-in-the-making (Callon and Latour, 1981; Latour, 1987; Latour, 1999; Latour, 2005). I started 'in medias res'-at the opening of an exhibition-without a predefined object of study and noticed how a network emerged. I focused on the career making practices of that network without privileging specific actors, considering humans and non-humans as equal, or—in Latour's words—symmetrical. I followed the actors upstream, in the case of the leaflet, as well as downstream, following artworks in new exhibitions. In my research, I started from the actions (what was done?), shifting my gaze to the networks in which the actions took place (who/what was related to who/what in the actions), and finally to the actors (who/what made a difference?). This approach provided me with access to processes, contexts and artefacts, thereby overcoming the limitations of current methods in studying careers.

These insights can be extrapolated to an alternative paradigm in the study of careers away from anthropocentric, individualistic, and managerial assumptions. The sociology of translation offers a radically different way to understand careers due to its ontological reversion: a career actor is an effect of, not a cause of performances. Action precedes actors. Instead of being stable entities, actors are performed in practices. They are precarious effects of networks rather than the outcome of an agentic career actor. This ontological reversal strips

actors of intentionality, subjectivity and identity. The ongoing process of constructing and reconstructing careers is more than a discursive practice. Instead of being an epistemological construction, it constitutes an ontological construction: careers are not solely discursively constructed, but they are also performed. They are staged, stabilized and revised by a network. This anti-humanist view on action has the potential to enrich career research which, until now, has struggled to fully comprehend the complexity and unpredictability of contemporary careers (Barley et al., 2017; Forrier, 2023). Rather than conceiving of careers as given (structural functionalist paradigm), as socially constructed (interpretivist paradigm), or as disciplinary devices (critical paradigm), careers can in fact also be understood as enacted in practices in which humans and non-humans are involved. A Latourian study of careers would concentrate on how careers are performed in practices and assumes venturing backstage, in order to witness careers coming into being, and grasping the inherent riskiness in the convergence of human activities and non-human entities. It overcomes the dualities upon which current approaches in career research are based, such as agency versus structure, humans versus non-humans, and bodies versus minds.

Latour's work on translation not only offers conceptual, but also methodological tools to investigate career processes and practices (contingency, unexpected, not planned outcomes) and the role of non-humans (technology). The empirical illustration showed that shadowing actors in real time revealed processes that are usually hidden (blackboxed in Latour's words) and filtered out in narratives (Czarniawska, 2007; Czarniawska, 2014). The method was able to reveal the complexity of establishing a sustainable artistic career as an ongoing, negotiated, and complicated work, performed by a network consisting of more than humans.

Empirical studies based on the new paradigm would rely on ethnographic and archival methods, which are scarcely employed in career studies dominated by cross-sectional research designs, where longitudinality is primarily captured through a series of snapshots (Van Maanen, 2015). Only longitudinal research can fully comprehend how careers unfold and who and what are involved in these processes. Examples of such research exist in career studies (e.g. ethnographies (e.g. Adler, 1979; Smith, 2001; Barley and Kunda, 2006; Ho, 2009) and archival studies (e.g. Kirschbaum, 2007; McKinlay, 2013)) but are scarce and primarily published in books.

## Conclusion

This paper introduced the work of Bruno Latour on translation in the study of careers and positions it in relation to current career approaches. It argues that the sociology of translation offers an alternative approach to more fully understand the unpredictable and complex careers of today. Latour's focus on practices, multiplicity, ambiguity, and on the embracing of non-humans can in fact enrich the field of careers which has been dominated by an anthropocentric, individualistic, and strategic perspective. It makes us understand careers as precarious effects of networks, that are performed in practices, and in which non-humans play an important role in establishing, stabilizing and reproducing careers. Latour's relational, processual and performative approach can better understand how people navigate sustainable careers in times of increasing flexibility, uncertainty, and technology. It decentres human's agency and foregrounds the networks that perform careers in practices and is therefore more open to unexpected influences and outcomes of career practices.

- Adler, Judith E. (1979) *Artists in Offices. An Ethnography of an Academic Art Scene*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books.
- Akkermans, Jos and Kubasch, Stella (2017) #Trending topics in careers: a review and future research agenda. *Career development international* 22(6): 586-627. 10.1108/CDI-08-2017-0143
- Akkermans, Jos, Seibert, Scott E. and Mol, Stefan T. (2018) Tales of the unexpected: Integrating career shocks in the contemporary careers literature. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 44(1): 1-10.
- Alacovska, Ana, Bucher, Eliane and Fieseler, Christian (2022) A Relational Work Perspective on the Gig Economy: Doing Creative Work on Digital Labour Platforms. *Work, employment and society* 38(1): 161-179. 10.1177/09500170221103146
- Alvesson, Mats and Deetz, Stanley (1997) Critical Theory and Postmodernism. Approaches to Organizational Studies. In: Clegg Stewart R., Hardy Cynthia and Nord Walter R. (Eds.) (eds) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Arthur, Michael B., Hall, Douglas T. and Lawrence, Barbara S. (1989) *Handbook of Career Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barley, Stephen R. (1989) Careers, identities, and institutions: the legacy of the Chicago School of Sociology. In: Arthur Michael B., Hall Douglas, T. and Lawrence Barbara, S. (eds) *Handbook of Career Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.41-65.
- Barley, Stephen R., Bechky, Beth A. and Milliken, Frances J. (2017) The Changing Nature of Work: Careers, Identities, and Work Lives in the 21st Century. *Academy of Management Discoveries* 3(2): 111-115. 10.5465/amd.2017.0034
- Barley, Stephen R. and Kunda, Gideon (2006) *Gurus, hired guns, and warm bodies: itinerant experts in a knowledge economy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Bartosiak, Marcin Lukasz and Modlinski, Artur (2022) Fired by an algorithm? Exploration of conformism with biased intelligent decision support systems in the context of workplace discipline. *Career development international* 27(6/7): 601-615.
- Baruch, Yehuda and Sullivan, Sherry E. (2022) The why, what and how of career research: a review and recommendations for future study. *Career development international* 27(1): 135-159. 10.1108/CDI-10-2021-0251
- Becker, Howard S and Strauss, Anselm L (1956) Careers, personality, and adult socialization. *American journal of sociology* 62(3): 253-263.
- Becker, Howard S. (1952) The Career of the Chicago Public Schoolteacher. *American journal of sociology* 57(5): 470-477.
- Bristow, Alexandra, Robinson, Sarah and Ratle, Olivier (2017) Being an Early-Career CMS Academic in the Context of Insecurity and 'Excellence': The Dialectics of Resistance and Compliance. *Organization studies* 38(9): 1185-1207. 10.1177/0170840616685361
- Callon, Michel (1984) Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. *The Sociological Review* 32(1\_suppl): 196-233. 10.1111/j.1467-954X.1984.tb00113.x
- Callon, Michel and Latour, Bruno (1981) Unscrewing the big Leviathan: how actors macro-structure reality and how sociologists help them to do so. In: Knorr-Cetina Karen and Cicourel Aaron Victor (eds) *Advances in social theory and methodology. Toward an integration of micro- and macro-sociologies*. London: Routledge and Kegan & Paul.
- Cohen, Laurie and Duberley, Joanne (2015) Three faces of context and their implications for career: A study of public sector careers cut short. *Journal of vocational behavior* 91: 189-202. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2015.10.006>

- Cohen, Laurie, Duberley, Joanne and Mallon, Mary (2004) Social constructionism in the study of career: Accessing the parts that other approaches cannot reach. *Journal of vocational behavior* 64: 407-422.
- Collin, Audrey and Young, Richard A. (1986) New Directions for Theories of Career. *human relations* 39(9): 837-853. 10.1177/001872678603900904
- Curchod, Corentin, Patriotta, Gerardo, Cohen, Laurie and Neysen, Nicolas (2020) Working for an algorithm: Power asymmetries and agency in online work settings. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 65(3): 644-676.
- Czarniawska, Barbara (2007) *Shadowing: and other techniques for doing fieldwork in modern societies*. Malmö, Sweden: Liber.
- Czarniawska, Barbara (2014) Why I think shadowing is the best field technique in management and organization studies. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 9(1): 90-93.
- De Vos, Ans, Van der Heijden, Beatrice IJM and Akkermans, Jos (2020) Sustainable careers: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of vocational behavior* 117: 103196.
- Duff, Cameron and Sumartojo, Shanti (2017) Assemblages of creativity: Material practices in the creative economy. *Organization* 24(3): 418-432. 10.1177/1350508416687765
- El-Sawad, Amal (2005) Becoming a 'lifer'? Unlocking career through metaphor. *Journal of occupational and organizational psychology* 78: 23-41.
- Evetts, Julia (1992) Dimensions of Career: Avoiding Reification in the Analysis of Change. *Sociology* 26(1): 1-21.
- Fernando, Dulini, Cohen, Laurie and Duberley, Joanne (2019) Navigating sexualised visibility: A study of British women engineers. *Journal of vocational behavior* 113: 6-19. 10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.001
- Fleming, Peter (2017) The human capital hoax: Work, debt and insecurity in the era of Uberization. *Organization studies* 38(5): 691-709.
- Forrier, Anneleen (2023) What if we abandon the concept of career proactivity to move research forward? *Applied psychology* 72(1): 191-198. 10.1111/apps.12441
- Fournier, Valerie (1998) Stories of Development and Exploitation: Militant Voices in an Enterprise Culture. *Organization* 5(1): 55-80.
- Gandini, Alessandro (2019) Labour process theory and the gig economy. *human relations* 72(6): 1039-1056. 10.1177/0018726718790002
- Gherardi, Silvia and Laasch, Oliver (2022) Responsible Management-as-Practice: Mobilizing a Posthumanist Approach. *Journal of Business Ethics* 181(2): 269-281. 10.1007/s10551-021-04945-7
- Gowler, Dan and Legge, Karen (1989) Rhetoric in bureaucratic careers: managing the meaning of management success. In: Arthur Michael B., Hall Douglas, T. and Lawrence Barbara, S. (eds) *Handbook of Career Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grey, Christopher (1994) Career as a Project of the Self and Labour Process Discipline. *Sociology* 28(2): 479-497.
- Gunz, Hugh and Mayrhofer, Wolfgang (2011) Re-conceptualizing career success: a contextual approach. *Journal for Labour Market Research* 43(3): 251-260. 10.1007/s12651-010-0049-z
- Ho, Karen Zouwen (2009) *Liquidated: an ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hughes, Everett C. (1937) Institutional Office and the Person. *American journal of sociology* 43(3): 404-413.
- Hughes, Everett C. (1958) *Men and Their Work*. London: Collier-MacMillan Ltd.

- Kelly, Ciara M., Strauss, Karoline, Arnold, John and Stride, Chris (2020) The relationship between leisure activities and psychological resources that support a sustainable career: The role of leisure seriousness and work-leisure similarity. *Journal of vocational behavior* 117: 1-15. 10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103340
- Kirschbaum, Charles (2007) Careers in the right beat: US jazz musicians' typical and non-typical trajectories. *Career development international* 12(2): 187-201. 10.1108/13620430710733659
- Latour, Bruno (1987) *Science in action. How to follow scientists and engineers through society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, Bruno (1991) Technology is society made durable. In: Law John (ed) *A Sociology of Monsters. Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*. London: Routledge.
- Latour, Bruno (1999) Circulating Reference. Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest. In: Latour Bruno (ed) *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, Bruno (2002) Morality and Technology: The End of the Means. *Theory, culture & society* 19(5-6): 247-260. 10.1177/026327602761899246
- Latour, Bruno (2005) *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Latour, Bruno and Woolgar, Steve (1979/1986) *Laboratory life: The construction of scientific facts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Law, John (1987) The structure of sociotechnical engineering—a review of the new sociology of technology. *The Sociological Review* 35(2): 404-425.
- Legge, Karen (1995) *Human Resource Management. Rhetorics and Realities*. Basingstoke: MacMillan Business.
- Mayrhofer, Wolfgang, Meyer, Michael and Steyer, Johannes (2007) Contextual Issues in the Study of Careers. In: Gunz Hugh and Peiperl Maury (eds) *Handbook of career studies*. Los Angeles - London - New Dehli - Singapore: Sage Publications, pp.215-240.
- McDonald, Kimberly S., Hite, Linda M. and O'Connor, Kimberly W. (2022) Developing sustainable careers for remote workers. *Human Resource Development International* 25(2): 182-198. 10.1080/13678868.2022.2047148
- McKinlay, Alan (2002) 'Dead selves': The birth of the modern career. *Organization* 9(4): 595-614. 10.1177/135050840294005
- McKinlay, Alan (2013) Banking, bureaucracy and the career: the curious case of Mr Notman. *Business History* 55(3): 431-447. 10.1080/00076791.2013.773683
- Menger, Pierre-Michel (1999) Artistic Labor Markets and Careers. *Annual Review Sociology* 25: 541-574.
- Pignot, Edouard (2023) Who is pulling the strings in the platform economy? Accounting for the dark and unexpected sides of algorithmic control. *Organization* 30(1): 140-167. 10.1177/1350508420974523
- Primecz, Henriett (2020) Positivist, constructivist and critical approaches to international human resource management and some future directions. *German Journal of Human Resource Management* 34(2): 124-147. 10.1177/2397002220909069
- Richardson, Julia, O'Neil, Deborah Anne and Thorn, Kaye (2022) Exploring careers through a qualitative lens: an investigation and invitation. *Career development international* 27(1): 99-112. 10.1108/CDI-08-2021-0197
- Savage, Mike (1998) Discipline, Surveillance and the 'Career': Employment on the Great Western Railway 1833-1914. In: McKinlay Alan and Starkey Ken (eds) *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- Sennett, Richard (1998) *The Corrosion of Character. The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

- Smith, Chris and McKinlay, Alan (2009) Creative Industries and Labour Process Analysis. In: McKinlay Alan and Smith Chris (Eds.) (eds) *Creative Labour. Working in the Creative Industries*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Smith, Vicki (2001) *Crossing the Great Divide : Worker Risk and Opportunity in the New Economy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Smith, Vicki (2010) Enhancing employability. Human, cultural, and social capital in an era of turbulent unpredictability. *human relations* 63(2): 279-300. 10.1177/0018726709353639
- Sturges, Jane and Bailey, Catherine (2022) Walking back to happiness: The resurgence of latent callings in later life. *human relations* 76(8): 1256-1284. 10.1177/00187267221095759
- Symon, Gillian and Cassell, Catherine (2006) Neglected perspectives in work and organizational psychology. *Journal of occupational and organizational psychology* 79(3): 307-314. 10.1348/096317906X109676
- Townley, Barbara (1994) *Reframing human resource management : power, ethics and subject at work*. London: Sage Publications.
- Van der Heijden, Beatrice I.J.M. and De Vos, Ans (2015) Sustainable careers: introductory chapter. In: De Vos Ans and van der Heijden Beatrice I.J.M. (eds) *Handbook of Research on Sustainable Careers*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Van Maanen, John (2015) The present of things past: Ethnography and career studies. *human relations* 68(1): 35-53. 10.1177/0018726714552287