

## **From vocational calling to career construction: late-career authors and critical self-reflection**

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### **Introduction**

A particular challenge when thinking about contemporary writers is that their later works often suffer through critical comparison to earlier work for which they are better known. In many cases this has the effect that the writer becomes associated with one or two specific works produced years – or even decades – earlier, in a way that hinders a positive reception of the later work. This situation raises an unanswered theoretical question about how we define the contemporary; and another about the mechanics of canonization more generally. Moreover, until recently the concept of a literary career, with certain material properties of its own, had received inadequate critical scholarly attention.

This chapter has two goals. First, by applying career construction theory to a discussion of the late stage of contemporary authorial careers, it presents career construction as a new theory of authorship – with potential application to analysis of artistic careers in different media and art forms. In doing so it will construct a framework for considering what is specific to late-career works when compared with those produced during earlier stages, to avoid the negative comparison mentioned above. Having done so, it then considers the extent to which career construction theory can be used to explore ethical questions about writers' careers. Specifically, it will evaluate whether career construction theory is always-already implicated in the construction of the bourgeois, individualistic subject in a cultural marketplace that is both competitive and consumerist; or whether the application of career construction theory to analysis of creative careers can be used to develop a space from which those dominant ideological assumptions can be interrogated.

### **The Emergence of Career Construction Theory**

Major contributions to analysing the vocational aspect of lives in writing have been made by Edward Said in *Beginnings* (1975) and Wayne C. Booth in *The Company We Keep* (1988). However, Said relies upon a dichotomy between writing as a career and writing

as a vocation that is in the last instance untenable because it fails to account for the fact that to many contemporary writers, writing is both of these things simultaneously. Booth was interested in documenting how different readers told him the reading of particularly cherished books had inspired them to make specific ethical or vocational decisions in their lives. He was not, however, able to adduce any proof that the books in question really had made the telling contribution to the decisions.

Beyond the insights of Said and Booth therefore, a new way of thinking about literary careers has therefore become necessary. The main insight of this chapter is that such a way is enabled by bringing the tools of career constructionism into the domain of literary analysis. Although it is a branch of social psychology more concerned with training career guidance counsellors than with literary study, career construction has the potential to illuminate our understanding of the vocation to be a writer. This is because it marked a shift in away from statistical and quantitative approaches to vocational guidance based on aptitude tests and computer databanks, using instead a narrative method based on the telling of life stories. In other words, it employs a highly literary paradigm. In the counselling relationship, the purpose of elucidating life stories is to enable the person seeking guidance to make some kind of decision about the next stage of their career, metaphorically becoming the author of the next chapter in that narrative. If the individuals in question happen to be authors, that metaphor becomes oddly literal in the sense that authors enter a new phase of their career as such when they start producing new kinds of work. This means that without consulting career counsellors, they are enacting the same kinds of symbolic behaviour that career advisors develop in the people they advise.

Career construction theory was developed by Larry Cochran (1997) and Mark Savickas (2011) in the context of three major developments. The first of these was the fact that patterns of life and work in the western world had changed dramatically in the last quarter of the twentieth century compared to the middle of century so that whereas people of the preceding two generations might commonly expect to work in the same field – even for the same employer – for their whole working life, people at the turn of the century were much more likely to need to change both employers and kinds of work several times. For this reason, one of the goals of career construction is to build qualities of resilience, the capacity to live with uncertainty and comfort in experiencing change.

For Cochran and Savickas, encouraging their clients to tell their life stories helps elucidate certain recurring themes and aptitudes which are discernible across very different life experiences. This fosters those qualities just mentioned and supports the person to develop their inner resources for negotiating turbulent or difficult transitions in their working life. Interestingly, both Cochran and Savickas assert that the life stories people tell their counsellors need not be true in a verifiable, factual sense. What is important is the meaning that the individuals associate with the stories they tell, whether or not they are empirically accurate, because the meaning so ascribed becomes a potential source for making new career decisions in the future.

Thus the order of truth associated with the life stories told by people seeking vocational guidance exists at the symbolic and emotive level as opposed to that of documented fact. The same is true of the recently emerging literary genre known as autofiction, which is typically a form in which authors write autobiographies using the techniques of modernist experimental novels. The experiences so narrated are real events, but confirming the facts surrounding them is less important than achieving the level of symbolic truth, which remains to some extent surrounded by uncertainty at the level of the merely factual because that is in any case the nature of memory. To career guidance counsellors, therefore, telling life stories is less about recapitulating knowable facts as it is a matter of elucidating cyclical patterns of symbolic behaviour to which can be ascribed feelings of satisfaction and fulfilment, thereby enabling people to seek professional roles that will provide similar feelings in the future and so facilitating the process of constructing a career.

The development of career constructionism was given a major impetus by the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, a period typified by widespread financial uncertainty and the concomitant closures of businesses and employers at every level from the very small to the transnational. Such closures resulted in millions of people changing not only jobs, but also careers in the immediate aftermath. That is, not only did they stop working for their previous employers, but they also started to work in fundamentally different industries doing completely different kinds of work. At the same time, the third context in which career construction arose is the fact that as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, people were on average living much longer. As state retirement and pension

ages have been systematically raised by the neo-liberal governments of the entire western world, people are working for much longer than ever before.

This of course has been a highly controversial development, often seen as an assault on the access to basic welfare provision that had not only been fought for by previous generations but also actively financed through the taxes paid by the current. It would, however, be a mistake to assume straightforwardly that working longer per se is always in all quarters an unwelcome development. By switching its focus and methodology from statistics to narratives, one of the key insights of career constructionism is that work itself confers important feelings of satisfaction, belonging and accomplishment, not to mention a series of social relationships in people feel rooted and to which they can actively contribute. Continuing to work has the potential to engender feelings of optimism and excitement about the process of living longer and entering old age, which has often in the past been marked by trepidation and even stigma, especially in the West. Thus in outlining a new 'map' for thinking about career trajectories that last much longer than traditional working lives would have done, Peter Laslett adumbrates: 'Live in the presence of all your future selves' (p.72).

Career construction treats individuals as archives or repositories of memory and feeling. Excavating those archives is then in large part the purpose of this form of vocational guidance, directing the individual's attention towards their own internal resources and opening up the potential for those resources to be re-applied in changing roles and new environments. The storytelling approach on which career constructionism depends thus has the potential for eliciting sources of meaning and value that arise from the fact of continuing to work, and that might assuage the otherwise negative expectations associated with ageing. As living archives, people moving into older age have myriad rich and complex stories to tell, which is why narrative approaches to vocational guidance is potentially beneficial in thinking about those changes. In this sense, the general tendency of people to live and work longer illustrates an important facet of specifically authorial careers. Authors tend not to retire at all, or as Roger Grenier puts it, 'few writers have willingly put their last words to paper' (p.105). This means that the traditional model of a lifespan divided into the three stages of youth and education; followed by a working life; followed by retirement does not obtain in the case of authorial careers and may not be applicable to other kinds of career either. In other words, a new way of

thinking about the stages within an authorial career is necessary. For this too, career construction is potentially illuminative.

### **Life Stages and Career Trajectories**

Figures 1-6 represent in abstract form the indicative career trajectories typically experienced by authors, where degrees of critical and/ or commercial success vary over time. Clearly, the question of how to define 'success' is variable from one author to another, depending on what precisely each author aims to achieve. This might be very commercially focused and hence measurable in a quantitative way; or it may alternatively depend on a degree of innovation that is less tangible, less easy to document and by its nature less concerned with achieving measurable outputs. Although David Galenson has provided a highly innovative means of quantifying success statistically in *Artistic Capital*, for the purposes of this chapter there are no specific units of measurement. The charts should rather be taken to indicate a generalised raising or lowering of success in the abstract over time.

It should also be noted that only those portions of a career where the author is active as author have been considered; those portions of a working life dedicated to performing other kinds of work in other kinds of career have not been considered here even though in many cases success in other professions intersects with writers' careers in complex ways. From a materialist perspective the stability that arises from the effective engagement in another kind of work in an alternative field might create the degree of financial security that makes it possible for the people in those fields to write at all. Lawyers (Alexander McCall Smith), doctors (Khaled Hosseini), teachers (Michael Morpurgo/ Joanne Harris), politicians (Michael Dobbs) and bankers (Polly Courtney) are all professions from which contemporary authors have emerged. On the other hand, the mere fact of devoting a significant portion of one's time, creativity and mental energy to those spheres also conflicts with the vocation to be a writer which in the prior sense they enable. The relationship between writing and other work is therefore highly ambivalent and dialectical. In many cases, the pressures created by that work and by other life experiences are too great and the vocation to write is sacrificed to them.

Figure 1 maps out the indicative trajectory of a career in writing for an author who has not become established as such. The level of success (however measured) remains

relatively low throughout the whole period he or she dedicates to writing. This might be because they have created a work that has been badly received and struggled to make an impact in either a critical or commercial sense; or it might be that the other life and professional commitments in which he or she is involved have made it impossible to produce a single written work (or having produced one, have made it impossible to publish and publicise it). The kinds of work that are typically created during this kind of career might in fact be somewhat common, but by definition are unlikely to come to the attention of any but the narrowest readership as the manuscripts languish unpublished in drawers or linger on the remainder shelves of warehouses. Even in these cases, however, a low level of success in a quantifiable sense need not be interpreted to mean *no* success, especially for individuals whose writing has been undertaken with the specific aim of self-reflection and self-development rather than with any necessary market orientation as such. This is increasingly the case of writers who practise the emerging genre of autofiction (about which more below); and of students enrolled in certain kinds of writing programmes.

Figure 2 shows a contrasting indicative career trajectory for authors who achieve a major breakthrough early on in their careers as *writers*, and thereafter manage to retain a comparably high critical and/ or commercial standard throughout subsequent stages of their authorial careers. Again, it should be emphasised that the start of the career *in writing* does not necessarily coincide with the start of the professional career more generally and in many cases necessarily does not. This means that the beginning stage of an authorial career is not necessarily defined by age: a debut novelist is not necessarily young when measured by the career stages of other industries but by the same token a relatively young person, not yet ready for retirement in any other industry and certainly not drawing near the end of their career as novelist, might be considered a veteran if they have already published ten or fifteen novels. Examples of flesh-and-blood authors whose careers have followed the trajectory indicated in Figure 2 are sadly much rarer than those in Figure 1. Among contemporary writers, J.K. Rowling might be considered such a figure, having achieved such broad commercial success and such public worldwide visibility that her status has eclipsed that of *mere* author and has become that of a policy maker and advocate of the literary arts more generally. All sorts of complicating questions then arise first of all about the relationship of the specialist field of children's literature to commercial success and then about the impact of

Rowling's subsequent role with UNESCO on any future attempts she might make to continue writing. Indeed this may be an ironic counter-foil to those instances where the need to make a living in other kinds of work render dedicating sufficient time and mental energy for artistic success difficult to achieve in practice. In Rowling's case, it is not a question of having been insufficiently successful but rather excessively so, her great success propelling her into the orbit of an advocate, policy leader and public figure that risks taking her out of the domain of writing altogether. Indeed, early critical responses to her fictional output subsequent to the *Harry Potter* series for which she is best known have been much less enthusiastic. This might indicate that her success as an innovative writer (which is only one way of defining success) might in fact be following that indicated in Figure 3: an early major break out is followed by a gradual lessening of artistic achievement.

The opposite case is indicated in Figure 4. This maps the career of a writer whose breakthrough is much less sudden and dramatic than that of an author like Rowling, but who nevertheless chips away over a long and sustained period of time so that by degrees a successful authorial career is constructed. Among contemporary writers, Jim Crace sits in this category and possibly Shena Mackay. Galenson refers to artists of this kind as 'experimental innovators' because their careers evince a commitment to many different attempts at stylistic, aesthetic and formal innovation over time (p.174). This contrasts with artists whom he terms 'conceptual innovators' who typically achieve one specific innovation in a particular work during their career, and then repeat the practice of that same innovation in subsequent works (ibid). Jonathan Buckley's practice of portraying the epistemological lacunae in various forms of fictional biography; and Sarah Hall's defamiliarisation of the landscape of her native Northwest of England in a number of different novels are current examples.

It would however be a mistake to assume that career narratives are best understood through recourse to a model of linear progress that brings nothing but improved standing within the artistic community and/ or higher levels of commercial reward over time. Although many writers continue to expand their degree of innovation, formal accomplishment and the size and reach of their readership over time, in reality this is rarely experienced as a one-way narrative of development. Degrees of formal experimentation, commercial acumen, aesthetic innovation and readerly pleasure are all

prone to fluctuate somewhat over time so that at any given point in a given writer's career, there may be slight dips and inclines as well as gradual climbs. But in a case like that indicated by Figure 4, the overall tendency is likely to be upwards (whereas in Figure 3 the overall momentum is down).

It would also be misleading to assume that in cases like Figure 4, the achievements of the author go on slowly increasing forever. It is much more common that the writer's status reaches a high point at some point during the career and then either ceases to grow or positively declines thereafter. Figure 5 indicates this typical career trajectory with a peak followed by a gradual decline. Again, allowing for the inclusion of lesser degrees of gradation at specific point, the career path that follows this shape is the most commonly experienced general career trajectory. A good example is the career of A.S. Byatt, whose early novels received little attention but whose accomplishments reached a high point with *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Possession* (1990) whereas her subsequent work was less highly consecrated. It did however, achieve a second, lesser peak following her award of the Man Booker Prize for *The Children's Book* (2009). This shows that in fact Byatt's career evinces elements of both Figure 5 and Figure 6, where Figure 6 illustrates a form of inverted peak: the successes achieved during the early stages of the career give rise to a period where the author is still active but neither the critical response, commercial success or artistic innovation matches what was achieved early on, until a noted upturn in fortunes takes place somewhat belatedly. This career trajectory is somewhat rare, but Kingsley Amis could be considered an example: the early success of *Lucky Jim* (1954) was succeeded by an output that was prolific but somewhat inconsequential in the 1960s and 1970s, before a significant degree of innovation was achieved with the late *Old Devils* (1986).

### **Lateness Interrogated**

What these models all have in common to some degree is the equation of later stages in an author's career with lesser achievement. There are many possible reasons for this. It may be that the works produced by certain authors in the later stages of their careers really are less innovative, less aesthetically pleasing or less formally accomplished than what they did earlier. It might be that they are driven out of the limelight as fashions change and critical attention shifts elsewhere. It may simply be a matter of having said all there is to say. Or it could be a question of sociological positioning: the very success of

earlier works at the high point of the career peak sets up an expectation for what kind of work that author should produce so that to deviate from that expectation is to be found wanting (whereas to meet it is to become open to the charge of repetition and unoriginality). Authors in the later stages of their careers are often thus in a peculiar kind of double bind. Indeed, the idea of a decline narrative whereby levels of creative achievement diminish over time is very commonly associated with authorial careers. In this sense the careers of authors are not very different from other kinds of career, where retirement and withdrawal from the workforce gives rise to a lowering of both social status and economic power.

What typical decline narratives fail to interrogate, however, is the category of lateness itself. In *On Late Style*, Edward Said argues that certain late-career works of art have a special ability to speak truth to power and hence expound a form of critique with regard to the prevailing social order. This, he argues implicitly, is because artists at such a stage are to some degree insulated against the forms of pressure that can be brought to bear on individuals working in specific material and institutional contexts and their status is therefore liberating and able to give rise to a degree of outspokenness.

One problem with this is that it gives rise to a number of quite ropey critical judgements by Said, associating with certain late works a powerful enunciation that is often quite hard to find in them. Moreover, if Said says a lot about the *style* of late style he has less to say about the *lateness* of late style. He identifies various different ways in which a work could be considered 'late,' but never marshals these into a systematic programme and a certain taken-for-grantedness about the definition of lateness pervades his thinking in spite of his efforts to consider different forms of the belated. This has the advantage that artists' careers cease to be seen as special cases and can then be analysed using some of the same tools of career construction theory as other kinds of profession and other kinds of life.

However, such assumptions of authorial careers also have a disadvantage, which is that lateness becomes associated with old age and old age with loss of creativity in a pattern of thought that is both lazy and prejudicial. One of the major insights of career construction theory is that life stages are not necessarily successive or mutually exclusive. Somebody can be involved in many different roles, many different kinds of

work and many different working relationships at the same time. It would be misguided to think that one stage simply replaces the previous and gives rise to the next in a simple chronological fashion because the stages necessarily overlap and intertwine. For this reason, lateness itself is perhaps better defined as a relational concept, constructed as such through association to what has gone before, than through simple recourse to biological age. One could be considered an early-stage novelist or artist at a relatively advanced age if the portion of the lifespan devoted to being an artist only started at such an age. Likewise one might enter the 'late' stage of a career at a somewhat early age if particular levels of accomplishment have been attained early on so that whatever comes next is belated relative to that accomplishment. Thus the late stage is less a question of age than of the positioning of certain life stages and the work done during them with regard to what has gone before.

Using career construction theory to conceptualise the different stages of an authorial career is useful for a number of reasons. First of all it demystifies the status of authorship as such, by treating it as a field that has material properties and characteristics just like other careers and disciplines, subject to discernible fluctuations and vicissitudes like any other, and need not be considered a special case. Second, career construction employs a dialogic method for constructing a narrative trajectory of the career of a given individual through a synthesis of two distinct timeframes. One of these emphasises continuity and commonality across all the phases of a given career; the other identifies discernible stages within that career and then considers the distinct properties of each. A key question then arises over how to define the different stages.

When a career construction practitioner counsels a client the principal method employed is a narrative method: the telling and re-telling of life stories. That is, the client narrates a series of memories, anecdotes and life stories to the counsellor who then re-narrates them back to the client. This process facilitates the latter in gaining a new degree of self-knowledge arising out of the experience of hearing his or her own story narrated from a position that is simultaneously inside and outside themselves. As noted above, the purpose of narrating memories and stories in his way is not merely to recover factual information; and indeed the content of the memories might not be factually accurate at all. The point is rather to gain a sense of what matters to the person in question: what are their core values, their skills, the attributes they have cultivated in themselves and

admire in others, sources of potential satisfaction and self-meaning at a very profound level. In vocational guidance, having elicited what precisely it is that generates genuine meaning for an individual and so confers lasting meaning on their life, the next step is to identify potential roles, vocations or working environments that are capable of providing those things. Metaphorically speaking, the individuals in question become both characters in their own narrative arc and crucially authors of that narrative, capable of writing the next stage in their life story – which means making a new vocational decision and then acting upon it, thereby reverting to the role of protagonist in the ‘occupational plot’ (Savickas, p.147). Thus periods of career or vocational uncertainty are tantamount to experiences of writer’s block, which it is the counsellor’s business to assist the client in overcoming.

This emphasis on the co-creation of a life story told by the client and re-told back to the client by the counsellor chimes in with much recent scholarship about the category of authorship. This too has overhauled the outmoded, classical model of an author sitting at a desk in splendid isolation from the rest of the world, creating works of art by virtue of his unique creative vision; replacing it with a greater emphasis on the collaborative networks and relationships in which all authors are necessarily involved at every level. One of the main points to arise from applying career construction to theoretical discussion of authorial careers is this identification of the importance of collaboration and joint authorship. By the same token, just as the model of ‘the author’ is interrogated and altered, so too the different stages that comprise an authorial career turn out to be something other than they first appeared. This is because (the abstract schemata discussed above notwithstanding), the different stages that comprise an overall career should not be seen as empty chunks of time and are better understood as the sum total of activities and relationships in which a person is involved during different periods of time, and to which he or she assigns deep sources of meaning and value. In the case of an author’s career this means a new stage exists when a new kind of work, or related set of works, begins to be created.

The new way of thinking about career stages has significant implications for how we think about the properties associated with works written during the late stages of authors’ careers. It was noted above that Said theorised a form of material stability for artists at that stage that he believed made possible a degree of outspokenness with

regard to the social and political order. This in his account gives such works a special critical power. It was also noted however that this sharp theoretical critique is difficult to discern in some of the literary works he discussed. For example, it is not easy to read into Lampedusa's somewhat nostalgic novel *The Leopard* the historical rage against a changing social structure that Said seems to impute to it. Part of the problem might be that although it was written when Lampedusa was sixty-one, it was in fact his first (and only novel) so that the status of the late-career writer, that Said wants to suggest enables vociferous social critique, is not necessarily applicable. To try and avoid this problem Said moves towards arguing that all works of art in the twentieth century and beyond have an inherent lateness relative to the full depth of prior literary and artistic history (which is also how Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy each define the 'contemporary'). To Said, the fact of coming after a whole long, rich and deep cultural history in itself endows such works with a status and set of properties that earlier works and writers could not have. This is perhaps a useful emphasis on the historical specificity of twentieth century experience in its relation to what had gone before; and a corresponding emphasis on what is newly specific to the twenty-first century might also be useful in thinking about contemporary writers. However, it also has the unfortunate effect of offering to essentialise those writers and works that Said associates with an inherent belatedness.

An alternative means of thinking about afterwards-ness in the context of literary careers is generated by Meg Jensen. Drawing on the research of Lynn Hunt and Joseph Slaughter into the relationship between the development of human rights law and the evolution of confessional literary genres such as the *bildungsroman*, Jensen argues that the material history of the former was strongly inflected by the development of the latter. Specifically, she points out that in a *bildungsroman* the protagonist typically progresses from the status of an outsider relative to some civilisational, cultural or moral norm towards incorporation and acceptance within those norms by sloughing off the experiences, attitudes or characteristics that had previously marked their outside status as such. What interests Jensen is the degree to which the same thing can be said of the history of the development of the discourse of human rights. Here too individuals are brought within the sphere of a legal-political system based partly on the guarantee of rights, partly on the discharging of responsibilities and ultimately therefore on the acceptance of legal and political structures of authority. Those who do not accept such authority

therefore avoid acquiescence in the discharging of responsibilities and correspondingly cede (whether willingly or not) a portion of their legal rights. By drawing attention to this parallel between the histories of the *bildungsroman* and the discourse of legal rights from the late eighteenth century to the present day, Jensen argues that each 'informed' the development of the other (p.68). This sense of interrelation enables her to suggest that the *bildungsroman* has been the primary literary genre by which art mediates and constructs (as opposed to merely reflecting) a certain legal and political version of the human subject. 'Through its relation to rights law, in other words, the *bildungsroman* privileges a certain type of human experience as having universal value and deserving human dignity' (p.69). In turn, this process of privileging one type of human experience over others had the effect of constituting in a legal sense what it means to be human at all. Human experiences that do not conform to the dominant type are therefore implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – not afforded the same human status. Identifying this imbrication of the *bildungsroman* with the advent of human rights discourse and how each constitute the human subject makes it possible to think about the relationship between literature and ethics in the twenty-first century without essentialising the properties of either. In the final part of the chapter, that relationship will be further explored.

### **Career Construction and Ethical Spaces**

It was argued above that career construction theory provides a new set of tools for thinking about the material properties of the careers of contemporary writers, and in particular the later stages of those careers. This is because career construction places an emphasis on changing work and life patterns across a whole working life, which is a pattern of empirical experience familiar to many writers, who are often involved in different kinds of work at different times. Moreover, the narrative method and metaphor of authorship on which career construction depends is rendered specifically literal and material in cases where the particular career under discussion is that of an author.

Since it is a form of vocational counselling practice, career construction typically posits the individual subject as sovereign and all-important, often to the detriment of social or collective responsibilities in a way that squeezes out space for critique of the prevailing socio-economic order of which the material careers in question are a part. This may explain why the astute, cutting power that Said theoretically associates with literary

works written during the later stages of their authors' careers are not easy to identify in practice. In Jensen (and Slaughter's) more nuanced understanding of twenty- and twenty-first-century specificity, a somewhat different account of belatedness emerges. Where Said talks of the savage power of late works and then mines texts for stylistic features that would provide evidence of such features, they generate a sociological blueprint of the interrelation between legal discourses and literary genres in which the latter, far from, expressing dissent with regard to the dominant structures of legal and political power are incorporated within them. The construction of the individual subject as sovereign and all important depends on the recognition and fulfilment by the individual of certain social expectations based on participation within civil society and consumer capitalism. But if such a construction in art limits the capacity of the writer to expound a detailed critique of the social order, there is a danger that the same is true of career counselling. This again tends towards equipping an individual to function in a particular way based on the legal and juridical norms of capitalist and consumerist society. It therefore values one version of what it means to be human over other versions that do not meet those norms. In doing so, it actively constitutes the human subject as the subject of rights. Those same rights are therefore not available to individuals who do not function in the same way with regard to the fulfilment of legal responsibilities or the acknowledgement of political or legal authority.

On the surface, it might seem that career construction is a practice that is implicated in the construction of the bourgeois individual Western subject in the same ways that human rights discourse and the *bildungsroman* are both implicated. In each case, the sovereign subject is interpellated as such on behalf of structures of social and political authority which ironically offer to guarantee forms of liberty and equality. Indeed, if it were the case that career construction practitioners were only ever concerned to enhance the benefit of their individual clients as individuals, this might vitiate the capacity of the field to evoke meaningful social contribution. For example, in *Career Counseling* Savickas notes that during the vocational guidance process he often asks clients what fictional characters they 'admire' because elucidating symbolic traits can be a useful way of clarifying vocational decisions (p.57). He then gives the example of a student who could not decide what to do after graduation, and whose favourite fictional character was *Wonder Woman*. This of course could be interpreted in a number of different ways: it might be that he was passionately interested in fighting social justice;

enforcing law and order; or leadership of a team of people. In another sense, it might indicate that he was interested in working outdoors; or that he is attracted to creative elements such as design, costume or animation. At the extreme end, it could be seen as an indicator of an incipient bisexuality. Career counsellors must be careful to 'triangulate' (Maree, p.77.) such propositions alongside at least two other sources of information about each person before any real suggestion can be made and the whole process is highly complex and indirect and must therefore avoid simplistic judgements. In the case Savickas discusses, what the student really admired was *Wonder Woman's* invisible plane. After graduation, brought to a new degree of self-knowledge through the construction of his life story, he went on to become a designer of stealth aircraft.

This is an extreme example, and far more common are case studies of individuals using the life narratives generated during the counselling process to make vocational decisions of a less dramatic nature. However, it demonstrates a potential pitfall of the field, which is that in treating the individual as sovereign, even if this means participating in the construction of bomber aircraft, in discourages relationships based on solidarity or social commitment. For this reason, N. Mkhize suggests that the 'the notion of an object, sovereign self' should be 'rejected' by career counsellors, in favour of 'a relational stance to the object of one's knowledge' which in the context of career counselling 'may involve active attempts to change the plight of those who may be less fortunate than us' (p.97). Jean Guichard, Jacques Pouyaud and Bernadette Dumora go even further, pointing out that individualistic approaches to career counselling 'could appear to be progress for those who have a margin of choice, but could constitute social regression and thus a psychological ordeal for vulnerable workers who are placed in the paradoxical situation of being made to feel responsible for their own career path over which in fact they have no control' (p.70). This leads them to doubt whether the imbrication of vocational guidance with individual self-management, which has been the dominant paradigm in the West, is sufficient to equip humanity to face the major challenges of today such as economic and environmental crises, the rise of the precariat, large-scale economic and political migration and an increase in fundamentalism. They thus conclude by asking: 'Should we not accept that the individual's reflection about his/ her development goes beyond mere self-concern and includes concern for the other?' (ibid).

Perhaps with this question in mind, Kobus Maree has suggested an ethical shift within career construction theory in order to address the possibility using career construction narratives to incite a meaningful 'social contribution' (p.68). Having noted that people typically seek vocational guidance in response to some kind of pressuring expectation, turbulent change or even a traumatic experience, he suggests that seeking new roles that can combine the skills, aptitudes and interests of the individual with opportunities to contribute to the better functioning or social cohesion of a community can be effective ways of overcoming the pain or frustration associated with such negative experiences.

Savickas concurs, giving as an example the case study of a young woman who had been traumatised by witnessing her mother's suicide when she was a young girl, and who had been unable to commit herself to a single educational route, career path or personal relationship ever since. Through the development of a life story, Savickas elicited from her the idea that the feeling of powerlessness would overwhelm her if it was allowed to, that it stemmed from the experience of her mother's death, and that she had no desire to repeat that experience either in her own life or that of others. Ironically, however, she also realised that in having become somewhat shiftless and unrooted she was in the process of doing exactly that. Although making a commitment to an educational course, or a job, or even a relationship might seem like the obvious means of combatting such instability, this is much more easily suggested in the abstract than it is adopted in practical experience: wanting to pursue a vocation in order to end the uncertainty is not the same as committing to any *particular* vocation, and the desire to choose one over any other cannot be consciously willed if it is not deeply felt. No individual can make themselves dream of doing something they do not dream of.

Drawing all these elements together, Savicaks elucidated the idea that the although the goal was to end the feelings of shiftlessness associated with the original trauma, this could only be achieved by reaching a sense of purpose. From here, it was only a short step from not wanting to repeat that trauma, to taking steps that would actively prevent such repetition both in her own life and that of others. She became a hospice carer, helping people overcome grief and feelings of despair and abandonment as a means of allaying her own experience of those same feelings. Every time she helped somebody 'die well,' she therefore recovered her own sense of purpose and empowerment a little more (p.82). In this way, it is possible for career counsellors to combine the idea of

individual vocation with that of a social calling and achieve a beneficial social or communitarian effect.

### **The Ethics of Self-reflection**

As the above discussion about the relationship between individual benefit and collective moral commitment suggests, the overall purpose of narrative-based approaches to constructing career models remains open-ended and questionable and should not at all be taken for granted. For Larry Cochran careers advisors practise exactly this questioning of wider purpose when they encourage their clients to seek not merely a better career role or a better professional opportunity, but when they interrogate and redefine at a much more fundamental level what it is that constitutes such an improvement in the first place: 'better or worse for what, or to what end?' (p.85). In the last instance, Cochran's work implies, clients seeking to change career paths are likely to feel a satisfactory sense of betterment if they are able to devise a means of marrying individual aspiration with social contribution. In turn, the best way of doing this is to reflect on the kinds of contribution they are meaningfully able to make given the range of skills, experiences, interests and aptitudes available to them. In this final section of the chapter, this idea of reflection, and more specifically, of critical self-reflection, is brought to bear of the idea of what kind of work authors tend to produce during the later stages of their careers (where *later* is again defined in the relational sense outlined above; rather than in the simple linear sense it was intended to replace).

Within career construction research, Hazel Reid has made a distinction between reflection on action; reflection in action; and reflection for action – where each of these can be seen as gradations on a continuum of ascending degrees of self-criticality (p.106). An enhanced capacity for self-awareness or critical self-consciousness need not be an effect of age or even of experience but the pattern of behaviours associated with self-reflection typically takes the form of a cycle. It starts with an action that somebody has performed and then that person evaluates the action in order to find ways of improving similar actions in the future. Thus the distinction between reflection on a given action or intervention and reflection for action is that the former takes a mainly remedial approach to the correction of error whereas the latter overhauls the dichotomy between success and error and creates constant opportunities for improvement as an end in its own right. As Cochran suggests, career construction need not only assist individuals

whose career paths have been subject to some kind of troubling change or traumatic experience, and may simply involve transforming a 'state of affairs' that is good to one that is 'more ideal' (p.49).

What Reid's tripartite model of reflection on- in- and for action does not encompass, however, is the possibility of seeing reflection as a form of action in and for itself. Yet critical self-reflection as an activity in its own right, rather than as a stage in the evolution of other actions, appears to be the form of reflection most germane to a consideration of the work produced by authors during the later stages of their careers. This is because, as we have seen, being an author – perhaps any form of artist – is not a career than many people consciously retire from. Rather, because it is something they have chosen to pursue as a form of vocation or creative calling they are likely to feel this calling go on long after people in other professions might have withdrawn from the labour pool. At the same time, precisely because it is a calling, to pursue an artistic vision is also to feel continually driven to improve upon and exceed what has already been attempted, a feeling which in turn engenders a continual striving for better. Indeed, the extent to which a relatively high level of creative or critical success has been achieved earlier in the writer's career might be inversely proportional to how authors feel about their own work. It may be the case that the great success of a prior work sets up certain sociological expectations for what subsequent works by the same author will feel like, at the level of both style and content, in terms of adherence to or wilful deviation from a now-established model. Where this is the case, such expectations might positively inhibit further innovation and so the very success of that work or works for which the author is best known casts a long shadow over later endeavours. To put it another way, because it is a creative calling the vocation of author means that authors are often more attached to their *next* piece of work than to any *previous* work, even in cases where a previous work has been well received. Genette goes as far as to suggest that from among his or her entire oeuvre, an author's own 'preference' naturally 'inclines' towards those works least valued by critics, audiences or the reading public (p.255).

To be an artist is to be continually dissatisfied with one's own work and to want to produce something better. As noted above, however, the category of *better* itself is not a given and is in fact highly provisional and subject to continual modification and redefinition through a process of self-reflection as a new form of creative intervention.

Or, doing better work is made possible by the capacity to make some kind of social contribution through that work. In some ways, this idea of a social contribution accords with Said's idea of the outspoken social criticism that artists late in their careers might be able to generate precisely because of the status they have achieved in reaching such a stage. On the other hand, unlike Said's rather grandiose sense of the belligerent power of late works of art and literature, this chapter adumbrates the more modest idea of self-criticality as a form of social contribution in its own right. Since critical self-awareness is enabled through meaningful self-reflection, it therefore follows that self-reflection is an important feature of literary works produced late in their authors' careers. Authors at that stage can be described as evincing an ongoing concern with the conditions of authorship in general, and with their own authorial practice in particular – so much so that late-career works are often identifiable by their deployment of a specific form of metafiction.

In fact there are four different ways in which late-career authors practice reflection-as-action in their writing. First of all there is the retrospective self-commentary, in which the author reviews his or her writing so far. This could take the form of essays or articles written about specific works. Typically these are written in the form of a new introduction to a work that was published years earlier, possibly heralding the publication of a re-issue or a new edition, or marking a landmark occasion such as an anniversary. Genette refers to these as 'delayed' prefaces (p.247). A.S. Byatt's self-commentary, written in the 1991 introduction to her first novel *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) is a good example. So is Graham Swift's introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition (2008) of his novel *Waterland* (1993). On the other hand, there is no *a priori* reason why retrospective self-commentary need be addressed to specific works; or to creative work as such. V.S. Naipaul's penultimate book *A Writer's People* (2007) was a belated summation of his commitment to the world of writing per se, rather than to any particular work within it. Jonathan Dollimore's *Desire: A Memoir* (2017) is more concerned with the life than with the writing, but retains the suggestion that certain key episodes in the life were crucial parts of the writer's intellectual formation and therefore are not entirely extricable from the critical, non-fictional works for which Dollimore became known.

It has by now become a commonplace observation within biographical and autobiographical studies that the easy distinction between purportedly factual genres such as biography and criticism, and purportedly creative ones such as fiction, is not in

practice as clear-cut as it seems. This is partly because as the example of Dollimore's account of his intellectual formation shows, for a writer, writing about one's life is to some extent bound up with writing also about one's own writing. In other words, the distinction between fact and fiction does not necessarily hold at the level of content. By the same token, neither does that distinction easily hold at the level of form. The second general category for forms of writing in which writers late in their careers re-visit their earlier work is that which Heather Kerr has termed *fictocriticism*. Here, the writer engages in the retrospective self-commentary of specific works mentioned above, but often in a loosely imaginative and creative way (as opposed to the scrupulous analytical rigour associated with literary research and scholarship). Gillian Clarke's re-imagining of herself as a mythic avatar of Shakespeare's Cordelia, first in the narrative poem *The King of Britain's Daughter* (1993) and subsequently in a different form in the memoir *At the Source: A Writer's Year* (2008) are clear examples of this ficto-critical practice.

A natural complement to Kerr's *fictocriticism* is the recently emerging genre of autofiction, which arose in France in the 1970s through the work of Serge Doubrovsky and has latterly been gaining momentum in the English-speaking world both as an object of analysis and a subject of fictional practice. In autofiction authors effectively create fictionalised autobiographies. That is, they narrate memories, incidents, events and relationships that are empirically true. But whereas biographies and autobiographies tend to adhere to the semblance of verifiable factual accuracy, autofiction uses the experimental techniques of modernist writing, foregrounding the gaps and aporia that exist in memory and hence its fundamentally flawed nature and overall unreliability. This means that writing autofiction is often tantamount to a process of trying to remember, and of assigning emotional significance and meaning to what is remembered.

Autofictions are so many self-reflective quests for truth, but the truths that emerge are of a symbolic, provisional and unstable nature rather than the kinds of factual information we would find in a reference book or encyclopaedia. There is no necessary reason why autofiction should arise late in the author's life as defined by biological age, but autofictions tend to be written in the aftermath either of some traumatic experience or simply after a period of time has elapsed between what is narrated and the act of narrating. For this reason, autofictions are often belated in the relational (as opposed to linear, chronological) sense discussed above. The semi-fictionalisation of herself that is a feature of Jeanette Winterson's oeuvre, or John Burnside's serialisation of different

fictionalised episodes from his empirical life, are prominent examples of autofiction in English.

Finally, there is a specific form of fictional self-retrospect that is sometimes to be found in literary texts produced by authors late in their careers. No critical term has yet been coined for such works, but they could accurately be described as late-career metafiction. Typically in such works, authors revisit themes, structures, events or even techniques that they had already employed during those works that were produced earlier in their career and for which they are probably better known. However, it is not merely a question of revisiting or simplistically repeating. What is distinctive about such works is that to the existing forms and themes is added a newly critical self-awareness on the part of the author as such. This critical self-awareness is both enabled and demonstrated by embedding within the text so many avatars for the author function. The typical protagonists portrayed in late-career metafiction are often characters who are themselves authors, storytellers, filmmakers, artists, letter writers or others whose fictional vocations enable the flesh-and-blood author to inscribe within their construction a whole series of explorations into the role and nature of authorship. This is why, just as so many debut novels evince a philosophical concern with the question of what it means to be an author (and often explore the environment and conditions in which the practice of authorship occurs), so too late-career metafiction are concerned to explore those same questions from a different career standpoint. For example, in A.S. Byatt's novel *The Children's Book* (2009) many of the themes and interests portrayed bespeak a widespread continuity with the works produced earlier in Byatt's oeuvre. Adding to those interests a protagonist whose vocation also happens to be that of a storyteller elevates the work into a profoundly metatextual orbit whereby, rather than merely repeating what has gone before, Byatt meditates on her role in the creative process and uses that meditation as the basis for further creation. A similar point can be made about Graham Swift's (later) novel *Wish You Were Here* (2010) with regard to his earlier and better-known works. In the process of creating such specifically late-career metafiction, authors apply the process of reflection-as-action to the work of creating new and distinctive metafictional works.

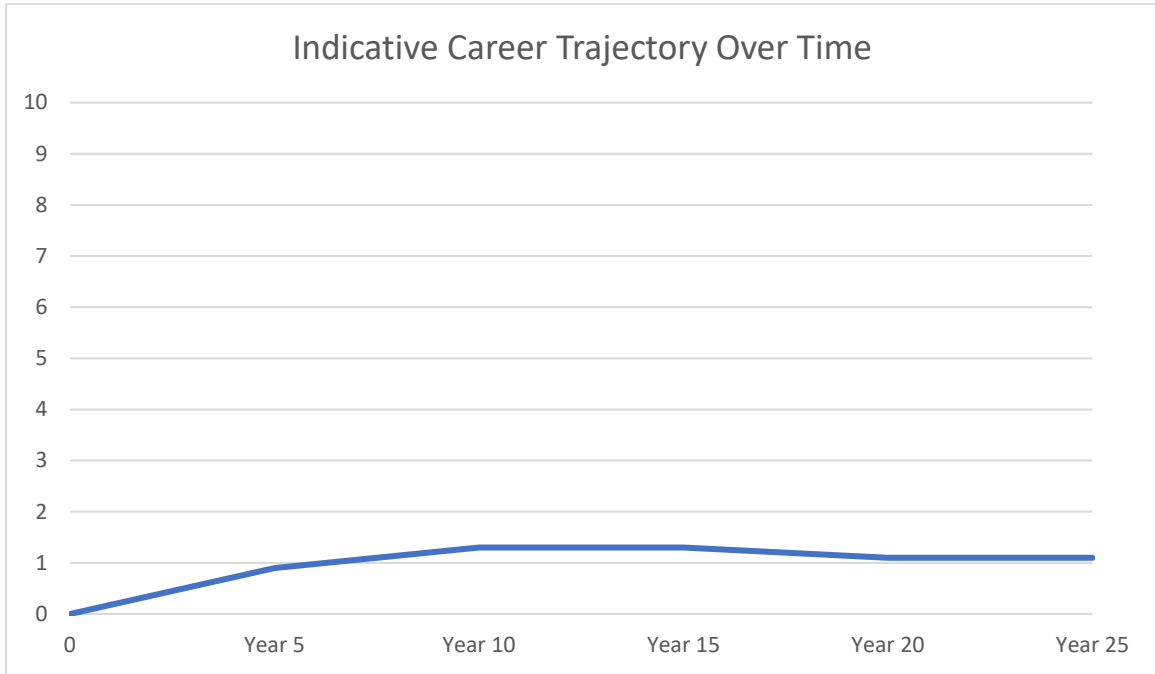


Figure 1: Only a low level of success is ever achieved.

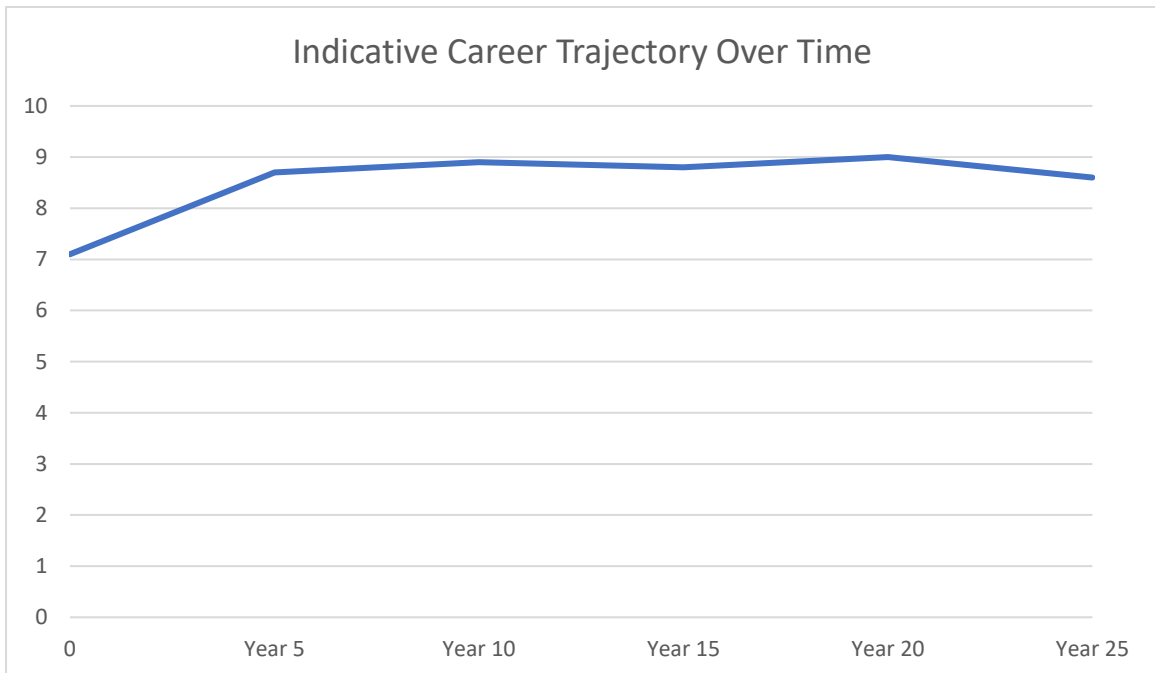


Figure 2: Early break-out is consolidated by a high level of subsequent success.

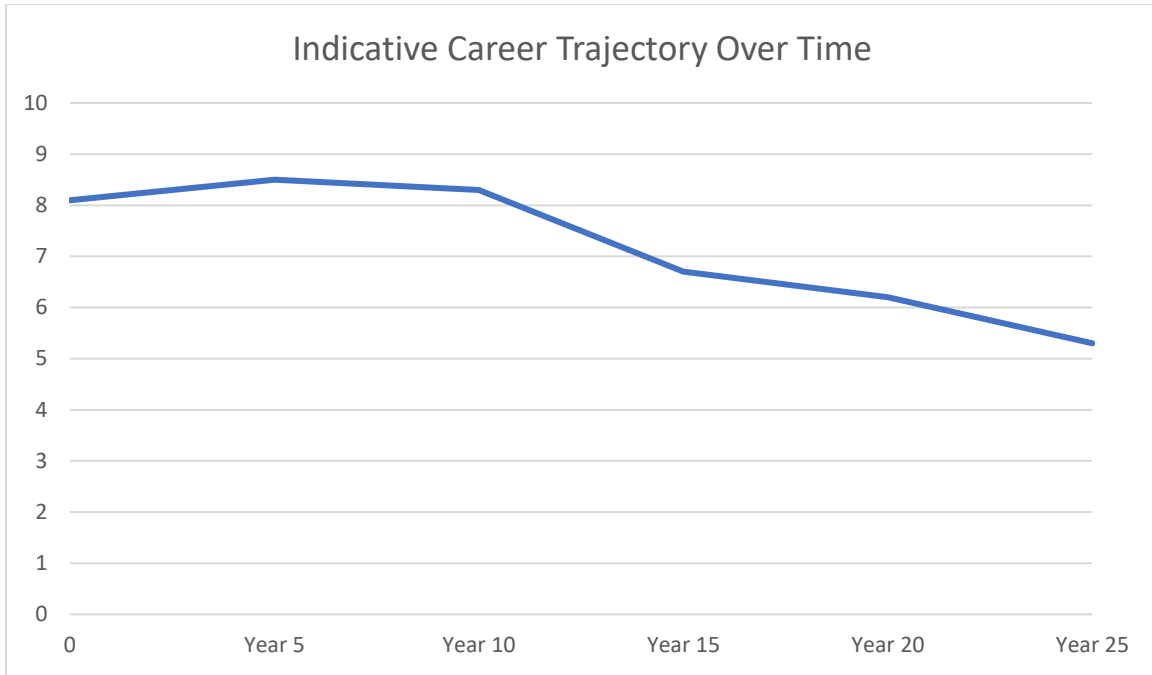


Figure 3: Subsequent work struggles to live up to an early success.

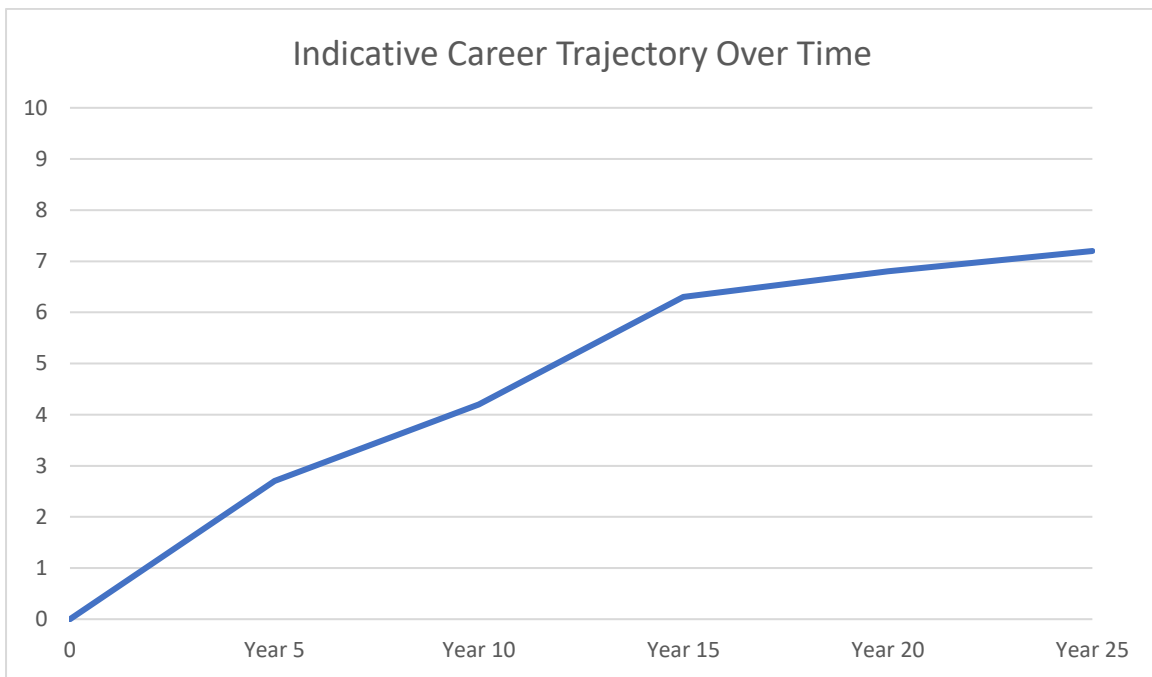


Figure 4: The career is slowly and gradually developed.

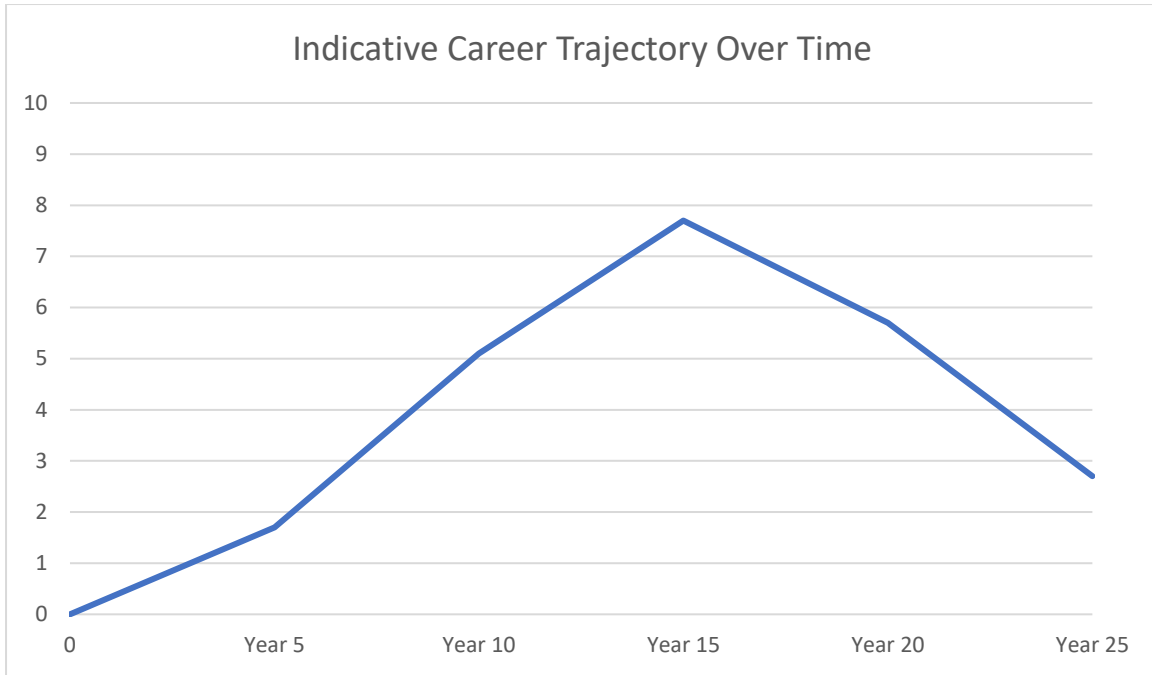


Figure 5: The 'peak'

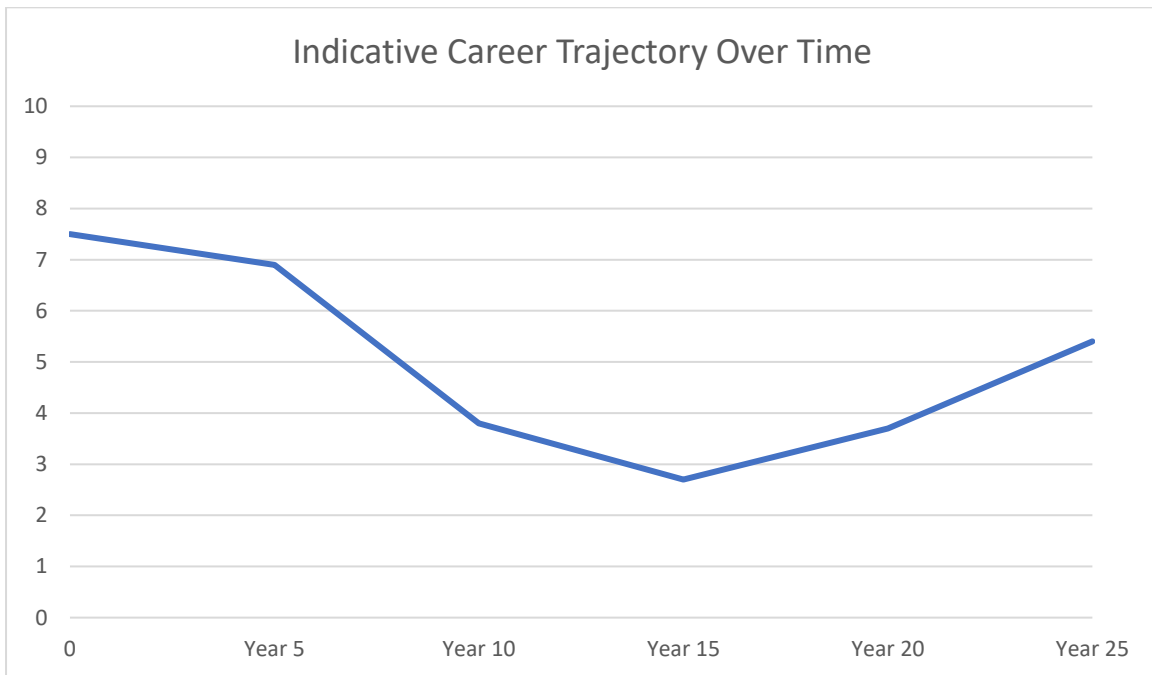


Figure 6: The inverted peak

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