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**Article**

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Ronald Hartz\*

## **‘Everything must change in order to stay the same’\*\***

The contribution of Kattenbach, Lücke, Schlese, & Schramm (2011<sup>1</sup>) points to one of the basic narratives about capitalism nowadays, the seemingly inescapable demand of mobility and flexibility of employees, managers and organisations of all kinds (Lemke, 2004). From quite different points of view, this diagnosis of the times is for example articulated by sociologists (e.g. Sennett, 1998; Rosa, 2005), organisational scholars (e.g. Clegg, 1990) and management theorists (e.g. Hamel & Prahalad, 1996). Not surprisingly, the proclaimed ‘boundaryless organisation’ finds its echo in the field of HRM in the concept of the ‘boundaryless career’. My following remarks and suggestions should be read as small and more or less critical reflections about the discourse on flexibility and mobility in general and the concept of the boundaryless career in particular. To outline the specific strengths of the contribution of Kattenbach et al. from a critical perspective, I will first link their study to some basic ideas of the so-called Critical Management Studies (CMS). At once, this is a plea for more plurality in the research field. Second, I will make two empirical suggestions to differentiate the picture drawn by Kattenbach et al. In my main comment, I suggest an alternative reframing of the concept of boundaryless career as another possible way of providing critical reflection.

It is first and foremost refreshing that Kattenbach et al. question the overall validity and scope of this narration. It seems to me that their scepticism about the truth claim of the ‘historical a priori’ (Foucault, 1981) of flexibility and mobility serves as a *leitmotiv* of their own empirical investigation as well as their recommendations for designing HR strategies. Personally, I have a lot of sympathy with their scepticism which comes close to some principles of the Critical Management Studies (e.g. Fournier & Grey, 2000; Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007). I am not sure if the authors will agree, but I would argue that they follow a ‘dissent orientation’ (Alvesson & Deetz 1996) and a strategy of ‘de-naturalization’ (Fournier & Grey, 2000) of the aforementioned basic narration of flexibility. According to Alvesson and Deetz (1996, p. 196), a dissent orientation is not primarily about disagreement but about ‘disruption of a coherent dominant discourse’, deriving from the argument ‘that people, orders, and objects are constructed in work, social interaction, and the process of research’. In reference to the principle of de-naturalisation, Fournier and Grey (2000, p. 18) state that ‘whilst in mainstream management theories various “imperatives” are invoked (e.g. globalization, competitiveness) to legitimize a proposed course of action and to suggest (im-

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<sup>1</sup> In this discourse, a single reference list for all contributions is given at the end.

plicity or explicitly) that “there is no alternative”, CMS is committed to uncovering the alternatives that have been effaced by management knowledge and practice’. From such a point of view, it is a major strength of the study of Kattenbach et al. to promote on the basis of their empirical results an alternative view to the widespread concept of boundaryless careers. In their own words:

Job stability and intraorganisational career paths are still of importance to German white collar workers. Career and talent management even gain in importance given the phenomenon of an aging workforce as well as the strong negative impact of growing age on mobility. [...] Company vision and HR strategies should not promote transactional, protean and boundaryless oriented employees. HR development, diversity and age management should be enforced and in today’s de-layered organisations there is a need to develop new internal career concepts e.g. by using side-step promotions or skill and competence related human resource development. (Kattenbach et al., 2011, p. 309).

The second strength of their study is its general interest in the perspective and voices of employees, although empirically restricted to the framework of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP). The results indicate the still existing and fundamental relevance of job satisfaction and security as *intraorganisational* variables for career expectations (ibid., p. 307), and the authors highlight the importance of age, gender, and household and private life data for future career research (ibid., p. 308). Recently, Werner Nienhüser vividly argues that empirical research on HRM as a ‘collective body of statements’ (Nienhüser 2011, p. 369) ‘creates a one-sided, distorted image of the reality of work and thus generates ideology’ (ibid., p. 367). In contrast, Kattenbach et al. take an interest in the perspective of employees and call for transcending the firm level (Nienhüser, 2011, p. 379), i.e. to take the *lifeworld* of the employees more seriously. This in my view is a small, but welcomed contribution toward changing the overall picture to a more pluralistic and critical one.

In order to deepen and especially to differentiate their *empirical* argument, I see at least two further directions for research and reflection. First, the authors are aware that the results are restricted to the decade 1999 – 2009 (Kattenbach et al., 2011, p. 306). Whilst during this decade ‘no clear trend [is] detectable’ (ibid., p. 304) in reference to career expectations, historical points of reference beyond the restrictions of the GSOEP-Panel could help to establish a more convincing diachronic view on turnover intentions, and so forth. Given the longstanding discussion about the post-industrial society from the midst of the 1960s onwards, this time horizon could probably help to identify long-term shifts or continuities in employee expectations. Second, it is empirically comprehensible but in reference to its explanatory power a pity that the study excludes marginally employed people and civil servants from its sample (ibid., p. 300). This is especially problematic in the context of the authors’ generalising hypothesis: ‘There is no trend in career expectations (regarding turnover intention, job insecurity, and promotion and demotion expectation) among *employees* in the German labour market’ (ibid., p. 287). Although the notion of ‘career expectations’ in reference to marginally employed people is in some way a euphemism, their inclusion could help to depict a more complex as well as a more realistic picture of the subjective consequences of factors such as organisational downsizing and delayering. The inclusion of civil servants could help to clarify the effects of the ongoing restruc-

turing of the public sector in Germany. For example, on the basis of my own personal experience, we are in need of studies which investigate the consequences of 'academic capitalism', the 'entrepreneurial university' and the 'economization of education' (e.g. Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Münch, 2011) from the viewpoint of the academic workforce.

The study of Kattenbach et al. presents one possible way to question HR strategies and their underlying academic concepts. The authors implicitly follow the assumption that the concept of boundaryless career was brought into the academic discussion to respond to societal changes and re-adjust careers research in order to represent the reality of careers and organisations more adequately. In line with this ontological realism, Kattenbach et al. consequently scrutinise the range and 'truth' of the concept (i.e. the (mis-)match between the academic discourse and the subjective and organisational reality). The lack of empirical evidence then seems to falsify the concept for this specific empirical case and calls for different HR strategies as discussed above.

However, in reading the article, I have the suspicion that from the point of view of the concept of boundaryless career the results do not speak against the concept itself but point to the lack of its realisation. The twisted punch line is that some could bring into play the empirical results to argue for additional efforts and the promotion of boundaryless careers (e.g. to face global competition, enhance organisational competitiveness, etc.). Thus, not the concept but the stable trend in career expectations among white collar workers is problematic. Against the backdrop of this 'thought experiment', I would like to outline an alternative, additional critical reading or reframing of the concept of boundaryless career. Due to the character of the 'ZfP-Diskurs', this should be understood as an invitation for further discussion about the status of our scientific concepts and respective worldviews.

This re-reading takes its *first* inspiration from a basic argument in the study about the 'entrepreneurial self' by Ulrich Bröckling (2007), which was itself inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and the studies of governmentality. In short and quite roughly, Foucault rejects a realistic ontology and follows a rather nominalist impulse, which sees language and discourses (e.g. about discipline, sexuality or madness) not as representations of a reality outside the discourse but as producers of reality (Foucault, 1972). Consequently, the exploration of the historically contingent rules of discursive sense-making and their truth claims is a prior object of inquiry. Accordingly, Bröckling characterises the discourse about the entrepreneurial self not as a representation of a changed economic or social reality but as 'Realfiktion' (Hutter & Teubner, 1994), which addresses people as entrepreneurial self and simultaneously calls them to become one: 'One is not an entrepreneurial self, but should become one. But you can only become one because of your invocation as entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling, 2007, p. 47; own transl.). It seems possible to reframe the concept of the boundaryless career as well as the 'protean career' following the same logic. They both make truth claims about a new reality for careers and organisations whilst actively giving advice to HR strategists and employees about how to cope with this reality. To paraphrase Bröckling: 'One is not a boundaryless employee, but should become one. But you can only become one because of your invocation as boundaryless employee'. Kattenbach et al. (2011, p. 308) are quite aware of this *performativity* of scientific concepts; that is,

the power to bring their 'objects into being': 'Overemphasis on an ever-changing society and growing market dynamics in theoretical concepts ... as well as in public discussion could emerge as an inappropriate guideline in designing HR strategies. Moreover, it could even result in a self-fulfilling prophecy if employees proactively react to the calls for being more boundaryless'.

Given this argument, another question is of interest: How does a scientific concept get *performativity*? One way to deal with this question is to take a closer look at the rhetoric of science. My suggestion to re-read the concept of boundaryless career takes its second inspiration from the work of Deirdre McCloskey (1998) about the 'rhetoric of economics': 'Science is an instance of writing with intent, the intent to persuade other scientist's [...]. The study of such writing with intent was called by the Greeks "rhetoric"' (ibid., p. 4). To get at least an idea about two rhetorical means of science, I will discuss the rhetorical establishment of a scientific ethos (ibid., p. 7) and the equation of the authors point of view with a 'represented reality' (ibid., p. 9-10) in the context of the boundaryless career concept. For this purpose, I will take a closer, but inevitably rough look at an article of Michael B. Arthur (1994) '*The boundaryless career: A new perspective for organizational inquiry*', which could be seen as one of the initial contributions to the concept. To avoid any misinterpretation, I would like to emphasise that my aim is not to blame the article of Arthur for its rhetorical means. Science is always about persuasion and rhetoric is an unavoidable part of any scientific writing.

### Establishing an ethos

'The exordium, or beginning, of any speech must establish an ethos worth believing. An established ethos is the most persuasive of scientific arguments, and scientists are therefore very busy establishing it' (McCloskey, 1998, p. 7),

Arthur opens his article with a baseball story (1994, p. 295). In short: Don Baylor was an ageing slugger, recruited via a short-term arrangement by the Boston Red Sox in 1986. Baylor quickly became an informal leader but 'rigid assumptions about roles and careers' hampered his assignment in the decisive sixth game of the World Series. The team lost its motivation and so the game. As with any story, the plot demands moral reasoning (McCloskey, 1998, p. 15). Consequently, Arthur introduces an *ethos of (scientific) self doubt and critic* and invites *us*, i.e. the scientific audience to this critical self-assessment, whilst introducing at the same time the solution to overcome our contribution—the concept of a boundaryless career:

How much of our empirical work has explored the kind of issues the Don Baylor story raises? To what extent have temporary, market-driven employment arrangements captured our interest? Have we considered what careers [...] can mean for organizational learning? The purpose of this issue is to highlight questions such as these, and to promote a new point of departure for careers research, namely the 'boundaryless career' (ibid., p. 296).

In turn, Arthur draws a picture of scientific marginalisation if we persist in our *orthodox* approaches. To stand at the forefront of scientific progress is another invitation to the reader and part of a scientific ethos as well. Arthur's questions are (again) of a rhetorical nature:

The suggestion from the preceding discussion is that careers research has maintained its orthodox approach despite the emergent pace of organizational change. Should careers

research persist in this approach, and accept a smaller place in the overall organizational studies agenda? Or can there be a change in emphasis of careers research to accommodate the changing realities of organizational life? (ibid., p. 300).

### Point of view = 'represented reality'

'The scientists says, it is not I the scientist who make these assertions but reality itself (Nature's words in the scientists mouth)' (McCloskey, 1998, p. 9),

In the case of the article of Arthur, he strings together statistics and data from seemingly all over the world to impress (and to persuade) upon the reader a new reality for employees and organisations. Unsurprisingly, this reality calls (again) for the concept of boundaryless careers. However, the rhetorically informed reader should be aware of words and phrases such as 'evidence', 'just', 'only', 'in sum', 'old', 'new', 'fading' in the following quotations:

How significant are boundaryless careers? Direct evidence stems from several sources. The median employment tenure for all U.S. workers is just four and a half years [...] In Japan [...] the median for male workers is only eight years [...]. Firms of under 500 employees [...] account for 56 per cent of U.S. private employment ... predicted to rise to 70 per cent by the year 2000 [...]. A similar shift has already occurred in the U.K. ... and other European countries [...]. [...] In sum, the old picture of stable employment and associated organizational careers is fading. A new picture of dynamic employment and boundaryless careers calls for our attention (Arthur, 1994, p. 296-97)

[...] the unpredictable, market-sensitive world in which so many careers now unfold (ibid., p. 297).

The presumption of stable contexts associated with 'organizational careers' was evidently fading (ibid., p. 300).

Further evidence about Japanese and other East Asian forms of organization also challenged large firm assumptions (ibid., p. 300).

In sum, recent familiar assumptions about the employment world have suddenly become distant (ibid., p. 300).

To sum up, both the proclaimed scientific ethos and the 'represented reality', indistinguishable from the 'point of view' of the boundaryless career approach, seem to play a role in reference to the persuasive power of the concept. Moreover, these rhetorical means support its performativity; that is, to make truth claims about a new reality for careers and organisations whilst actively producing this reality. Granted, this suggested re-framing of a scientific concept needs further work and elaboration. However, I am convinced that such a perspective can support critical reflections about the ontological *and* the political status of science. In turning to the title of my comment, borrowed from the novel of Lampedusa, such reflections possibly question a common logic of science, and that is that everything must change (our reality and our concepts) in order to maintain the same scientific community.