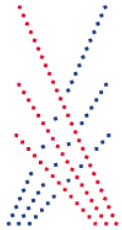

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Positioning Career Identity Construction: Identity Work and Identity Status Models

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Abstract

To date, little has been done to illuminate the process of identity content construction, how individuals use exploration to construct career-identities, or how identity construction processes function at both the personal and social level. In response, the purpose of this paper is to explore the theoretical contribution of recent research carried out by the author into the nature of career-identity and its construction. Firstly, a grounded theory study of 36 Generation Y graduates from U.K. and Irish universities resulted in the development of two models: a Cycle of Individual Career-Identity Construction (CICIC); and a Conceptual Model of Individual Career-Identity. These models demonstrate that Generation Y graduates have fluid rather than stable career-identities, that they put emphasis on personal over social identity, and that they construct and reconstruct their individual career-identities over time, primarily through sense-making processes as opposed to identification processes. Secondly, this paper makes a further theoretical contribution by attempting to locate the CICIC within extant literature, while integrating concepts from pragmatism, identity work, sense-making, and identity status models to advance our understanding of career-identity construction as a process. Practical implications include a review of retention strategies and career counselling interventions.

Keywords - Career identity, Generation Y, Graduate careers, Sense making, Identity work, Identity Status Models

Introduction

It can be argued that 'identity represents the central agency mechanism in career development' (Praskova, 2015, p.146). In the contemporary world of protean and boundaryless careers, individuals no longer appear to be experiencing long-term socialisation or career direction from organisations (Savickas, 2012). Thus, career-identity is becoming an important concept (e.g. LaPointe, 2010; Meijers *et al.*, 2013; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Career-identity is a 'self-concept about one's career interest, values, beliefs, skills and goals' (Garrison *et al*., 2017, p.517). By guiding goal formation, it can help individuals navigate their direction through uncertain and unpredictable labour markets (Fugate *et al*., 2004; McArdle *et al.,* 2007). Essentially therefore, career-identities 'help fill the void by replacing institutionalized career structures with individual psychological structures' (Fugate *et al*., 2004, p.20). Nonetheless, Atewologun *et al*. (2017) note that, as yet, career-identity has received little attention in comparison to other types of identity, e.g. organisational identity. The current study, therefore, attempts to readdress this balance, by investigating the nature of career-identity and its construction.

In conceptualising identity, McLean *et al.* (2016) note there are two critical elements: content and process. In relation to the former, 'Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is' (Oyserman *et al.*, 2012,

p.69). Content can therefore include values and standards of behaviour, as well as social roles and identification (Vignoles *et al*., 2011). Furthermore, 'identities make up one's self-concept' which is a cognitive structure or way of thinking, defining, or evaluating the self (Oyserman *et al.*, 2012, p.69). Accordingly, career-identity 'can be best understood as comprising of the career aspirations, values and beliefs that inform our self-concept which enable us to answer the question "who am I"' (Lysova *et al*., 2015, p.40). In relation to the latter, process encompasses the way in which identities and self-concepts are 'formed, maintained, and changed over time' (Vignoles *et al*., 2011, p.5). Discussion on process over time often encompass ontological considerations. Some view career-identity as a stable self or self-concept, e.g. Schein (1978). Others take a functionalist approach, e.g. Fugate *et al*. (2004), McArdle *et al*. (2007) and Hoekstra (2011). In contrast, LaPointe (2010) argues for socially constructed career-identities, while Meijers and Lengelle (2012) and Bosley *et al*. (2009) use constructionist perspectives. Investigations into identity construction can therefore encapsulate discussion on content, self-concept, and process, as well as the ontological nature of identity itself.

The purpose of the current paper is, therefore, to make a theoretical contribution by investigating how the content and self-concept of individuals' career-identities are constructed and by which processes. A synopsis of a grounded theory study into the career-identity construction of Generation Y graduates from U.K. and Irish universities is presented, with its main research outcome highlighted as the CICIC. I then discuss the challenges of searching for theoretical sensitivity in a relatively under researched area. Subsequently, I position the CICIC within extant theory. More specifically, I evaluate how far the CICIC can be located under identity work, what the process of career-identity construction implies about the predominance of personal or social identity within career-identity, and how the CICIC links to extant theory on sense making and identity status models. Finally, practical implications of the study are underlined.

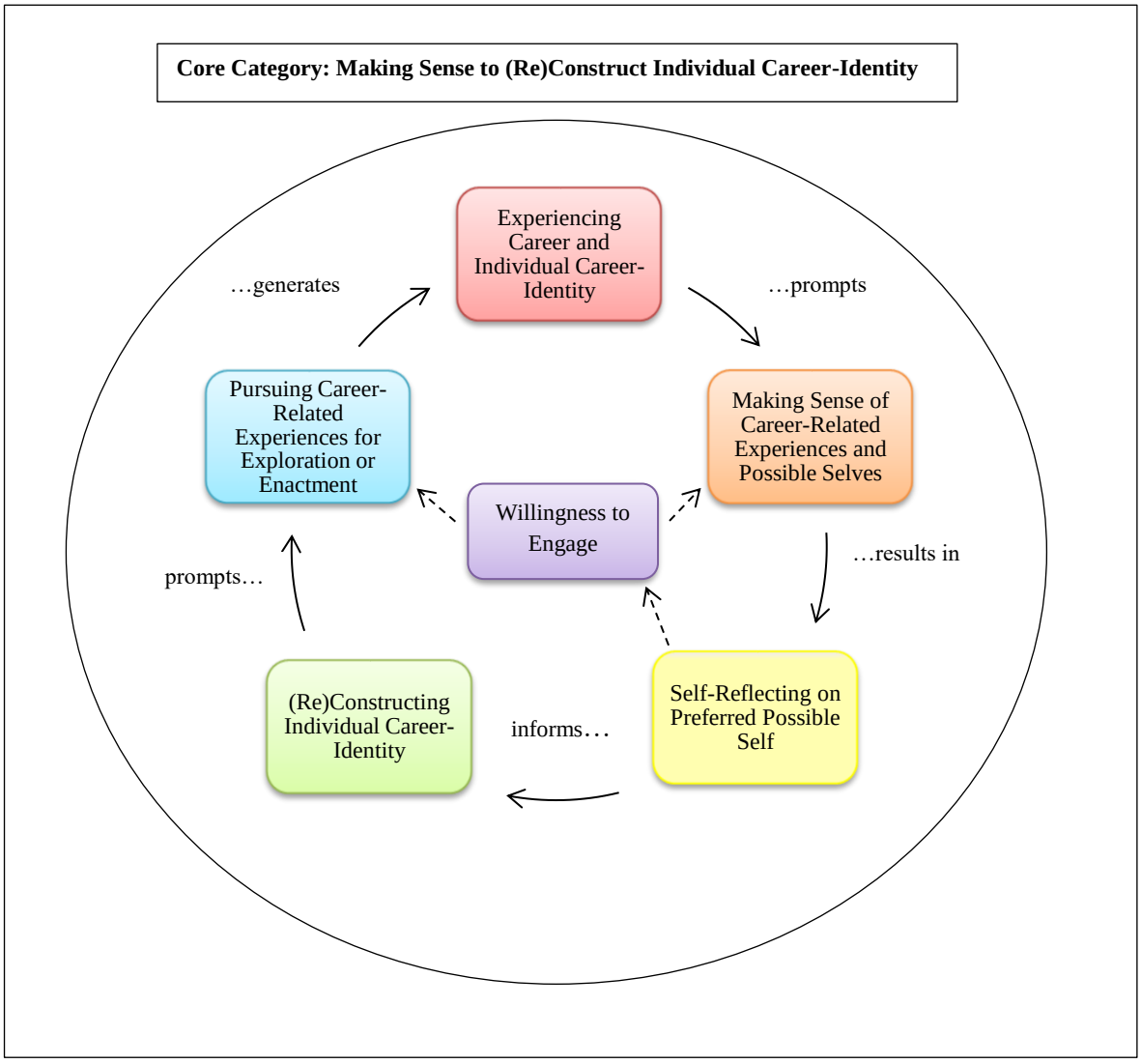
The Research Study and Research Outcomes

While a full methodology and findings are presented elsewhere, the focus of this paper is to summarise the research findings to make commentary on its theoretical and practical implications. The research purpose was to generate understanding of identity exploration within a particular context and historical era (e.g. Flum and Blustein, 2000). Specifically, how Generation Y women and men developed their career-identity in the form of career-values, career-agency, and career-adaptability, as they transitioned from U.K. and Irish universities to the workplace (see Author, 2018). A two-phase mixed methods explanatory research design was undertaken with an abductive drive, underpinned by a pragmatist theory of knowledge. Phase 1 tested a theoretical framework based on the contention that career-identity was primarily influenced by stable social identities, in this case, generation and gender (which would explain well-documented generational and gender differences in career-values, career-agency, and career-adaptability, e.g. Lyons and Kuron, 2014; Maxwell and Broadbridge, 2014). It comprised of a survey (n=112) and quantitative analysis. Results showed that participants demonstrated split-identification with same-gender peers and same-gender parents (see Brown, 2017, for a typology of identification outcomes). It was also found that women and men were more similar than different in their career-identities. Furthermore, contrary to Kuron *et al*. (2015), results showed that participants felt they had changed parts of their career-identity in the years after the graduate transition to work (GTW). Findings, therefore, indicated that extant generation and gender socialisation theories, e.g. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 1986), Mannheim (1952), Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Gender Schema

Theory (Bem, 1981), could not fully explain variations in individual career-identity in the sample.

On that basis, research questions were developed for Phase 2, and priority was given to generating new substantive theory by interviewing a subsample of survey participants (n=36). The overall research question was: from their own self-perceptions, how do graduates continue to form their career-identities throughout their lifetime? At interview, participants were asked to explain their survey scores, e.g. describe the reasons why they had increased or decreased their levels of career-agency, career-agency, and career-adaptability throughout their life. The results of this analysis are encapsulated in two empirically and conceptually informed models: the CICIC, and a Conceptual Model of Individual Career-Identity. The CICIC's (Figure 1) core category is *Making Sense to (Re)Construct Individual Career-Identity* which encapsulates six key categories.

Figure 1: Cycle of Individual Career-Identity Construction (CICIC) (Author, 2018)



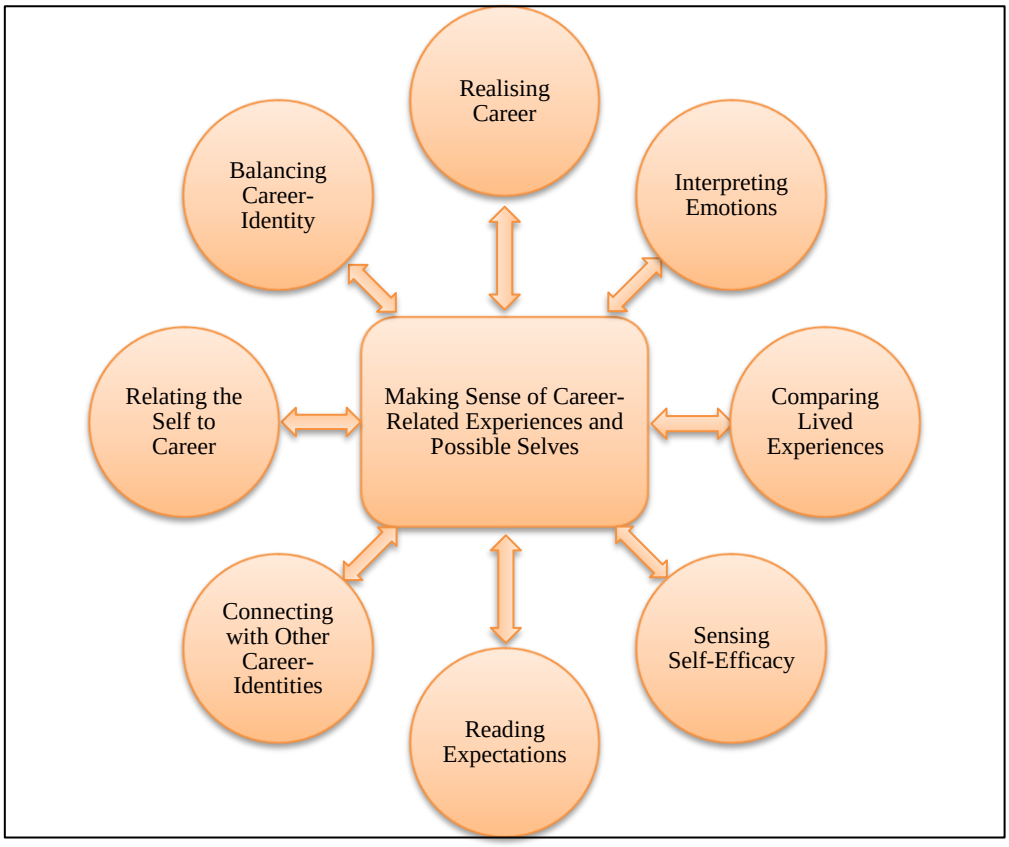
The CICIC demonstrates that individual career-identity is not a fixed entity, but is constantly constructed, made sense of, and then reconstructed on the basis of that sense-making. It

therefore emphasises sense-making rather than social identification as the primary identity construction process.

More specifically, mapping on to Corbin and Strauss's (2015) coding paradigm, *Experiencing Career and Individual Career-Identity* (conditions) prompts *Making Sense of Career-Related Experiences and Possible Selves* (actions-interactions); this results in *Self-Reflecting on Preferred Possible Self* (consequence/outcome); which informs *(Re)Constructing Individual Career-Identity* (consequence/outcome); prompting *Pursuing Career-Related Experiences for Exploration or Enactment* (consequence/outcome); which finally generates *Experiencing Career and Individual Career-Identity*. In addition, *Self-Reflecting on Preferred Possible Self* can also inform varying levels of *Willingness to Engage* (consequence/outcome) in *Pursuing Career-Related Experiences for Exploration or Enactment*, and *Making Sense of Career-Related Experiences*.

The CICIC ultimately represents a process. Process is defined as 'the rhythm as well as the changing and repetitive forms of action-interaction' (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p.172). It therefore accounts for both routineness and variability. The core category and six key categories above represent routineness. However, variableness was represented by the six key categories' properties and dimensions, i.e. subcategories or sub-processes (conditional/consequential matrix). To take the CICIC's second key category, *Making Sense of Career-Related Experiences and Possible Selves* was coded from eight sub-processes: *Realising Career; Interpreting Emotions; Comparing Lived Experiences; Sensing Self-Efficacy; Reading Expectations; Connecting with Other Career-Identities; Relating the Self to Career;* and *Balancing Career-Identity* (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Making Sense of Career-Related Experiences and Possible Selves (Author, 2018)



These sub-processes therefore give detail about what sense-making strategies were actually employed by participants. Analysis showed that these strategies could interact with one another, and that they included both affective and cognitive elements.

For instance, analysis showed that graduates tended to increase their intrinsic values over time through a variety of sense-making strategies. Thus, after *Realising Career*, some graduates experienced disillusionment which caused them to re-evaluate the importance of intrinsic values. Additionally, in *Interpreting Emotions*, some graduates made sense of positive or negative emotions, and on that experiential basis, realised how much enjoyable and interesting work was important to them. Emotional reactions could be heightened by *Comparing Lived Experiences*, where graduates cognitively compared more favourable with less favourable experiences. In *Reading Expectations (of the Graduate Career Journey)*, participants recognised that as they became more established in their careers, the possibility (through opportunity as well as social acceptance) and thence intention to fulfil intrinsic values increased. Moreover, in *Co-Constructing Career-Identity*, graduates were actively encouraged, both by parents and peers, to look for jobs they enjoyed. That being said, the importance of intrinsic values was also tempered by *Relating the Self to Career*. If a graduate started to compartmentalise their personal and career lives, intrinsic values were sometimes viewed as less important through time. However, if a graduate felt that their career was becoming central to who they were as a person, they could begin to prioritise intrinsic values more.

Overall then, both the quantitative and qualitative findings appeared to contradict a large body of literature which had informed the original theoretical framework. Career-identity and career modelling literature had been the starting points for the research. Both sets of literature emphasised broad contextual changes, where Generation Y was now operating in a changeable graduate labour market, and single organisations could not provide long-term careers. Thus, there was an assertion that individuals must have a stable sense of their own identity to aid goal formation and navigate themselves through such a dynamic labour market (e.g. Fugate *et al*., 2004; McArdle *et al*., 2007). Additionally, many career models, e.g. the boundaryless and protean career models, have been operationalised into cross-sectional surveys with such assumptions (e.g. Abessollo, 2017; Briscoe *et al*., 2006). Moreover, in consideration of generation and gendered nuances in career-identity, there was an assumption that socialisation theories had a critical role to play in creating such a stable sense of identity (e.g. Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Thus, without strong organisational ties, the tendency to involve the self in social identification processes would encourage the individual to use generational and gendered schemata over organisational schemata. There was, therefore, a functionalist contention regarding the stability of career-identity. This was an assumption which the findings questioned, specifically through the CICIC's emphasis on sense-making (as opposed to identification) as the critical process involved in career-identity construction, as well as the CICIC's cyclical nature which indicated that career-identities were fluid and susceptible to unpredictable changes through time.

Searching for Theoretical Sensitivity

In 2003, Sveningsson and Alvesson argued that there were few studies illuminating the process of identity construction. Despite the passage of time, this view has been repeated by Alvesson and Empson (2008), Anderson and Mounts (2012), Gioia *et al*. (2013), and Brown (2015). Likewise, Meijers and Lengelle (2012, p.160) note that though career exploration is a popular topic, there is little indication in literature of how 'individuals can use career exploration to create career identities'. While such authors have made progress in exploring how narratives help to form coherent self-concepts (see Meijers *et al*., 2013, 2016), there is a lack of research

on how individuals form the actual content of their career-identities. In addition, there are few perspectives which consider identity construction processes at all levels, e.g. personal and social (Vignoles *et al.,* 2011). While this indicates the CICIC's theoretical contribution, it meant there was a limited amount of literature to assist in theoretical sensitivity.

During the grounded theory analysis, I initially turned to career development theories. However, though many of these refer to identities and self-concepts, they are of limited value in describing career-identity construction in terms of content, self-concept and process together. For instance, trait and factor theories, e.g. Holland (1973) and Dawis and Lofquist (1984), are predicated on individuals having stable traits which can then be matched to specific categories of jobs. Developmental theories, e.g. Ginzberg *et al*. (1951) and Vondracek *et al*. (1986), describe certain developmental stages and resultant goal setting, but do not theorise on precisely how specific contents of career-identity are formed in terms of process. Those that document social learning processes, e.g. Krumboltz (1979), and Lent and Brown (2002), appear to focus on the development of self-efficacy and specific occupational interests rather than broad career-identify and values. And while Super (1980) and Savickas (2002) discuss the concept of identity, they appear to do so in terms of developing a coherent self-concept over an individual's life course. They acknowledge the influence of both social and individual determinants in career decision making, but offer no theory on exactly how career-values, for instance, are constructed by individuals.

Resultantly, I turned to literature around identity work, sense-making, possible selves, and identity status models as more apt sources for how an individual might construct the actual content of their career-identities, as well as their self-concept**.**

Locating the CICIC within Identity Work

Identity work has become a popular way of describing identity-related processes within organisational studies (Brown, 2015). Identity work refers to…

> '…people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness'. (Alvesson, 2010, p.201)

Implicit in the term 'work' is that identity is an ongoing project (McInnes & Corlett, 2012), corresponding to the CICIC's cyclical format. However, 'identity work' generally describes a concept rather than a specific process or theory (e.g. Brown, 2017, 2014; Alvesson *et al*., 2008). For example, Brown (2015) states:

> 'There have been multiple attempts to specify "generic" processes of identity work, though there is little consensus on these, including "claiming", "affirming", "accepting", "complying", "resisting", "separating", "joining", "defining", "limiting", "bounding", "stabilizing", "sensemaking", "reconciling", "stabilizing", and "restructuring"'. (Brown, 2015, p.11)

There is thus no agreement on how to conceptualise the processes which identity work entails. This is a view echoed by work-related identity academics (e.g. Crafford *et al.*, 2015; Miscenko & Day, 2016), who state that various authors have sought to describe identity-construction

strategies using different perspectives. Accordingly, Brown (2017, p.299) offers an integrative definition of identity work as 'a distinctive perspective on identities construction, which emphasizes agency and processual issues' which is able to accommodate academics working from different ontological and epistemological frameworks. Such a definition places the CICIC broadly within identity work.

While identity work is sometimes viewed as a cognate for identity construction itself (e.g. Brown, 2017; Watson, 2008), the CICIC views identity construction as a narrower concept. The CICIC, for example, mainly deals with the 'forming' and 'revising' stages of Alvesson's (2010, p.201) definition of identity work, rather than the 'repairing, maintaining, strengthening'. The CICIC also accommodates many of the process words which Brown (2015, p.11) presents, e.g. 'affirming', 'accepting', 'resisting', 'separating', however it is 'sensemaking' and 'restructuring' which are emphasised in the CICIC's key categories.

Accordingly, the CICIC conceptualises identity work but is scoped to emphasise individual career-identity construction and sense-making. Consequently, there are implications for theory which require more detailed discussion. Firstly, if locating the CICIC under identity work, it is relevant to clarify whether the CICIC emphasises personal or social identity. Secondly, the cyclical nature of the CICIC prompts critical discussion in relation to how time, and consequently the nature of identity, is conceptualised in the CICIC. Thirdly, the CICIC's key category of *Making Sense of Career-Related Experiences* needs locating within literature on sense-making. Fourthly, the CICIC's validity as a whole requires evaluation by comparing it to extant identity status models.

Personal and Social Identity in the CICIC

To take the first issue, it became clear that participants had a sense of their own identity which was both influenced and set apart from social structure. Socialised identities were underlined in two sub-processes of *Making Sense of Career-Related Experiences and Possible Selves: Connecting with Other Career-Identities*; and *Reading Expectations*. In relation to the former, for example, W5 explained how she co-constructed her sense of self by seeing herself through the eyes of a peer:

> '…I think being with X and having had a lot conversations over the years, about me and my potential future and what would suit me and what I would enjoy, with him and getting his insight, have helped me to get a better idea of who I am and what I would suit and what I wouldn't suit.' (W5)

Participants also engaged in personal identification to underpin role modelling processes (e.g. Ashforth *et al*., 2016; Sealy and Singh, 2010). Role models were sourced from both younger and older generations, and could cross gender boundaries. The relevancy of role models was assessed by self-identifying with various attributes such as personality, type of job, and economic status. Thus, it was personal identification which superseded generational and gender identification, explaining in part the split identification with same-gender parents and same-gender peers apparent from the survey results. However, analysis showed that, overall, social influences were tempered by asserting individuality.

> '…now that I'm in that position now that I've worked for so many companies, there's not so much they can steer me in now because I've kind of got… I've

> kind of learned myself now and I've kind of got on my own two feet. It was different when you were a graduate and you'd not worked before, but now I've got more experience than my mum and dad and it would be me that would make the decision there, not them.' (M11)

Over time, therefore, the influence of close social referents such as friends or parents tended to become less. Personal identities were further emphasised in the remaining sub-processes of sense-making, e.g. *Interpreting Emotions; Comparing Lived Experiences; Sensing Self-Efficacy*; and *Relating the Self to Career*. For instance, M5 viewed his personal experience as what had defined him the most:

> 'If I didn't have the experience of that work my outlook would be completely different, but while it was horrible, I hated the job, I hated that period of time because I was just so miserable, it's definitely made me the person I am today and I don't want to say I wouldn't change it, but it's definitely helped me today, it drives me today if I'm honest.' (M5)

The analysis of Phase 2 findings, therefore, indicated that both social and personal identities were important in constructing individual career-identities. However, as they talked, participants appeared to emphasise personal identification and personal experience more than social identification and social referents.

While identity work is concerned with self-identity as a whole (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008), Stryker (2007) delineates how self-identity consists of both personal and social identity. The former has roots in psychological literature which often discusses identity in terms of personality traits and uniqueness. The latter has roots in sociological literature where the focus is often on identification and sameness. Balzacq (2002) also reminds us that personal and social identities are reflected in early pragmatist notions, e.g. Mead's 'I' and 'Me', and James's social self. Accordingly, personal and social identities are often conceived as being in tension, i.e. people want to assert a unique individual identity, yet at the same time want to belong to a social group (Crafford *et al*., 2015; Knights & Clarke, 2017). This way of conceptualising has led some academics, like Grote and Hall (2013), to question whether personal or social identity is more powerful in forming career-related identities.

Given the predominance of organisational identity research, discussions have often centred round organisational identity as a type of social identity with a focus on sameness, e.g. Haslam *et al*. (2017); Bardon *et al*. (2017); Anderson & Mounts (2012); Alvesson & Empson (2008); and Watson (2008). At the same time, there has been little research on career-identity (Atewologun *et al*., 2017) which, it could be argued, emphasises personal identity. Van Dick (2001, cited in Ashforth *et al*., 2008) for instance proposes that as careers become more idiosyncratic (e.g. protean careers) personal identity comes to the fore over social identity.
Relatedly, Brown (2017) clarifies that in principal identity work can include both personal and social identities. However, citing Ashforth *et al*., 2008, he suggests that identification (i.e. social identity) might be a subpart of identity formation. Similarly, Watson (2008) offers a more nuanced definition of identity work which explicitly refers to both personal and social identities:

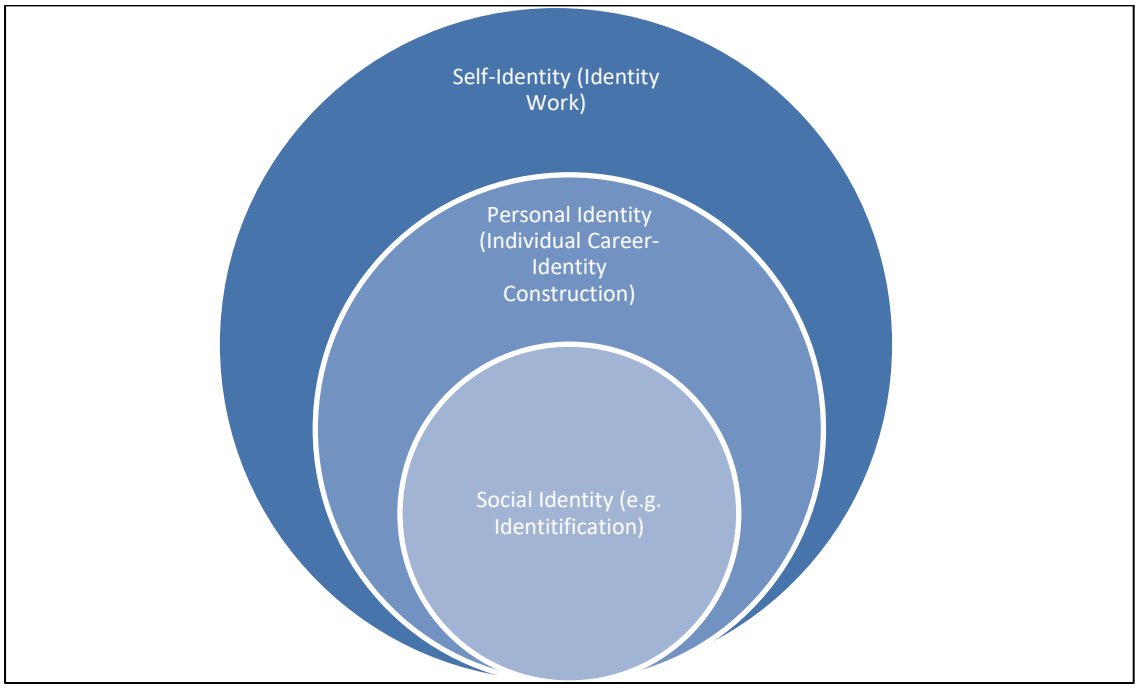
> 'Identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-

> identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives' (Watson, 2008, p.129)

Watson's (2008) definition at once points to the difference between personal and social identities, as well as the necessary relationship between them. I would also view such a definition as compatible with pragmatist notions of humans being individual agents, yet also social agents immersed in their environment. Furthermore, Watson's (2008) definition echoes Alvesson *et al*.'s (2008, p.10) call for more theorising around the 'dual presence of personal and social'. It also echoes Rattansi and Phoenix (2005, cited in Weigert and Gecas, 2005), who call for the development of theoretical frameworks which conceptualise identity construction as an intersection between personal and social identities. Given therefore that personal and social identities are 'twin emergent' (Balzacq, 2002, p.479), understanding the interplay and processes between them is an important goal for current theorizing and research (Vignoles *et al*., 2011).

Based on the CICIC, therefore, (where *Connecting with Other Career-Identities* and its properties was coded underneath *Making Sense of Career-Related Experiences and Possible Selves*) identification is viewed as a subpart of identity construction. Accordingly, a conceptual model to accompany the CICIC follows (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Individual Career-Identity (Author, 2018)



As Figure 2 shows, the findings of the current study encapsulate personal identity and individual career-identity construction as a subpart of self-identity. Individual Career-Identity Construction incorporates both personal and social identities, meaning that the CICIC emphasises personal identity and accommodates social identity.

Time and the Nature of Career-Identity

In relation to time, Pratt (2012, cited in Brown, 2015) argues that although it is an important concept, few identity theorists have tackled it in depth. The CICIC attempts to do so. Indeed, time is integral to Atewologun *et al.*'s (2017, p.279) integrative definition of career-identity as 'an understanding of one's past, present, future work experiences that incorporates longer-term occupational experiences.' One of the difficulties with conceptualising time is that it denotes career-identity as malleable. This contradicts traditional realist and functionalist orientations. Indeed, identity theorists have long debated whether an individual discovers a stable identity (or true self), or whether they construct a fluid identity which is continually reworked (Gioia *et al*., 2013; Vignoles *et al*., 2011). Being closer to the language of pragmatism, the CICIC adopts Berzonksy's (2011, p.57) perspective: rather than discovering the essence of oneself, 'people construct a theory about who they *think* they are and what they *think* they want'.

Even so, when individuals related their experiences to me, they appeared to talk in terms of discovering an authentic self. W5 interpreted her change in career-identity after the GTW as a learning event:

> 'I think that's just to do with self-knowledge. I didn't know, I didn't know what I wanted at all when I first graduated... And I also don't think I necessarily knew myself in work very well to know what it was that was important to me. You kind of need enough time in employment to work out who you are in that context… It's kind of developmental trajectory in terms of working out who I am…I know myself better now, I don't think I knew who I was when I first graduated, and part of that's just maturity.' (W5)

Gioia *et al.* (2013) argue the debate over the enduring nature of identity has been resolved. That is, although identities change, individuals are often motivated to perceive that they are stable. Thus, a personal sense of historical continuity is important (Erikson, 1968). Likewise, although Petriglieri (2011, p.644) stresses the fluidity of identity, she also stresses that individuals are strongly motivated to seek 'a sense of stability and continuity over time'. Indeed, Vignoles *et al*. (2011, p.12) posit that it is 'the subjective experience of self-discovery and the accompanying feelings of authenticity that matter' rather than whether a true self exists or is discovered. These ideas correspond with previous research where people tended to talk about authentic or true self-identities, e.g. Ybema *et al*., 2009 (cited in Brown, 2015) and Ibarra (1999). In trying to make sense of their experiences, individuals actively look for coherence of identity over time and space (Berzonsky, 2011). Therefore, even if people hold or have held several different identities, to make sense and move forward they reconstruct coherent images of themselves (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), and reduce inconsistencies (Brown, 2015). Ultimately then, there are times when individuals view their own identities as stable and organised self-schemata (Alvesson, 2010; Howard, 2000; Stryker, 2007). Thus, Meijers and Lengelle (2012), LaPointe (2010) and Fugate *et al*. (2004) describe career stories as narratives, wherein consistency is highlighted and inconsistencies downplayed (Fugate *et al*., 2004).

However, there was also increasing consciousness on the part of participants of the temporality of career-identity:

> '…I would probably say that yes at the moment I know exactly what I want... I would say I'm almost at the top at the moment but that may change.' (M6)

> 'I think I have a fair idea but I think that's just down to being older and having different experiences, but I'm also aware that it might change…' (W3)

> 'I think I know myself better now than I did when I left uni, just more experience than anything else and maybe a clearer idea of what I want and a more balanced idea of what I want, but I do expect it, I think it would be naïve to say it isn't going to change, I think there will be something in there that's going to maybe impact it again, it could be anything.' (M9)

Indeed, M11 related his fluid career-identity to his unpredictable career path. He went as far as to say he was comfortable with not having a stable sense of self:

> '…but I'm one of these guys I don't actually really know what I want to do yet… I don't know if that's a bad thing, it's good that you know you always want something different…Well that's the thing though, it's quite interesting though, because I don't have like a set career, I'm not a doctor or a lawyer or I'm not like a… I am I suppose a professional but it's not like... it's not something that I've got that just really, kind of you know you say one word - you can't - it's very hard to pigeonhole me. And I don't know if that's good or if it's bad but it's obviously who I am and I think it goes into a lot of me. So my career is very, it's very… it fluctuates between different companies, and it's still going to fluctuate in the future, it's not going to… I don't have like a set job or a set thing that I'm going to do so I suppose it makes me quite interesting. I don't know what I'll be doing in 5 years or even 2, 3 years, but then I think I'm in that position that I'm in more control.' (M11)

Accordingly, one wonders if the debate over the enduring nature of identities needs reawakened in the context of career-identities… career-identities which are potentially being forged alongside weakening organisational, generational and gender identification.

Sense-Making

Indeed, rather than identification, the over-arching identity construction process in the CICIC is sense-making. Ashforth *et al.* (2008) state the link between sense-making and identity construction is well established. Indeed, in the context of career-identities, Meijers (1998, p.201) highlighted the importance of an individual collecting 'information about oneself' and who 'actively and creatively has to give meaning to that information'. Sense-making particularly occurs in moments of crisis (Weick *et al.*, 2005). The GTW can be classed as a crisis, or critical incident, prompting sense-making and identity exploration. Firstly, graduates fall within Arnett's (2000) classification of emerging adulthood where those in their late teens and early twenties engage in identity exploration. Secondly, the GTW is particularly important, since individuals are generally less invested in their pre-graduate jobs and may not fully engage in career exploration until they graduate (Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Laughland-Booy *et al.*, 2017). Thirdly, there is resultantly a high potential for dissonance: 'irresolution between an aspired-to-identity and an experienced identity' (Beech, 2017, p.361).

In relation to the third, a sense of disillusionment was palpable in some interviewees:

> 'Then the financial crash hit and all of the jobs disappeared and that gloriously optimistic, some might say naïve, bubble was burst in the most kind of violent way and we still haven't recovered from that even though it was 10 years ago.' (W5)

Indeed, 'Explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world' (Weick *et al*., 2005, p.409). Accordingly, the GTW often prompted participants to reform possible selves.

The concept of sense-making fits well with Atewologun *et al.*'s (2017, p.279) definition of career-identity as 'an understanding of one's past, present, future work experiences.' For instance, sense made always 'refers to a totality that generates its own past, present and future' (Langenberg & Wesseling, 2016, p.235). It is necessarily retrospective because individuals are attaching meaning to past experiences (Weick *et al*., 2005). It incorporates the present as the moment of sense-making, but experiences close to the present are also interpreted as past events for the purpose of cognition by the meaning-makers (Langenberg & Wesseling, 2016). Sense-making is also an articulated comprehension of a situation, formed for the purposes of future action (Weick *et al*., 2005). It involves creating meaning that can either unbind or constrain identity enactment. This corresponds with the pragmatist view of future-oriented problem-solving (see Morgan, 2014), as well as the notion of possible selves (see Marcus and Nurius, 1986).

Weick *et al.* (2005) further state sense-making is not about achieving truth but rather plausibility, through the accumulation of experience and meaning-making. This corresponds with the way participants accumulated experience as means of informing their sense of self, and how they started to acknowledge the influence of time and change. Ultimately, sense-making is more about invention than discovery (Brown *et al*., 2015). Accordingly, sense-making corresponds with the pragmatist notion of truth, and the way career-identity has been conceptualised in the CICIC as a self-theory (e.g. Berzonsky, 2011).

The CICIC and Identity Status Models

Finally, theoretical sensitivity also led to a review of extant identity status models. Key features of the CICIC which correspond with identity status models are its cyclical nature, and its two key categories: *Pursuing Career-Related Experiences for Exploration and Enactment*, and *Willingness to Engage*. The cyclical nature of the CICIC emphasises that career-identity construction is an ongoing process. Social interaction and work experiences are continually made sense of, and feed into self-reflection on preferred career-identities. There is therefore no clear starting point, and graduates can start making sense of, or pursuing, their career-identities at any conceivable time. Pursuing experiences was an indirect outcome of this sense-making process. It involved following or seeking career-related experiences in order to explore or enact one's career-identity, and it could be done either reactively or proactively. Given the current study's focus on career-identity construction, it was exploration rather than enactment which received much of my attention.

Nonetheless, data analysis hinted that pursuing experiences could be influenced by an individual's *Willingness to Engage*. This was expressed in three ways. Firstly, when analysing *Realising Career*, it was noted that some graduates had not used pre-graduate work experience to help them explore their preferred career-identity. Consequently, these graduates engaged in a period of intense exploration immediately in the GTW, explaining why it can be classed as a

critical incident. Secondly, it was noted that although the sample largely represented graduates who had actively engaged in exploration at some point in their career, there were some who had been more reluctant to do so. For instance, W10 expressed her early difficulties with identity exploration:

> 'It's probably me that's made it more difficult because I've not been assertive, I've not been as confident to what I want or to figure out what I want to do, so in that respect, that's been difficult.' (W10)

Therefore, although many graduates engaged in exploration particularly soon after the GTW, others like W10 were returning to a new exploration phase after a period of enactment. Thirdly, the analysis appeared to reflect variations in willingness to engage throughout time.

Moving to identity literature, several theorists have developed identity status models which centre round both identity construction and its maintenance. Such theorists are primarily interested in how adolescents and young adults form their identities, and tend to use writings which have evolved from Erikson (1956, 1959, 1968). Like Mead, Erikson saw identity construction as an interpersonal process that constituted both personal and social identities (Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Schwarz, 2001). Nonetheless, it is Weigert and Gecas' (2005) view that Erikson neglected social identity in favour of ego-identity (coherent sense of self). According to Erikson, identity achievement comes after experiencing a crisis which causes an individual to explore their identity. This idea of crisis fits well with the pragmatist notion of reflective thought and action where reflection is predicated on a cognitive or effective disturbance of some kind (e.g. Miettinen, 2000). There are two possible outcomes of such identity exploration: commitment to an occupation or ideology; or identity diffusion, i.e. a lack of commitment.

Following on from Erikson, Marcia (1966) developed his identity status models based on the concepts of exploration and commitment (Laughland-Booy *et al*., 2017; Schwarz, 2001). He developed a matrix with four resulting identity statuses: 1) achievement - exploration followed by commitment; 2) moratorium - exploration without commitment; 3) foreclosure - commitment without exploration; 4) and diffusion - neither exploration nor commitment (McLean *et al.,* 2016). Exploration and commitment can therefore be linked to a key category of the CICIC - *Pursuing Career-Related Experiences for Exploration or Enactment.* Nevertheless, and pertinent to the current study's aim, such identity statuses appear to be 'character types' rather than 'developmental stages' (Schwarz, 2001, p.12). Identity status theory therefore can be classed as a typology rather than a process model (Anderson & Mounts, 2012).

Others have expanded on the concept of identity statuses to include more processual elements. Erikson (1956) originally included reflection in his conceptual understanding 'whereby past patterns are examined, some discarded, and others integrated into a new identity configuration' (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p.33). From this, Grotevant (1987, p.204) developed the concept of evaluation, and conceptualised the exploration phase as 'problem-solving'. (Again, problem-solving is compatible with pragmatist notions, e.g. Morgan, 2014). More specifically, he identified five interactive elements: initial expectations and beliefs; hypothesis-testing; the degree of investment in current identities; the degree to which competing alternative identities are attractive; and the evaluation of progress. Such hypothesis testing and evaluation also correspond with pragmatism, as well as Berzonsky's (2011) concept of a self-theory, and those

participants who indicated that they were re-evaluating their career. Moreover, both Grotevant and the CICIC account for cognitive as well as affective outcomes. From Grotevant's point of view, therefore, the totality of identity construction involves a cyclical process of continual evaluation and exploration.

Overall then, the cyclical element of Grotevant's (1987) model echoes that of the CICIC. Grotevant's understanding is also similar to other identity theorists. For instance, Bosma and Kunnen (2001, cited in Lichtwarck-Aschoff *et al*., 2008) also view identity development as involving continuous transactions between an individual and their environment, resulting in an iterative process. Likewise, Crocetti *et al.*'s (2008, cited in Schwartz *et al.*, 2013) certainty-uncertainty model includes commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment (Mancini *et al*., 2015). Exploration and cyclical testing are also compatible with Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves (Anderson & Mounts, 2012). So like the CICIC, attempts at describing the process of identity formation often contain a cyclical element where identities are continually evaluated and revised.

Luyckx *et al*. (2011) further integrate such understandings of exploration, commitment and (re)evaluation with concepts of breadth and depth. They propose that commitment formation involves exploration *in breadth* and commitment making, while commitment evaluation is exploration *in depth* and identification with commitment. Their model again demonstrates a cyclical process. Where there is commitment, there is exploration in depth. However, where there is a lack of commitment, it can prompt further exploration in breadth. Nonetheless, Luyckx *et al*. (2011) assume that successive stages of exploration and commitment lead to positive outcomes (Luyckx & Robitschek, 2014). Yet there are some studies which link ongoing exploration with negative emotions, e.g. Praskova *et al.* (2015), and Schwartz *et al*. (2009, cited in Luyckx & Robitschek, 2014). Thus Luyckz and Beyers (2008) propose that ruminative exploration may also be a feature of identity formation, where people are hesitant or indecisive, never coming to a firm sense of identity. This appears to link in with the CICIC's key category *Willingness to Engage*, i.e. some participants revealed at times they were not interested in exploring their career-identity, while others at times engaged in reactive exploration, finding it difficult to know who they were.

A closer look at how exploration is carried out in practice is hence required. According to the identity literature, exploration is central to identity formation (Berman *et al*., 2001). Ideally, exploration is an agentic process where individuals may accept or reject identities based on experiences (Schwarz, 2001). However, Berzonsky (1989) highlights that individuals have different information processing styles (Berman *et al*., 2001). His identity style model describes how individuals deal with identity conflicts and issues. Three identity-processing orientations are named: 1) informational processors 'intentionally seek out, process, and utilize identity-relevant information'; 2) normative processors 'automatically adopt a collective sense of identity by internalizing the standards and prescriptions of significant others and referent groups'; 3) while diffuse-avoidant processors are 'reluctant to confront and face up to identity' (Berzonsky, 2011, p.55). Berzonsky (2008) additionally found that forming personal identity was associated with both rational and intuitive processing, whereas collective or social identity was more associated with automatic processing. The critical point being that there are those who intentionally explore their identity, and those who do not (Dunkel & Lavoie, 2005), thus, linking to the CICIC's key category *Willingness to Engage*.

In practice, life context can influence whether an individual engages in intentional exploration (Grotevant, 1987). Work experience is particularly seen as a key precondition for career-

identity exploration, both in breadth and depth (Stringer & Kerpelman, 2014). Breadth can mean having many different kinds of jobs, while depth, having work experiences specifically relevant to a chosen career. However, studies have shown that emerging adults do not always use work experience well in career-identity exploration (Anderson & Mounts, 2012). For example, Lemme (1999) found that graduates did not always work in jobs related to their degree or chosen career, and that they tended to stabilise their careers in their late 20s because of financial or family responsibilities. More recently, Carlsson *et al*. (2016) explored long-term experiences of identity diffusion and found a similar pattern. They concluded that personal identity exploration and meaning making was put on hold due to adult responsibilities, e.g. organisational or parental commitments. These findings compare to the stories the researcher interpreted from interviews. Although there were some participants who clearly engaged in active exploration before graduating, there were others who delayed exploration until the GTW due to perceived academic commitments. Therefore, in delaying entering fulltime employment, graduates were also delaying a critical exploration phase of their individual career-identity construction.

Positioning the CICIC

To summarise overall, the CICIC can be positioned within extant literature as below (Table 1).

Table 1: The CICIC's Key Links to Literature (Author, 2018)

Key Category	Key Concept	Key Links to Literature
Experiencing Career and Individual Career-identity	Experiencing	Pragmatist theory of knowledge (Dewey, 1925, cited in Morgan, 2014).
	Individual	Work-related identities as both personal and social (e.g. Ashforth *et al*., 2008; Brown, 2017; Watson, 2008) Constructionist career-identity scholars (e.g. Bosley *et al*., 2009; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).
	Career-Identity	As a concept (e.g. Fugate *et al*., 2004; Hoekstra, 2011; LaPointe, 2010; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). As a self-theory (Berzonsky, 2011); Dewey's (1925) notion of belief (cited in Morgan, 2014).
Making Sense of Career-Related	Making Sense	Sense-making (Weick, 1995).

Experiences and Possible Selves	Possible Selves	Possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).
Self-Reflecting on Preferred Possible Self	Self-Reflecting	Dewey's (1925, cited in Morgan, 2014; 1938, cited in Miettinen, 2000) notion of reflective thought and action. Reflexivity from career-identity literature (e.g. LaPointe, 2010; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).
(Re)Constructing Individual Career-Identity	(Re)	Time (e.g. Pratt, 2012, cited in Brown, 2015). Pragmatist cycle of beliefs, actions and consequences (e.g. Morgan, 2014); pragmatist theory of knowledge (Dewey, 1925, cited in Morgan, 2014). Cyclical identity status models (e.g. Grotevant, 1987; Luyckx *et al*., 2011).
	Constructing	Identity work (e.g. Alvesson, 2010; Brown, 2015)
Pursuing Career Related Experiences for Exploration or Enactment	Exploration or Enactment	Identity status models (e.g. Erikson, 1956, 1959, 1968; Grotevant, 1987; Luyckx *et al*., 2011; Marcia, 1966)
Willingness to Engage	Willingness to Engage	Identity styles (Berzonsky, 1989)

Thus, the CICIC effectively integrates concepts from pragmatism, career-identity, sense-making, identity work, and identity status models.

In terms of the theoretical contribution, as far as the author is aware, no other theory or model exists to explain how individual career-identities are constructed after the GTW as specifically as the CICIC. The CICIC conceptualises career-identity construction and reconstruction as an ongoing process, where eight sense-making strategies are employed by Generation Y graduates to construct their career-values, career-agency, and career-adaptability. Career-identities are represented as self-theories rather than authentic selves. The debate over the enduring nature of identity may, therefore, need reawakened in the context of career-identity. If career-identities are individual and fluid, this also contradicts a large body of literature on career-identity and

career models, and has important implications for re-evaluating the influence of social structure (traditionally seen as a stabilising force). It therefore represents assumption-challenging research of the kind Alvesson & Sandberg (2013) call for. Ultimately, the CICIC suggests support for constructionist career-identity scholars such as Meijers and Lengelle (2012) and Bosley *et al.* (2009). Thus, in the context of a contemporary Western context, perhaps social identities are becoming more malleable, and individual identity more salient (Beck, 2000; Kelan, 2014).

Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, it has been well documented that organisations currently face challenges in retaining new graduates, e.g. McCracken *et al.* (2016). The current research findings indicate that without sufficient exploration, some participants did not appear to have a realistic sense of self during the GTW. As they reflected, they spoke about choosing the wrong degree subjects, later working in unrelated fields, and changing their career-identities after experience of fulltime graduate work. Critically then, employers may not be recruiting fully formed graduates ready to enact their preferred career-identity. Rather they could be recruiting graduates who are only just beginning to explore what they really want out of a career and, consequently, whose career-identities are particularly sensitive to alteration, and thence misalignment with organisational identity. Understanding this may allow organisations to manage their own expectations of young graduate tenure, and plan retention strategies accordingly.

In terms of career-counselling, it may be important to foster a culture of career-identity exploration much earlier in educational systems. Interventions might include: developing a diagnostic on career-identity exploration based on the CICIC's sense-making categories; encouraging access to career counselling at all levels of education (school, further education, and higher education); promoting the utilisation of part-time work and internships as valuable experiences which can be used for sense-making and reflecting about career-identity; including more work placements in university degrees; and developing more degree apprenticeship programmes. Such initiatives may assist students to mature more appropriately in relation to their career-identity before the GTW.

Fostering a culture of individual career-identity exploration earlier in the education system may also help increase students' sense of self-responsibility and better manage their own expectations. Some participants spoke about being part of a graduate generation where they felt railroaded onto a conveyer belt system, taking them from school to university without consideration of alternative options such as apprenticeships. Though most graduates accepted their degree was required for career development, some also acknowledged Higher Education had not benefitted them as expected. Due to the high numbers of graduates in the labour market, some felt the value of a degree was lower than anticipated, with underemployment a noteworthy concern. This corresponds with extant literature, e.g. Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2014. Nevertheless, if career-identity exploration was encouraged earlier in the education system, young adults may be able to make better informed decisions about their own education and career. In this way, they might increase their sense of self-responsibility in terms of choosing the most appropriate educational path and managing their career expectations accordingly.

Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that career-identity denotes neither a stable entity nor stable self-concept. Even if graduates have sufficiently explored their career-identity in early

adulthood, and are enacting a suitable career-identity soon after graduating, the sense-making process is ultimately continual. Critical juncture points, such as life and career stages, as well as unpredictable cognitive and affective reactions to working environments, mean that individuals can begin to reassess their career-identity at any time. Additionally, given that the graduate labour market is filled with abundant opportunities, employees may have both the impetus and opportunity to set off exploring again.

Conclusion

This paper has theorised on the nature of career-identity and its construction, and has positioned the Conceptual Model of Individual Career-Identity and Cycle of Individual Career-Identity Construction (CICIC) within literature on identity work identity status models. Due to a lack of research in this area, searching for theoretical sensitivity has not been without its challenges. Nonetheless, the CICIC appears to sit well with cyclical identity status models, incorporating exploration and enactment, yet adding critical processual elements such as sense-making and the production of possible selves. The research findings are also located within a pragmatist notion of reflective thought and action, and it is worth noting that my thinking on the subject of career-identity has similarly gone through a process of reflective thought and action. Ultimately, I have moved away from a functionalist to a more constructivist understanding of the nature of career-identity.

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