Using career metaphors to make sense of the role of the community aged care

worker

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Career metaphors and their workforce implications for community aged care workers

ABSTRACT: This study uses narratives to explore how community aged care workers make sense of their work and their contribution to society. Inkson's (2004) nine career metaphors provided a framework to analyse career narratives and to identify key factors impacting on the attraction and retention of community carers. Our findings suggest that career legacy, life-seasons, networks and matching (job-person fit) play an important role in the attraction process while retention is influenced by career as a resource, matching, the caring role and career as a journey. Community carer retention may be enhanced by building on positive elements and by creating more attractive and definable career paths.

Caring jobs, such as child care and aged care, are often regarded as poor quality or even 'bad' jobs (Martin 2007:185). Care jobs may involve "hard, dirty or demeaning" tasks (Martin and King 2007:185) and are therefore equated with 'dirty work' (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Ashforth et al. 2007). Furthermore, they tend to be low paid, to have poor working conditions, and limited career structures (Department of Health &Ageing 2011). As a consequence many care organisations struggle to attract and retain suitably qualified and experienced employees (Austen and McMurray 2012) and thus to provide the level of care expected from caring professions. The implications for both organisations that offer care, and for society as a whole, are numerous, particularly in developed countries where demand for care is increasing steadily due to aging populations and extended life expectancies (Howe et al. 2012; King et al. 2012). These circumstances mean that it is even more important to understand what attracts people to caring roles and why they remain in them.

This paper explores the question of attraction and retention in relation to one specific group – community aged care workers – through the use of narrative and career metaphors. Story telling is a common method for exploring careers (Cohen and Mallon 2001; Bujold 2004) and a means by which individuals construct and reconstruct "subjective and multiple realities" (Savickas et al. 2009:243). As Weick (1995:128) observes, "When people punctuate their own living into stories, they impose a formal coherence on what is otherwise a flowing soup". In a similar vein, Inkson (2006:48) notes that "metaphor typically gives physical or visual texture to abstract concepts". Thus narrative and metaphor provide structures that help make sense of individual careers and the subjective experiences that shape those careers over time. This approach aligns well with non-traditional and non-

professional careers that often lack the career structures and career paths associated with white collar professions.

Care work and identity

Care work is recognised as providing a public good (England 2005) yet it is consistently undervalued and under-rewarded (Meagher 2007). It reflects many of the characteristics of low quality jobs such as job insecurity, few non-wage benefits, contingent employment contracts, limited opportunities for career advancement and a lack of collective voice (Burgess and Connell 2008). It is also seen as a low status job which is associated with low entry requirements (Stone and Dawson 2008). Within this context how do those employed in caring roles make sense of and validate their contribution to society? Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) suggest various strategies for developing and maintaining a positive social identity when engaged in 'dirty work'. These include reframing (by describing the job in terms of positive values), recalibrating (or enhancing the positive qualities) and refocusing (so that the less attractive attributes are overlooked in favour of more positive ones). Each of these strategies involves the use of individual narratives, either a product of self-talk or verbalised to friends and family. As career narratives evolve the meaning and purpose also evolves to reflect the reality that career identity is "co-constructed, socially situated and performed in interaction" (LaPointe 2010:2). Similarly, metaphors help researchers to interpret an individual's career thinking and their strategies for making sense of jobs (such as garbage collectors) that may have high value for society, yet low status in comparison to other professions (Inkson and Amundson 2002; Inkson 2006).

Arthur and Rousseau (1996) define career as "the unfolding sequence of any person's work experiences over time" p30. Common metaphors used to describe careers include career as a journey, a path, a ladder or a river to be navigated (Baruch 2004). This paper uses nine common career metaphors identified by Inkson (2004) as a frame for analysing the career stories of community aged care workers (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

Inkson (2004) acknowledges that this is not an exhaustive list but argues that it reflects current thinking in relation to generic and individual careers. For example, careers can be seen through the metaphor of legacy or inheritance where careers are inherited through social frameworks that influence opportunities and expectations (Ng et al. 2005). Careers can be framed as craft or construction. That is, careers are increasingly seen as individually managed and crafted (Baruch 2006) in ways that enable the individual to earn a living while reinforcing personal values, self-satisfaction, dignity and self worth (Stacey 2005). Further, the shift from life-long employment in a single organisation to more boundaryless careers (Arthur et al. 2005) reflects the season (cycle), matching (fit) , and path (journey) metaphors. The usefulness of these metaphors for this study is that they offer multiple metaphors to help shape and interpret career narratives in ways that highlight the motivations and values of community carers and thus the factors likely to impact on attraction and retention.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Community carers provide in-home care through assistance with activities such as shopping, cleaning, transport to medical appointments and basic personal care (showering, dressing). The goal of in-home care services is to assist people (the elderly or disabled) to remain at home rather than moving into institutional care as in-home care is a less costly and generally preferable option for both individuals and governments. The study was conducted in two not-for-profit organisations offering in-home care services, retirement living and residential care homes in metropolitan and regional South Australia. Data collection followed an iterative process. In the first organisation, ABC, data was collected through 5 focus groups as well as face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 community carers, a total of 47 participants (41 females and 6 males). Focus groups provided an opportunity to explore perceptions of community care work in general while interviews facilitated a more in-depth narrative from the individual perspective. In the second organisation, ABH, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were held with 17 Community Care workers (16 female and 1 male) and 7 staff in coordinator or supervisor roles (all female); a total of 24 participants. The decision to include coordinators and supervisors in this second stage of data collection was so that the researchers could

gain a better understanding of career paths within a quite flat organisational structure. In each organisation the Human Resource Manager was also interviewed to provide general background information on the organisation and the challenges associated with managing the community care workforce. Community carers who participated in the study had worked on average five and a half years – this included some who had worked in aged care for 10 years or more and two who had only worked as a carer for a few months. The majority in co-ordinator/supervisory roles had more than 10 years' experience; three had over 20 years' experience. Some had only worked for one organisation while others had worked for multiple aged care organisations, either in community or residential care. Prior work experience included positions in the disability sector, health, welfare, retail, factory work, food industries and office work.

The interviews took place in meeting rooms provided by the organisations. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and focus groups about an hour. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Data was analysed in a three step process. First an experienced research assistant read through the transcripts and made notes on recurrent themes that aligned with the topics covered by the interview guide. This framework was then used to code data with support from NVivo (QSR 2011), a qualitative research software program that assists in the management of large amounts of interview material. The research assistant provided a summary of findings through reflections on the main themes in the interviews. In the final stage of analysis the researcher read through the coded data to identify themes and metaphors both within and across cases.

FINDINGS

Inkson's nine career metaphors (Table 1) were used to provide structure to the narratives in this study. They helped explain why individuals choose to work as a community carer, how they make sense of the role and to identify the factors that underpin attraction and retention of community care workers. The findings primarily represent a female view of the community care role which reflects the highly feminised workforce and the limited number of male participants in the study.

1. Legacy metaphor – career as inheritance

For community aged care workers the legacy metaphor was evident across the key variables of class, educational achievements and gender (Ng et al. 2005). The majority had low levels of education and low expectations regarding career opportunities and choices. Working as a community carer was seen by some as a better option than working in other low level jobs or as an improvement on previous roles. Gender also emerged as a significant factor shaping career legacies. For women, paid care work can be a natural extension of previous unpaid roles – child care, care of older family members, care of younger siblings – and thus they inherit a 'career' that is passed down through the family. Many participants referred to caring responsibilities within the family unit, particularly care of an elderly parent, as a precursor to working in aged care.

> *I don't know that I originally considered it as an occupation when I was younger, I just sort of did the things I do now as a job for my own grandparents and I guess I didn't realise it was available or it wasn't maybe as promoted as what it is nowadays. And when I was younger I guess I would've thought of Aged Care as just Nursing Home or Residential facilities, I didn't know that the Community Care work and Aged Care work was available at all but I was already sort of doing it myself anyway. (Community care worker ABC).*

The care legacy could also be seen as a consequence of role modelling within the family unit, for example parents caring for grandparents or other relatives and friends as well as shared family values.

> *Of course it helps to get paid but in my heart it was about caring for me. And that was learnt from a very young age. I think it can be in your blood, I really do. I guess it just came naturally (Community care worker ABH).*

2. Craft metaphor – career as construction

For care workers, crafting and creating a meaningful identity was clearly important in how they described their role and their contribution to society. It was linked to perceptions of their role as a professional caring service rather than a low-level, low-paid, 'dirty job'. A number of carers who had previously worked in higher status jobs referred to their current role as one they were crafting to support life stage, personal goals and work values.

> *...the job I had immediately prior to coming into care work was social work. But I actually found that emotionally challenging and I was finding it difficult to step back sufficiently. And*

at the same time I would counsel people who would say, you know, look I just want someone to come and give me a hand, and they were older clients who come to the community health service. So it was sort of a combination of feeling that maybe I could reduce the stress but that I could still be useful (Community care coordinator, ABH).

3. Seasons metaphor – career as cycle

For women, much more than men, the seasons of life (and career) have traditionally been shaped by family and caring responsibilities (O'Neil and Bilimoria 2005). Moving into a community care role was generally linked to the 'season' of returning to the paid workforce after having children. For the men who participated in the study it was associated with career transition due to job loss and the limited alternatives in this stage of life. For women the capacity to undertake a paid caring role was closely associated with previous experiences in different seasons of unpaid care work within the nuclear and extended family unit.

Well, actually, I have to be honest, I didn't think "Oh, I want to work in Aged Care" – one of my girlfriends did it, and she was going on and on about how much she loved it and that, and I sort of thought – I was finding it very difficult to get another job, after I'd had my second two children – and I thought "Oh, I'll give it a shot", and then I just loved it. So, it was sort of a blessing in disguise (Community care worker ABC).

The downside was that many community care workers had begun this new career when they were middle-aged or older. Given the physical demands of the job participants observed that their 'season' as an aged care worker was likely to be constrained by their own health and wellbeing more than their desire to continue in a caring role.

4. Matching metaphor - Career as fit

The care workforce is highly feminised (England 2005) which many argue is because women are seen as more likely to have a 'calling'. They are thus considered to be more suited to care-related roles and more likely to work for lower pay than those seeking less altruistic employment (Nelson and Folbre 2006). Community aged care workers reinforced these perceptions. Their work is low status and poorly paid and for many in this sector, there is very little job security and few options for career progression. Yet despite these constraints, the notion of calling or fit was evident in their career stories. They could see the match between their skills, abilities, and previous life experience, which

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for women was associated with experience gained from parenting or caring for an older family member. For some, while not immediately evident, but perhaps through relating their stories, they began to see the fit.

> *We do it for the love of the job, it's certainly not an easy job but it's not exactly suitable for everyone, but I'd say it's got to be one of the most rewarding jobs that you can do and I've come to the conclusion that I was maybe meant to be doing this sort of a job. I'm made for it or it's made for me so to speak (Community care worker ABC)*

For others the match was clear as soon as they started in the role.

> *I actually found my calling because I did - I absolutely love them. In fact, it didn't even feel like a job at first, it felt like visiting old friends (Community care worker, ABH).*

5. Path metaphor – career as journey

The path metaphor underpins the career experiences of many community aged care workers. It aligns with the concept of career seasons or career cycles by adding structure to career changes. Having worked in other low level, low paid and perhaps unrewarding roles they made a choice to move forwards on the next stage of the journey. One woman in her 20s who had only worked as a community carer for three months described her journey:

> *I worked as a Store Manager at Subway for 10 years. But I just thought that this was something I could do for longer – I just felt like Subway was – there were children working there with me, and I couldn't be 50 and making sandwiches and stuff like that. So I think, just to better my career and my future (Community care worker, ABH).*

This stage of the career journey offers intrinsic rewards (helping people), a sense of purpose (my job has meaning) and a bringing together of skills and experiences acquired in earlier seasons.

> *I ran the second hand uniform shop at my daughter's school for 8 years and always knew I enjoyed talking to people and helping people. And then I went and did a computer course and got a job as an accounts payable and after two years of that I knew that's not what I wanted to do (laughing) I needed to get back with people again (Community care worker ABH).*

A reported downside of community care was that future career directions were limited by the flat structure and lack of alternative roles, other than moving into a coordinator role. While some participants had chosen this upward career path, others did not want to be constrained by an office job which would mean losing contact with clients, the primary driver for their community support roles.

6. Network metaphor – career as encounters and relationships

The decision to enter community care was often associated with chance encounters or casual conversations with family and friends. Few had chosen this career as a first option, or had even considered it as a career, until someone in their network had raised it as a possibility.

> *So when I started, I had had a family and then went to look for work, and was approached by another mum at the school where my kids went, to ask whether I'd be interested in working in aged care (Community care coordinator, ABH).*

The idea of working in community care came either through positive recommendations from others who worked in the sector ("aged care is a good sector to work in"; "my organisation is a good place to work") or comments from family and friends who believed that the care role would be a good fit for their caring nature, personal attributes and life experiences.

> *Well back in 2003 I was working in the credit union with a girl that was friends with a manager here and I was getting a bit stale in finance and this girl said "Why don't you do some aged care – you would be great". And I happened to know so and so, so she gave me the details and that's how come I started working – basically because I was getting a bit tired of finance... and then once I got a taste of it I realised how rewarding it was (Community care worker ABC).*

7. Theatre metaphor – career as a role

By working as a community carer it was evident that individuals had begun to define themselves by that role. The role provided a rationale and a lens through which they evaluated their contribution to the community and to their clients – 'this is what I do, this is who I am, I provide care to enable older people to live better lives, to remain in their own homes'. This not only offered a means of interpreting their work but also a script to explain the value of their contribution to other people.

> *I love my role, it's just like you're caring for people; you're trying to give them what they want within the means of what we've got. And its, what do you say – I think it's a caring role regardless of what service you're performing for them. They are trusting you to go into their house. I think you need to be really mindful of that trust and treat it with respect (Community care worker ABH).*

Significantly, carers described their work in terms of the skills and qualities required to play the role of a 'good carer', qualities which included empathy, compassion, patience, friendliness and emotional

intelligence. Although the work involved menial tasks such as cleaning, carers saw themselves in a complex professional role.

> *I think my personality stands by being a professional. Anybody can sit down and look at books but it takes a professional to sort of stand by what you're learning and actually go beyond it almost. Being that compassionate person and really understanding the role that you've studied for (Community care worker ABH).*

8. Economic metaphor – career as a resource

This metaphor refers to careers as a resource, owned either by the organisation or the individual. The majority of community aged carers was employed on casual or part-time contracts. Uncertainty surrounding their employment contract (hours of work and take-home pay), and the semi-autonomous nature of the work itself meant that there was only a limited sense of belonging to an organisation that wanted to invest in their development. Both organisations offered on-going training but the focus was primarily on knowledge acquisition rather than personal or career development. As low paid workers there was also little indication that they saw their career as a resource to be managed and developed. Instead, the main concern was finding enough hours to earn an income. One former community care worker who was now a coordinator summarised the situation;

> *If you're relying on a wage, if you're relying on a certain wage because you've got set bills, don't do community care (Community care worker ABH).*

To manage low wages and unpredictable incomes many had worked, or were continuing to work, for more than one aged care organisation and thus saw themselves as independent contractors in charge of their own careers, not simply as the employee of a single organisation.

> *I've worked in aged care for seven and a half years, and at the same time that I started working as a carer for ABH, I also worked as a care worker for another agency, but mostly the bulk of my work has been through ABH (Community care worker ABH).*

9. Narrative metaphor – career as a story

The value of telling career stories is that it helps individuals begin to see new patterns and to reinterpret the value and meaning of their career trajectory (Weick 1996 p106). In this study, initially many were surprised to be invited to participate in academic research. They considered their lives to

be quite ordinary and their career story to be uneventful. However, for these low-level employees career stories appeared to change and develop with the re-telling. Through describing their history and explaining their motivations it was evident that they were able to redefine themselves in terms of contributing to society, of making a difference, of doing things that are valuable and necessary.

> *I thought I wanted to be a nurse so I studied that and I found I didn't like the hospital setting – actually didn't really like the other nurses. They were really – I don't know – they didn't seem to care and I was doing nursing in-home but that's very limited, there's not a lot of work. So I started doing more caring and I thought, I actually quite like this and I'll just let my registration lapse (Community care worker ABC).*

For other participants, career stories were shaped by factors such as changing family circumstances, job loss or physical relocation which required finding new career paths.

> *My background is in marketing, so when I arrived (in Australia) I started to work in a business but… I did feel something missing inside of my heart – it was empty because in Brazil even work with marketing you have a lot of opportunities to volunteer…. So I said maybe that's what I'm missing because I'm in a different position and also I don't have a chance of doing what I was used to. Then I tried to find a place to be a volunteer and after probably one or two months I was really in love with the industry, with the sector, with the things that I could experience. Then I decided to quit my job and start to study. Now I'm finishing a diploma (in community aged care) because I really like the industry (Community care worker ABH).*

DISCUSSION

The nine career metaphors proposed by Inkson (2004) helped frame carer narratives. All appeared to be significant for employee attraction and retention, although some more than others. Key metaphors associated with attraction were i) the legacy metaphor– career as inheritance through demographic influences; ii) the seasons metaphor – career as cycle reinforcing the frequently later life entry to community care work; iii) the matching metaphor – career as fit; and iv) the network metaphor – career as encounters and relationships. In combination they indicated that community carers regarded this type of work, which was often recommended to them by those in their networks, as a good fit for someone from their social and educational background, for their age and stage of life, and their life experiences. Our findings reinforce the gendered stereotypes that place caring work firmly in the female domain (Palmer and Eveline 2012), however the use of metaphors shows that working in community aged care provides an opportunity to change career direction or re-enter the workforce

with limited relevant experience or qualifications while making a valuable contribution to society. Importantly, they help explain how individuals can find satisfaction and meaning through job-person fit where fit is associated with the legacy, seasons and matching metaphors.

Key metaphors associated with retention were i) the economic metaphor – career as a resource and the driving force of earning a living; ii) the matching metaphor - career as a good 'fit' where remaining with the organisation continues to reflect interests, innate abilities (caring) and career choices (or lack of choices ; iii) the theatre metaphor – career as a role where built in 'scripts' are developed to provide a rationale for why and how they work; and iv) the path metaphor – career as a journey, not just a collection of random events. There was clearly a tension between the desire to make a contribution and the income resulting from low paid work and irregular hours. Many participants noted that they worked more for love than money even though income was important. It was also evident that this role had limited options for the future which is a potentially limiting factor if aged care organisations want to attract and retain younger employees. One option was to move into a coordinator role but this appeared to negate the concept of career as fit. A few participants had briefly worked as a coordinator but had returned to in-home care because they found it more rewarding. To a lesser extent, three more metaphors were relevant to retention of community care workers; i) the seasons metaphor; ii) the craft metaphor; and iii) the narrative metaphor – which appeared to help participants retrospectively find meaning in their work by telling their story to others.

A permeating theme was that carers believe they make an important contribution. The role that they play, the passion and commitment they bring to their work, and caring as a good fit for their life experiences, underpinned their career narratives. The value of narrative in relation to low status work is that it acknowledges that there are "multiple ways to interpret one's own diverse life experiences, different life perspectives" (Savickas et al. 2009, p 243), and that these interpretations may challenge societal viewpoints. Supporting the work of Stacey (2005), society may see care work as 'dirty work' but through narratives and metaphors, our study found that carers are able to make sense of their career choice, to express meaning in their interactions with clients, to recognise their natural caring abilities and find dignity in their work.

Our findings therefore provide insights for aged care organisations seeking to attract and retain a resilient community care workforce. Notably, the study suggests that the opportunity to explain to others what their work is about added value to community care workers' perceptions of their work, potentially increasing retention, a finding that supports the use of narrative as a sense-making process and a means of giving shape to career experiences (Weick 1995). This is important, given that the work is low paid, and therefore keeping a sense of value through story and recognition *may* in part compensate for the work being largely undervalued. Strategies management could consider to increase attraction and retention include the use of community care workers' stories told by themselves in recruitment campaigns and in organisational branding material. Possibly client-nominated annual awards could also highlight the importance of this work for those workers. Undoubtedly, secure work and good pay must be considered also. Further, career strategies and new avenues for career progression for community care workers (apart from moving away from clients and into co-ordinator roles) may be a worthwhile retention consideration.

Most research is not without its limitation and ours is no exception. The limitations for this study include the lack of generalisability beyond community care workers. Also, the study was conducted in two organisations in one Australian state. The small number of males participating in this study (which represented the female-dominated population of community care workers) makes it difficult to ascertain views of male care workers and whether they are similar to, or different from, the views of females. Thus, further research is warranted to examine the male perspective in community aged care and to identify attraction strategies that might increase the number of males choosing to work in the sector. Other areas for research include exploring different community care contexts, for example, residential aged care and aged care in other countries, to reveal whether our findings are applicable in those contexts and a more in-depth examination of career identity in relation to care work. Understanding how career identity is shaped among aged care workers may lead to the development of new strategies for attraction and retention, new insights into what it means to pursue a career in the aged care sector (particularly community care), and ultimately greater job satisfaction for those engaged in this important work.

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Table 1: Career metaphors (Inkson 2004).

Metaphor	Description	Explanation
1. Legacy metaphor	Career as inheritance	Career choices often reflect generational influences (Inkson 2004) through demographic factors such as socio-economic status, education, family values/expectations and gender.
2. Craft metaphor	Career as construction	Crafting a career balances the functional and creative aspects – the practical need to earn an income and the creative need to find and implement a personal sense of self-worth and value.
3. Seasons metaphor	Career as cycle	Career stages are associated with age-stage theories (early, mid, late stage) such as those presented by Super (1957; Super 1990) and Levinson (1978).
4. Matching metaphor	Career as fit	Career as a 'good fit' reflects the concept of vocation or match between personality, interests, natural abilities and career choices (Holland 1997).
5. Path metaphor	Career as journey	Careers are described as a journey, a path or a progression (Baruch 2004). This brings a sense of direction and purpose to seemingly random career events.
6. Network metaphor	Career as encounters and relationships	Careers are embedded in social systems. Encounters with people in or out of the individual's social system help build networks and shape the evolving pattern of career (Eby et al. 2003)
7. Theatre metaphor	Career as a role	Through acting out careers, role behaviour becomes built into career 'scripts' that match the actors' views of why and how they work (Cohen & Mallon 2001).
8. Economic metaphor	Career as a resource	Careers are seen as a resource which is owned either by the organisation or the individual. Career capital gives individual a marketable asset (Iellatchitch et al. 2003).
9. Narrative metaphor	Career as a story	Career stories help to make retrospective sense of decisions that were made, often without a clear plan or intention other than finding a job (Weick 1996).