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THEORIES OF MANAGERIAL ACTION AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF EXECUTIVE CAREERS

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Abstract

In this paper I outline one of the developments in the social sciences and macro organizational theory that could be of special profit for academic work on careers. I argue that a theory of action perspective is timely because its assumptions fit extremely well with the heterogeneity and lability of today's structures and the plurality and unpredictability they bring to careers. I suggest there are two basic potential contributions of theories of action to the field of careers. First, they endorse the relevance of the shift in the basic image of managers' careers, from the analogy of an ascendant trajectory of positions to that of an idiosyncratic sequence of experiences loosely related to an organisational architecture. Second, they reinforce Weick's arguments (1996) that careers cannot be conceived of merely as a dependent variable, as just "following" structures. Both contributions spring from a notion of management work in theories of action as essentially local, tactical, and pragmatic, with enacting or social constructionist effects on structure and organizations.

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Introduction

I will argue that the diffusion of weak and highly differentiated organizational structures makes theories of action a fruitful perspective from which to address the challenges presented by the careers of executives in such settings. I will also present several of the academic developments in Sociology and Organizational Theory that make an action perspective timely.

This paper converges with Weick (1996). He points out that trends towards the softening and fragmentation of structures favour the impact on social systems of enactment attempts by organizational actors. In the absence or lesser salience of external cues provided by strong or hierarchical organizations, such as clear lines of command or detailed instructions for performance, actors such as managers ought to rely more on internal guides (from scripts to psychological predisposition). Using Weick's words, "microstrength will shape macroweakness." This is also the argument of this paper, although formulated from the academic platform of theories of action, contained in organizational theory and in sociology.

I focus on the organizational context, tasks and careers of top managers. This is not an ideological preference. The choice comes partly from my own previous work on the subject of top management teams and chief executives. Additionally, top management has usually been more subject to the effects of the ambiguity arising from uncertain contexts and weak structures than lower echelon managers or employees. In this regard, top management is a good target group for examining trends that are rapidly becoming more widespread. Finally, theories of action have traditionally centred on those with more autonomy in organizational decision-making, namely top managers.

The Changing Social Settings. Managerial careers are undergoing a transformation probably without parallel since the generalisation of the divisional structures accounted for by Alfred Chandler in *Strategy and Structure* (1969), and the establishment of a professional management model around the set of executive tasks and careers required by capital-allocation processes such as planning and budgeting, organising and staffing, controlling and problem solving (Kotter, 1982).

Sumantra Ghoshal and Chris Barlett (1997) argue that that model, valid for decades, while the scarce resource was capital, is currently collapsing in complex organisations. They find managerial work and careers in today’s leading corporations, where the scarce resource is knowledge, to be highly specialised, and compartimentalised into a basic threefold categorisation. First, the entrepreneurial work performed by front-line managers, such as heads of strategic business units, dominated by an external orientation, and focused on results, by which they are evaluated. Second, the integrative function, focused primarily

on people development, carried out by experienced managers in trimmed-down integrating units. These managers are structurally equivalent to the former middle management, although with much fewer control responsibilities. Third, the institutional work, aimed at holding the corporation together through mechanisms such as values, distinctive competencies, and strategic priorities or intent. This task is to be carried out by the very top management of the corporation. Since these different tasks demand highly specialised competencies that cannot be either quickly developed or readily transferred, they lead to distinct and non-transferable executive careers.

Apart from this division of managerial tasks in complex organisations and the diversity of professional paths it produces, another consequence of the corporate revolution described by Ghoshal and Barlett refers to the attachment between the individual and the organisation. It has been widely noted that a job or social contract based upon a "loyalty model," characterised by a strong and enduring relationship, where obedience is rewarded with employment security, is being replaced by a new type of attachment. This has become known among scholars as the "flexibility model," with shorter and more tenuous relationships between organisations and individuals. Precisely because of that flexibility, it is much more varied and difficult to grasp than the previous one. In this model, employees build their careers across organisations, displaying loyalty to themselves, their competencies and professions and, temporarily, to project teams, rather than to single organisations. This centring of professional careers around individuals' competencies, and the shortened length of time employees are attached to organisations, has led Peiperl and Baruch (1997) to reflect on the apparent return to a sort of guild organisation of knowledge-based labour, if it were not for the current globalisation of the economy, including some professional labour markets. To put it differently, external labour markets are taking over domains previously held by internal labour markets.

As the previous arguments exemplify, a great deal of contemporary work on executives' careers starts from the acknowledgment that shifts in the environment require highly adaptive, non-hierarchical organisations, capable of transforming structures, competencies, and activities. These organisations in turn demand flexible managers, capable of learning and displaying new skills for the performance of a wide and changing range of tasks. Changes in managers' careers do not come, therefore, primarily from modifications in social values or demographics, or from new developments in management education, or from other factors, although undoubtedly these and other causes have also played a role. They come from demands in organizations' structuring. Thus, research on the current transformation of managerial careers has always been dominated (both in the loyalty model and in the flexibility model) by a structural or organisational hypothesis.

While this hypothesis is certainly realistic and fruitful for identifying and describing the main causes driving the transformation in corporate careers, another complementary perspective might also be appropriate. This approach is based on theories of managerial action. It has been developed mostly in sociology and macro organizational theory, and refers to the basic models of the motives, purposes and skills behind actors' (in this case, managers') behaviours with regard to the construction or maintenance of social structures (in this case, organisations). Its distinctive locus is the local interface between executive actions, professional interests and personal identities, organizational strategies and structures. Theories of action assume degrees of autonomy for actors and therefore recognize the impact of their intervention on the social system, or their capability for enactment, to use Weick's term.

The current structural revolution in organisations, where formal structures and systems are less influential, is making the importance of the essentials of managerial action even more patent. As Burt (1997) summarises: "The shift away from bureaucracy means that managers

cannot rely as much on directives from the firm. They are more than ever the authors of their own work. Firms gain by being able to identify, and adapt more readily to, needed production changes and market shifts. There are new opportunities for managers, but there are also new costs.....a corresponding increase in uncertainty, stress, and potentially disruptive conflict." It is in this situation that the managerial action perspective could be fruitful.

The Academic Stimuli. Moreover, this approach appears to be timely because of reasons originating in a number of academic fields, where scholars are demanding a major role for theories of action or more elaborated versions. From practice-oriented managerial thinking, Barlett and Ghoshal (1993) call for a "managerial theory of the firm." They complain that most current approaches to management are too structurally dominated, driving away the elements of purpose and stretch they find in leading organisations. Similarly, Kanter (1997) suggests that a focus on action and process is one of the pending challenges of the entire field of management. In Organisational Theory, Hirsch (1997) complains about the overly powerful role of culture in the neo-institutional school, where actors in organisations appear to almost mechanically follow the maps impressed in their cognitive systems. Hirsch then calls for a more purposive notion of organisational actors. From a related sociological perspective, Fligstein (1997) vindicates the need for theories of action that allow more room for social constructionist hypotheses of institution-building, and that recognize ample social space and initiative for actors' political entrepreneurship. This void in theories of action could stem from the fact that the most important attempt at elaborating a theory of action so far (Parsons, 1968) was formulated in such a tightly-integrated, systemic and abstract framework that it scared many scholars away from the topic, as if his conservative discussion of the topic were the only possible way of dealing with it.

II. Fathoming the Elusive Phenomenon: Managerial Action

The role of top managers, their competencies, and professional trajectories, have had a limited presence in theories of organisations, which have traditionally been focused on structural topics and dominated by structural arguments. Although in the beginnings of organisational theory, in the "old" institutional approaches, such as in Michels' and Selznick's, the role of leaders and top managers was extremely relevant, after the contributions of Simon, March, Thompson, and others, structures became the main variable. This was patent in contingency theory, resource dependency, and in recent schools such as population ecology. Even the "neo" versions of institutional theory are less receptive than early institutional formulations to assumptions of management autonomy and influence, without which notions of managerial action and careers are rendered too overdetermined (Alvarez, 1989). Although other contributions in the domain of strategy, such as Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996), recognize the impact of top management teams' decisions and actions on the performance of firms, the prominent use of demographic variables and the scant attention to processes of decision making and implementation impede a true action perspective.

Although the network approach in organisational theory was, in its beginnings, heir to structurally dominated explanations, by noticing the internal and external openness of organizations, by paying special attention to social –not just formal– structures, by emphasizing structuring instead of structures, it easily led to a positive acknowledgment of the behaviors and roles of those doing the structuring, of the "structurers", and in particular of top managers, the more autonomous action-takers in organisational settings.

Fortunately, there have been in the last few years several efforts at theorising managerial action. They are built upon several traditions. The first pieces on managerial action were written by authors, such as March and colleagues, who were working primarily on non-bureaucratic organisations. The loosely structured organizations that concerned these authors were probably more similar to today's organisations than to the tightly bounded ones that were dominant then. Representative work from this period includes March and Cohen's *Leadership and Ambiguity* (1974), where they provide recommendations to top executives in educational institutions. Padgett (1980) gives a succinct and efficient description of these organised anarchies: they do not have clear or consistent notions about what it is they are trying to do (problematic preferences), how it is they are supposed to do it (unclear technology), or who it is that should make the decisions (fluid participation). March and Cohen's commandments for top management action in these highly complex systems are the following. First, spend time and energy, since investing time in itself becomes a "claim" on the decision-making system. Second, persistence, since having more patience than other people facilitates acceptance of one's plan. Third, exchange status for substance, that is, make concessions to win allies. Fourth, facilitate the opposition's participation in the change effort, to foster commitment and realism. Fifth, overload the system with as many initiatives as possible, in order to increase the number of projects that get through the openings of the inertia. Six, provide garbage cans, that is, decouple problems from solutions by putting many issues up for discussion simultaneously. Seventh, manage unobtrusively, meaning try to influence the organisation imperceptibly, calling little attention to your most important actions, since the most important events are often the least apparent. Finally, be the one in charge of recording, interpreting or "writing down in history" the events of your organisation. See Tom Peters (1980) for a good summary of the practical implications of these recommendations.

In 1980 Padgett extended March and Cohen's work to more hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations than the loosely structured institutions originally examined by these two authors. Padgett concluded that March and Cohen's recommendations for the management of organised anarchies, summarized by the expression "unobtrusive management," also apply to more rigid settings, such as bureaucracies. Padgett (1980) suggested that top managers, across types of organizations, should follow these fundamental rules of executive action. First, hire rigid analysts for old programs, but hire uncertain and insecure analysts for new programs. Second, to the extent possible, reorganise program assignments to divisions in order to segregate high-saliency programs from low-saliency programs. Third, hire only department heads even more liberal than yourself to run your low-saliency divisions. Fourth, never make any decisions yourself. You may do so only at your own risk. Fifth, concentrate instead on manipulating rules of discretion (i.e. centralisation policy) in order to balance off your conflicting units and program chiefs. Sixth, do not fight subunit biases and internal conflict. Use them to force your laggard organisation to keep up with a changing world.

Management as "Robust Action." A more recent formulation, heir to the theoretical tradition just described, is Eccles and Nohria (1992). They react against the overflow into management education in the 80s and 90s of business fads and fashions that have obscured the essentials of management, and pushed executives into a frantic search for the acquisition and implementation of the latest how-to. I have argued elsewhere (Alvarez, 1997) that managers have the potential to fall easily into the temptation of simplistic formulas because of the simultaneous overdetermination of organisational outcomes and high uncertainty typical in today's volatile environments. These two features, overdetermination and high uncertainty elicit, as a compensation reaction, the need for "determined" explanations. Eccles and Nohria identify the essence of management not in technical procedures with the potential

of being standardized or translated into formulas, but in some pragmatic and highly tactical competencies, effective in "getting things done," in accomplishing goals in social settings. Nohria and Eccles expressed the pragmatic essence of the managerial job in the notion of "robust action," that is, in arranging the mix of organisational elements (from systems and formal structures to shared values and styles) in ways that facilitate the accomplishment of short-term objectives while preserving long-term flexibility. The principles of "robust action" posed by Nohria and Eccles are, first, acting without certitude; second, constantly preserving flexibility; third, being politically savvy; fourth, having a keen sense of timing; fifth, judging the situation at hand; sixth, using rhetoric effectively; and seventh, working multiple agendas. The principles of "robust action" give us more evidence that what managers do, that is, getting action, springs from a set of competencies not dependent on formalised knowledge. Thus, robust action is not easily conducive to standardisation nor, therefore, to professionalisation.

An illustration of "robust action," one that underlines its kinship with studies by political scientists on the exercise of power, is Neustadt's classic study on modern presidential power in the U.S. (1960). This author provides fascinating historical examples of his tenet: that the key to presidential effectiveness is the exercise of power in prospective terms, that is, the tactical pursuit of immediate aims, at the same time that, in every short-term choice, power is buttressed, accumulated, and the maneuvering capacity enlarged, for still-to-be-specified use in the long run.

Another empirical piece illustrating "robust action" in action, so to speak, is Padgett and Ansell's (1993) original article on Cosimo de Medici's political skills in XVI Century Florence. Padgett and Ansell argue that Cosimo displayed a "robust" style, consisting of a high multivocality, which favoured that his actions, vis-a-vis a plurality of parties, could be "interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives simultaneously, the fact that single actions can be moves in many games at once, and the fact that public and private motivations cannot be parsed...flexible opportunism--maintaining discretionary options across unforeseeable futures in the hostile attempts by others to narrow those options."

The interesting point about Padgett and Ansell's hermeneutics of Cosimo's style is its fit with the contingencies of his time. Florence's social structures looked very much like a highly differentiated network, with the ties composing its social organisation segregated into economic, friendship and social kinds, with abundance of isolated parties or clusters (stakeholders) aiming at inclusion into the city's core clique. In fact, Medici's Florence appears strikingly contemporary.

As in Florence, the current softness and fragmentation of organizations and social systems favours "robust action," which thrives in what Leifer (1988, 1991) calls "local games." Understanding organizational action as local events is in timely accordance with generalised processes of organisational decentralisation into highly autonomous structures, or with trends towards the so-called "commodification" of organisations (the partition of corporations into smaller, highly-focused business units, easily exchangeable in the market with other corporations), along with the high differentiation of managerial tasks and careers noted by Ghoshal and Barlett (1997). Moreover, localisation adds to the characterisation of managerial action as being of a highly political nature. As the saying goes: "all politics is local."

Although Eccles and Nohria's inventory of suggestions for "robust action" could appear to be just a collection of commonsense aphorisms for savvy corporate political behaviour, it has a prestigious genealogy that could be traced back to the works of March, Cohen, and particularly to Harrison White's *Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of*

Social Action. Published in 1992, the latter is perhaps, along with Fligstein's recent pieces, to be presented next, the most self-conscious attempt at developing a theory of social and organisational action. White has been the academic mentor of many scholars doing work today on issues related to a theory of action, or on the fundamental problem of structure and agency, such as Leifer, Breiger, Padgett, Eccles, Emirfayer, and others. White argues that social organisations are the opposite of action generation. Organisations arise out of control efforts that produce structure, social order, stability, routines and responsibilities. Action is a reverse social phenomenon of organisations, an attempt at change. That is, organisations or structures serve to block fresh action, or agency. A paradox emerges from the fact that agents in their quest for action, and in their "decoupling," to use White's favourite term (meaning the displacement or breaking of extant rigidities or of stable organizational junctions, in search for better adjustments), create new connections and structures of control, which, in turn, generate attainment differentiation and consolidate new inequalities.

White's book contains an entire section on General Managers, something rare in works on fundamental sociological concepts such as structure and agency. In White's view, the general manager's function is to cut through the rigidities of social organisation, to dilute the inertia of social forms, and to break the codification derived from rules. In sum, managers' essential function is to serve as change agents, as action enactors. It is interesting to note, given the very different intellectual quarters from which they approached this subject, how much akin White's general manager is to Kotter's "leader," and White's administrator, the social expert in blocking action, to Kotter's "manager," a specialist in reinforcing rules and maintaining the status quo.

Another inspiration for Eccles and Nohria could be in a classic piece aimed at practitioners: Wrapp's "Good Managers Don't Make Policy Decisions" (1984). Going against the grain of widespread beliefs which portrayed executives as primarily setting policies, communicating precise goals and objectives, and making clear-cut decisions, Wrapp's recommendations to general managers coincide with a by now familiar enumeration of some "robust action" features: develop a network of information sources; concentrate energies and time on priorities; play the power game; cultivate a sense of timing; press cautiously; appear imprecise; maintain viability; avoid policy straitjackets; muddle with a purpose; exploit change. Wrapp does in fact deliver the basics of "robust action," and the following lines, excerpted from his article, became an often reproduced quote in many later works on the topic, such as White (1992) and Eccles and Nohria (1992): "The good manager can function effectively only in an environment of continual change... Only with many changes in the works can the manager discover new combinations of opportunities and open up new corridors of comparative indifference... In the day-to-day operation of a going concern, they find the milieu to maneuver and conceptualize."

One of the latest attempts at developing a theory of action is Fligstein (1997). He criticises the neo-institutional school of organisational theory for its lack of political dimensions and of notions of social action that recognize enough autonomy in organisational actors (agreeing with this is Alvarez, 1997). Coinciding with Eccles and Nohria, Fligstein proposes that such a theory of action should conceptualize organisational actors as "specialists" in obtaining desired social outcomes by working through others, as skilled agents in motivating co-operation from other parties. The paramount competency of these actors is "empathy," that is, being capable of relating to the constituencies playing in particular local situations, and developing those constituencies' identity (both interests and world views) in ways coherent with the strategy of the actors taking action. These actors have a repertoire of tactics available for the implementation of their strategies that reiterates the register of behaviours already exposed in this paper. Fligstein's complete record of action tactics available to social actors is the following:

1) Direct authority, basically formal power;
2) Ability to set the agenda for other actors;
3) Understanding and using the ambiguities and uncertainties of organisational settings, and taking and using the resources available at any moment;
4) Framing action by linking broader interpretations of reality to groups' existing conceptions of interest;
5) Wheeling and annealing, that is, shaking up settled situations and hoping the new configuration is better than the original one;
6) Brokering, or being highly active at networking (or bridging structural holes, as network theory would express it);
7) Asking for more and accepting less;
8) Appearing hard to read (goallessness) and without values oriented to personal gain (selflessness);
9) Maintaining ambiguity, in order to impede others from developing strategies;
10) Building alliances and coalitions through the aggregation of interests;
11) Initiating several courses of action in the hope that some will succeed;
12) Displaying more power than one really has, in the belief that the appearance of power is power (social construction of reality);
13) Inducing others to act by making them think they are in charge;
14) Bringing outsiders into coalitions, then becoming central to the network, and isolating competitors;
15) Using deterrents as a source of power.

The many coincidences of all these lists really suggest that scholars are zeroing in on a bundle of behaviours that embody the fundamentals of managerial action. Executive tasks are primarily conceived of as "unobtrusive" or as what White calls "managing by indirection," meaning, for instance, that managing context is more appropriate in uncertain and changing environments than managing content; that managing organising –the process– is a more realistic way of putting it than managing organisations; that setting up structures and selecting staff and then giving autonomy is better than managing operational details; that organizations are a socially constructed reality and therefore that managing sense-making is at least as relevant as controlling. And the teleology of managers' actions is basically oriented at "decoupling."

Top Managers as Politicians. The tasks described lead us to a basic view of top managerial action as highly political, a fundamental notion of managers as experts in long-term strategic action through playing short-term local games. This political model of top managers has been pointed out time ago. For instance, March (1988) poses that executives should be seen as political brokers that, relentlessly and from the power base of coalitions they need to build and continuously maintain, negotiate the composition of the firm and bargain its goals. However, while political theories of organisations have existed for a long time in organisational theory (among others, Cyert and March, 1963; Hickson et al., 1971; Pettigrew, 1973), they have never become hegemonic, and managers' tasks have not been widely recognized as essentially political either, with a few exceptions, usually practitioner-oriented works (for instance, Kotter, 1985; Pfeffer, 1992).

What I believe is very important here is that this political, pragmatic notion of executives' work, derived from theories of action, fits contemporary corporate realities and professional tracks particularly well. For one thing, the "revolt" of shareholders and other stakeholders against managerial prerogatives is pushing top executives willy-nilly to be more responsive to a variety of external constituencies, a challenge to be added to the need for balancing internal groups, already noticed by Uyterhoeven (1991). Another reason that increases the relevance of a political notion of managerial tasks is what we could call the

"informalisation" of organising, meaning a lesser emphasis on strong structures and the formal systems of organisations, as Burt's quote in the Introduction so clearly illustrates. Also augmenting the political content of managerial work is the "commodification" of organisations already alluded to above. The co-ordination of units, only loosely subject to hierarchical umbrellas, is impossible to achieve with a stringent command-and-control style. All these features are pushing managers to become more like mobilisers of collective action, like leaders of social movements created around specific and transitory issues, or like coordinators of a number of small or middle size cells, or of transitory teams enacted around projects.

Years ago, Zald and Berger (1978) noted the emerging analogies between the organisational tendencies of economic organisations with social and political movements. As just discussed, this analogy is even more patent today. Consequently, a kinship is also emerging between the careers of business people and professionals and those of politicians, as Kanter (1989) has suggested, especially with regard to the importance of reputation, the weakening links between careers and formal structures, and the frequent movements across organisations or units.

The impact of the psychological endowment on managerial action and careers. The political nature of management action requires of executives a peculiar set of dispositions or attitudes and even a predisposition or particular psychological profile, which has implications for managerial careers. In this regard, Athos (1975) has contributed fascinating work on executives' personal and professional development. He discusses the multidimensionality of the "managerial experience," one that cuts simultaneously across cognitive levels and realms of experience (ideals, purpose, social, psychological, learning), and poses three basic characteristics. One is imperfection, since managers cannot comprehend everything that is going on at all those levels and in all those realms. Another is ambiguity, for even the things and events available as data are not clear in their meaning. Finally, there is uncertainty, because although executives are supposed to do, to act, they will never be sure of the outcomes of their decisions and actions. Being able to develop professionally in a context of imperfection, ambiguity and uncertainty, characteristics that can also be attributed to political contexts, demands strong personal balance. As Athos sustains, it requires personal growth based first upon flexibility, or being able to circulate across dimensions (e.g., from ideals to practical, implementable purposes), since one cannot fulfill all of them at the same time. It also demands reversibility of behaviour or being able to learn, recognise mistakes and escape from escalation dynamics. And it calls for balance over time, not at any particular moment, which is impossible.

The high psychological order of the managerial experience is even more true in weakened structures and in boundaryless careers, where fewer cues for learning are available, paradoxically when high learning is required. And to the idiosyncrasies of managerial action, the uniqueness of the psychological endowment for being efficient at robust action is added. Although to my knowledge statistics are not available, we could easily agree that the highly mature character that Athos ascribes to harmoniously developing managers surely cannot be widespread.

Elaborating a little bit more on the psychological requirements of executives apt for action in labile organizations could be useful to evaluate the previous proposition. Over forty years ago Argyris (1957) argued that bureaucratic organisations with a strict and detailed division of labour and high differentials of power do not facilitate healthy personal and professional development. I have ventured that, for opposite reasons, the same could be argued of post-bureaucratic organisations, characterised by wide and unclear spans of control, flat and multiple hierarchies and blurred boundaries (Alvarez, 1996). There are not enough

empirical studies on this issue to make clear statements, either descriptive or prescriptive. There is, in fact, a clear division of positions about this issue. On one side there are those that see in new forms of work organisation, characterised ideally by flexible and highly skilled employees, engaged in lifelong learning, working in entrepreneurial structures, an opportunity for more organisational productivity and richer and more autonomous lives (Mirvis and Hall, 1994). On the other side, some criticise the new organisational arrangements, even for white collar and executive groups, characterising them as intensified, decentered and destabilized (Smith, 1997). Intensified, because the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional realms, as well as the demands placed on managers by high-performing organisations usually mean more work time. Decentered, given the increasing proportion of subcontracting, for which self-monitoring is essential, that is, self-administered repression. Destabilized, given that the instability and insecurity traditionally reserved to non-management groups have also reached executives.

Another input for reflecting on the psychological difficulties that action in new organisational forms could create comes from Pucik *et al.* (1995) in their study of the executive temperament and careers better suited to manage and go through change processes. The characteristics that Pucik and colleagues studied in managers were: tolerance for ambiguity, risk aversion, self-efficacy, self-esteem, affective disposition, and openness to experience. Another feature studied by Pucik *et al.* was the previous type of career of executives: linear, spiral, expert and transitory. They confirmed that, as expected, being able to cope with change facilitates personal and career adjustment. More significantly, successful coping was found to be predicted above all by three features of the managerial character: high tolerance for ambiguity, positive affectivity, and low risk aversion. Another suggestive finding, in line with my concern, was that only a minority of the managers in the sites studied by Pucik *et al.* exhibited these psychological characteristics.

This reinforces one of the insights provided by theories of action. Managerial tasks and careers are not only highly contingent on a variety of heterogeneous social forces coalescing locally. They also are dependent on individual characters. Moreover, the capabilities for enacting robust action, for being a pragmatic, efficient manager in the situations of change so widespread today, or in soft and highly politicized structures, will surely not be widely distributed in the population. In fact, as Nicholson (1998) would argue, such capabilities go against some of the features of the common genetic heritage.

In sum, managerial reality is rapidly becoming extremely varied and diverse, both objectively –tasks– and subjectively– predisposition and felt experience. Theories of action, with their situational focus and their acknowledgment of organisations as political arenas, could therefore provide a fruitful perspective for the study of the careers of managers operating in increasingly diffused weak structures. These theories assume that executives operate within highly local contexts, constrained by their firms' strategies and enabled as enactors by their own skills, especially tactical ones. Executives are oriented in their actions by their interests, basically based upon their perception of their own professional identity (see Ibarra (1996) on the generation of the managerial identity). Moreover, theories of managerial action, insofar as they recognize that the political maneuvering of actors impacts --though in non-predictable ways-- beyond local domains, on larger systems, complement and reinforce Weick's (1996) assertion that careers cannot be considered anymore as mere dependent variables.

III. Concluding Reflections

I have agreed with a number of colleagues that the adoption of practices of organising based upon weak structures are leading to high levels of differentiation in executives' tasks and, as a consequence, in careers. I believe that these practices make the hypothesis of theories of action presented in this paper especially timely.

Moreover, the convergence of academic trends that call for further development of a theory of managerial action is remarkable. Among them the growing acknowledgment within organisational theory, mostly by neo-institutionalists, of the need for new assumptions on actors' orientation to action, less determined by culture, more open to tactical autonomy, more capable of enactment, to use Weick's expression. This drive is compounded by renewed efforts to develop a theory of action in mainstream sociology that could centre perspectives too polarised either towards the structure or towards the agency poles.

I have also detailed in the previous pages several sets of behaviours that a group of authors have presented as capturing the essence of managerial action. These inventories show obvious and significant similarities around a political understanding of management tasks. This political analogy has been labeled, by authors like Eccles and Nohria (1994), as "pragmatist", because of its alignment with contemporary developments in social and political philosophy.

A theory of action does not imply radically alternative ways for conceptualising professional trajectories, but may complement or reinforce some of the perspectives already in place, or may contribute to direct extant frameworks to evocative and critical areas in the domain of executive careers.

An example of these potential contributions is the reinforcement that theories of action could provide to Ghoshal and Barlett's (1997) rejection of what they call the Russian Doll Syndrome (the assumption that performing well in a managerial position is the best predictor of success in a hierarchically superior assignment). Ghoshal and Barlett argue against the supposition that managerial positions are essentially similar, and against the view that there is something like a generalist career for top managers, coinciding in this with Kotter's tenets as early as 1982. Managerial work is becoming very diversified and fragmented (Leicht and Fennell, 1997). Diversified because one of the characteristics of new organisational forms is that they are plural, more heterogeneous than the old dominant model. Organisational models are going to proliferate, and with them, templates for structures, combinations of organisational tasks and types of managerial careers. And fragmented because even in single organisations, as Ghoshal and Barlett describe, managerial roles are going to be very differentiated, implying again different tasks, behaviours, orientations, and careers and, consequently, very difficult work transitions. This argument by Ghoshal and Barlett is very coherent with what theories of action would have to say of managerial work.

The diversification and fragmentation of managerial work pose difficult challenges, both theoretical and methodological. In a way, the very object of the field of managerial careers is losing stability, homogeneity and substance. I propose that the tenets of theories of action, of the "localisation" and idiosyncrasy of managerial tasks, converge on the need for modifying the basic image of the notion of careers. An analogy of careers as predictable trajectories along an upward path of hierarchical positions, essentially equivalent, universal and therefore comparable across organisations, is increasingly unable to capture the essentials of today's managerial experience. However, this established image still is the underlying hypothesis of a good deal of existing research on careers: structures determine tasks and positions, and the sequence of these determine careers. Theories of action would agree that new managerial

careers could perhaps be better grasped by a more blurred, impressionistic, and subjective basic analogy: a succession of work experiences, only loosely related to an organisational architecture, that cannot be easily plotted along a line of hierarchical advancement. Probably, the criteria for the assessment of these experiences, and of the professional identity they provide, is no longer singular and objective, a measure of their vertical location in an organisational architecture. Instead, a combination of a plurality of measures, individual, social and professional, could be needed. Even more relevant, and difficult to grasp academically, these measures are no longer external, but internal or subjective.

Considering the suitability of the modification in the basic images behind academic work on managerial professions leads, logically, to a second reflection, stimulated by an action perspective. The heterogeneity of professional trajectories demands special academic work. If it is true that there is an accelerated process of diffusion of new realities in top management careers, that this change is one of substance, the research methodologies to be employed should be appropriate for that stage of the phenomenon.

In-depth case studies have traditionally been recommended for the first stages of exploration of an uncharted subject, or for a topic subject to substantial changes. It could be said that, to an important degree, managerial careers constitute today a qualitatively distinct phenomenon and that, therefore, they warrant qualitative methodologies, such as ethnographies, and then grounded theories, and the like, which would provide rich, "thick" descriptions of the phenomenon, and the new primordial constructs for looking conceptually at it, new basic hypotheses of interplay among variables, etc.

Although qualitative research in the field of careers is not novel, there are two more factors that invite a more widespread use of what are generally called ideographic research approaches. First, because the architecture of organisations is no longer, as stated, the dominant dimension in ordering the professional experience; field methodologies, which are more apt to capture local and idiosyncratic combinations of variables, and labile social settings, seem better fitted than quantitative methods. A second reason lies in the basic research hypothesis. Theories of action allow us to conceive of managers as being more autonomous, that is, not merely the occupants of pre-established domains, but significant molders, through their actions, of their own tasks and positions in the structure, and, through these, of their organisations. In order to capture the decision-making processes of these managers, their subjective strategies and orientation to action, ethnographic methodological strategies are very well suited.

There could also be another suggestive new methodological development in the field of careers linked to an action perspective. Breiger (1995), in a review of research on social structures and their effects on inequality and individual opportunities--what has been called the sociology of the life course--describes how this field is drifting increasingly away from all too encompassing and abstract variables such as class, status, structures, and the like, that is, away from basic general characterisations of the social system. Breiger argues that better explanations of the trajectories of individuals who are within the system, and of their socio-economic attainments, lie in specific social junctures, the most influential of which are firms and work settings. Social or organisational opportunities are viewed as embedded in local intersections of networks of personal, social, organisational and institutional relations. Concern is also being directed by this emerging perspective to the subjective views of the individuals, to whom the capability to act purposively and pragmatically, and to make tactical use of the available resources, is assigned. While the traditional approach is usually labeled "structuralist," the second, because of the attention to the strategies and subjective positioning towards action of the actors, has been called "phenomenologist."

On the topic of careers, there are two interesting points in these developments in the sociology of the life course. First is the acknowledgment that socio-economic attainment is derived from specific positions at the firm and organisational level that, in turn, are structured "far less along the lines of routine promotion and more around circles of affiliated networks" (Breiger, 1995). Due to the extent that these circles of mutual acquaintance, obligation and information channeling are idiosyncratic and local, this perspective fits the diversification of tasks, actions and careers that has been repeatedly noted in this paper. Second, due to the extent that careers are intertwined with personal and social variables because of the mentioned social embedding, the field of careers should overlap to an important degree with the field of the life course. Unfortunately, a quick examination of the domain of the sociology of life course rapidly reveals a lack of research on executives.

Not only, then, is there an opportunity for cross-fertilisation of the fields of careers and life course, in terms of lack of attention to a social group –managers–, but also careers are becoming more a life course matter, that is, their study needs to include personal and social variables, such as networks of friendship and acquaintances, and not limit itself to strictly professional variables, such as intellectual capital. This is why research on social capital is coming increasingly into vogue.

In sum, in this paper I have tried to contribute to an approach to the field of careers from the viewpoint of a scholar educated in macro theories. I have proposed that theories of action could bring to the field if not new approaches, at least the confirmation that new concerns, realities and understandings, already noted by colleagues who are experts in careers, are also shared from other academic quarters. □

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