Understanding the impact of contextual influences on Indian MBA careers:

An exploratory, qualitative study

ABSTRACT

A highly competitive global business environment, together with advancements in technology, diversity in family structures and changing demography are shaping contemporary careers (Greenhaus and Kossek, 2014). Consequently, research on career studies has evolved from its focus on lifelong careers with a single organization (Schein, 1978) to more boundaryless (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and protean career (Hall, 2004) perspectives that emphasize mobility and individual agency. However, these approaches have been critiqued for assuming an overoptimistic (Forrier et al., 2009) and deterministic view of careers (Akkermans et al., 2018) where individuals have complete agency and things eventually always work out (Baruch and Vardi, 2016). Global career studies have also been critiqued for having a W.E.I.R.D. (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) perspective (Mayrhofer et al., 2016).

Scholars have, therefore, suggested that it is important to refocus on the context in which careers unfold (Inkson et al., 2012; Lawrence, 2011; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). The Indian context, with its sociocultural norms, growing economy, large population and young demography, offers a distinct setting to examine the role of contextual influences on an individual's career. My thesis explores two research questions:

Q1 - What are the career shocks, and how do they impact career development of Indian MBAs?

Q2 - How did economic structural changes impact career development of Indian MBAs?

A career shock is defined as a distinct and impactful event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control, and that triggers deliberation about potential career transitions (Akkermans et al., 2018; Kraimer et al., 2019). By focusing on events that are, at least partially, outside the focal individual's control, career shocks heighten the role of context. Structural changes initiated in the Indian economy in the early 1990s are likely to have shaped the structure of opportunities available to Indians and its impact on their notions of career success.

Given the paucity of qualitative research on career development in the Indian setting, an exploratory approach without any pre-set frames was deemed suitable (Kindsiko and Baruch, 2019; McMahon et al., 2012). An inductive, qualitative research design was employed to examine the career experiences of forty-one Indian MBAs. To capture a variety of career shocks across the lifespan and the impact of the changing economic context, the sampling strategy ensured participants from both genders, and across a diverse age range. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The themes pertaining to the first research question outline eight career shock themes, four of which originated from the family domain. These themes were categorized in terms of the types of transitions that they are most associated with. Examination outcomes emerged as a new type of career shock relevant to the Indian context. We also showcase how different career shocks are likely to be salient at different career stages. Finally, prevailing socio-cultural norms introduced gender-based differences.

The themes pertaining to the second research question illustrated the impact of structural economic changes on notions of career success among Indian MBA graduates. The dimensions of career success deemed meaningful by the different age cohorts were different. The older cohort moved to non-corporate organizations in a bid to give back to society. While some in the younger cohort searched for opportunities for achievement and upward mobility, others were more concerned about work-life balance to manage other life roles better. The differential salience led to different career choices. Learning and development emerged as a key dimension of career success relevant to both cohorts. Entrepreneurship was a new career path for MBA graduates with its own set of enablers and challenges.

The thesis contributes to a more contextual, cultural, and international understanding of careers. Specifically, the value of career shocks to emphasize specific structural factors that influence career development processes in the Indian context was highlighted. Indian MBAs' perceptions of the changes to the broader structure of opportunities available to them and the trade-offs involved in managing one's career were showcased. The research identifies implications for individuals, organizations and educational institutions. Employees and managers could gain from communicating more explicitly at the workplace as well as evaluating opportunities more holistically. We highlight the need for multinational corporations to customize their organizational systems and processes for the Indian context. Finally, as management schools are being considered as safe spaces for experimentation for one's professional identity (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010), I delineate how educational institutions can help their students to cope with the challenges of career management. I finally conclude with the limitations of the study and avenues for future research.

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