

[Research Note]

Guiding Individual Career Planning Through the Medium of *Manga*

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Abstract

This article offers insights into an ongoing research project—a joint endeavour by researchers at KGU's *Institute of Business and Accounting* and Kobe University's *Graduate School of Business Administration*. The field of interest is human resource management and development. The research focus is on processes of individual career planning. It explores questions about how mid-career professionals in Japan envisage the current state of their career. It examines questions and potential answers to questions about how these individuals might further plan and advance their respective careers.

The approach adopted towards addressing these questions is novel. For, as stated in the title of our article, we explore the extent to which individuals might find guidance towards visualizing and planning the advancement of a career through the medium of *manga*. The research reported in this article draws on learning theory in order to propose and prepare for practical techniques relevant to individual career planning drawing on the potential of *o-shigoto* (i. e., work-based) *manga* as a medium with and through which mid-career professionals might draw guidance and inspiration.

The article offers insights into an ongoing research and education project. After establishing a theoretical and conceptual foundation, it presents, describes and justifies a series of exercises that the authors as co-researchers are preparing to test empirically in contexts for professional career development and higher education in Japan. Readers of this article are invited to offer feedback on our approach to guiding individual career planning and development and, if interested, participate in our endeavour¹⁾.

Keywords: Career; career planning; learning theory; *manga*; storyboarding; visualization

I Introduction

The on-going Covid-19 global pandemic has had a disruptive effect in many areas of social, economic political and moral life. For example, ever more complex perceptions of uncertainty and calculations of risk have prompted employers and employees to re-assess their work-based relationships. Indeed, there have been frequent references to an impending 'great resignation' as employees question their loyalty to employers who (they sense) have under-rewarded their commitment and their efforts during the pandemic. The disruptive experience of the pandemic has, we believe, caused many mid-career professionals along with undergraduate students as career starters in Japan to ask critical questions about what they individually aspire to achieve and to become as they, individually, imagine future career opportunities and the obstacles they perceive towards the achievement of these.

In Japan, it is commonly observed how women who have achieved what might be perceived as a 'mid-career stage' of development and (for example) a 'middle management' level of responsibility might question more acutely how the next phases of their career might evolve. Our proposal is that these individuals could engage in planning their career in a more structured and, perhaps, a more individually imagined and tailored manner: i. e., take more individual responsibility and initiative regarding what they might become and achieve professionally.

As a novel contribution to career planning research and practice, we propose that these individuals might be guided towards drawing on established concepts and techniques from career coaching and mentoring practice and re-apply these through the medium of *manga*.

II Literature review

In this section we define and illustrate the key words and concepts that appear in the title and in the list of 'Keywords' guiding the structure and narrative direction of our article. Simultaneously, the concepts and theories highlighted in this review inform the practical techniques we present towards later in the article.

1 Career

In 1959, the MGM film studio in Hollywood released *Ben-Hur*, by design an 'epic' and 'star-studded' movie that set a pattern for blockbuster productions that continues to this day. The

height of action in the movie is a chariot race that remains vivid and memorable even today for its intensity²⁾.

It is relevant to invoke this film and the images that have become iconic in the visual arts industry about its storyline: it is immediately relevant to our discussion in this article. For, the modern English word 'career' derives from a Latin term that denotes a 'road or racetrack for vehicles'. Thus, in Roman times, and for Ben-Hur to regain his social status and individual sense of dignity and freedom, he was challenged to win a chariot race that was both biased against him and spectacularly dramatic. He was challenged to compete and win along a *career*.

Specific to social-economic contexts for career research and theory development Arthur et al (1999) define 'career' as 'the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time'. They adopt an approach that distinguishes between 'objective' and 'subjective' interpretations of these work experiences over time. In short, an individual's 'objective' interpretation and assessment of a career will emphasize given, external or institutional definitions and assessments of career; in dualistic contrast, a 'subjective career' is one where individuals assess the extent to which 'their' career is shaped by independent efforts, self-designed **plans** and time-specific objectives and measures of career 'success' (Schein, 1971; Hall, 2002; Arthur, et. al., 2005; Thomas et. al, 2005).

In general terms, the on-line Cambridge English Dictionary³⁾ defines a 'career path' as 'the way that [an individual] might progress in work, either in one job or in a series of jobs'. Objectified from a human resource management (HRM) perspective, individual 'career paths' might be 'mapped out' – literally, *drawn up*: for example, through processes of 'job description' that identify, list and specify the levels or 'bands' of skills and competences that each employee is expected to aim for and, assuming an 'upwards' trajectory, achieve in order that a manager or supervisor might assess an individual's career to be 'progressing', or faltering (Armstrong, 2006; Rowley and Poon, 2011). In professional fields of career coaching and mentoring, clients can be guided towards 'visualizing' an individual 'career path' as a lifetime series of achievement objectives and/or a career pathway that should offer individuals self-selected signposts towards entering jobs that – in the longer term – should serve to progress a 'career' (Cox et al, 2014). To illustrate, individuals who elect to study for a PhD degree in social sciences might commonly be assumed to have chosen a career path that leads towards becoming employed as and achieving the professional status of a university researcher or teacher (Tomlinson, 2004; Jackson, 2017).

On this basis, it is possible to conceptualise a ‘career path’ as a perceptibly linear and progressive vector through times and spaces (contexts) specifically focusing on work, employment and other areas of individual social-economic activity. In Japan, there appears to be an enduring social-cultural expectation that linear and progressive ‘career paths’ made available to women will differ from those paths generally made available to men – an expectation that continues to shape the perceptions of women who are both ‘mapping’ and experiencing the resources of ‘time and space’ that serve to describe and distinguish an individual’s experienced, expected or ‘hoped for’ career path (cf. Kurihara, 2009).

Correspondingly, variables that impact on how individuals might imagine and (as an ongoing process) perceive their ‘career path’ include: gender, age, educational background and level of achievement, physical and psychological disabilities. Focusing, for example, on the initial steps or *stages* along an individual career path, combinations of such variables might – from a social research perspective – serve (objectively) to define an individual’s ‘appearance’ in society and, subjectively, influence how these individuals might assess their own chances or opportunities of ‘progress’ through processes of self-perception and self-identification (Giddens, 1991). Across societies, such disabilities can be observed to ‘intersect’ and thereby compound and further influence how individuals might perceive, expect and subsequently experience distances between the career path they hope for or ‘dream of’ (Kato and Suzuki, 2006) and the career paths they perceive as being realistically open to them from the beginning of their journey along a designated career path – or, *racetrack*?

Modern conceptualizations of an individual ‘career’ and ‘career path’ thus continue to invoke notions of candidates entering a competitive, forward-moving and perhaps accelerating race over the course of which they find themselves in pursuit of ‘prizes’ that include a ‘career’ which society might attribute enhanced social status and economic reward along (perhaps) with a supplementary prize that offers career-seeking individuals the opportunity to achieve an emergent sense of personal and professional self-fulfilment (Maslow, 1954) and, when assessed retrospectively, a sense of having enjoyed career *success*.

2 Career planning

Adopting a human resource management practitioner perspective, Armstrong (2006: 404) defines ‘career planning’ as follows:

- Career planning uses all the information provided by the organization’s assessments of requirements, the assessments of performance, and potential and management succession

plans, and translates it into the form of individual career development programmes and general arrangements for management development, career counselling and mentoring.

Developing an individual employee perspective, Poon and Rowley (2011: 13) highlight activities that employees can invest in towards developing an individual career plan:

- Self-assess abilities, interests and values
- Analyse career options and decide on development objectives
- Communicate development preferences to managers
- Map out mutually agreeable action plans with managers
- Pursue agreed-on action plans

Results from our initial research into using *manga* to guide and support the career planning efforts of individual mid-career professionals suggest that one notable gain might appear in the individual's efforts to *self-assess abilities, interests and values*: i. e., the first of activities listed above. However, we should remember that the activities highlighted by Poon and Rowley overlap with each other and their effect becomes cumulative as part of a structured career planning process. To illustrate, the 'if I were you' visualization exercises we present later in this article can be expected to influence processes and decisions as mid-career professionals 'analyse their individual career options' and 'decide on individual career development objectives' when seeking guidance from a line-manager, career coach or mentor and /or as an individual self-guided endeavour.

Accordingly, with further research and application of our approach, we might expect that this potential for positive impact on the individual career planning might accrue especially to individuals who choose to work with *manga* as a *self-help learning resource*.

Planning a career; or, planning for *careers*?

To date, sociological and psychological approaches in career research and theory development have tended to emphasize (linguistically) codified and (conceptually) commodified conceptualizations of 'career': e. g., evident in theoretical frameworks that claim to identify discrete and distinct 'anchors', 'stages' or 'steps' (and so on) of individual career visualizations and planning. Overlapping research approaches emphasize processual conceptualizations of 'career' in terms such as 'initiation', 'negotiation' and 'transition' (Hooley et al, 2013; Inkson, 2007). As we illustrate later in this article, drawing on theories of human learning and career development can inform potentially effective approaches towards guiding processes of individual career planning through the medium of *manga*.

It has also been noted that there are metaphors behind these career theories and concepts (Kato, 2004, Inkson, 2004). For example, Kato (2004) points out that the career stage model, which understands careers as stages, has metaphors such as mountain climbing and stairs behind it, and that theories that capture one's identity in career, such as career anchors, have a key and keyhole metaphor. Inkson (2004) points out that there are nine metaphors in career theory. Thus, not only theories, but also in practice, we as individuals, when we perceive our careers, we perceive our careers as a story or series of stories based on some metaphor.

In this light, thinking about one's career through the medium of comics may make us more aware of the metaphors that each of us potentially possesses, and may enable us to perceive, image, and plan their own careers in a relative way.

For, and unlike comparable storylines in many *animé* products and the so-called 'Marvel' franchise storylines and characters from America, we maintain that *manga* generally – and *o-shigoto manga* especially – can be interpreted by readers as representations of real life rather than fantasy. Accordingly, *o-shigoto manga* can be used to prompt observations and visualization relevant to career planning of pathways through and across observed and experienced working life settings and thus observable examples of each individual's lived experience of *career* and/or careers: e.g., of current, past and possible future *careers*.

Emerging trends in international HRM and HRD research and practice appear to be giving more systematic attention to the impact of global technological factors such as advances in information communication technologies along with locally defined factors such as demographic shift in order to describe increasingly 'diverse' contexts for individual career development. One consequence is that research conceptualisations of 'career' are becoming more 'global' and 'fluid' in terms of the discourse and terms of reference applied.

To illustrate, Kato and Suzuki (2006) invoke references to career 'mist', 'hope' and 'drift' and thereby promote a 'conceptual framework for understanding career development in Japan'. Other researchers interpret and explore diversity in reference to 'multiple' or 'portfolio' careers, while other researchers refer to 'global' and 'boundaryless' careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Rowley and Poon, 2011). The time thus appears appropriate to examine the extent to which the current 'boundaries' that commonly define established HRM/HRD researcher and practitioner visualisations and conceptualisations of individual career development continue to resonate among today's undergraduate students in Japan and elsewhere: i.e., among millennials whose career thinking and decisions today will set the parameters for future research into individual career development.

Table 1 : Theories of human learning relevant to individual career development (selected)

Theory	Key proponents	Assumptions	Potential sources of individual learning	Example applications of learning to career planning
Social learning	Bandura, Mischel	Individuals learn from observing, imitating and rehearsing behaviours modelled by other people, commonly, people whom the individual perceives as influential or socially 'successful'.	Direct observations of other people's behaviour and / or vicarious experiences of other people's behaviour: e.g., real or fictional characters in books, films, fables and <i>manga</i>	Seeking out, interacting and self-identifying with personal and / or professional, real and / or fictional role models in society.
Thought and language	Piaget, Vygotsky	Children learn language by imitation and self-monitored rehearsal: e.g., children may be observed speaking aloud and to themselves from a book of fables. Similarly, they might alone or with others compare interpretations of still or moving images and roleplay the characters that appear in them.	Imitating and internalizing other people's use of language, including gestures and images.	'Following in family footsteps' in terms of career plans and choices.
Giftedness	Albert, Vygotsky	Individuals can be observed to behave in ways that distinguish them from the learning group and, when invoked as 'talent', from society generally.	Expressing (self-)confidence during participation in group learning and in self-directed learning.	Seek individual control over career planning and distance from the influence of social stereotype and / or career expectation. An individual career plan that reflects a distinct ' life strategy '.

Correspondingly, this current research proposes to build on established conceptualisations of 'subjective career' and – as a research theme – targets the elicitation of individual visualisations of career, thereby highlighting how pre- or early-career candidates envisage or – in terms of triangulation – 'visualise' their planned, intended or 'hoped for' career.

3 Learning theory

In methodological terms, this article has been researched with reference to established and evidence-based research in fields such as developmental psychology and, notably, learning theory as applied in fields of professional practice such as career counselling, coaching and mentoring (cf. Ladyshevsky, 2014; Jackson, 2017; Jackson and Kasai, 2022). Table 1 (below) offers readers summative insights into two theories of learning that are easily accessible and appear most relevant to the central theme of this article.

Applying learning theory in contexts for *manga* research

Referring to Table 1 (above), we can now offer brief illustrations of how two of these selected theoretical approaches has influenced our choice of research methods and practical techniques. We refer back to theories from developmental psychology of 'giftedness' in our

discussion of ‘storyboarding’ (below).

We can illustrate our engagement with **social learning** (cf. Bandura, 1977; Mischel, 1966; 1973) relevant to our theme by invoking the fables of Aesop – a social observer and storyteller in Ancient Greece. Many readers will be familiar with Aesop’s fable of ‘the hare and the tortoise’ who challenged each other to a running race. Of course, the fox might be expected to win easily – much as an individual from a privileged socio-economic background in the UK or in Japan might be expected more easily to get a job in a ‘famous’ company and thus gain a ‘flying start’ to his or her career. However, in life as in races – and careers – those with resources to more easily make a ‘flying start’ might not ultimately win the (chariot) race⁴).

It is of particular visual relevance to our theme to make reference to fables where animals talk and act like human beings, illustrating moral and personal weaknesses and potential virtues of our species. For, firstly, art and *manga* researchers in Japan commonly refer to early ‘*manga*’ style stories that involved creatures such as rabbits and toads demonstrating the contemporary social behaviours and mores of humans. Secondly, with reference to theories of social learning, we should immediately recognize that the fables of Aesop are written not only for humans in early stages of development: i. e., children. As with *manga* today, fables are designed to educate the adults whose responsibility might be to educate children in society.

Of further relevance to our theme, we can note how Albert Bandura became recognized as a leading theorist and proponent of ‘self-efficacy’ (Bandura, 1995). Self-efficacy is a competence and thus a performance or self-development objective that commonly appears in career coaching practices, where individual coachees are guided towards addressing and working with questions such as:

- What can I do? What can I do *well*? What can I improve? (*competencies*)
- How do I visualize my future career? (*encoding strategies*)
- What might become of me (professionally) if I stay in my current job or position, or working with or for my current ‘boss’? (*expectancies*)

We can illustrate and apply theories of socialization, thought (independent thinking) and language learning and communication by selecting from the vital work of two prominent development psychologists and philosophers of human thought and learning: Vygotsky (1978; 1986) and Piaget (1955). To do this we can take an example from one of Vygotsky’s observations about how children repeatedly rehearse and develop ‘inner speech’: e. g., the ‘speech’ that we can each ‘hear’ when we read *manga*.

Lev Vygotsky observed how children play fantasy games during which they create and speak aloud a narrative, to an audience or to themselves alone. For example, one toy he observed children of his time playing with was a *hobbyhorse*. A child would ride the horse, speaking to it, making noises a real-life horse might make. The hobbyhorse is not a ‘real’ horse: in the child’s play this toy is a **representation** of a real horse of the type the child might have observed in real life or through some other medium such as a film or a picture book. From a developmental psychologist’s perspective, by playing and interacting with a representation of a horse, the child can learn more about the world and about her/his place in that world⁵⁾.

Across societies, adults are commonly discouraged to ‘speak to themselves’ in public. However, learning psychologists might, under defined circumstances, readily encourage people to talk about what they observe of the world and/or of how they perceive to be their own place, status or role in the world. By ‘getting things off our chest’ with trusted friends we can – individually – regain momentum in life or, in the context of our current discussion, re-conceptualize our current career ‘pathway’ and thereby ‘re-draw’ our current career plan: or *storyline*?

We bring such research- and practice-based insights and questions to our discussion of **storyboarding** later in this article. For now, we can emphasize how the work of learning psychologists such as Jean Piaget whose 1955 work *The Language and Thought of the Child* should remind each of us that we each, individually, and as ‘adults’ now, are what we have become. And when we each come to planning a continuation of our journey through *careers*, we should make efforts to learn from where we have been travelling from while simultaneously learn from the journeys charted by others: e. g., in the stories they choose to share with us in a rich and vivid variety of media, including *manga*.

4 Visualization and representation: *If I were you.....*

A story is told that Albert Einstein first began to visualize a theory of relativity when he was commuting to work at the patent office in Berne, Switzerland. He was travelling by electric tram, and imagined how and how far travelling faster than he could walk as a pedestrian could bring him closer to achieving the speed of light.

In contexts for career coaching and mentoring, ‘**visualization**’ is a commonly applied technique. According to Parsloe and Needham (2017: 137):

- Sportsmen and women often use this technique and visualize themselves carrying out

each action in slow motion. They concentrate on mentally rehearsing each step and then grooming it until it is perfect. Whenever the action is unclear or hazy, they re-run this mental video until a perfect sequence is logged in the memory bank.

Correspondingly, another commonly applied approach using visualizing towards developing the competitive performance of individual and teams of athletes is to watch, interpret and internalize the ‘slow-motion’ performance captured in films of their main rivals. In this way, sports coaches can create a *gap* between media in order to guide the ‘mind’s eye’ of individual athletes referred to by Parsloe and Needham (above) using the medium of film (i. e., where moving and ‘frozen’) images are combined to create a linear narrative and/or multi-dimensional diagrams or models.

In our research, we attempt to encourage individuals to **visualize** and then **vocalize** their interpretations of such gaps: e. g., between the *manga* image and/or storyline and their own self image as a professional and their individual storyline of career.

One linguistic technique we use to prompt vocalization across this gap is what we (for now) call the ‘*if I were you*’ (*moshi, anata, dattara*) approach. Echoing Swan (2005: 235), the ‘were’ element in this phrase expresses, in grammatical terms specific to English language, a ‘subjunctive’: i. e., *not* a ‘past tense’. Clarifying subsequently, Swan explains how the ‘I’ in this phrase is imagining on behalf of ‘you’ an “unreal situation” or “things which are possible, desirable or imaginary” (2005: 559)⁶.

5 *Manga*

It is difficult to define *manga*, which can be broadly defined as pictures and other images juxtaposed in a deliberate continuity. Researching how human beings evolved and learned various ‘ways of seeing’, Berger (1972: 10) concludes that:

- Images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent. Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it **represented**; it then showed how something or somebody had once looked – and this by implication how the subject had once been seen by other people.

According to the online Oxford Dictionary (2022), **representation** can refer to a process of:

- Depicting or ‘making present’ something which is absent (e. g., people, places, events, or abstractions) in a different form: as in paintings, photographs, films, or language.

Combining these three definitions, we can argue that *manga* is a medium of communica-

tion that is distinguished by a style of sequentially arranging images, represents realities that are *absent*—and, perhaps, never existed—and serves to make them *present* and thereby observable by readers, individually and collectively.

Manga as a medium of social communication is characterized by its extremely high degree of freedom, in that it seeks to tap into the subtleties of life, to reveal the truth as it really is, whereas fine art painting places the highest priority on beauty (*aesthetics*). As such, the medium of *manga* includes both the meanings of ‘comic’, which mainly includes narrative *manga*, and ‘cartoon’, which mainly includes single-picture *manga*. Such *manga* can be traced historically in Japan back to the *choju-jinbutsugiga* (caricatures of birds and animals) and the *shigisan-engi*—a story about the life and death of a man and his wife⁷⁾.

(1) *o-shigoto manga*

Owing to the high degree of freedom afforded to its creators, *manga* exist as a medium for expressing a variety of things, including fantasy, daily life, sports, romance, history and mystery, and among these is so-called ‘job *manga*’—*o-shigoto manga*—the main images and storylines of which offer readers representations of work as an activity and the workplace as a context for doing and/or imagining work-related activities: i. e., the workplace as a distinct social domain.

There are two main types of *o-shigoto manga*: *manga* depicting people engaged in work, and *manga* read by people engaged in work, or preparing for work⁸⁾. Some of the former depict the stories of so-called company-employed *salarymen*, while others depict the drama of people engaged in professional occupations, such as nurses, doctors and cooks. Basically, *manga* is entertainment and is often read for the enjoyment of its stories. In recent years, however, *o-shigoto manga* are read by individuals seeking knowledge and information about the work from comics that are well researched and drawn by authors with experience in the field. For example, the *Kosaku Shima* series, which features *salarymen*, has in recent years often depicted recent business topics and news, while in *manga* about chefs and other craft-people, readers can learn about the various backyards and backstories of the everyday work of people occupied in diverse professions.

(2) *o-shigoto manga* and individual career development

A common storyline in *o-shigoto manga* sees a young protagonist who enters a job and grows through overcoming various difficulties. In many stories, through failures and experi-

ences, the protagonist gains knowledge about the job, builds relationships with the people he works with and for with the result that he – and it most often is ‘he’ – reconsiders his attitudes towards work and finds fresh meaning of their job or profession. Because they are stories, they are a little more dramatic than real life, and most protagonists grow from them. In this way, representations of a nascent individual career are presented.

One of the classic assumptions of career theory and processes of individual career development holds that knowing the challenges in each expected or predicted career stage can lead to a better career. One of these career challenges is the period immediately after entry into the professional world, known as the establishment period. This is the period of establishing one's career in that profession. New entrants to a profession have not yet developed their professional competences, they are new to the world of work, they face many work-related difficulties, and they are in the process of exploring various career paths before they become full-fledged professionals (cf. Super, 1957; Schein, 1978; Jackson, 2017).

Applying theories of human learning and development to the topic of ‘careers’ explains this period of establishment through several theoretical concepts, but the actual challenges of the period of establishment are different for each person and each profession, making it challenging for career researchers and career-seeking individuals to both *visualize* and *generalize*. By reading about the experiences of the main characters in the *manga*, it will be possible for individual readers to prepare for these challenges in a practical and meaningful manner, as well as to rehearse mentally or – as a role play – enact what one would do, how, and with which expected consequences.

(3) *o-shigoto manga* and career planning: international perspectives

One distinctive feature of our research project is to attention we give to exploring *o-shigoto manga* linked to individual career development and as international and cross-cultural phenomenon, by extension, possibility. For, as Matanle et al (2014: 476) emphasize:

- Every national political economy creates ideal representations of itself via text and image, whose transcendence depends on both the maintenance of a hegemonic system of institutions and people's willingness to substantiate their place within them. Hence, institutional norms and organizational structures are necessarily rooted in the construction of a hegemonic culture of the standard citizen and worker to which individuals are expected to conform.

On this premise, Peter Matanle and colleagues proceed to examine the representation of working women in Japanese *manga*: e. g. in terms of offering both male and female readers convincing role models in *o-shigoto manga* storylines and thus beyond common stereotypes of women workers in Japanese workplaces. Correspondingly, we have begun to create a bank of pilot studies that seek to elicit career planning expectations and experiences of mid-career women professionals: e. g. as illustrated by the pilot interviews reported below in this article.

And here we can re-connect with *Table 1* (above) and our reference to research into gift-ness that—in contexts for human resource management and development (HRM/HRD), including career coaching and mentoring, leads us to explore the perspective of individuals that might be described as ‘talented’ and thus as individuals who can be expected to bring telling insights and elements to the *manga* storylines they interpret and, as an element in their own career planning, create.

6 Storyboarding as technique towards guiding individual career planning

How, then, are *manga* constructed? Generally speaking, *manga* artists will first create a storyboard. As with filmmaking, this begins with processes of **visualization** (e. g., of characters, events, settings, etc.) and then **planning**, then drafting, then completing. As with other forms of narrative media creation, artists will seldom ‘begin at the beginning’. Rather, the beginning of the storyboard might be some sense of purpose that is derived from observations of society and/or of human (and/or animal behaviours in specified and drawn real-life or imagined settings.

In contexts for career coaching, this approach is an example of what Drake (2104: 123) describes as ‘re-storying’, whereby:

- Narrative coaches help people to discern what they are ultimately trying to accomplish with the stories they currently tell (and for whom) as the foundation for exploring new options. ‘Re-storying’ is the process of creating a new, more powerful alignment between the three pillars for development in narrative design theory—mindset, behavior and environment—in order to bring them to life.

Accordingly, it is in anticipation of the above-mentioned ‘new and more powerful alignment’ of existing *manga* stories with the stories or ‘narratives’ that mid-career professionals might be guided towards creating individual in response to our research and practical endeavours that we refer back to *Table 1* and to learning theories founded on observations of

‘gifted’ (talented) individuals. In doing this, we can begin to formulate our research questions. As our Literature Review proceeds and we continue to gather additional data via our pilot interviews (individual case studies) we can begin to assess the extent to which the individuals who agree to participate in this research might be encouraged and guided in a structured and vivid manner towards planning their respective individual careers.

III Research questions (tentative)

On this basis, and drawing on key concepts of learning theory, our tentative research questions are formulated as follows:

- Accepting that talented individuals tend to *seek control* over what or who they work with and that individuals identified as ‘gifted’ tend to create and rely on their own perceptions and interpretations of life’s challenges, when asked about their plans for future careers, to what extent might their responses appear markedly different or distinct in comparison to expected social norms?
- Accepting that talented individuals can be sociable and willingly collaborate with other people at work, to what extent can we expect to discover evidence that their plans for future careers appear designed to *distance themselves* socially: i. e., to ‘free’ themselves from distraction and (possibly) from what they perceive as the restraining influences and/or expectations of other people’s social, cultural and institutional biases?
- Accepting that talented individuals rehearse the above-mentioned aspirations towards balancing ‘control’ and ‘distance’, to what extent can we expect to evidence of individual career planning processes that appear to express a *strategy for life*?

IV Raising awareness: pilot interviews/individual case studies

In order to elicit the degree of acceptance among individuals who are making and/or contemplating decisions regarding their respective career paths, we used four sets of questions (below) to structure short pilot ‘awareness raising’ interviews with individuals who might be considered – by themselves and by others – as having arrived at a ‘mid-stage’ in their professional career development.

Consistent with the theme of our article, our primary purpose of conducting these pilot interviews was to encourage these individuals to become more vividly and immediately aware

of their current experience – and, by implication, expectations – of an individual *career*.

We asked four sets of questions, as presented in the **Appendix**. As can be seen there, the purpose of piloting our research theme was to raise awareness and (we hoped) interest among the individuals we interviewed: we wanted to ascertain that our theme appeared relevant to these mid-career professionals.

Consequently, we decided to avoid using technical concepts or theoretical terminology as (for example) is presented in the Literature Review to this article. In the interviews, we decided not to ‘push’ our *manga* theme. Rather, we invited the interviewees to respond using images and visualizations that are personal and thereby individual to themselves. The tone of the interviews was thus, by design, informal and intimate in the sense of potentially encroaching on significant events in each individual interviewee’s social life and history.

Correspondingly, we offered each interview an explicit statement of our **research ethics**, promising that their identity would not be shared and nor would any personal details emerging from the interview appear in a subsequent publication.

One outcome of each interview was an offer from our (the researcher) side to share with them the practical ‘Exercises’ that appear (below) in this article. As a form of (in field research terms) ‘psychic gratification’ we offered to give individual feedback on any of these Exercises, if requested.

Two outcomes from the piloting process that encouraged to regard our research project as ‘relevant’ to mid-career professionals also informed the design of the exercises. Firstly, the interviewees appear both willing and able to adopt observer perspectives on their own workplace behaviours and, furthermore, to engage enthusiastically in the type of ‘*if I were you*’ role play discussed above.

A second observation we made was the frequency with which interviewees made eye movements that withdrew from the time and place – and person – of the interview situation as each interviewee attempted to visualize themselves from another person’s perspective: e. g., from the perspective of work colleagues and from a visualized younger or older version of themselves. On the strength of the results generated through our piloting process we concluded that using the potential of *o-shigoto manga* images and storylines remains worthy of further theoretical and empirical investigation.

V Putting theory into practice

This section offers practical examples of how people can apply the techniques of *manga* storyboarding towards visualizing, framing, deciding and facilitating paths of **individual career planning** and development. Readers of this article are invited to try the exercises that follow and use them to raise awareness of their own individual experiences and expectations of *career*.

The Exercises are designed to be used by individuals in a self-development approach. Of course, the Exercises can also be used in settings for dyadic and group career coaching and mentoring. Overall, our intention is that the *manga* theme can become a thread in any conversation about individual career development that not only achieves the ‘critical’ and ‘reflective’ *if I were you / if you were me – created spaces* we associate with, for example, processes of professional career coaching, counselling and mentoring. We also propose that the *manga* theme generates a sense of levity, of rehearsing and discussing serious and perhaps life- and career-changing decisions and their potential outcomes in spaces that are perceived as being non-threatening, safe – and *fun*⁹⁾.

We encourage readers who do choose to work through the Exercises below to note their responses to the exercises, and use these notes towards deciding / confirming their future individual career path.

We hope that after completing all or some of the Exercises, readers will send us feedback about their experiences of working with and through them. With such feedback, we as authors / researchers can continue to refine our theoretical basis informing and underpinning the techniques illustrated in the following Exercises.

Exercise #1:

Look at the images you can find under the links listed below¹⁰⁾. For each image in turn, ask yourself and suggest answers to the following questions¹¹⁾:

- If I were in that situation, how might I feel?
- If I were a central character in the image, what would I do in response to the situation as depicted in the image?
- If I were asked to give practical career advice to a character in the image I see / the situation I perceive, what would it be, and why?

Link # 1: [ANGELICO, Fra Annunciation, 1437-46\(2236990916\) – Annunciation \(Fra Angelico, San Marco\) – Wikipedia](#)

Link #2: [41OcWuW1ZIL_BO1,204,203,200_QL40_.jpg \(177×252\) \(ssl-images-amazon.com\)](#)

Link #3: <https://depositphotos.com/181352616/stock-illustration-business-woman-character-vector-working.html>

Exercise #2:

Read the following extracts from a book written by an employee in a medium-sized Japanese company. She writes about her observations and experiences by combining roles as new employee (intern) and as ethnographic researcher. It is this dual role that prompts her to refer to her work colleagues in the extracts below as her ‘subjects’

As you read the words, successively imagine yourself as an employee / subject in the same company: i. e. in the ‘corporate setting’ referred to by the researcher. Imagine yourself observing this new employee’s appearance and behaviour on a day-to-day basis.

- I became hypercritical of my own form, movement and gestures.
- From the start [of my internship], I used my body as an effective research tool to draw out definitions of “normal” in this corporate setting. This method guaranteed that I keep my distance from workplace culture as well.
- I deliberately deviated away from the ideals of femininity of the female office worker; effectively, I made semi-concrete the differences and boundaries existing between my subjects and myself, but implicitly enough so that I could still participate and observe in their milieu.
- Eschewing the sophisticated look, I got a boyish haircut that I adorned sometimes with little butterfly clips, wore kitsch rings preferred by teenagers – and colored my nails in rouge noir.
- One subject labelled my style *mōda-kei* (wearing trendy and simple shapes in monotone) while others said, and not as a compliment, that I looked like a high school student (Kurihara, 2009: 39)

Now close your eyes and try to *visualize* (i. e., form an image of) the woman who wrote the text extracts above.

Now, imagine yourself again as a work colleague of this woman. Imagine she asked you for career advice. What practical advice would you give her, and why?

Now look at the image under the following link:

Link #4: [41QS33K2LpL_SY291_BO1,204,203,200_QL40_ML2_.jpg \(195×293\) \(ssl-images-amazon.com\)](#)¹²⁾

Now that you have seen an image of the author of the text extracts cited above, would you consider changing the career advice you imagined giving her as a work colleague? If yes, why? If no, why not?

Exercise #3:

Choose a *manga* story or one of a *manga* series that you enjoy¹³⁾.

As you read or re-read the story, *pause* at the moments that most interest you: e. g., situations that appear critical for the narrative flow of the storyline or appear critical for one of the characters in the story. At such moments, and having paused your reading, ask yourself questions such as:

- What is likely to happen next: e. g., on the following page of the *manga*?
- Why do you think this is likely to happen?
- How would you prepare to respond to what you think might happen *if you were in the position of a manga* character you are following in the story?
 - Why would you prepare to respond in this way?
 - How would you expect other characters to respond to your actions: e. g., *decisions* that you would make – or *not make* – as a character in the *manga*?

Exercise #4:

We can call the first part of this Exercise ‘visualizing Picture #0’.

Using the same *manga* story that you read and worked with during Exercise #3¹⁴⁾, try to visualize what happened *prior to* the first image in the *manga*. Imagine situations that occurred and decisions that characters in the *manga* story might have made in or before ‘Picture #0: i. e., before the story you can see and read in the *manga* begins.

Now return to the final image in the *manga* story you read and worked with for Exercise #3 and, now, Exercise #4.

- What would *you* decide to do next *if you were* in the position of one of the characters in the final image of the *manga* story you read?
 - Why would you decide to do this?
 - What do you expect would be the implications of your decision for your individual career development as the character you chose in the *manga* you read?
 - What do you expect would be the implications of your decision for your individual career development: i. e., for *the individual you are now* and *not* as the *manga* character you imagined when answering the question above?

Exercise #5:

Respond to the following questions using a combination of words, drawings or symbols of your own design.

- If a *manga* artist were to draw you as a *manga* character, what individual or particular features of yourself would you expect to see drawn?
 - How would you behave: e. g., if your place of work appeared in an *o-shigoto manga* and you as a *character* in that *manga*?
 - What clothes ('uniform') would you be wearing, and why?
 - What would be your role or responsibility in the organization giving context to the storyline of the *o-shigoto manga* you are appearing in?
 - How would other characters in the *o-shigoto manga* respond to your behaviour: e. g., the way you make decisions that impact on other people's work in the organization?

Exercise #6:

- Try to draw yourself as a character in an *o-shigoto*-type *manga*.
- Now visualize and sketch key situations in the storyline of the next few years of your *manga* character's individual career.

Note: If you're shy about your *manga* drawing skills, there is no need to show the image to anyone else. However, do please try to use this exercise as a learning and career development opportunity, using the *visualization-conceptualization-theorization / generalization cycle* we presented in the Literature Review section to this article.

Exercise #7:

- Visualize and sketch the storyline of your individual career: i. e., as the person you are, have become and intend in future to become.

VI Conclusions

This article has offered insights into an ongoing research project, where the focus is on processes of individual career planning. The contexts selected for this research include one-to-one and group career guidance offered to mid-career professionals and undergraduate students in Japan. As illustrated in this article, the results of the research presented here represent a 'work in progress': we have begun to explore in a topical and structured manner questions about how mid-career professionals and undergraduate students in Japan currently envisage the current state of their respective career paths and prospects. Through a literature review followed by an initial analysis of data from pilot interviews, this article has offered

readers examples of the type of practical methods that we intend to apply towards gathering more data from mid- and pre-career individuals, and especially from women in Japan. As a novel contribution, this article has indicated how the ongoing gathering and analysis of empirical data along with the dissemination of expected findings might contribute to attempts to guide further research into processes and practices of individual career planning through the medium of *manga*.

We thank those who have read our article. We invite their feedback on our project. Furthermore, we heartily invite their participation.

Appendix: Pilot interviews (individual case studies)

We used four sets of questions (below) to structure short pilot interviews with women who might be considered – by themselves and by others – as having arrived at a ‘mid-stage’ in their individual career development.

Set #1: Do you have a photo from your high school and/or university graduation? If yes, when did you last look at this photo / at these photos, and why?

Set #2: Do you have a photo from your first day in your current job? Do you have vivid memories of this first day? Looking at this photo and/or reflecting on your memories of your first day in your current job, how do you think your work colleagues perceived you on that day? Note: Try to recall specific examples of how your new work colleagues behaved towards you when you began working in your current position, including things they said to you.

Set #3: Imagine now that you are one of the work colleagues you met on your first day in your current job. What practical career advice would you give to your earlier professional self: i. e., the person you were on that first day in your current job?

Set #4: Imagine now that you have an opportunity to give practical career advice to the individual who appears in your high school or university graduation photos. Using phrases equivalent to the English “*If I were you...*”, what practical career advice would you give to the person you were in that photo/in those photos, and why?

Notes:

- 1) The examples we present in this article about how to draw on the potential of *o-shigoto manga* towards guiding individual career planning appear only in English language. In order to achieve wider relevance and greater impact among professionals seeking to more effectively plan their individual careers, the techniques we present and the practical examples we cite can be readily translated into Japanese language.
- 2) Readers can learn more about this film and glimpse its iconic poster at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052618/>
- 3) <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>, accessed 10th September 2022

- 4) To those readers who do not know how the race in Aesop's fable ended, we suggest you read the text – or, find a *manga* version of the fable.
- 5) Thank you for being curious enough to check this endnote! A 'hobbyhorse' is a toy that appeared during the pre-industrial age in Europe. As with toys and videogames today, a child could have and play with the version of the toy the family could afford to buy, or had the resources to make. We suggest you check on-line for what European-style hobbyhorses looked like: e.g. during the time of Lev Vygotsky's childhood in the late 1800s in what today is Belarus.
- 6) It's possible that some readers of this article have been taught in classes about English grammar that the 'were' in this type of phrase uses a 'past tense' form of the verb 'to be'. This is conceptually and thus grammatically incorrect. The 'were' in phrases such as '**If I were you ...**' or '**If you were me**' refer not to a time but to a place of possibility that might be visualized using the 'mind's eye' referred to earlier in this section. The distinction appears more precisely in language such as German, where 'Ich war ...' means (in English, 'I was') and 'Ich wäre ...' – the subjunctive form: e.g., 'Wenn ich an Ihrer Stelle wäre' = 'If I were in your position, ...'.
- 7) Placing *kanji* for *manga* (漫画) next to those for 'film' or 'movie' (映画) illustrates the salience of image and visuality. It is believed that the great *ukiyo-e* artist Hokusai was the first to use the term *manga* to describe a 'spontaneous' or 'freestyle' sketch. As readers are aware, versions of Hokusai's *Great Wave off Kanazawa* remain iconic in that that people worldwide associate this image with 'Japan' and 'Japanese'.
- 8) Co-author Jackson's first encounter with *o-shigoto manga* was in Germany, where he was working with a company that provided pre-training for Japanese managers preparing for expatriate ('expat') assignments in German-speaking countries in Europe. The 'speech bubbles' of the main characters expressed interactions between European and Japanese office and factory workers using mixtures of German and Japanese languages.
- 9) Readers of this article might have visited the excellent *International Manga Museum* in Kyoto. This welcoming space of artistic achievement, scholarly research, cross-generational learning and 'fun for all' inspired in part the Exercises we designed for this article.
- 10) The three images selected for illustration in Exercise #1 are: i) an image of the *Annunciation* (1440–1445) by Fra Angelico, a painter from the Early Renaissance period in Italy; ii) an image from the *manga* series **Salary Man Kintaro** (サラリーマン金太郎) drawn (1994–2002) by Hiroshi Motomiya; iii) a 'royalty-free' *manga*-style image (vector) from France of a '**business woman**' who runs a start-up IT company. The copyright of the image is held by ©pikepicture and is distributed online by depositphotos.com.
- 11) The three images selected for reference here are for illustration only. As we demonstrate with the interviews (see **Appendix**), readers are free to select their own preferred images. For the purpose of this initial Exercise, we recommend that readers choose images of similar styles and themes the ones we present in Exercise #1. We also recommend that readers apply the same questions to their selected images as proposed here in Exercise #1.
- 12) The image is a cover picture from the book entitled *Japanese Corporate Transition in Time and*

Space, written (2009) by Kurihara Tomoko. The book draws on Kurihara's ethnographic research while working as an intern at a medium-sized Japanese organization located in Osaka. Her research led to the award of a PhD at a prestigious university in the UK.

- 13) Consistent with the theme of our article, we suggest you choose a *manga* of the *o-shigoto* type. However, the procedures and (we hope) awareness raising effects described in Exercises #3 and #4 can be achieved using any *manga* storyline or type.
- 14) Consistent with the central theme of this article, we recommend that the *manga* you use for Exercise #4 followed by Exercise #5 is an *o-shigoto*-type *manga*.

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