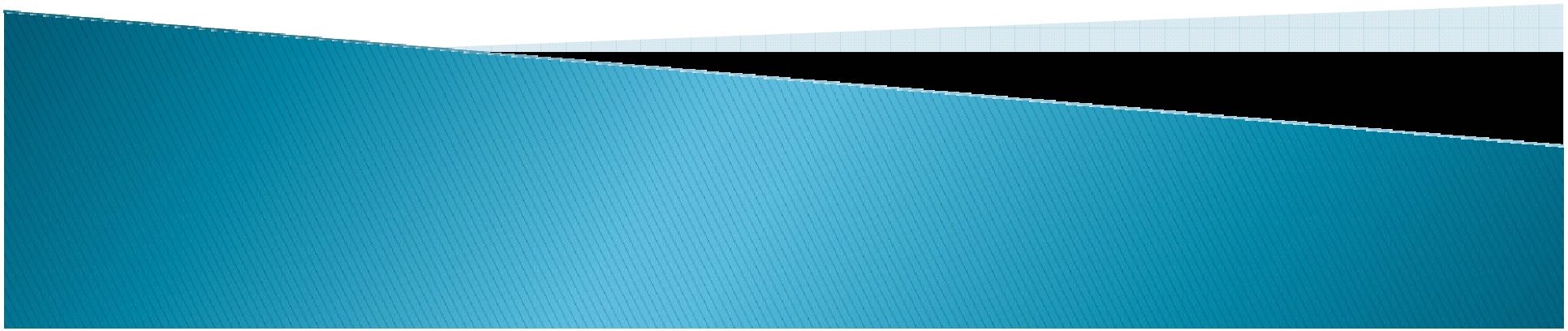
Career Success: A multiperspective approach

Hugh Gunz, University of Toronto
Wolfgang Mayrhofer, WU, Vienna



The Background

Career success: the problem

- "Career success":
  - at first sight, seems to be about the state of an individual
  - has strong evaluative component:
    - how well people seem to others to have done in their careers (objective success)
    - how they feel about how well they have done in their careers (subjective success).

Examples: objective career success

(Nicholson & De Waal-Andrews, 2005)

- Status and rank (hierarchical position)
- Material success (wealth, property, earning capacity)
- Social reputation and regard, prestige, influence
- Knowledge and skills
- Friendships, network connections
- Health and well-being.

Examples: subjective career success (Nicholson & De Waal-Andrews, 2005)

- Pride in achievement
- Intrinsic job satisfaction
- Self-worth
- Commitment to work role or institution
- Fulfilling relationships, moral satisfaction.

The state problem

- So where's the "career" in "career success"?
  - Subjective career satisfaction hard to distinguish from job satisfaction (Heslin, 2005)
  - Objective career success measures often hard to distinguish from straightforward measures of, e.g., salary, promotion
- In other words, what *is* career success?.

The state problem (cont'd)

- Consider typical items like
  - I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career
  - I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals (Greenhaus et al. 1990)
- Answers depend on
  - what "career" or "career goal" means to the respondent
  - whether respondent can distinguish between
    - his/her current situation
    - his/her career.

…so we have two problems with career success

- Problem 1: How do we know we're dealing with a career thing?
- Problem 2: What do we mean by "career" anyway?.

“The term career suffers from surplus meaning” (Hall, 1976)

- 1. Pattern of roles/offices examined over time (the “objective” career) (London and Stumpf, 1982)
- 2. Pattern of roles/offices, and the subjective experience of the individual, examined over time (“objective” and “subjective” career)
  - “the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time” (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989).

Surplus meaning (cont'd)

- 3. Career as retrospective sense-making (Nicholson and West, 1989)
- 4. Career as that which connects levels of analysis (Schein, 1980)
- 5. Career as product rather than process (Bird, 1996)
- 6. Career as movement through space—time (Collin, 2006)
- ...and that's just careers scholars.

Why is it a muddle?

- Career studies has its roots in many different disciplines (Moore, Gunz and Hall, 2007):
  - sociology
  - developmental psychology
  - vocational psychology
- and now can be found in pretty much every branch of the social sciences
- Everyone has their own view of what it is
- which is where our attempts to define the field come in.

Social Chronology Theorizing (SCrT)

Proposition: career is about the application of three perspectives

- Our suggestion: career involves the simultaneous application of three perspectives:
  - conditionary: everything we know about the condition of

What is a perspective?

- Perspectives:
  - organize reality by focussing on a relevant meta-issue or core construct
  - provide a core scheme (Leitdifferenz = “leading difference”) related to the meta-issue
  - generate meaning by applying the core scheme to the unstructured data “out there”
- e.g. a financial perspective
  - focusses on economic value as the core construct
  - provides money as the index of leading difference (attaching monetary values to things)
  - generates meaning by applying the metric of money to society.

Combining perspectives

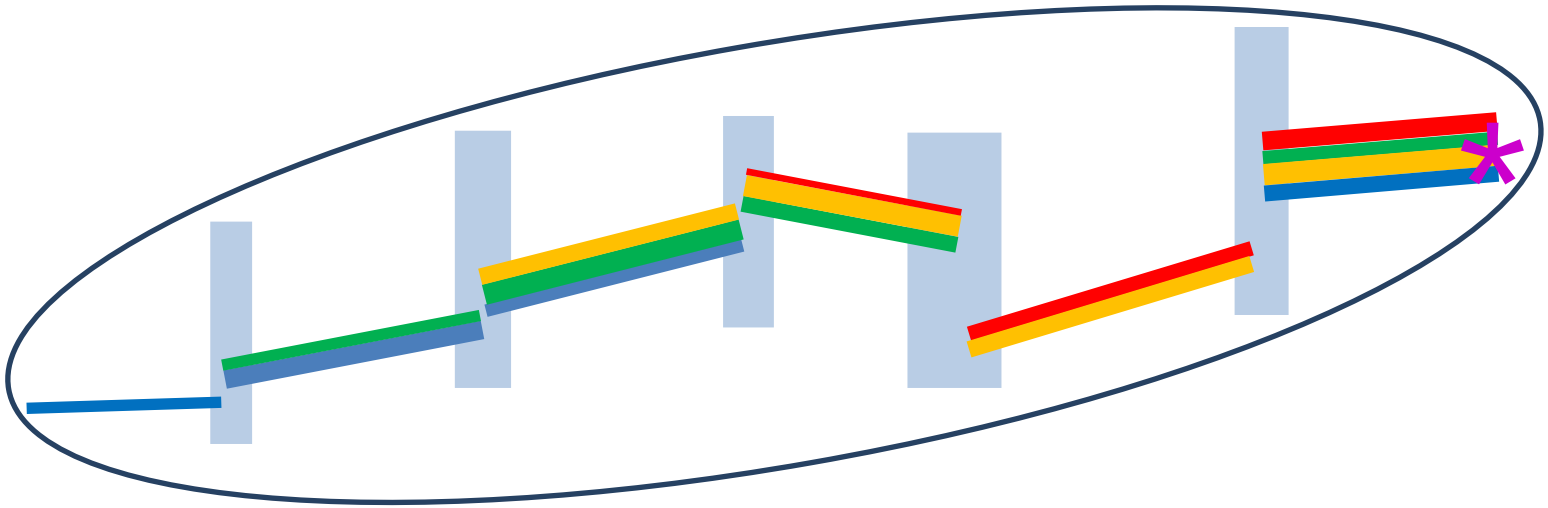
- Perspectives (one core construct) are selective in what they show
- so applying more than one perspective should provide a richer view of “reality” (Morgan, 1986; Bolman and Deal, 2003).

The perspectives

Perspective	Core construct	Core operation	*Leitdifferenz*
Conditionary	Condition	Comparison	ego—alter
Boundative	Boundary	Mapping	in—out
Temporal	Time	Chronologizing	precedes—follows

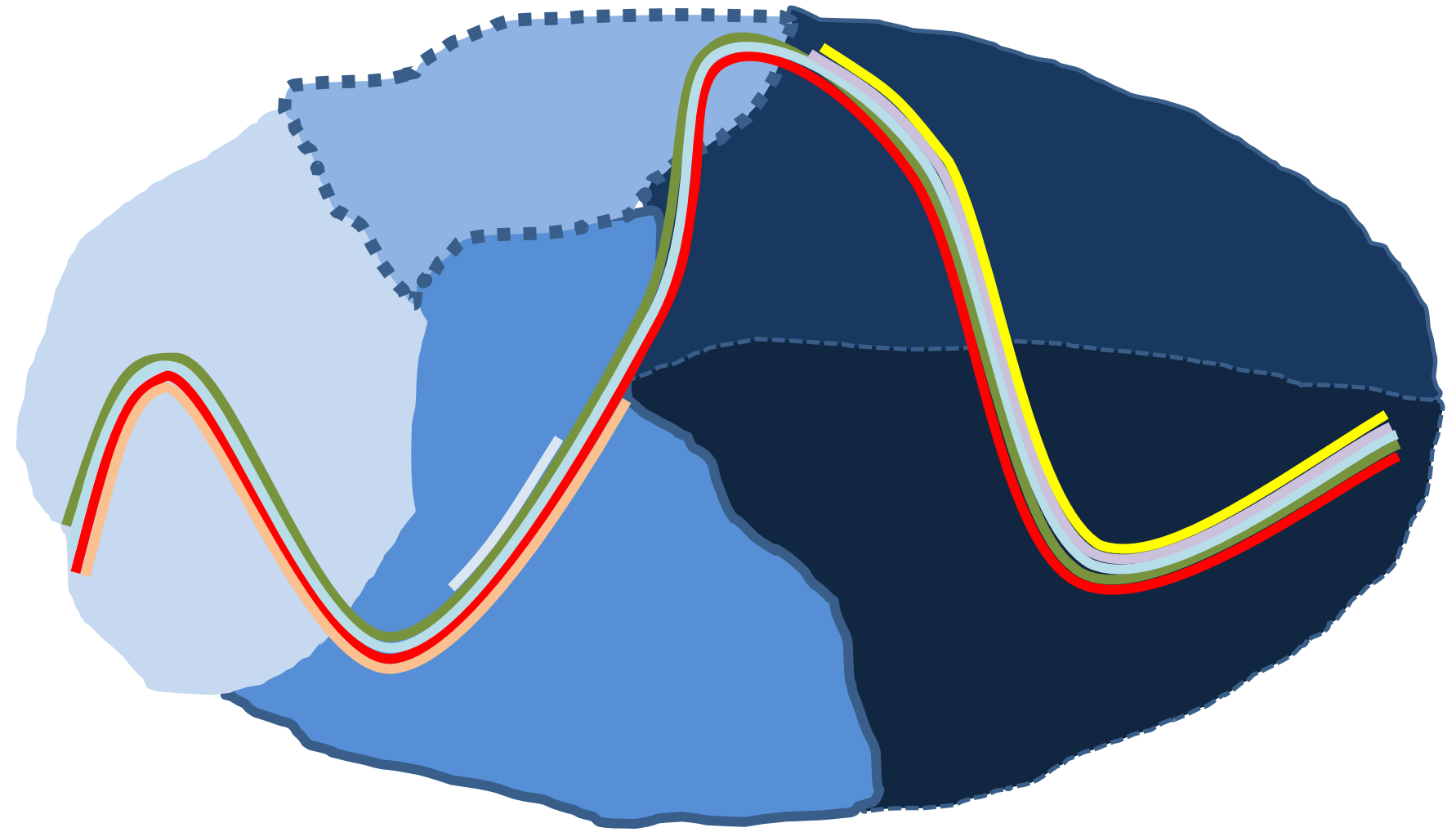
Taken together, the three perspectives define a space for mapping a career

- Over the course of a life, an individual's condition changes as they cross many boundaries
- This pattern
  - defines the person's career
  - differentiates it from those of others.



Now

Time


Time

Consequences for conceptualizing career success

Recapitulation: objective and subjective career success

- Status and rank (hierarchical position)
- Material success (wealth, property, earning capacity)
- Social reputation and regard, prestige, influence
- Knowledge and skills
- Friendships, network connections
- Health and well-being
- Pride in achievement
- Intrinsic job satisfaction
- Self-worth
- Commitment to work role or institution
- Fulfilling relationships, moral satisfaction.

Recapitulation: the state problem

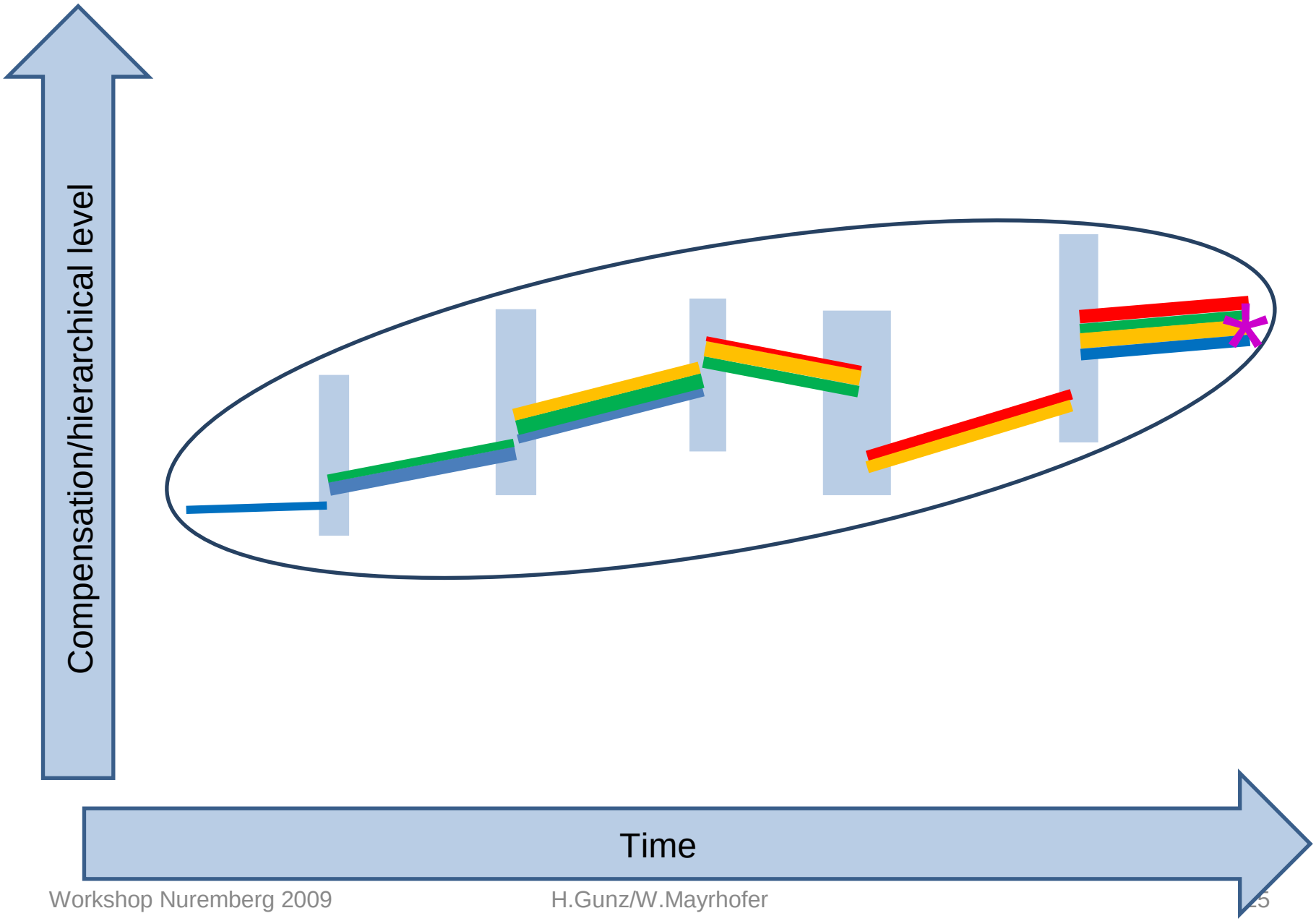
- These suggest that career success is about condition
- e.g. two people earning €300K – are they equally "successful"?
  - obviously, we need to know more than just this
    - e.g. intergenerational mobility
  - otherwise, might be making spurious comparisons
- Is that all there is to it?.

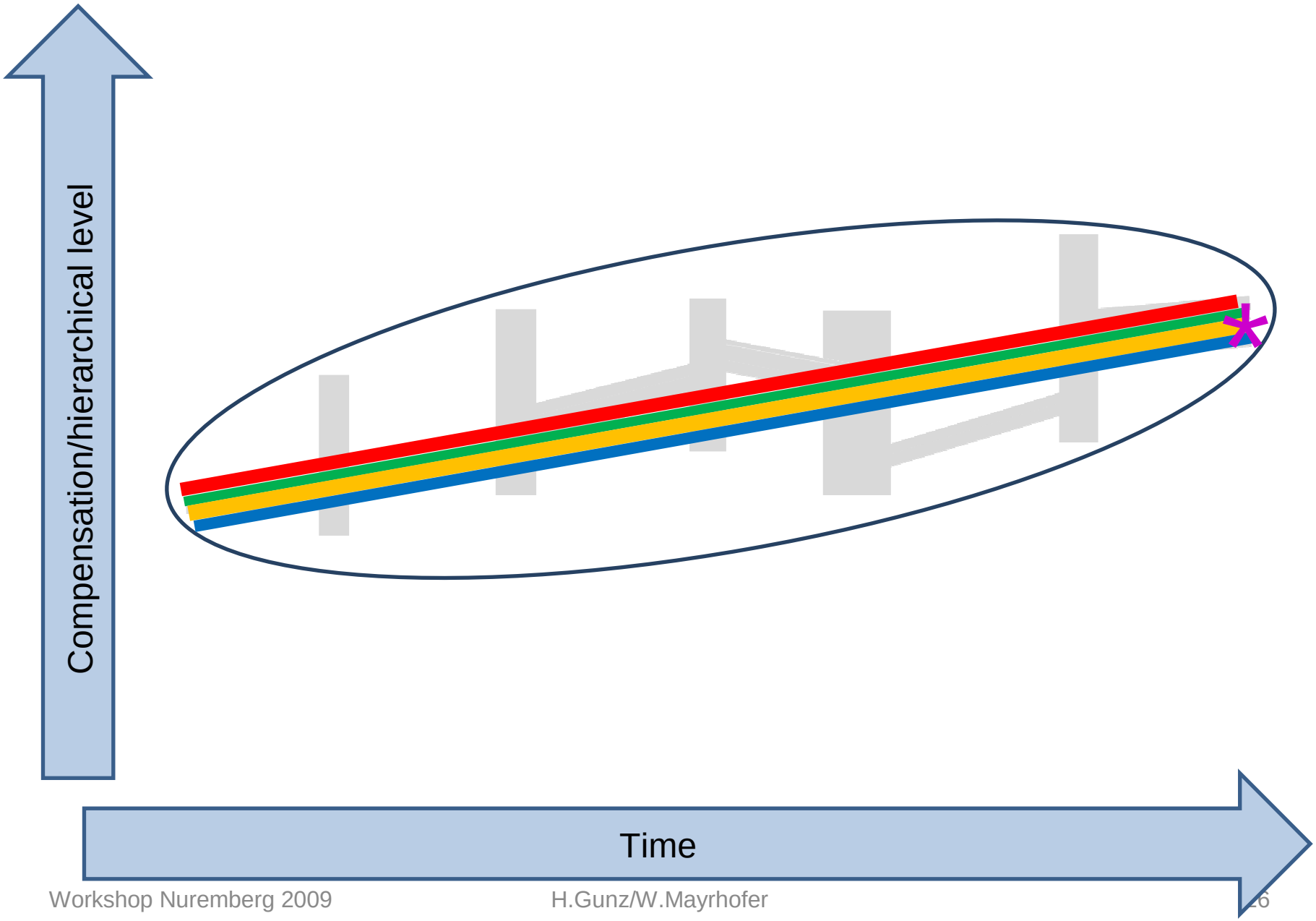
SCrT view of subjective career success

- Key concept: narrative, i.e. a process of creating subjective meaning
  - A pattern over time, having a 'Gestalt'-like quality
  - Building block: Subjective *perceptions* about what happened when looking back and *assumptions* about the future.

SCrT view of objective career success

- Key concept: pattern analysis
  - analysis of the pattern formed by an objective indicator over time.


Compensation/hierarchical level
Time


Compensation/hierarchical level
Time

Common building blocks for both objective and subjective analyses

- Potentially multi-layered pattern of conditions
- Pattern of boundary crossings
- Configuration of segments of the bounded social space
- Development over time.

Reflections on SCrT view

- Importance of sequence (temporal aspect)
  - e.g. are these the same? does it matter?
    - bad experience—good experience—good experience
    - good experience—bad experience—good experience
  - Same building blocks, but different sequence makes a difference
- Importance of configuration (conditionary aspect)
  - One dimension of a condition can mean very different things, depending on the state of other dimensions
  - Single measures are highly selective and hard to interpret.

Reflections on SCrT view cont'd

- Importance of boundedness (boundative aspect)
  - Relating career success to the structured social space requires
    - Theoretical framework(s) for (re)constructing the social space
    - Operationalizations for measuring core aspects of the social space
- Which theoretical frameworks?
- Operationalizations
  - Number and type of boundaries?
  - Number and type of actors?
  - Kind of relationships between actors (e.g. cooperative, antagonistic, neutral)?
  - Density of (career related) rules?
  - relationships between different segments of the social space (e.g. building on each other; neutral; opposing)
  - Etc.?

as a bonus... does SCrT unite objective and subjective success?

- Condition encompasses both subjective and objective descriptors
- So, supposing we start with an *objective* view of career:
  - the richer the contextualization of someone's career success, the more one gets drawn into a picture that includes *subjective* concepts
  - and vice versa
- So is the subjective/objective distinction relevant only to single-index criteria of success?.

Conclusions

To return to our point of departure…

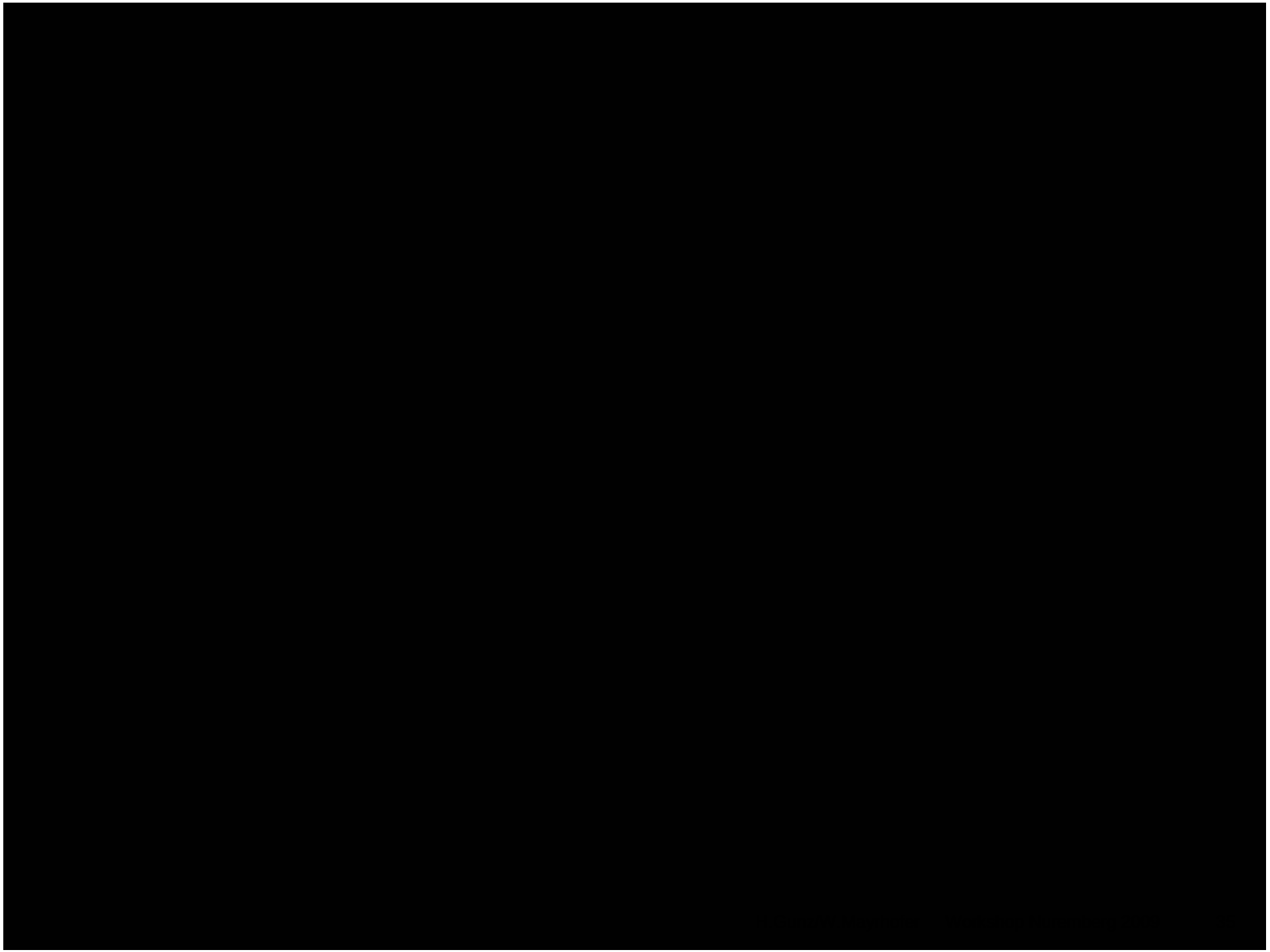
- Attempts to measure career success
  - using single indices (even if they're composites of several measures)
  - based on state of the individual at one or a few points in time
- are potentially misleading, because
  - it's hard to know whether you're looking at state or career
  - everyone has their own idea of what "career" is.

Social Chronology Theorizing calls for …

- Contextualization: conceptualizing and measuring career success depends on understanding
  - structure of the social space within which careers unfold
  - complexity of condition
  - as both change over time
- Examining
  - narrative
  - pattern.

This isn't easy!

- Obviously, one has to make choices – apply filters
- But if we don't, we risk
  - construct invalidity
  - spurious comparisons
  - …in other words, failing with success.



“The term career suffers from surplus meaning” (Hall, 1976)

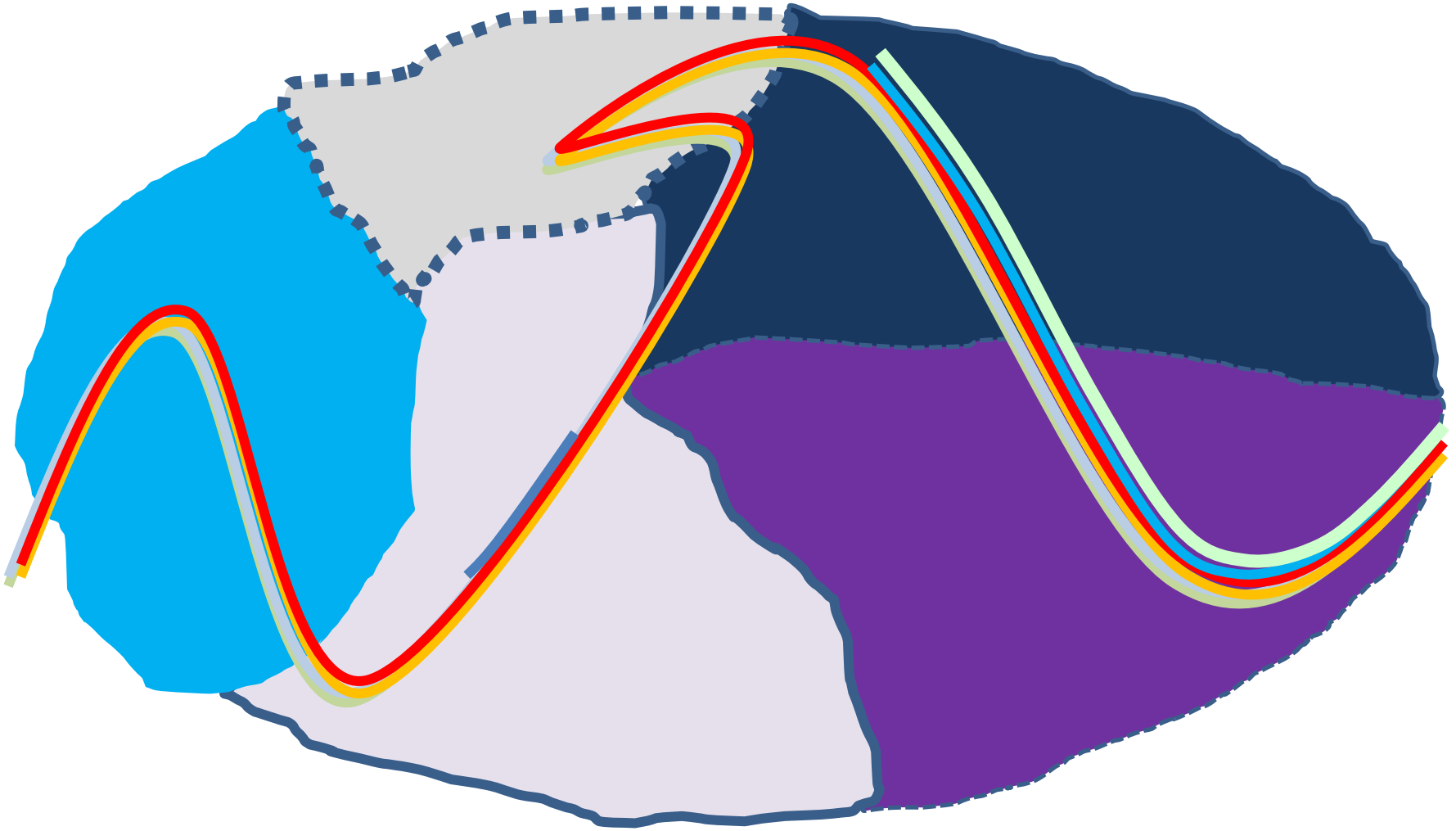
- 1. Pattern of roles/offices examined over time (the “objective” career)
  - “A career is the sequence of work-related positions occupied throughout a person's life” (London and Stumpf, 1982)
- 2. Pattern of roles/offices, and the subjective experience of the individual, examined over time (“objective” and “subjective” career)
  - “the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time” (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989).

Definitions (continued)

- 3. Career as retrospective sense-making
  - “We would recommend use of the more neutral term "work histories" to denote sequences of job experiences and reserve the term "career" for the sense people make of them.” (Nicholson and West, 1989)
- 4. Career as that which connects levels of analysis
  - “falling at the intersection between the individual and society” (Schein, 1980).

Definitions (continued)

- 5. Career as product rather than process
  - “I define careers as accumulations of information and knowledge embodied in skills, expertise, and relationship networks” (Bird, 1996)
- 6. Career as movement through space—time
  - “Career refers to movement (of an object or person) through time and (social) space.” (Collin, 2006).


Time

What's wrong with this picture?

- Implies that career success is about the person's condition at a given moment
- But when comparing two sailors occupying the same spot in the ocean
  - did they leave port at the same time?
  - was it the same port?
  - did one hit bad weather?
  - did another have engine trouble?
  - how much of their capabilities can be traced to the capabilities of their boats?