

# Narrowing the scientist-practitioner gap via career triangulation

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## About the author

Gamze Arman is a Work and Organizational Psychologist, career researcher and coach. She earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology from Bogazici University and Koc University (Istanbul, Turkey), and her doctorate degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from DePaul University (Chicago, USA). She is currently working as a Senior Lecturer at the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol). She has experience in various areas and types of research in organizational psychology but is primarily interested in careers of high-skilled immigrants and expatriates and the role of context in career development of different populations. While progressing in her research and teaching career, she has always been keen on addressing the scientist-practitioner gap and got involved in several applied projects related to consulting and training. Her quest to be a scientist and practitioner with an aligned approach has led her to become a career coach for high-skilled immigrants and expatriates.

## Abstract

Our career journeys are unique and become integral parts of our life stories. This paper describes the development of a career path that can be currently defined as a persistent effort to balance three separate but highly aligned areas that feed into each other: research, teaching and coaching. The emergence and improvement of each of these career identities will be explained, focusing on the motives and concerns that guided the quest. The dynamic nature of this triangular career and the interaction among its components will be clarified, followed by a summary of key suggestions and insights based on this journey to address the scientist-practitioner gap. This career story is expected to inspire others who need to reconsider their career perceptions and expectations, and define their authentic career identities.

*Keywords:* portfolio careers, career identity, careers in context, career journey, work and organizational psychology

## Introduction

*"So, is this your job? Do you just talk to people?" (GA, Age 8)*

My curiosity about occupations started with this question after witnessing my mother's quite lengthy conversation with a friend who happened to be an insurance agent.

After being pushed away by them following each effort to intervene and get some attention, I just had this question in mind when they were finished. Now, looking back, I proudly consider this my first attempt at conducting job analysis, although the dismissive response at that time (*'No, it's more complicated, but you wouldn't understand'*) was quite discouraging for my curious mind. Ten years after this question, I became a psychology student and found myself among an ambitious group dominated by future clinical psychologists. I was unaware of the various specific areas and the richness of psychology at the time. Like many of my peers, I just started my search for my area of focus with a trial-and-error process, including assistance in an experimental psychology laboratory (aiming to understand bird by behaviour studying quails) and a cognitive psychology laboratory (analysing visual perception). Unfortunately, I could not spend much time in the brain and behaviour laboratory, since I did not feel comfortable working with rats, while running experiments on birds was easier. Instead, I started my first human resources (HR) internship, where my old question *"Do you just talk to people?"* made so much sense again. Around the same time, I had the chance to volunteer for the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) conference held in Istanbul and was amazed to learn more about research in Work and Organizational Psychology and meet a couple of top researchers in the area in person.

One year before graduating from the undergraduate programme, I was certain that I wanted to remain in academia and specialise in organizational psychology, thanks to my research experience in various areas, attendance at the EAWOP conference and completion of my HR internship. While everything looked clear back then, I was unaware of the career path ahead, which would bring various joys and disappointments, many questions to be answered and decisions to be made. Throughout this lengthy journey, I invested in developing multiple aspects of my career identity, and ultimately, I take pride in defining the pillars of my triangular career portfolio as research, teaching and career coaching. In the following sections, I will explain how I found my way in each of these pillars and summarise how they build on and impact each other.

## **Becoming a researcher**

My real adventure as a Work and Organizational Psychologist (with research questions more complicated than the one I had as a child) began when I started the master's programme at Koc University (Istanbul, Turkey), where I had the chance to work with my very first role model as an organizational psychology researcher, Prof. Zeynep

Aycan, along with many other top-notch faculty members from other subdisciplines of psychology. I still remember the joy of working on my very first research project focusing on the glass ceiling phenomenon, where we interviewed top-level female managers in person with a great research partner (see Okay-Somerville & Arman, 2021). While learning about the main principles and bases of scientific research in-depth, I also started learning about the scientist-practitioner gap as a critical concept, without comprehending the actual size of the gap yet. During those years as a master's student, I also started establishing my line of research shaped around global careers, e.g., the repatriation process (Arman, 2009) and attitudes toward expatriates (Arman & Aycan, 2013). When I neared the completion of the programme, I was a hundred percent sure that I wanted to become a researcher who keeps investigating the psychological bases of work from multiple perspectives, disseminating her research via publications and conference presentations, and contributing to the literature. With this motivation, I got involved in the highly stressful and competitive process of PhD applications.

The next and even more critical phase of my research path started when I joined the PhD programme at DePaul University (Chicago, USA), where I learned about quite advanced research methods and deeply enjoyed the opportunities of working in top-calibre research laboratories and attending conferences such as the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP). Around that time, I also met my second highly influential academic role model; Prof. Suzanne Bell. I learned a lot from her about how a researcher should think, particularly while working on my dissertation, which was not any easier than the usual dissertation research process. As you might guess, completing my dissertation and earning the PhD degree was one of the biggest reliefs of my life, particularly since I was raising my lovely son, Erim, during the final year of this journey.

However, academia is not a fairy tale, where you earn your degrees and then publish and get promoted into higher level roles happily ever after. Throughout this journey, I also gained insights into the peaks and valleys of careers in research (particularly for non-native speakers of English; Romero-Olivares, 2019). I learned how to navigate various obstacles, including comprehensive examinations, manuscript rejections, prolonged and demotivating revise-and-resubmit cycles, the scarcity of secure jobs in academia and the dependence on external funding for large-scale projects that have a higher likelihood of making a significant research impact. The prevalent performance expectations shaped around quantifiable efficiency measures in research via the number of funding applications and top-journal publications within certain periods of time felt too much for

me (yes, even as a Work and Organizational Psychologist) and I realised that the stress and pressure were not motivating; but just draining me. Thus, I decided to follow the slow professor trend (Berg & Seeber, 2016) and this was a breaking point in my career with fruitful outcomes.

Another major challenge was tailoring my line of research. I had been involved in a wide range of research projects on multiple topics such as training efficiency, team functioning, abusive supervision, gender issues in leadership and commuting for work, in addition to my ongoing interest in global careers, on the contrary to the widespread (and actually wise) advice in academia suggesting staying focused to one or two topics. I was quite happy with defining myself as a “very curious” researcher back then, without noticing the costs of not specialising, such as having limited time for following up the literature in several areas or missing the opportunities to develop my network of researchers with similar interests. Thus, another breaking point with a significant positive impact was defining myself as a career researcher and focusing my attention on my ongoing work on careers of expatriates / high-skilled immigrants and the impact of context on careers of different populations. I am still a very curious researcher but just use my time more efficiently and have the chance to delve much deeper theoretically with each step I take. Since I clarified my research area, I also started getting involved in highly valuable collaborative projects: in my network I am now known as a career researcher, and people with similar interests reach out or share calls or announcements aligned with my research experience.

While defining my authentic researcher identity was quite liberating and enriching, I was still admiring the scientist-practitioner model and kept searching for my own way of addressing the gap. I felt the urge to address it as I wanted to be a ‘complete’ Work and Organizational Psychologist, who can not only contribute to science but also to individuals and society on a daily basis. In fact, in my ongoing effort to address this gap, I realised that I had already been involved in several projects from my early career years. I worked in HR departments, delivered training programmes and got involved in various consulting projects on issues such as performance appraisal systems in NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), people management in production companies and employee assistance programme efficiency. However, I was not satisfied with the link between my research and practice; they were just two distinct parts of my career and the lack of alignment and interaction was quite discouraging for me. With these feelings, I paused my practical work and focused on my research and teaching as a full-time faculty

member, while my interest in addressing the gap stayed intact and took me to a different route via career coaching later, after I had also established my teaching identity.

## Becoming a lecturer

Research-oriented academics can have complicated feelings towards teaching, particularly if they believe it steals their precious research time due to its demanding tasks and communication requirements, apart from the act of teaching itself. Personally, I have always enjoyed teaching and started it quite early, at the age of 15 years, as a private tutor for younger children in my school. Thus, when I chose an academic career, I was prepared and excited for its teaching component as well. Leading discussion sections for various courses as a teaching assistant during my graduate education, both at the master's and doctorate levels, was a fantastic opportunity for me. As a doctoral student, we were also offered courses focusing on pedagogical principles, which helped me think about various aspects of teaching, particularly in psychology. I still enjoy the dynamic nature of teaching and the impact of technological advances on it, which also serves as a trigger for me to stay up to date and continuously think of better ways to use the available tools for more efficient teaching. Having the chance to teach in the graduate programmes has been particularly fruitful in my effort to transmit my knowledge to future Work and Organizational Psychologists. I also deeply enjoy learning from our students, especially when they share their experiences and insights from organizational contexts to which I have no access. Moreover, as a researcher, I naturally integrate research into my teaching and contribute to research-informed teaching, in line with the expectations in the current higher education scene. (I will explain the interaction between them further when I summarise the impact of my aligned triangular career on its pillars.)

As a Work and Organizational Psychologist it has been years since I accepted that the perfect job does not exist. Thus, there are definitely times when I question my lecturer identity, apart from the joy, pride and rewards of teaching. The higher education industry is led by ranking systems that are questionable (e.g., Brankovic, 2021). A major result of this system is the ongoing pressure on faculty to achieve better scores on institutional or national student satisfaction surveys. Regardless of the evaluation-related concerns, there are times when you can feel that your efforts to create better teaching materials, design more interesting and interactive in-class activities or provide more constructive feedback do not translate to students' improvement, since they do not pay a great deal

of attention. Thus, all your effort to integrate your research into teaching and use it for student improvement may also feel like a waste sometimes. This feeling, in particular, left me with an especially important question: *How can I use my research to create more impact at the individual level?* And very soon this question merged with another (much older) question: *How can I address the scientist-practitioner gap on my behalf?*

## Becoming a career coach

Long before I decided to become a Work and Organizational Psychologist, and subsequently a researcher and lecturer in the field, I was intrigued by psychology for two main reasons (which are probably quite similar for all psychologists): to learn more about the human mind and behaviour (starting with understanding myself better) and eventually to use this knowledge to support people in need. Helping people was my primary motivation for the consulting and training projects I got involved in. However, being an external party made it difficult for me to observe and assess the long-term impact of my efforts on employees, which was quite demotivating. Academics always aim to create impact with their research; however, it might not be easy if you do not have substantial external funding to support multiple aspects of your studies, including research-based and applied elements, depending on your research area. As a lecturer, I have always been happy to observe my students' improvement during their studies and witness their career progression over the years (thanks to LinkedIn, mostly), but it still was not sufficient for me, as a robust link between my research and its impact was missing.

While I was questioning the content and meaning of my research and teaching identities, two major events impacted my career progression. First, I moved to the United Kingdom from Turkey with my family and became a high-skilled immigrant working with multinational teams, which was quite different from being an international student in the United States by myself. This shift gave me a fantastic opportunity to better understand the experiences as well as the needs of the samples of the majority of my former research (Arman, 2009; Arman & Adair, 2012; Arman & Aycan, 2013; Colakoglu et al., 2018). Moreover, during my second year in the UK, COVID-19 affected me, along with the rest of the world and it led to another meaningful study I deeply enjoyed working on (Arman, 2023). Apart from the pandemic's unforgettable impact on personal lives as well as teaching, it provided a new path for diverse types of work, as people quickly got used to the idea of having online sessions for almost everything, ranging from drawing and

yoga classes to therapy sessions. Given the conjunction of these events, along with my personal progression and deeper questioning in different domains of my life, the stars I had been chasing for years were finally perfectly aligned and career coaching for global employees appeared as a great outlet for me.

The next step was finding high-calibre coaching training that would fit my needs and highly academic background. After some research, I signed up for the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) accredited certification programme offered by TPC Leadership, primarily aiming at career and leadership coaching (rather than life coaching), in line with my goals. This programme also offered an eclectic approach, rather than specialising in one school of coaching. The overall training process has been a transformative experience and I left each trial session (either as a coach or a client) with increased levels of awareness. Thus, I witnessed the personal impact of coaching very quickly. Throughout the certification process, I was also greatly encouraged by my peers with or without any background in psychology and learned a lot from them. Looking back, I am particularly thankful to my very first clients from various cultural backgrounds living in different host countries, since they trusted me and contributed to my development and progression toward becoming an Associate Certified Coach (ACC).

Coaching training and practice came with its own struggles for sure. During the certification process, a significant hurdle I faced was transitioning away from my academic identities and placing greater emphasis on practical application. One of the biggest challenges was using psychometric tools with a less critical eye (particularly as a lecturer teaching psychological assessment at the graduate level) and focusing mostly on their practical use and benefits in the coaching context, without compromising on adopting sound and scientific tools. I mostly ensure that I select the best available tools (i.e., those with strong reliability and validity) to assess factors such as coachability, resilience or perceived strengths of my clients, tailored to their unique conditions and needs. However, in certain situations, I am now more inclined to utilise tools that might raise slight but acceptable concerns, as long as I am confident that these scales will facilitate the client's deep reflection. In this context, helping my client supersedes my habit of being a critic of psychometrics.

Another major challenge was leaving the didactic style arising from my teaching and research background and focusing only on the unique experience and perception of



my clients with the primary aim of coaching them through their own processes with structured sessions and strong open questions. This can be only achieved by being present and actively listening to the clients during the sessions and focusing only on their unique narratives, perceptions and feelings. For instance, while I possess a clear theoretical understanding of the cross-cultural adjustment process, my focus during a session should centre on the client's immediate experience rather than lecturing them about past or future steps of adjustment. However, my comprehensive understanding of the entire process and its complexities allows me to ask probing questions that encourage the client to reflect on their accomplishments thus far, recognising their efforts and successes, or consider how they can better prepare for forthcoming challenges in their adjustment.

In addition, from a business perspective, leaving my tendency to be an introverted academic and being more vocal about my coaching practice and relevant background is a requirement for reaching out to potential clients and I am coaching myself to get better at it. Last but not least, in any initial session with a potential client, I have to explain that I am not a clinical psychologist and/or therapist and clarify the ethical and professional limits within these boundaries (but this shouldn't be a new experience for any Work and Organizational Psychologist). Likewise, I also have to declare to my clients that I am not studying them for any research project, since some clients held this assumption. Despite these challenges, as of today, career coaching feels like the glue of my unique career portfolio and adds a great deal of meaning and personal satisfaction, while each pillar benefits from and contributes to the triangle in diverse ways.

## **Dynamic nature of my career portfolio**

As I enjoy each pillar of my current career, the primary benefit of incorporating all these facets into my career identity lies in the pleasure, efficiency, richness and depth that arise from combining them with a coherent perspective. My research, teaching and coaching mutually inspire and enhance each other in many ways.

My research gains substantial benefits from this triangle, as I learn a great deal from my coaching clients, particularly when I approach them with an open mind, setting aside my research experience and knowledge until they specifically seek insights and guidance. Additionally, the experiences of my clients often reveal gaps in the literature,

driven by the unique contexts in which they live and work. As a result, their insights and perceptions serve as inspiration for my future research on global careers. After each coaching session, I feel that I am creating research impact at the individual level through my aligned approach, which, in turn, motivates me to continue my research. Teaching is also largely aligned with and contributes to my research, as my students inspire my research with their intriguing questions and examples, drawn from their diverse work backgrounds. Since I primarily teach at the graduate level, their dissertation projects present excellent opportunities for expanding coaching research, an area that is understudied. I am currently supervising the research of several students who have either a background or strong interest in coaching.

My teaching also benefits from this triangular approach, as it allows me to integrate my research as well as my practical experience into my lectures. I recognised the significant potential of this integration when I began leading discussion sessions as a master's student 16 years ago. Even my limited experience as an HR intern at that time had enabled me to incorporate some engaging examples and observations into my sessions, moving beyond mere explanation of theories and models. Understanding the value of practical experience in enhancing teaching quality has consistently fuelled my desire to embrace the scientist-practitioner model. With the addition of coaching, my teaching is further enriched, particularly in my role as the lecturer of the “Learning, Training and Development” module. Additionally, adopting a coaching style, particularly when working with my dissertation students, significantly contributes to my students' progress. I am also pleased to teach another graduate-level course on "Researching Organizations" as a researcher. This allows me to provide a coherent overview of research in the work context, which would have been challenging without hands-on research experience. In short, research- and coaching- informed teaching is a natural consequence of my triangular career.

My coaching practice also gains from this triangular approach, primarily due to my research and personal experience working in multinational environments as an immigrant and international student. This background makes it easy for me to comprehend the challenges faced by my unique clientele as they strive to establish or advance their identities and careers while navigating the complexities of cross-cultural adaptation on multiple levels. My background enables me to grasp potential underlying mechanisms or assumptions that impact my clients. For example, if a client raises serious concerns about their local colleagues' negative stereotypes against their country

of origin, I question the client's own stereotypes of the host country and ask challenging questions about the effort they put to facilitate their adjustment to the new culture. Such a reflection provides a solid basis for developing an awareness of how the clients can change their perceptions, assumptions and behaviours to ease their lives in the new culture. Furthermore, by staying updated on relevant literature, I can enrich and deepen my coaching practice with recent scientific findings from various multicultural contexts.

## **Key lessons and suggestions (so far)**

### **Career identity is crucial but can be multiple and dynamic**

Our identities define us and we are familiar with having multiple identities in our lives. While training for academia, especially in doctoral programmes, there is a strong emphasis on our researcher identities, aligned with the primary goal of studying at such an advanced level to contribute to the scientific domain. For those who aspire to remain in academia, the expected performance criteria, such as continuous publication in top journals and pursuing external funding, can be significant stressors. I hold great respect for the dedication and contributions of all my colleagues who have chosen research-focused careers, which may also involve teaching to some extent. I do not underestimate the challenges associated with this path, which is explored in several resources on academic careers (e.g., Darley et al., 2003). However, this path was not the right one for me, beginning from the early years of my career and my career identity could only feel complete after redefining and enriching it with multiple aligned identities, irrespective of prevalent expectations within the higher education industry. This decision may come with costs, such as slowing down the traditional academic career progression, but titles hold less importance to me than having a coherent and meaningful career that allows me to create impact and add value in numerous ways. I also acknowledge that future revisions to my career identity may be necessary. In short, as a career researcher and coach, my primary recommendation is to seek and craft your own unique career identity, design your life accordingly (see Burnett & Evans, 2016) and define your ideal portfolio career if this approach appears to be a better option for you (see Wallace, 2023).

## Meaning connects, motivates and creates impact

We often discuss the importance of meaning in various aspects of our lives and our pursuit of meaningful lives extends beyond our career aspirations (see Frankl, 1963). There are conflicting views on whether our careers should be the central components of our lives and fundamental tools for our quest for meaning. However, for people like me, our careers can serve as one of the several mechanisms that add meaning to our lives. From an existentialist perspective (e.g., Yalom, 2009), our careers may even be potential sources for enhancing our chances of achieving a form of immortality through our impact on our research area (as well as on people affected by our research in numerous ways), our students or our clients. Meaning in life can take different forms and definitions for everyone. It is beneficial regardless of the domains you aim to juggle and finding your authentic balance is crucial.

## Values guide and unify

Work and Organizational Psychology has faced criticism in the past for its business and capitalism-oriented approaches. Ongoing efforts of critical groups, such as Future of Work and Organizational Psychology (FOWOP), provide an insightful overview of the field's history and offer guidance on making it more humanistic in the future. Personally, I am strongly against the assumption that all Work and Organizational Psychologists are business-minded and concerned only with organizational gains. In my previous attempts to bridge the scientist-practitioner gap, I consistently prioritised the impact of my work (whether as an HR employee, a trainer or a consultant) on the employees of the relevant organizations. I highlighted the impact of any suggested intervention on people, even though I had limited opportunities to observe the real (hopefully positive) impact. As a career coach, I can directly witness the significant impact of my efforts on my clients, which is a major source of satisfaction for me. Moreover, the same values have prompted me to consider the impact I can have on different populations, who face more substantial challenges than career progression, and encouraged me to explore other ways of contributing to people. As a testament to these values, I continuously allocate a portion of my coaching income as donations to a UK-based foundation (Turkey Mozaik), which supports several NGOs in Turkey.

## **Prioritisation is the key**

Numerous resources are available on time management and efficient working strategies and I will not reiterate their advice here. Given that I manage multiple roles simultaneously, I must carefully balance all three pillars of my career triangle. In this endeavour, I gain significant benefits from prioritising one of these pillars depending on the time of the year to achieve an overall balance. For instance, when marking or grading student work is my primary task, I have to temporarily reduce the pace of my research and coaching activities. The period after teaching, just before summer, provides an excellent opportunity to focus more on research, and the end of summer, right before the active teaching begins, is ideal for planning and development activities related to coaching.

## **Context matters**

Careers develop within unique contexts (see Mayrhofer et al., 2007) and the influence of factors at various contextual levels is evident in my own career journey as well. For instance, I have consistently felt supported within my current work context by my colleagues and managers as I sought to establish my career identity. In addition, my origin and current life context have significantly defined and impacted my research and coaching. As a high-skilled immigrant who specialises in studying and coaching this group, my own background plays a vital role. Meanwhile, my quest was also affected by the global context, particularly through the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as previously explained. Thus, our pursuit of the ideal career path is not an individual journey. It is crucial to have an open mind about the changes in the context, adapt to them and embrace the new opportunities.

## **Work-life balance is imperative**

Last, but undoubtedly not least, I am acutely aware of the importance of maintaining a work-life balance and the risks associated with becoming consumed by the efforts to advance and balance research, teaching and coaching simultaneously. In essence, I ensure that my life consists of more than just my career prospects and plans and I cherish the quality time spent with my family, my friends and by myself. My life would be significantly less meaningful without these diverse aspects and identities. It is through this balance that I find true purpose in my career-related tasks, goals and plans.

## Potential next steps

While I feel content, aligned and complete at this point in my life, I also keep thinking of potential future steps I can take to strengthen the links among various aspects of my career. One of my primary targets is getting more involved in coaching-related research, starting with student projects for now. From a coaching perspective, I believe that we can benefit a lot from the vast literature on global careers in multiple contexts, particularly to help the high-skilled immigrants and expatriates. Therefore, I have recently started to create accessible summaries of scientific content to provide better guidance to these populations via evidence-based coaching and mentoring. I also think I can integrate coaching more into my teaching by, for example, delivering classes or sessions on coaching itself at some point. Most importantly, I am happy to embrace what future will bring to my career identities and expectations with an open and flexible mind.

## Conclusion

All my different career identities have their own meaning, rewards and challenges, as I explained in detail above. However, just like a classical example of gestalt principles, their combined meaning to me is much more than their sum. My path and quest have been quite adventurous (like for many of us) but I am quite happy with my current response to the question of eight-year-old version of me: “Yes, dear Gamze, this is my job! I talk to people to understand their experiences as a researcher, to teach them as a lecturer and to help them in their career progression as a coach, and I take pride in being a scientist and practitioner in the amazing world of Work and Organizational Psychology!”

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