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WHEN PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE THEIR CAREER DECISIONS: TOWARDS A THEORY OF CAREER INACTION

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ABSTRACT

Most theories and empirical studies on career decisions implicitly focus on changes in work-related positions which people succeed to realize. Career *inaction*, i.e., the failure to realize a desired career-related change, has received little attention to date. We build on behavioral decision science to develop a theory about career inaction.

INTRODUCTION

Career decisions are among the most important choices people have to make in their lives. Yet, most theories and empirical papers on career decisions focus – explicitly or implicitly – on career *transitions*, so on objective changes in work-related positions which people actually go through and succeed to realize. In this paper, we posit that due to this focus, our understanding of people's career experiences remains inherently incomplete since a specific and likely important career phenomenon is hereby ignored, i.e., career inaction. We define career inaction as the failure to realize a desired change in work-related positions. We believe that without explicit consideration and inclusion of career inaction in career studies, people's career paths, experiences and outcomes cannot be fully understood and this for at least three reasons.

First, there are several indications that career inaction is indeed a relevant and significant aspect of careers. Research on life regrets for instance shows that people's biggest regrets in their lives are things they did *not* do in their *career*. In a study among Terman's intellectually gifted subjects, *not having completed college*, *not having attended college* and *not having pursued a professional interest* were ranked 1st, 3rd and 5th of all life regrets that were mentioned (Hattiangadi, Medvec & Gilovich, 1995).

Second, career inaction also seems real in its consequences. A study of Aronsson and Goransson (2000) for instance showed that employees who were not in their preferred occupation experienced higher levels of burnout. Similarly, Wrzesniewski and colleagues (2011) found that individuals who wished they had pursued a different occupation were on average less satisfied and less engaged with their work and life in general.

Third, developing the concept of career inaction implies broadening our understanding of career decisions and transitions to include *non-linearity* and *inconsistency*. Both theoretical and empirical work on career decisions and transitions implicitly focus on *consistency*; that is: people who wish or need to make a career decision are assumed to make a decision in line with their

aspirations and then to realize it. Though it is acknowledged – and widely shown – that not all desires to change result in decisions to change and not all decisions to change result in actual change (Allen, Weeks & Moffit, 2005), career theories and models have rarely reflected on this form of non-linearity and inconsistency, let alone on what it might imply for an individual's emotions, attitudes, well-being, and further career actions.

The aim of this study is to develop a theory of career inaction. Building on the behavioral decision science literature, we explore the nature and the possible consequences of career inaction and develop a number of propositions which may guide career researchers to think about and include career inaction in their future studies.

DEFINING CAREERS AND CAREER INACTION

We define career inaction as ‘the failure to act on a desired change in work-related positions’. We see career inaction as a phenomenon which occurs during the career decision and transition process and which essentially interrupts the so often assumed linearity of this process. Where exactly the linearity in the process stops, is not essential. What is essential is (1) that the person became aware of different alternatives and had a desire for a specific alternative involving change, (2) that there was sufficient room for agency to make a choice and act on it; but (3) that the desired alternative was in the end not realized. We argue that when a person becomes aware of a desirable career alternative, certain psychological processes are induced which may endure and even intensify when the desire does not result in actual change.

First of all, career inaction relates to situations where people became aware of and considered different alternatives. In that way, inaction differs from situations where people did not do or did not change something simply because they did not perceive other options. When people consider different options, they tend to engage in prefactual thinking, meaning that they construct a mental representation of how these options will be like (Carmon, Wertenbroch & Zeelenberg, 2003). The stronger one’s desire for a certain alternative, the more positive, vivid and intense this representation is likely to be and the longer it may remain cognitively available. When people then do not realize the desired option, these prefactual thoughts are likely to evolve in counterfactual thoughts, i.e., thoughts about “what could have been” if they would have realized the desired change, which may induce emotional responses like regret, and affect people’s subsequent decisions and actions (e.g., Van Putten, Zeelenberg & Van Dijk, 2009).

Second, career inaction concerns a choice situation, i.e., a situation where people have sufficient control to actually choose between and act on the available alternatives. Thus, inaction differs from situations where someone is forced to do nothing or where one has no immediate power to change something that has not happened. Due to this element of choice and agency, people are likely to feel personally responsible for their career inaction, which can magnify how people experience and evaluate the inaction and its consequences (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995).

Third, career inaction is characterized by inconsistency between people’s objective and subjective career. Since people have a natural tendency for consistency, they often have a hard time coping with inconsistencies and finding psychological closure (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005). This is especially true for inactions, since inactions involve a lack of change and thus are barely visible to others. Therefore, they generally evoke little interest from other people and give little opportunity to talk about and justify the inconsistency to others. This may hinders “repair work” (e.g. cognitive dissonance reduction) and inhibit psychological closure. This process may explain why people’s reactions to inaction tend to intensify over time, whereas people’s reactions to actions rather weaken when time passes (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995).

The next sections explore when and why career inaction is likely to occur and what the

possible consequences of career inaction could be.

WHEN AND WHY DOES CAREER INACTION OCCUR?

Realizing a desired career change is a complex process, involving several intermediate judgements and choices to be made, with the desired outcome often being uncertain and only to be obtained in the long run. For instance if one decides to leave a dissatisfying job and search for new challenges elsewhere, a myriad of choices, decisions and actions need to follow in order to realize the desired change. These are situated both within the job and the broader life context. It thus seems quite likely that intentions to change work-related positions are not always realized and that career inaction might occur because the assumed linear process of turning a desired change into action is interrupted “somewhere in-between”. We propose that, consistent with the distinction between outcome expectations and process expectations (self-efficacy) in social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), prefactual thinking will not only occur about the *desired end-result*, i.e. envisioning the desired career change, but also about the *process*, i.e. envisioning the intermediate steps including sub-actions and sub-decisions needed to realize the desired change. These cognitive processes might be prone to (1) cognitive biases, (2) influences from the social context, and (3) individual difference factors such that the process of realizing a desired change may get interrupted, eventually resulting in career inaction.

First, in the process of following through on a desired career change, the short term questions that follow from the desired change might be biased by short term impressions, feelings and emotions which can be explained by heuristics like the availability and affect heuristic (Kahneman, 2003). Individuals are prone to the influence of thoughts that are most accessible and answers are often given based on intuitive rather than deliberate thought processes (i.e. answers directly reflecting impressions rather than deliberate thoughts) (Kahneman, 2003). Motivationally relevant and emotionally arousing information will thereby attract more attention than abstract information. Not only the short-term judgements but also the intermediate choices individuals make when following through upon a desired career change might be prone to biases potentially leading to career inaction. Most career options people face are mixed: they include an opportunity for gain, but possibly also a risk of loss. Even though a desired career change is likely to be considered as an overall gain when realized – otherwise it would not be desired – the intermediate choices that have to be made might possibly result in losses and people have a tendency to be loss averse. Applied to careers, career inaction might be more likely when individuals expect more or larger short-term losses to occur in the process of changing.

Second, although careers are an individual phenomenon, many other people both at work and at home serve as social forces that could potentially affect the process of realizing a desired change, directly through the expression of social norms and indirectly through social comparison and social contagion processes which affect the prefactual thoughts about intermediate decisions. Apart from social norms, there is also the influence of the immediate context where behaviors of significant others who act as referents for the focal person can influence the person’s thoughts, judgements, feelings and behaviors through social information processes like social comparison (Festinger, 1954) and social contagion (Felps, Mitchell, Hekman, Lee, Holtom & Harman, 2009) processes. Given the high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity characterizing career transitions, we expect individuals to look to others in evaluating whether or not to engage in the sub-steps needed to implement the decision. If relevant others are not realizing any changes, the focal person may become less inclined to initiate a process of implementing the desired change because the implied behaviors are inconsistent with those of significant others.

Third, we propose that individual differences influence whether career inaction will occur.

Earlier studies showed that the strength of the intention-behavior relationship varies systematically with certain individual difference variables (Bagozzi, Baumgartner & Yi, 1992).

We propose that career inaction will be more likely to occur among individuals who believe that they have no control over the outcome of their actions due to a *low internal locus of control or low self-efficacy*. Also, a high degree of state-orientation, i.e., a tendency to be passive in approaching or avoiding things (Kuhl ,1981), may increase the likelihood of inaction. This concept is closely related to the concept of *proactive personality* (Crant, 1995). Given its emphasis on taking control and bringing about change, proactive personality should explain why some people are more action-oriented than others. Finally, *consideration of future consequences*, i.e. the extent to which people consider distant versus immediate consequences of potential behaviors (Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger & Edwards, 1994) and *individual risk attitudes* (Dohmen, Falk, Huffman, Sunde, Schupp & Wagner, 2011) may lead individuals to be more or less likely to act upon their decision

IMPACT OF CAREER INACTIONS

We posit that not realizing a desired change in work-related positions is likely to impact a person's emotions, job attitudes, and behaviors. First, career inaction may induce decision-related emotions, such as regret and disappointment (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005). When people consider a change, they tend to construct a mental representation of the alternative reality, which stimulates thoughts and fantasies about the not-yet realized option (Carmon et al., 2003). When people fail to realize this option, it is often hard to find psychological closure (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). People then keep getting confronted with thoughts of what could have been (i.e., counterfactual thoughts), which may aggravate the experience of negative emotions, like regret or disappointment (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005).

Career inaction may also affect people's job attitudes, in particular their job and career satisfaction. Most satisfaction theories assume that individual satisfaction does not so much depend on events that do or do not happen, but rather on the discrepancy between a situation and a reference point, like people's prior desires (Hsee & Abelson, 1991). Since career inaction involves a discrepancy between one's desired and one's actual work-related position as well as a discrepancy between one's desired and one's actual career path, it is likely to induce both job dissatisfaction and career dissatisfaction. Besides this direct impact, career inaction may also induce dissatisfaction through the negative decision-related emotions of regret and disappointment, which have both been linked with dissatisfaction (Tsiros & Mittal, 2000).

Finally, career inaction is likely to have behavioral consequences. Which type of behaviors career inaction is likely to induce, may strongly depend on the emotion that is dominating the inaction situation. Regret has for instance been found to induce a desire to take compensatory steps to mitigate or undo the negative outcomes of the inaction, whereas disappointment has been associated more with a tendency to sulk, do nothing or to get even (Zeelenberg, Van Dijk, Manstead, & Van der Pligt., 1998). A particular interesting behavioral consequence in this respect is *inaction inertia*. Inaction inertia refers to the phenomenon that people who have bypassed an initial attractive opportunity are less likely to act on a further opportunity even if it is an objectively attractive one (Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998). People who did not realize a desired career change may therefore be likely to not act on career opportunities later in life. This phenomenon could explain why people stay stuck in the wrong career (Ibarra, 2002) or why they get "locked in" or "entrapped" in an unfitting or unsatisfying line of work (Drummond & Chell, 2001).

THE MODERATING ROLE OF JUSTIFIABILITY

Of course, career inaction does not necessarily lead to negative emotions, dissatisfaction and

inaction inertia. Though there may be various factors that can moderate this relationship, we limit our discussion here to one factor which has been shown to have particular relevance as a moderator in decision-outcome relationships: justifiability (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005). In particular, we posit that justifiability may mitigate the negative impact which career inaction may have. When people are better able to justify and explain why they did not realize their initial desire to change work-related positions, they are likely to have less regret and may therefore experience less dissatisfaction and less negative behavioral effects. Several studies have indeed found support for the attenuating role of justifiability (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005).

CONCLUSION

This paper introduced the concept of career inaction, reflected on when and why career inaction could occur and which consequences it could have. As we showed in this paper, the concept of career inaction captures a real career phenomenon which cannot be understood by existing career decision or career transition models and which is not yet captured by existing concepts. We hope that our theory may stimulate career researchers to explore this whole new area of careers and to move away from the dominant focus on linearity and consistency.

Figure 1 Overall model of career inaction

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