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When People Don't Realize Their Career Desires: Toward a Theory of Career Inaction

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ABSTRACT

Career decisions are at the core of the career literature. Most current career theories focus on how career decisions are enacted and in the end realized. However, empirical evidence shows that people often do *not* realize their career desires. For instance, many people who have turnover intentions stay in their organization; and people with entrepreneurial desires often turn out to be wantrepreneurs (i.e., people who talk about starting a business without doing anything to realize it). Although structural barriers sometimes inhibit people from realizing a desired change, there are also indications that people often do not even mobilize into action, or give up prematurely, when trying to realize their career desires. This explanation, however, has rarely been acknowledged, let alone studied. To address this gap, we develop a theory of career inaction. We define career inaction as the failure to act sufficiently over some period of time on a desired change in one's career. Building on the psychology of doing nothing, we explain why and when career inaction may occur and how it can impact people, even in the longer run. Our propositions may guide career researchers to think about and include career inaction in their future studies.

Keywords:

Career inaction; career transitions; psychology of doing nothing; counterfactual thoughts; regret; relief

When People Don't Realize Their Career Desires: Toward a Theory of Career Inaction

"The price of inaction is far greater than the cost of making a mistake" (Meister Eckhart)

Career decisions are among the most important choices that people have to make in their lives (Gati & Tal, 2008). Throughout their career, people make decisions about which educational path to pursue, which kind of job to apply for, which organization to join, when to take on a new challenge, how to combine work with family life, whether to take a career break, and when to retire, to name a few. These decisions have a significant and often long-term impact on people's financial situation, lifestyle, subsequent career opportunities, social network, sense of identity, and feelings of personal success (e.g., Bernhardt, Morris, Handcock, & Scott, 2001; Gati & Tal, 2008; Verbruggen, van Emmerik, Van Gils, Meng, & de Grip, 2015).

Given the importance of career decisions, it is not surprising that, over time, many theories have been developed to explain how these decisions are—or should be—made (e.g., Gati, 1986, 2002; Holland, 1973; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and which factors influence the quality of the career decision-making process (e.g., Holland & Holland, 1977; Taylor & Betz, 1983). In addition, some theoretical work has been done on the career enactment process, i.e., the process people go through to implement a career decision (e.g., Nicholson, 1984; Schlossberg, 1981). These theories, consistent with rational decision-making perspectives (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009), typically focus on how intended career changes are being enacted and realized (Obodaru, 2012). However, due to this one-sided focus on how career decisions are made and realized, our understanding of careers has remained incomplete. In particular, we posit that this focus ignores a specific career phenomenon that is likely to be relevant to many people's careers, i.e., career inaction. The term inaction refers to the failure to act sufficiently on a desired change

(Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005). Examples of career inaction include wanting to leave but remaining in a dissatisfying job, not pursuing that internal promotion one feels drawn to, or not starting that own business one always dreamed about. Though it seems commonsensical that inaction plays a role in many people's careers, the phenomenon has hitherto received little attention in the career literature.

We see at least three reasons why career inaction needs to be studied more explicitly in career research. First, there are several indications that the phenomenon is a relevant and significant aspect of careers. The prevalence of career inaction is evident, for instance, in research on career-related intentions, which has generally found only weak to moderate correlations between people's career intentions or goals and their subsequent career situation. For example, meta-analyses on turnover have reported correlations from .24 to .45 between turnover intentions and actual turnover, with turnover intentions generally explaining only 10 to 15% of the variance in actual turnover (Allen, Weeks, & Moffitt, 2005; Vardaman, Taylor, Allen, Gondo, & Amis, 2015). Similarly, correlations between entrepreneurial intentions and actually starting one's own business (Ibarra, 2004) and between career goals and goal realization (Verbruggen & Sels, 2010) have been found to be moderate at best. Also research on life regrets points to the relevance of career inaction. When people are asked about their biggest life regrets, they most frequently mention things they did not do in their career (Roese & Summerville, 2005). For instance, 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 first, third, and fifth of all life regrets mentioned (Hattiangadi, Medvec, & Gilovich, 1995). Together, this evidence suggests that people often do not follow through on their career desires.

Second, a better understanding of career inaction can help us grasp why traditional stable career paths remain dominant in today's labor markets. Despite societal trends that stimulate

people to more frequently cross organizational, occupational, and/or geographical boundaries—and thus push toward more boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Dries & Verbruggen, 2012)—empirical evidence shows that most careers are still characterized by long periods of continuous employment with the same employer (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2014; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010), and that people rarely change functional domain (Chudzikowski, 2012). However, surprisingly little effort has been devoted to understanding *why* careers remain so stable. This is intriguing, especially given recent Gallup figures showing that many people are not very happy with their current career situation (Gallup, 2018). It is probable that structural barriers sometimes inhibit people from realizing a desired change in their career (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017). Yet, there are also indications that people often do not even mobilize into action, or give up prematurely, when trying to realize their career desires (Drummond & Chell, 2001; Hattiangadi et al., 1995; Hotur, 2015). This explanation, however, has rarely been acknowledged, let alone studied, and accordingly, we lack a thorough understanding of why and when people who desire a change in their career end up having a stable career in the absence of structural barriers.

Third, career inaction may have significant consequences. In the past few years, several researchers have shown that there can be important well-being (e.g., more burnout) and performance (e.g., more counterproductive work behavior) risks when people do not accomplish a desired change in their career—for instance, when people feel stuck or locked-in in their current job (Allen, Peltokorpi, & Rubenstein, 2016; Stengård, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, Leineweber, & Aronsson, 2016), do not realize their turnover cognitions (Mai, Ellis, Christian, & Porter, 2016; Verbruggen & van Emmerik, 2018), or are wantrepreneurs, i.e., people who talk about starting their own business without doing anything to realize it (Hotur, 2015). However, a systematic analysis of why and when stable careers are sometimes dysfunctional and what exactly makes

them dysfunctional is hitherto lacking. In addition, scholars have rarely acknowledged—or tried to understand—the reversed situation, i.e., when not acting on a desired career change turns out to have favorable rather than unfavorable consequences.

The theory of career inaction developed here aims to answer these questions. We ground our understanding of career inaction in the psychology of doing nothing (Anderson, 2003; Beike, Markman, & Karadogan, 2009; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005), i.e., insights from cognitive, social, and clinical psychology on a class of behaviors that involve a lack of (sufficient) action, despite a desire or stimulus to change. Anderson (2003) integrated many of these insights in 2003 in response to the observation that although this phenomenon occurs in several life domains and is often linked to high personal and even societal costs, it had not been the subject of any concentrated research attention. Even more, research had long overlooked the phenomenon completely, probably because organisms showing inaction were mistaken as being dormant, i.e., resting and conserving energy and, therefore, not very interesting to study (Anderson, 2003). Arguably, the career field is no different. The phenomenon of career inaction has received so little attention in the career literature to date possibly because in objectively stable career paths, nothing seems to be happening. In this paper, we argue, however, that in the case of career inaction, several cognitive and psychological processes are happening that keep people from taking sufficient action and that can be highly impactful even in the long run.

The aim of this paper is to address the theoretical gaps identified above by further integrating insights from the psychology of doing nothing (e.g., Anderson, 2003; Beike et al., 2009; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Hartley & Phelps, 2010; Kool, McGuire, Rosen, & Botvinick, 2010; Rajagopal, Raju & Unnava, 2006) and combining these with literature on career decision- and transition-making (e.g., Latack, 1984; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001; Steel, Griffeth, & Hom, 2002). In particular, research on human tendencies that keep

people from acting (e.g., Anderson, 2003; Hartley & Phelps, 2010; Kool et al., 2010) is helpful for understanding why and when people who desire a change in their career may avoid taking sufficient action even in the absence of structural barriers, while research on counterfactual thoughts and emotions triggered by inaction (e.g., Beike et al., 2009; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Rajagopal et al., 2006) can inform why and when a lack of sufficient action might be dysfunctional or, conversely, result in positive consequences. Integrating these insights with literature on career decision- and transition-making (e.g., Latack, 1984; Mitchell et al., 2001; Steel et al., 2002) produces a unique perspective on why, when, and with what impact cognitive and psychological mechanisms may keep people in a stable career, despite a desire for change.

In what follows, we first define career inaction and explore its key characteristics. Next, we examine why and when career inaction occurs. In line with Anderson (2003), we argue that career inaction occurs through some general human tendencies that all people are—at least to some extent—susceptible to. We therefore focus on explaining these general tendencies and on the (decisional and contextual) conditions that bring them about. Finally, we explore how career inaction may impact people, even in the longer run. The paper concludes by discussing its contributions and the implications for scholars studying career decision-making.

WHAT IS CAREER INACTION?

We follow Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence's (1989) influential definition of careers as "the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (p. 8). This broad definition captures both the occurrence and absence of changes of employer, job, occupation, and/or geographical location over time, and how people experience these changes or the lack thereof. A central feature in this definition is the relevance of time. Thus, rather than a static, momentary view on people's work-related positions and experiences, the concept of career captures how these positions and experiences evolve—or, conversely, remain stable—over time.

In applying the phenomenon of inaction to the domain of careers, the time component is, therefore, crucial. Accordingly, we define career inaction as the failure to act sufficiently over some period of time on a desire to make a change in one's career. Career inaction has three key features: (1) the person desires to make a change in his or her career; (2) the person recognizes that (s)he can take action to initiate the desired change but does not do so in a sufficient way; and (3) this situation persists for some period of time.

First, career inaction relates to situations in which people desire to make a change in their career. Many career theories and studies to date have examined why and how people develop such a desire to change (e.g., Eisenhauer, 1995; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Maertz & Kmitta, 2012; March & Simon, 1958), showing, among others, that this desire can vary from vague—e.g., wanting a new career challenge—to crystallized —e.g., wanting to start a business in computer speech technology (Steel et al., 2002) and can arise from both push factors—e.g., being bored-out in the current job or having an abusive supervisor—and pull factors—e.g., getting an attractive unsolicited job offer (Jackofsky, 1984; Woo & Allen, 2014). Because career inaction concerns situations in which people desire a change in their career, it differs from situations in which people do not change something by virtue of there being no conscious need or desire for change (Anderson, 2003). This is because the desire to change sets in motion certain internal processes that may affect people in the long run. More specifically, when people are aware that they desire a change, they tend to engage in prefactual thinking (Bagozzi, Dholakia, & Basuroy, 2003; Carmon, Wertenbroch, & Zeelenberg, 2003), meaning that they construct mental representations of what it would be like to realize the desired change (e.g., "I would have more time for my kids/partner"; "I would have less stress"; "I could be the artist I always dreamt of being"). The stronger one's desire for change, the more positive, vivid, and intense these representations are likely to be and the longer they remain cognitively available (Bagozzi et al., 2003). When people

do not realize the desired change, these prefactual thoughts tend to evolve into counterfactual thoughts about the outcomes they could have had "if only" (i.e., outcome-related counterfactual thoughts; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Roese, 1997).

Second, career inaction concerns situations in which people do not act sufficiently on their desired to change. In line with Anderson (2003), we argue that career inaction includes both situations in which people delay decision-making, and thus take no action at all, and situations in which people take insufficient action to realize their desired change because, as we will argue, both types of inaction are stimulated by similar biases in decision-making. Key is that people recognize that they have the opportunity to act *more* (e.g., "I looked up job vacancies, but I should still write an application letter"; "I failed the exam for that course, but I could try it a second time"). Admittedly, it is difficult to judge from an outsider's perspective what this "opportunity to act more" entails; what matters is how people appraise their situation. When people appraise that they could have acted more, they recognize that they had at least some personal agency over the situation. When people then do not realize their desired change, this recognition may stimulate thoughts about how they could have acted differently (i.e., process-related counterfactual thoughts; Alquist, Ainsworth, Baumeister, Daly, & Stillman, 2015) and trigger a feeling of personal responsibility for the inaction (Beike et al., 2009). As such, career inaction differs from situations in which people attribute the reason for not having realized a desired change to external factors outside their control—for instance, when a person desires an internal job transfer to another business unit but then that plant closes in a downsizing process or when someone has been unsuccessful in changing jobs because he or she was not invited to a job interview, despite hundreds of application letters. Research (McCloy & Byrne, 2002) has shown that in the latter case, people are more likely to develop semi-factual thoughts ("even if I had…") than counterfactual thoughts, which generally facilitate rather than complicate closure.

Third, consistent with the centrality of time in the definition of a career (Arthur et al., 1989), time also plays a crucial role in the phenomenon of career inaction. It is inherent to any career change that it takes time to realize this change. We can, therefore, only talk about career inaction if people do not act sufficiently on their desire to change for at least some duration. After all, when a person does not act on a desired change in the first week of becoming aware of this desire, this does not necessarily mean that he or she will not act on that desire later on. This implies that career inaction occurs only when people have failed to act over some period of time. How long "some period of time" entails may vary depending on—for instance—the desired change (e.g., wanting to make an occupational change may require more time than wanting a similar job in another organization) and the specific circumstances (e.g., wanting to apply for a specific vacancy has a precise deadline, while wanting to start one's own business does not). Yet, whenever people perceive that at least a part of the opportunity to act has passed (e.g., the vacancy is closed) and look back over what did not happen, they are likely to start ruminating over what could have been if only they had acted sufficiently.

Building on the reasoning above, we distinguish three phases that are relevant in describing and further understanding the phenomenon of career inaction (see Figure 1). First, in the awareness phase, people become aware of their desire to make a change in their career. This phase is then followed by the inaction phase, during which people fail to act, or do not act in a sufficient way, over some period of time. Finally, in the recall phase, people perceive that at least a part of the opportunity has passed, look back and realize that the desired change has not been accomplished due to a lack of sufficient action on their part. It is in this phase that counterfactual thoughts (e.g., "If only I had acted more"; "If only I had realized the desired change") arise. We also depict a feedback loop from the recall phase to the inaction phase (see Figure 1), since—as we will explain further—research (e.g., Terris & Tykocinski, 2016) has shown that how people

feel about not having acted in the past may affect the likelihood of subsequent (in)action.

< Insert Figure 1 about here>

Career inaction shows similarities with, yet is different from a number of other concepts with a counterfactual core that can be found in the career literature: “non-events” (Schlossberg, 2005), “unanswered callings” (Berg, Grant & Johnson, 2010) and “alternative selves” (Obodaru, 2012). Non-events refer to situations in which an expected event did not happen, such as not becoming a grandparent, or not getting a promotion (Schlossberg, 2005). Like career inaction, non-events are about a desired change that did not happen; however, the content of a non-event is not necessarily career-related (e.g., not getting married), and the reason for it may be out of a person’s immediate control (e.g., not having grandchildren). Thus career inaction can be seen as a career-related non-event for which the person had at least some control. Next, unanswered callings denote occupations which people felt drawn to but failed to pursue (Berg et al., 2010). These can be considered as a subtype of career inaction, i.e., career inaction related to an occupational choice, but career inaction is a more extensive construct that can apply to career choices other than occupational ones, for instance, an internal job transition, a change to a similar job with another employer or taking a career break. Finally, alternative selves concern a counterfactual self-representation of who a person would have been if something in the past had happened differently (Obodaru, 2012). Examples are: I could have been a successful business woman (e.g., if I had not taken that career break), or I could have been a millionaire (e.g., if the final Lotto number had been right). Since alternative selves are not necessarily career-related and do not need to imply a lack of action nor a sense of agency, the construct is broader than career inaction. Yet, alternative selves can arise as a result of career inaction, although this is not necessarily the case (e.g., when the counterfactual thoughts induced by career inaction are not identity-related, e.g., “I would have less stress”) and career inaction can have other consequences

than inducing an alternative self-image.

In sum, we forward that the concept of career inaction captures a real career phenomenon that cannot be fully understood using current career concepts. In the next section, we examine which mechanisms may keep people from acting sufficiently on a desired change and, thus, why career inaction may happen.

MECHANISMS THAT KEEP PEOPLE FROM ACTING

Building on the psychology of doing nothing (Anderson, 2003; Beike et al., 2009; Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005), we argue that the occurrence of career inaction is stimulated by the general human tendencies to delay decision-making and to avoid taking action, two tendencies that are particularly salient in cases of decision difficulty (Dhar, 1997; Luce, Bettman, & Payne, 2001) and outcome uncertainty (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997; van den Heuvel, Alison & Crego, 2012). Both cases typically apply to career decisions. Indeed, a career decision can be seen as difficult because it generally concerns a choice between multiple and not easily comparable options and because people usually need to take many intermediate actions to realize a desired change. In addition, career decisions are generally characterized by outcome uncertainty: although people may have vivid prefactual thoughts about their ideal career future, this future is more distal, less tangible, and, therefore, more hypothetical and uncertain than the concreteness of the current situation. Research has shown that in cases of decision difficulty and outcome uncertainty, several inertia-enhancing mechanisms inhibit people from taking sufficient action, even when there is an impetus or desire for change (DiBonaventura & Chapman, 2008; Ritov & Baron, 1992), in that way, keeping them stuck in the status quo (Dhar, 1997; Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997; Ritov & Baron, 1992). This can be understood through Lewin's (1951) tension system perspective, which posits that psychological and physical forces form a tension system that keep people in a constant state (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). For change to occur, people need to

overcome these inertial forces. While prefactual thoughts about the desired change give people some energy to pull free from these forces, several other mechanisms strengthen the initial inertial forces—especially in cases of decision difficulty and outcome uncertainty—thereby keeping people from acting sufficiently on their desire to change (Anderson, 2003).

Different inertia-enhancing mechanisms are likely to operate simultaneously in the case of career inaction. First, when a decision is difficult (Tversky & Shafir, 1992) and outcomes are uncertain (Hartley & Phelps, 2012)—as is typically the case for career decisions—people are likely to experience fear and anxiety when considering making a desired change. Think, for instance, of someone who wants to start his or her own business. Though this person may be excited about the idea of owning and running a business, the uncertainty of success and the idea of having to invest a substantial amount of personal capital may elicit fear and anxiety. Such situations, whereby the process of changing feels scary and the simple thought of acting elicits fear and anxiety, have been shown to strengthen the human tendencies to postpone making a decision (Luce, Bettman, & Payne, 1997) and to avoid taking sufficient action to realize a desired change (Luce et al., 1997; Riis & Schwarz, 2000). These avoidance behaviors, which typically happen spontaneously and unconsciously, may help people temporarily reduce negative feelings of anxiety and fear (Anderson, 2003). Over time, however, this may lead to not realizing the desired change due to inaction.

Second, people with a desire to make a change in their career may postpone a decision or be inhibited from acting sufficiently because people are typically disproportionately influenced by what will happen in the short term. When decisions are difficult, many intermediate steps are typically needed in the short run, which often require effort, create discomfort, and entail certain costs (Anderson, 2003). For a person who wants to start an own business, for instance, these intermediate steps may include discussing the idea with a spouse, applying for a loan, making a

business plan, investing one's own money, etc. Since these short-term efforts and costs are closer in time, they tend to be more concrete than the expected future gains, especially when these expected gains are highly uncertain. Accordingly, they tend to be more readily available in people's minds, and because of this, they typically have a disproportionate influence on people's behavior ("availability heuristic"; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973; Tversky & Kahneman, 1975). Convincing empirical evidence in different areas of life (e.g., Bazerman & Moore, 2008; Schwartz, Goldberg, & Hazen, 2008; Winter & Parker, 2007) has shown that when people associate more short-term efforts and costs with acting on a desire to change, they have the tendency to delay decision-making or to take insufficient action to realize the change, even if the expected future gains are, in total, equal to or greater than the anticipated short-term costs.

Third, the inertial forces may also be strengthened because difficult (Dhar, 1996) and uncertain (Gonzalez, Dana, Koshino & Just, 2005) choices—like career decisions—place high cognitive demands on people. Since the human capacity to interpret and process information is limited (Simon, 1990), overly high cognitive demands may result in people being confronted with the limits of their brain capacity (Joss & Weber, 2016). Situations like this have been shown to have a paralyzing effect and trigger avoidance behavior, often in an unconscious attempt to lower the cognitive demands (Dhar, 1996; Dhar & Nowlis, 1999; Kool et al., 2010).

The three above-described inertia-enhancing mechanisms—i.e., the elicitation of fear and anxiety when thinking of making a change, the disproportionate influence of short-term costs over potential long-term gains, and the paralyzing effect of overly high cognitive demands—are interdependent, non-rational processes that are typically not included in traditional (rational) career-decision and transition models. All three mechanisms are implicit processes that people are not generally aware of. As such, people influenced by them typically have difficulty explaining and justifying their inaction.

WHEN CAREER INACTION IS MORE (OR LESS) LIKELY

Whether the inertia-enhancing mechanisms described above outweigh a person's desire to change—thus, whether or not people remain stuck in the status quo—can vary within and across situations. We argue that both characteristics of the desired change and of the social context can affect these inertia-enhancing mechanisms and, thus, the likelihood of career inaction.

Characteristics of the Desired Change

Characteristics of a desired change can influence the basic cognitive and psychological processes underlying people's behaviors (Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012) and, as such, they are likely to influence the inertia-enhancing mechanisms described above. A first relevant characteristic of the desired change is whether the career desire is vague or has been crystallized (Steel, 1996; Steel et al., 2002). When people only have a vague impression of which alternative they desire—for instance, when people feel pushed out of their current job due to a conflict with colleagues but have no concrete alternative in mind—the set of potential options is likely to be large, and many additional steps will be needed to clarify which option to pursue. Since the process of searching is more difficult and the outcomes are less certain, the thought of acting on the desire may elicit *more anxiety* (Allen, Renn, Moffitt, & Vardaman, 2007), and people may have *increased fear* that they will not make the best choice (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Moreover, since people with a vague desire to change need to take additional steps to clarify their desire (Steel et al., 2002), they are likely to perceive more *short-term efforts and costs*. Finally, the process of comparing several vague alternatives may be *more cognitively demanding* as the person has to compare more options (Anderson, 2003). This may all enhance the likelihood of inaction. Conversely, when the desire to change is more crystallized (e.g., a person receives an attractive job offer), career inaction may be less likely because the prefactual thoughts about the alternative option are more specific and may, therefore, give the person more energy to pull free

from the initial inertial forces.

Proposition 1: People are less likely to act sufficiently on a desired change in their career when the desired alternative is vague compared to when the desired alternative has been crystallized.

Second, the inertia-enhancing mechanisms are likely to be stronger when the transition is perceived to be larger; i.e., when the current job and the desired alternative are seen as more different in terms of required knowledge, skills, habits, location, etc. (Latack, 1984; Nicholson, 1984). Note that what is a large change for one person (e.g., the transition from senior IT specialist to self-employed career coach) may not be so large for another person (e.g., because his or her parents were career coaches). The larger the perceived magnitude of the change, the more risky the change is likely to feel (Latack, 1984) and, therefore, the *more fear and anxiety* the thought of making this change will probably elicit. In addition, when people perceive the transition to be larger, they may anticipate that more intermediate steps are needed to realize the change, such as following additional training and building a new network (Nicholson, 1984). As such, the *short-term efforts and costs* tend to be higher. Finally, the decision process may be *more cognitively demanding* because of the disparity between the options, making it more difficult to compare the current and the desired job than when options are more similar. This all may make career inaction more likely.

Proposition 2: People are less likely to act sufficiently on a desired change in their career when they perceive the desired transition to be large compared to when they perceive the desired transition to be small.

Third, the timeframe for realizing a desired change may affect the inertia-enhancing mechanisms. The longer the window of opportunity, the more likely that the future will bring better opportunities, which may be forgone by acting now (Cooke, Meyvis, & Schwartz, 2001).

Therefore, when the window of opportunity is long or even undefined, people may be less likely to act sufficiently since they may have more *fear* to miss out on better opportunities later (Anderson, 2003; Beike et al., 2009) and may relate *more costs with acting in the short run* (i.e., more lost opportunities; Beike et al., 2009). In addition, the decision process may be *more cognitively demanding* because time entails the promise of better opportunities, which is an uncertainty that may be difficult for our brain to process. Conversely, when there is little time to realize a change, people tend to feel time pressure, which may motivate them and give them more energy to act on their desire to change. Although a short timeframe could also strengthen certain fears (e.g., "have I thought it through?"), research has shown that inaction is in general less likely when the window of opportunity is shorter (Carnevale & Lawler, 1986; Dhar & Nowlis, 1999), suggesting that the motivational aspect tend to outweigh the inertia enhancing mechanisms when the timeframe is short.

Proposition 3: People are less likely to act sufficiently on a desired change in their career when the timeframe to realize the desire is longer compared to when the timeframe is shorter.

Characteristics of the Social Context

Also contextual characteristics can affect the strength of the inertia-enhancing mechanisms. A first characteristic that may play a role is job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001). Job embeddedness refers to contextual on-the-job and off-the-job forces that keep people from leaving their organization, more specifically: the links they have with other people in the organization and the community, their perceptions of person–environment fit, and perceived sacrifices involved in quitting, such as a good pension plan (Lee, Mitchell, Sablynski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001). Although there is ample evidence that people who are more embedded in their job are less likely to leave (Jiang, Liu, McKay, Lee, & Mitchell, 2012), the

psychological mechanisms through which job embeddedness—as a contextual force—affects people's career decisions have not yet been elucidated (Jiang et al., 2012). We argue that job embeddedness may keep people in their current job, even when they desire a change, because embeddedness strengthens the inertia-enhancing mechanisms described above. First, for people who are more embedded in their job, for example because of strong links with their colleagues or an excellent health insurance package, the thought of changing may *elicit more anxiety and fear*, as there is the risk of losing more (Allen et al., 2016). Second, the more people are embedded in their job, the more vivid and concrete the losses associated with changing will be (Burton, Holtom, Sablynski & Lee, 2010). The anticipation of these *short-term losses* may have a disproportionate influence on people, outweighing the impact of the expected long-term gains of the desired change. Third, a change decision might be *more cognitively demanding* when people are more embedded because the comparison between the current job and alternative attractive jobs is complicated by the many positive features of the current job. Together, these forces may prevent people from acting sufficiently on their desired change.

Proposition 4: People are less likely to act sufficiently on a desired change in their career when they are more embedded in their on-the-job and off-the-job context than when they are less embedded in their context.

Second, the norms regarding careers and career changes prevailing in a person's social context may strengthen the inertia-enhancing mechanisms. Social norms provide information about expected behavior (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). As such, these norms may affect whether a desired change is framed as either "normal" or "abnormal" (Anderson, 2003) and whether this change is likely to be supported or rather resisted by others (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). If, within a given social context, a stable career path and a long-term employment relationship with the same employer are the norm, the thought of deviating from this norm by making a change in

one's career may elicit *more fear and anxiety* because people may then expect more resistance and negative reactions from others. In addition, when social norms favor staying, people may anticipate more *short-term efforts and costs* because they are likely to get less social support and could even be counteracted by their social context. Finally, the process may be *more cognitively demanding* since additional risks and losses (e.g., the negative reactions of others) should be taken into account (Gonzalez et al., 2005). This may all make career inaction more likely.

Proposition 5: People are less likely to act sufficiently on a desired change in their career when their social context is characterized by norms of staying than when their social context is characterized by norms of mobility.

HOW CAREER INACTION IMPACTS PEOPLE

When people do not succeed in overcoming the inertia-enhancing mechanisms described above, they may, at some point in time, perceive that at least part of the opportunity has passed (e.g., the registration deadline for a training course has passed; the vacancy is closed) and, looking back, realize that their desired career change has not been achieved due to a lack of sufficient action on their part. This is likely to engender counterfactual thoughts (Alquist et al., 2015; Beike et al., 2009). These thoughts typically include both ruminations about how the past career enactment *process* (i.e., process-related counterfactuals) and how the experienced *outcomes* (i.e., outcome-related counterfactuals) could have been different "if only" (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Markman & McMullen, 2003; Roese, 1997). Although process- and outcome-related counterfactuals are often related and intertwined (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Epstude & Roese, 2008), they operate through different processes (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002) and induce separate emotions, which may—though not necessarily—overlap (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005). We expect that the overall impact of career inaction may depend on how these process- and outcome-related emotions evolve and interact

over time.

Emotions Triggered by Counterfactual Thoughts

Before we reflect on the possible overall impact of career inaction, it is crucial to first ascertain which process- and outcome-related counterfactuals are triggered by career inaction and through which processes. Below, we explain these issues for both process- and outcome-related counterfactuals.

Process-related counterfactuals. In the recall phase, people may first of all ruminate about the past career enactment process, more specifically, about their lack of sufficient action despite the opportunity to do so. These process-related counterfactuals are likely to be upward counterfactual thoughts (Alquist et al., 2015; Begeer, De Rosnay, Lunenburg, Stegge & Meerum Terwogt, 2014), i.e., reflections on how things could have been done better (e.g., “if only I had retaken my exam”; “If only I had talked with my supervisor about my aspirations”). Upward counterfactual thoughts, in combination with feelings of personal responsibility (cf. supra), tend to induce the negative counterfactual emotion of regret (Alquist et al., 2015). This process-related —also called self-blame—regret (Connolly & Reb, 2005; Reb, 2008) is believed to be induced because upward counterfactual thoughts complicate *justifying* the past decision enactment process (Connolly & Reb, 2005; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). That is, the more people experience counterfactuals about what they could have done differently, the more difficult it becomes to justify their factual (lack of) actions (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). Because people have an innate need to justify themselves and their actions (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Heitmann, Lehmann, & Herrmann, 2007), low justifiability generally triggers a strong emotional response (Bettman, Luce & Payne, 1998), here: regret. The conversion of process-related counterfactuals into regret through lowered justifiability is highly likely in the case of career inaction. As noted earlier, the three inertia-enhancing mechanisms that keep people from acting sufficiently on their

desired career change—the elicitation of fear and anxiety when thinking of making the change, the disproportionate influence of what happens in the short term, and the paralyzing effect of high cognitive demands—are implicit processes that people are generally not aware of. As such, people who are influenced by these mechanisms typically have much difficulty justifying their lack of action (Bettman et al., 1998; Luce et al., 2001). The more process-related counterfactuals people have, the more difficult it is for people to justify not having acted more on their desired career change and, therefore, the more intense self-blame regret they are likely to experience. If, however, for whatever reason, people are better able to justify their inaction, the process-related counterfactuals may trigger less regret.

Proposition 6: Process-related counterfactuals hinder people to justify their past career decision-enactment process. Feelings of low justifiability, in turn, induce process-related (i.e., self-blame) regret.

Outcome-related counterfactuals. In the recall phase, people also tend to ruminate about alternative *outcomes* they could have had if only they had realized their desired career change. The seed of outcome-related counterfactuals is laid in the awareness phase when people engage in prefactual thinking about what it would be like to have realized the desired change (Bagozzi et al., 2003; Carmon et al., 2003). When looking back over what did not happen, these prefactual thoughts tend to evolve into counterfactual thoughts about the outcomes they could have had "if only." Since outcome-related counterfactuals originate from something people desired at one point in time, these thoughts typically concern a positive career alternative. People's emotional response to these counterfactuals will, however, depend on how this career alternative compares to their current situation. The key process converting outcome-related counterfactuals into emotions is, therefore, a *comparison process* (Begeer et al., 2014; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002; Sanna & Turley, 1996). When the factual outcomes are comparatively better than the

counterfactual ones, people are likely to experience positive outcome-related emotions, such as contentment or relief (Begeer et al., 2014). For instance, a person who did not act on his or her entrepreneurial intentions may feel content when the factual career allowed him or her to have a warm and rich family life, which would have been difficult under business ownership. This person could also feel relief, for instance, when, in retrospect, the endeavor was unlikely to have been successful as an economic crisis emerged. Conversely, when people deem their factual career outcomes to be worse than their imagined outcomes, they are likely to experience regret (Alquist et al., 2015; Begeer et al., 2014). People may, for instance, experience outcome-related regret when they focus on all the positive things (e.g., respect, financial benefits) that they are currently lacking but that they could have had if only they had accepted that attractive job offer; or when the initial desire to change was triggered by a push factor—for example, a boring job or an abusive supervisor—which persisted over time, but people now feel too old to still act on their desire to change. Overall, these examples illustrate that whether the overall comparison turns out to be positive or negative is likely to depend on the specific factual and counterfactual features a person focuses on in the comparison process.

Proposition 7: When the factual career outcomes are perceived as comparatively better than the counterfactual outcomes, people are likely to experience outcome-related contentment or relief, whereas when the factual outcomes are comparatively worse, people are likely to experience outcome-related regret.

Impact of Process- and Outcome-Related Emotions and Their Interaction Over Time

Since, as we argued above, process-related or self-blame regret is likely to be characteristic to most career inactions, this emotion—and how it evolves over time—probably plays a key role in the impact of career inaction. For most people, experiencing self-blame regret is likely to be truly challenging to their self-image. Recognizing that a once hoped for future is

not achieved due to one’s own inaction—due to one’s own fault—may feel as a threat to one’s self-esteem (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983; King & Hicks, 2007) and may therefore be particularly difficult and painful. Over time, this self-esteem threat and the associated pain may intensify because as time passes, people tend to blame themselves more intensely for their inactions (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). Indeed, the further removed people are from an opportunity on which they did not act, the more convinced they generally become that they would have or could have done just fine if only they had given it a decent try (Gilovich, Kerr, & Medvec, 1993; Nisan, 1972) and when people’s retrospective confidence grows, they tend to find it more difficult to justify their lack of action and, accordingly, they blame themselves even more as time passes (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). However, people can, over time, find closure for their self-blame regrets. Research (King & Hicks, 2007; Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2012) has for instance shown that people can achieve such closure when they, by engaging in significant, cognitive work to make sense of what (did not) happen, accommodate their cognitive frame of reference. Although this reframing is generally a painful process, it can over time contribute to a richer, more complex and less self-defensive frame of reference which is characterized by a more compassionate stance towards one’s past failures (King & Hicks, 2007; Strauss et al., 2012). It is therefore likely that people who are successful in this reframing will forgive themselves for their inaction and find closure for their self-blame regrets. As this form of closure is typically facilitated by positive emotions (King & Hicks, 2007)—because positive emotions serve as resources in the difficult process of accommodating one’s frame of reference—it is more likely to occur when people experience positive outcome-related emotions, such as content and relief. As such, process-related regret and outcome-related contentment and relief may interact over time, with the latter emotions facilitating closure for the former. This is not to say that everyone who experiences positive outcome-related emotions after career inaction will find closure for their self-blame

regret, but these positive emotions can help people to find the strength to actively grapple with the pain and self-esteem threat and, ultimately, grow as a person.

Yet, when people experience outcome-related regret, closure for self-blame regret is probably harder to achieve because every time people feel regret about the outcomes they could have had “if only”, they are reminded of the reason for being in their current, comparatively worse situation: their own lack of sufficient action. As such, outcome-related and process-related regret may reinforce each other. This interaction may strengthen over time because not only people’s self-blame regret may intensify as time passes, but also their outcome-related regret. Indeed, as time passes, people generally think of an increasing number of good things that could have happened “if only” because the outcome-related counterfactuals induced by inaction are generally open-ended in nature and only bound by one’s imagination (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Rajagopal et al., 2006). When process-related and outcome-related regret intensify and reinforce each other in this way, career inaction may end up having a highly negative impact on people. People may not only experience lowered self-esteem, (long-term) regret has also been associated with feelings of emptiness, helplessness, sadness (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998), lowered satisfaction (Verbruggen & van Emmerik, 2018), and reduced health (Jokisaari, 2003; Lee et al., 2017). In addition, people’s lingering commitment to their past career desires may lower the effectiveness of coping strategies. For instance, Berg et al. (2011) found that the coping efforts of people with an answered calling fell short of providing a desirable level of fulfillment when they couldn’t stop focusing on the outcomes that might have been.

Subsequent Career Enactment Process

A final issue worth addressing—given the importance of path dependency in careers (Verbruggen et al., 2015)—is the impact of career inaction on people’s subsequent career enactment process, in particular in cases when people experience both process-related and

outcome-related regret. In such cases when people experience overall regret from past career inaction, inaction inertia may develop (Butler & Highhouse, 2000; Sevdalis, Harvey, & Yip, 2006; Terris & Tykocinski, 2016), meaning that when people bypassed an initial opportunity to act on their desire to change, they are less likely to act on a subsequent opportunity when this opportunity is (slightly) less attractive than the initial one. For instance, when people regret not having acted on an attractive vacancy in the past, they are likely to also not act on a new, similar, though slightly less attractive vacancy. Inaction inertia may feel counterintuitive at first sight, but the phenomenon has been shown to occur in many areas in life (Zeelenberg, Van den Bos, Van Dijk, & Pieters, 2002) and is explained by the fact that acting on the new, comparatively less attractive opportunity would serve as a constant reminder that one had not acted on the previous opportunity to change. As such, acting on the new opportunity would make the previous inaction even harder to justify and, thus, risks to intensify regret about this initial inaction (Butler & Highhouse, 2000; Sevdalis et al., 2006; Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998). The anticipation of intensified regret may then strengthen the inertia-enhancing mechanisms described above. In particular, people may then experience more fear when thinking of making the change because they anticipate intensified regret about the initial career inaction (Butler & Highhouse, 2000; Sevdalis et al., 2006; Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998), and since this anticipated regret is experienced in the short term, it may have a disproportionate influence on their behaviors. In addition, the situation may be more cognitively demanding, since people may then try to take into account and cognitively deal with the fact that they had not acted sufficiently on a previous more attractive opportunity to change. This may all enhance the likelihood of career inaction.

It is less clear what will happen when people who did not act on an initial opportunity to act on their desired career change encounter a new, slightly more attractive opportunity than the one they initially passed. In line with Zeelenberg and colleagues (2002), we expect that in such

cases, people are more likely to act on this new opportunity because it gives them a "silver lining" and, thus, a justification for their past inaction (e.g., "Had I acted on the previous opportunity to change, I would not have the chance to go for this better opportunity"). This could both lower their process-related regret and enhance the motivational power of the desire, thereby giving people the energy to pull free from the inertial forces that kept people in a constant state.

Proposition 9: The experience of regret about career inaction will hinder people from acting on new, less attractive career opportunities that come along, but can stimulate them to act on new, more attractive career opportunities.

DISCUSSION

Building on the psychology of doing nothing (Anderson, 2003; Beike et al., 2009; Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005), we described the phenomenon of career inaction as the failure to act sufficiently over some period of time on a desired change in one's career, and we articulated several mechanisms that explain why career inaction might occur. In addition, we examined conditions that enhance the likelihood of career inaction and explored how career inaction may impact people, even in the long run. In the following section, we outline the theoretical contributions of our theory, explore how future research may examine this phenomenon, and discuss the practical implications of our theorizing.

Contributions to the Literature

By identifying cognitive and psychological mechanisms that inhibit people from acting on a desired change in their career, our theory sheds light on a specific explanation as to why people may have stable careers. In doing so, our theory extends recent empirical studies on dysfunctional forms of "staying" in one's job (Allen et al., 2016; Mai et al., 2016; Stengård et al., 2016), which have pointed to the risks of certain forms of staying for people's well-being and performance, but stop short of offering a systematic analysis of why and when these dysfunctional forms of staying

occur. As such, understanding why and when people do not act on a desired change—and, thus, why people may have stable careers—is an important advancement for the literature on careers. Of course, we do not argue that all stable careers are due to career inaction. After all, career inaction is restricted to those stable career episodes in which people do not act sufficiently on a desired change, despite the opportunity to act more. People may also go through an objectively stable career episode because they have no need or desire for change or because external factors inhibit them from realizing a desired change. Each of these different forms of stable career paths may be associated with different underlying mechanisms and, therefore, with different outcomes. We hope that by developing a theory on one of these stable career types, we may also spur research on these other forms of stable careers.

Second, by introducing the phenomenon of career inaction to the career literature, our theory highlights that people's career desires, on one hand, and their behaviors and future career states, on the other, are not always consistent. Most career theories—like most theories in organizational science—are variance theories, in the sense that they are primarily concerned with how constructs covary with each other (Mohr, 1982; Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015). In particular, career theories have focused predominantly on how a stimulus or desire to make a change (e.g., being dissatisfied with one's present job) correlates with people's intention to change, which then relates to taking action to realize that change and, subsequently, to the likelihood of realizing it (e.g., Gati & Asher, 2001; Hom & Griffeth, 1995; Lent et al., 1994; March & Simon, 1958; van Esbroeck, Tibos, & Zaman, 2005). Accordingly, most of the empirical research to date has focused on career options that have been chosen and realized (for an exception, see Mai et al., 2016). Recently, however, there have been calls—mainly in the turnover domain—to explore cases of inconsistency by applying an equifinality approach, i.e., by investigating different paths leading to the same end state, e.g., turnover (Hom, 2011; Lee &

Mitchell, 1994; Maertz & Campion, 2004). In addition to this equifinality approach, it may also be useful to apply a multifinality approach—that is, to examine the different paths that can follow from a particular starting state, for instance, after a desire to change has been formed. Such a desire can be followed by realizing the change, but also by a lack of change, for instance, when someone fails to act sufficiently on this desire (the focus of this study) or when someone is unsuccessful due to environmental barriers. By introducing the phenomenon of career inaction to the career literature, our process theory could spur researchers to study cases of inconsistency in careers and to consider multifinality in their research models. In a career context characterized by rapid change and unpredictability, such a process perspective will be important to move the career field forward as it allows for a better understanding of how careers evolve over time and how both actions and inactions can impact career outcomes and people's future career choices.

Third, our theory challenges the rather unilaterally positive view regarding the value of self-directedness in careers. In line with much psychological research that values freedom and the exercise of choice (Botti & McGill, 2004; e.g., Averill, 1973; Condry, 1977; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weiner, 1985), the contemporary career literature stresses that people should self-direct their career to achieve satisfaction and happiness therein (e.g., Abele & Wiese, 2008; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Hall, 1996; Hirschi, 2014; Verbruggen & Sels, 2008). In the past decade, this focus on agency and self-directedness has been criticized, for instance, for being overly one-sided and for concealing the many structural factors that also play a role in how careers develop (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017; Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000). Our theory adds another critique and points to the risk—or dark side—of the societal trend of holding people personally accountable for their career. This societal trend puts pressure on people to make the best possible choice (Verbruggen, Dries & van Vianen, 2013), which makes the decision-making process more cognitively demanding (Tetlock, 1985). As we

explained in this paper, this tendency may therefore have a paralyzing effect and could lead to people not acting sufficiently on—and, thus, probably not realizing—their desired change. People may then feel personally responsible for not having realized their career desire, which is likely to elicit counterfactual thoughts and may induce feelings of regret. As such, the societal tendency of holding people personally accountable for their career may, paradoxically, hold people back from acting on their career desires.

Fourth, by defining career inaction as a phenomenon that occurs through several phases (i.e., an awareness phase, an inaction phase, and a recall phase) and by reflecting on how the outcomes of inaction evolve over time, our theorizing gives a prominent role to time in the understanding of career inaction. Although time is an essential component of a career (Arthur et al., 1989), the career field is in need of more longitudinal approaches and designs (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). As Roe (2008) has argued, probably the greatest obstacle for researchers to include time in their research is a mental one: "It is the tendency among researchers to think in terms of 'what is,' rather than 'what happens'" (p. 40). Focusing on phenomena rather than constructs—as we have done in this study—may help overcome this tendency (Roe, 2008). Moreover, our discussion on how outcomes of career inaction evolve over time provides a theoretical basis to understand and empirically investigate evolutions in these—and related—outcomes over time when nothing seems to be happening. For instance, following our theorizing, the finding of Abele and Spurk (2009) that, on average, people's job satisfaction—an attitude that is strongly related with regret (Naquin, 2003)—decreased over a five-year period, might be attributable to regrettable career inaction and its increasing impact on over time. Overall, we believe that our theorizing can stimulate researchers to apply a temporal lens to career studies, which can deepen and extend our understanding of careers.

Finally, our theorizing contributes to the inaction literature. In particular, our theory

extends Anderson' (2003) work of fifteen years ago by integrating additional and more recent insights on inaction, by elaborating on the role of time and by speculating not only about negative but also about positive outcomes. Moreover, the domain of careers we focused on in our theory is a highly promising area for inaction researchers to further explore. Research in this field has suggested that in order to understand the impact of inaction (as well as action), it is important to look at (in)actions as being embedded in a decision sequence (Zeelenberg et al., 2002). However, most research on inaction uses either experimental designs, focusing on isolated inactions, or retrospective studies, with no particular attention to the timing of the reported actions and inactions. Studying inaction in careers may provide inaction researchers with a context in which decisions are naturally embedded in a time sequence. In addition, career decisions differ from several other decisions that people make (like daily buying decisions) in at least two other ways: (1) they are less frequent, and (2) they are generally very impactful and meaningful. By exploring career decisions more systematically and comparing them with other types of decisions, potentially important decision characteristics may be revealed, which can enhance our understanding of the psychology of doing nothing.

Methodological Considerations

To study career inaction, researchers may benefit from applying a mixed-method approach. First, multiple-wave survey studies may be useful in detecting episodes of career inaction and in examining their short-term impact. These studies should assess people's career desires, intentions, actions, actual career situation, and emotions at multiple time points. Researchers could, for instance, first categorize individuals into groups based on (a) their desire to make a change at one point in time and (b) the degree to which they have acted on and realized their desire at a later point in time, and subsequently compare the outcomes (e.g., emotions) among those groups. These studies probably need a time span varying from one to three years, since this is the likely amount

of time people need to act on a desire to make a specific change in their career. However, which time frame is actually needed may depend on the specific career decision under study and should be determined empirically by experimenting with different time frames (Roe, 2008).

Second, longitudinal qualitative case study research might be relevant for understanding the mechanisms at play in each phase of career inaction and how elements in the different phases interrelate over time. This would require following a group of individuals over a sufficiently long time span, ideally over the whole career, to capture desires to change as well as possible actions or inaction, and how people explain and justify their experiences. Although there are practical challenges with implementing such a design, this type of research is a much needed avenue for overcoming the tendency in current career research to over-simplify variables and relationships (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017).

Third, retrospective surveys, for example, with people at retirement age, could be used to study the overall occurrence and relevance of career inaction in people's lives and its relative importance compared to other types of stable career episodes (e.g., careers that are stable due to external factors that inhibit career change) and unfortunate career actions. Retrospective studies have already been used in research on life regrets (e.g., Hattiangadi et al., 1995). The advantage of this approach is the relative ease of obtaining a long-term perspective. A disadvantage, however, is that time may affect people's memories. It is, therefore, important to complement such studies with one of the prospective approaches described above.

Finally, experimental designs and vignette studies could be used, for instance, to examine the relevance of decision and contextual conditions affecting the likelihood of inaction or to study when career inaction is more or less likely to be dysfunctional. Though we did not formulate propositions about the latter, our theorizing highlights the processes (i.e., a justifiability and a comparison process) through which effects are induced, which is helpful to study this issue.

Researchers could for instance compare people's reactions to vignettes describing inaction situations that include factors complicating justifying the career inaction (e.g., when people are faced with a widely accepted reason to act, for instance, an abusive supervisor) versus inaction situations that include factors facilitating justifying inaction (e.g., high unemployment rate). Similarly, researchers could assess reactions to vignettes describing inaction situations in which the factual career outcomes compare more or, conversely, less favorably to the counterfactual ones. Overall, career researchers who are interested in studying career inaction may want to search for inspiration in (in)action research, since this literature has more experience with some of the proposed designs (e.g., retrospective studies and experimental research) as well as with measuring some of the key constructs in our theory, such as regret.

Practical Implications

Finally, our theory has several practical implications. First, our theorizing renders some practical guidelines for career practitioners helping people who have difficulty acting on a desired change. In particular, career counselors may help people become aware of, as well as weaken, the inertia-enhancing mechanisms that keep them from acting sufficiently on their desire to change. Career counselors can, for instance, help people deal with the anxiety and fear elicited by the thought of changing, reevaluate the possible gains versus losses associated with the desired change, and/or break down the career choice and enactment process in small steps to lower the cognitive demands. These practices may all help people pull free from the inertia-enhancing mechanisms and come into action. Career practitioners can also help people deal with the negative impact of past career inaction, for instance, by helping people understand and justify why they did not act sufficiently (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002) or by helping them reappraise their current situation, for instance, by emphasizing other features in the comparison process (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996).

Organizations also need to be aware of the phenomenon of career inaction. The counterfactual thoughts induced by career inaction may result in regret, which could, in turn, affect people's attitudes and well-being and may, therefore, have organizational consequences as well (e.g., lowered performance; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). It thus seems relevant for HR managers and leaders to pay attention to the underlying reasons for stable career paths in their organization and, if such stability is due to career inaction, examine whether employees should be helped or encouraged to enact their career desires. This highlights the importance of organizational career management, which includes both practices aimed at discovering career desires, such as making a personal development plan and having career conversations with one's supervisors, and those aimed at helping people act on their goals, such as introducing them to relevant people in the organization or sector (Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002).

Conclusion

In sum, this paper introduced the phenomenon of career inaction, reflected on why and when it occurs, as well as the possible impact it could have, thereby applying insights from the psychology of doing nothing to the career field. As demonstrated in this paper, the concept of career inaction captures a real career phenomenon that cannot be understood through existing career decision or transition models, and neither has it been captured by existing concepts. We hope that our theory will stimulate career researchers to explore this whole new area of careers.

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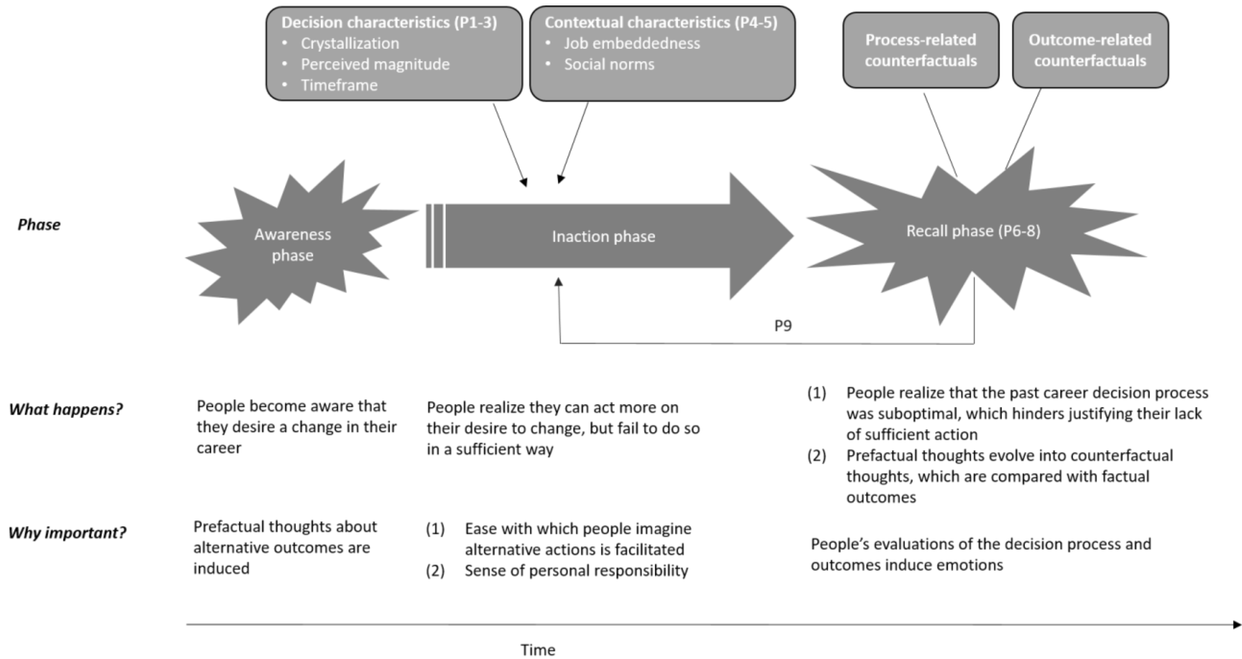
FIGURE 1

Career Inaction: A Phenomenon Occurring Through Several Phases



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