NAVIGATING PREDICTABLE PATHS AND EXPERIMENTAL TWISTS: DEVELOPING A CAREER IDENTITY ACROSS MULTIPLE LEVELS, PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

ABSTRACT

Growing literature on multiple identities and careers suggest that careers are no longer carried out through singular predictable professional paths but are experimented with through different twists and turns of multiple organizations and work and life roles. In this increasingly complex identity landscape, career identity may provide an overarching way to internalize and to communicate a cohesive sense of self. We synthesize extant definitions to bring career identity to the foreground and consider how multiple levels of identity motivate the processes by which career identity is constructed. We also investigate how individuals simultaneously explore and stabilize their careers by emphasizing experimentation and predictabilty at different points in their career. We present a framework of career identity development that links these processes to both positive and negative outcomes, and posit that engaging in multiple processes mitigates negative outcomes to provide coherence in an overarching career identity.

Keywords: Career Identity, Career Development, Narratives, Career Paths

Traditionally, research and advice that focused on career advancement emphasized the importance of full-time, long-term employment, and explained employees' professional commitment to a single employing organization (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Enache, Sallan, Simo, and Fernandez, 2011; Levinson, 1978; Whyte, 1956). In this traditional model, employees expected to receive material gains and valued progressive hierarchical advancement (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) in exchange for independence and competence to complete required work tasks (Hall, 1996). These career dynamics provided predictability for both employees in terms of how to advance and develop their careers as well as for employers in terms of succession planning. Yet increasing global competition and advances in technology have led to greater outsourcing and automation that have made jobs less stable, thereby changing the nature of work and the workforce (Autor and Acemoglu, 2010; Autor, Levy, and Murnane, 2003). As a result, individuals may no longer engage in continuous linear employment but instead follow nontraditional career paths that are characterized by less institutionalized companies, nonstandard employment relationships, and more flexibility in the workplace (Kossek and Lautsch, 2007; Moen and Sweet, 2004; Rousseau, 2004).

In the face of current workplace dynamics and less secure employer-employee relationships, the way in which individuals develop a career identity is a question of interest (Meijers, 1998). Fundamentally, career identity is the expression of who people are across their career. While nontraditional paths arise in part due to economic trends, employees entering into the workforce may also prefer to pursue their multiple interests through more varied work roles and discontinuous career paths. Trends in employment interests suggest that new employees entering into the workforce seek opportunity for advancement, as expected in more traditional career paths, yet also seek opportunities to pursue work that fits their interests and develops new

skills with flexibility found in nontraditional paths (Rigoni and Adkins, 2016). These dynamic

changes in a career can involve shifts in multiple levels of identity, including personal

(individual), relational (interpersonal), and collective (organizational/occupational) identities that

can coexist or activate at different times across different contexts (Brewer and Gardner, 1996).

These multiple levels of identity serve as different motivations for self-definition, including self-

interest at the personal level, other's benefit at the relational level, and collective welfare at the

collective level (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). Consequently, having a coherent sense of one's

identity can be challenging when faced not only with multiple workplaces and roles but also with

these multiple levels of identity.

  With the different twists and turns that can occur across a career, career identity serves to

unify a sense of one's self across multiple workplaces, roles, and even multiple levels of identity.

In communicating the meaning behind career to self and others, career identity is a grand

narrative (Savickas, 2005) that synthesizes multiple role transitions across one's work history

into an overarching coherent story (Nicholson and West, 1989). The overall arc of a career may

fall to the background when employees are faced with more immediate changes (Ashforth,

2001), yet employees can benefit from bringing career identity to the foreground to explain

multiple transitions. By examining who one is across the breadth of a career, employees may be

better positioned to take a long term view of immediate challenges and produce growth-based

stories that foster resilience (Vough and Caza, 2017).

  In this paper, we develop a framework for developing career identity that incorporates

multiple levels of identity, processes, and positive and negative identity outcomes that

demonstrate the importance of combining different processes to make meaning out of career

changes. While extant literature has investigated career identity as a socially constructed

narrative (LaPointe, 2010) and examined multiple identities through phased construction over time (Caza, Moss and Vough, 2017), putting these perspectives on meaning and time together to advance understanding of career identity development serves as a valuable tool for individuals and organizational practices on career development. By articulating *why* career identity is reshaped and motivated by multiple levels of identity and *how* people make meaning of their identity through different processes, our framework elaborates identity construction in the broader abstraction of a career. This framework also provides individuals with an approach to articulate the twists and turns in their careers, helping them make sense of their past work experiences and plan for the future.

Our theoretical framework makes several contributions to existing literature on identity construction and careers. First, we review definitions of career identity to offer a synthesized approach to understanding the construct, and we make explicit how multiple levels of identity motivate career identity development. We articulate three main assumptions about career identity—career identity as narrative, career identity as growth over time, and career identity as motivated by multiple levels of identity—which serve as the foundation for our theorizing.

Second, we offer an integrated perspective on the careers literature. Extant reviews of the careers literature indicates that more current career concepts such as boundaryless (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), protean (Hall, 1996), and kaleidoscope (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; 2006) careers are developed in contrast to traditional life cycle or life stage understanding of how career paths progress over time (Sullivan, 1999; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). This suggests careers are *either* nontraditional involving multiple roles and organizations as people experiment with different interests and adapt to different meaningful relationships *or* traditional involving a linear trajectory with progression through life stages. We suggest instead that careers are

alternately *both* experimented with across multiple roles, organizations, and interests *and* stabilized through predictable progression at various points in time. This perspective allows people to emphasize experimentation or predictability depending on the need to explore or to stabilize identity, while balancing both across the duration of a career.

Third, our theorizing offers a theoretical framework for how career identity is motivated across multiple levels of identity that inform different processes that emphasize gaining predictability or exploring through experimentation. We posit that each process in isolation can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Yet, when constructing processes are combined across a career to balance both predictability and experimentation, we argue that negative outcomes can be mitigated while positive outcomes are enhanced over time. Literature suggests that the complexity of multiple identities can result in conflict and enhancement of identity (Ramarajan, 2014), and we suggest that over time, engaging in multiple processes can help move toward a balanced and more coherent career identity.

Taken together, we improve our understanding of how people develop and make sense of their career identities over time. We begin by clarifying the construct of career identity and putting forth the assumptions that form the basis of our theorizing. We then examine predictability and experimentation in careers and introduce our theoretical framework of career identity construction.

CAREER IDENTITY

Across various definitions, career identity has been understood as a socially constructed abstraction of the self-concept that forms over time and changes with work history. Extant definitions include career identity as an assimilation of work experiences into meaningful and useful structures (Meijers, 1998), a longitudinal representation of diverse and diffuse experiences

and aspirations (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth, 2004), changes that involve forming, evolving, and even radically transforming the self-concept across one's work history (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008), and a narrative practice (LaPointe, 2010) of coherent self-concept constructed across one's work history into a meaningful whole.

Several core assumptions in existing literature inform our theoretical framework of career identity development. First, an understanding of career identity as a constructed self-concept draws from the perspective of career identity as narrative. A narrative perspective assumes that identity can be abstracted into a story that reflects on the past and informs the future. Identity narratives provide continuity across changes experienced in a career and provide a global narrative that serves as an overarching framework to story transitions across multiple identities (Ashforth, 2001). Additionally, this global narrative can serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy in which individuals become committed to their espoused story, which then influences future choices (Ashforth, 2001). With consideration given to past, present, and future, longitudinal and time-based definitions also indicate the growth of career identity over time.

Career identity is understood as a more generalized abstraction that can be adapted to changes as they occur across time (Ashforth et al., 2008). A growth or developmental perspective suggests that constructing a career identity involves learning and adapting as work experiences are gained, but also as life changes occur and careers are shifted in response to life events. Career development is understood as "literally the creation of new aspects of the self in relation to the career" (Hall and Mirvis, 1996, p. 25). Thus, we also assume in our theorizing that career identity is adapted and perhaps even further abstracted in order to accommodate new knowledge and learning that takes place across multiple identities that are occupied in a career.

Definitions that highlight change and the socially driven nature of career identity also

point to how career identity may be informed by multiple social contexts of identity. While identity may be internally formulated within an individual, it is also articulated externally, as the meaning behind an identity is both subjectively created by individuals as well as socially constructed and validated within a social reality (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Savickas, 2005). Different social motivations from multiple social contexts of identity may be engaged in constructing a career identity. For example, at the individual level, emphasis on personal traits may motivate the pursuit of self-interests (e.g., I am creative and want to be a writer). Alternatively, the benefit of others may inform how a current identity is performed at the interpersonal level (e.g., I am a teacher and use my creativity to benefit my students). Finally, collective welfare at the group level may have informed a past career choice (e.g., I pursued a degree in early childhood education to positively impact children in my community). Thus, an examination of multiple social contexts of identity can help shed light on the motivations that yield different processes of career identity construction. In what follows, we expand on each assumption provided above —career identity as narrative, career identity as growth over time, and career identity as motivated by multiple social contexts—in order to establish the foundation for our theorizing.

Career Identity as Narrative

Identity as narrative is an important concept for understanding how people maintain a sense of continuity across changes, such as occupational moves, entry and exit into different organizations, transfers within the same organization, as well as position changes such as promotions, demotions, and lateral moves (Ibarra and Barbalescu, 2010). Keeping a narrative going across these changes allows individuals to integrate self-definition through reconstructing the past, perceiving the present, and anticipating the future (McAdams, 1996). Work histories are

a lifetime journey, and careers "are the tales that are told about them" (Nicholson and West,

1989, p. 181). In telling the tale, people ascribe purpose to their experiences, which in turn

informs future career choices in order to align with that purpose (Nicholson and West, 1989).

Purpose enables life themes that informs current behavior, sustains a cohesive sense of identity,

and aligns future action to this sustained identity (Savickas, 2005).

Narrative also provides flexibility in terms of how themes of a story are integrated across

multiple identities (Ashforth, 2001). As an identity that can be expressed at a more abstract level,

career identity provides opportunity to frame oneself as being adaptive to the changes and

learning opportunities afforded in a more varied, and potentially more precarious, career path

(Ashforth et al., 2008). This abstraction can also provide a developmental view of career identity

through an ongoing story that better situates potentially disruptive work and life events into the

sustained sense of career identity.

Career Identity Developed Over Time

Career identity as narrative allows meaning to develop both retrospectively and

prospectively, creating consistency by formulating a plotline to explain the trajectory to the

current identity, and accommodating change by adapting the narrative for new aspirations

(Ashforth et al., 2008). As such, career identity offers an overarching basis for learning, change,

growth, flexibility, and openness across the accumulation of work history (Ashforth, et al.,

2008). Career growth as it relates to identity is a way to self-actualize or attain a sense of self-

fulfillment (Hall and Mirvis, 1996). Career identity as developed over time highlights the

processual and progressive meaning behind how events of a career unfold over time.

Process theorizing works to provide an explanation for a sequence of events that includes

who completed different activities and why (Langley, 1999). Explaining why certain events took

place can help individuals to make sense of negative events and potentially give positive

meaning for long term career growth. For example, when faced with a denied promotion, people

may create growth-based stories to give purpose to the event and foster a sense of resilience in

their career identity (Vough and Caza, 2017). Life stages explain growth in traditional careers,

where advancement in career is linked to progression in age (Levinson, 1978; Super, 1957).

While life stages provide one processual explanation for career growth (i.e., upward career

mobility occurs because of tenure with an organization or occupation and deepened expertise

with the advancement of age), career growth in nontraditional careers can no longer be linked to

age, as people experiment through multiple roles, organizations or occupations. Thus, a growth-

based understanding of career identity takes into consideration multiple processes by which

career identity is constructed and made coherent across a range of negative and positive

outcomes that occur over time.

Career Identity Motivated by Multiple Social Contexts

Meaning in a career is informed both by what an individual wants work to mean for their

own life, as well as by what they want to mean to others through their work (Meijers, 1998). In

this meaning-based view for self and others, careers are socially constructed through choices that

are made by individuals to express their self-concept and to substantiate this identity in their

social context (Savickas, 2005). Career identity then is both personally and socially motivated,

reflecting that there are multiple levels of motivation in forming a career identity.

Career identity is articulated and performed as the actor, or owner of the identity,

interacts with their audience, or meaningful others in their social context (LaPointe, 2010).

Changes in a career that provide new social contexts require an adjustment to revised meanings

tied to multiple levels of identity. Temporal proximity (i.e., how immediate or psychologically

close the identity is to the change) can also influence the extent to which different levels

motivate behaviors and career shifts (Ramarajan, 2014). The more concretely experienced role-

to-role relationship may be more immediately motivating, while the broader collective

occupational identity may serve as an aspiration and be more likely to inform future behaviors.

Through engagement with different levels of identity, career identity may be experimented with

or increased in its predictability.

While career identity is understood to provide coherence over time, career identity is also

understood to incorporate change. How coherence develops across potentially volatile changes in

identity has yet to be fully explicated in the construction of a career identity. Reviewing both the

careers and professional identity construction literatures reveals two mechanisms we posit are

balanced over time in constructing a career identity—predictability and experimentation.

Predictability provided by more well-defined roles and social contexts increases the stability of a

career identity, while experimentation provided by less constrained roles and social contexts

allows for experimentation with a career identity. We posit that both these mechanisms are

needed at different times across a career to sustain a career identity for the long term as workers

are faced with greater uncertainty.

Next, we begin our theorizing by examining predictability and experimentation,

explicating career identity constructing processes as shown in Table 1. We incorporate these

processes into an overall framework for career identity development that expands on multiple

levels of identity as the motivation for processes as well as outcomes that result from these

processes.

CAREER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Our framework includes six different career identity constructing processes as defined in Table 1. We posit that each process is motivated by different levels of identity and emphasizes either predictability or experimentation. Predictability is gained through interacting with the social environment, either through formal requirements of an occupation or informally through social interactions with meaningful others, that validate or invalidate behaviors to be repeated or discontinued (Abbott, 1988; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006). Experimentation is conducted to explore multiple options for enacting aspirational possibilities for identity, or desired possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Throughout a career both predictability and experimentation are needed in order to provide coherence and stability as well as expansion and exploration of identity. These mechanisms are mutually reinforcing, as a cohesive identity is needed to incorporate changes when constructing a career (Del Corso and Rehfuss, 2011).

Insert Table 1 about here

Predictability and Experimentation

Reviews of the careers literature (e.g., Sullivan, 1999; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009) largely draw an implicit either/or distinction between traditional careers understood through the structure of life stages (Levinson, 1978; Super, 1957) and more recent dynamic nontraditional careers (e.g., Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; 2006). Highlighting

these contrasts has been useful for noting the changing patterns of careers. Yet, when focusing

on how these patterns influence the expression of who people are in their career, we posit that

both the predictability embodied in traditional careers and the experimentation arising from

nontraditional careers are necessary to expand and to stabilize a developing career identity. Life

stages provide coherence and stability through a predictable and structured path, while

experimentation across multiple organizations (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and work life roles

(Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; 2006) provide possibility for self-driven change and learning

based on individual values (Hall, 1996).

Both the careers and professional identity construction literatures include elements of

predictability and experimentation, reflecting that these mechanisms are important to

constructing an identity across different professions and roles that constitute a career.

Particularly in the professional identity construction literature, relationships serve as an

important source to both stabilize and to encourage the exploration of identity. While identity

can be idiosyncratic, it is understood that similarities exist in the *processes* by which the meaning

of identity is created (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). Thus, as multiple levels of identity (i.e.,

individual, relational, and collective) serve to motivate different processes of professional

identity construction, multiple levels of identity are important to career identity development as

well. For example, mentors may communicate and provide the requirements of an occupation

(collective identity), and role models and peers provide a basis for understanding the

expectations of a particular role (relational level), which is then enacted and internalized by the

individual. In this way, predictability and experimentation link multiple levels of identity to

constructing processes in career identity development.

Figure 1 below presents a theoretical framework of how career identity development unfolds

across motivation informed by different levels of identity, constructing processes, and outcomes.

Next, we begin by explicating the processes introduced in table 1 at the intersections of each

level of identity (collective, relational, and individual) and the mechanisms of predictability and

experimentation. As we delve into each process, we also explain how each process leads to both

positive and negative outcomes as shown in figure 1. We then expand on how engaging with

multiple processes can help to mitigate negative outcomes and enhance positive ones. In figure 1,

boxes with dashed borders reflect insights drawn from both the identity and careers literatures.

Solid borders reflect new insights offered by our framework and takes into consideration both

predictability and experimentation as mutually necessary mechanisms in developing a career

identity. Where useful, we also draw upon anecdotal and empirical evidence within the medical

profession to illustrate our theoretical arguments because it is a well-established profession that

has clearly delineated formal requirement, but that also has undergone changes that have shifted

expectations of the profession.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Assimilating. More stable patterns in careers are associated with high-skill occupations,

where there is a clear trajectory to gaining expertise, often carried out through advancing in

higher education (Super, 1957). In assimilating, predictability is gained by meeting the

expectations tied to a collective identity, such as an occupation or organization. The benefits of

joining a professional occupation include prestige (Treiman, 1977) and a clear path to gain

expertise through higher education or other credentials as determined by professional

associations (Abbott, 1988). For example, becoming a doctor includes progressive stages

including indoctrination into institutions of medicine, working one's way up a hierarchical chain

of command from resident to attending, and gaining one's own practice and clientele (Hall,

1948).

Entry into an occupation provides a collective identity through which individuals

internalize the characteristics that are thought to be prototypical of its members (Ashforth and

Mael, 1989). This prototypical image of an expert doctor creates high stability of identity

through the unique knowledge of their area of expertise (Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, and

Casebeer, 2017). Yet this very stability may undermine performance in more dynamic work

environments by limiting adaptability of identity. Physicians shape their identity through doing

the work of a medical professional, and while some variations occur, the learning process of

medical residency generally ends with identity enrichment and stabilization (Pratt et al., 2006).

Thus, assimilating may limit adaptability as it emphasizes fitting into the set knowledge and

behaviors of a collective identity.

Adapting. In times of change, expert professionals may have to fundamentally alter the

logics by which they understand their work to reconstruct who they are in their career. While

assimilating provides stability, adaptability may be needed to meet the needs of changing

demands, even in more predictable career trajectories such as those found in the medical

profession. In the face of a reform initiative that changed how general practitioners (GPs)

understood their professional identities, change was created through interdependence with other

health care professionals (e.g., nurses, dieticians, and mental health counselors) and fundamental

changes in the institutional logics and ideal type of the professional role (Reay et al., 2017).

These shifts in logics allowed the prototypical or ideal image of the professional role to change

in response to others and to changing financial incentives (Reay et al., 2017). Adapting occurs when change in an occupation or organization shifts the understanding of the group prototype and results in a process that emphasizes experimentation with new ways of understanding that identity. In this example, while the GPs maintained their own practice, they were also placed in a new Primary Care Network (PCN) that provided a broader organizational context. Entry into this new context provided a basis for a new group or cohort identification with other providers placed into the network, and for an interdependence with these meaningful others that informed the shift of the GPs from autonomous experts to heads of a team.

In adapting, because motivation comes from the collective identity, meaningful others who share a similar entry point into the new organizational or occupational context become an important basis for the constructing process. Thus, interdependence is one of the identity outcomes for this process. Interdependence is the cognitive and affective glue of identity (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007), yet, with an increase in interdependence also comes a decrease in differentiation. Instead of tightly held boundaries of expertise, different functions may be shared as expectations from customers or other stakeholders require a more seamless service experience across providers. Thus, the understanding of occupational expertise may become less stable, posing potential challenges for how to educate and develop the particular skill set to gain proficiency.

Comparing. In comparing, predictability is gained through a target peer group, which serves as a basis for assessment of one's own career progression. Particularly in a time of change and transition to a new and ill-defined role, peers provide a reference group to monitor progress in performing a new role and provide a consistent source of information and feedback (Reilly, 2017). This reference group helps to resolve identity conflict by enhancing a sense that one is

performing consistently with peers, stabilizing identity in the incumbency of the role. These peer

relationships are understood to provide career enhancement when mutuality exists and can

include information peers (primary function is information sharing), collegial peers (primary

functions are career strategizing, job-related feedback, and friendship), and special peers

(primary functions are confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship)

(Kram and Isabella, 1985).

The motivation for new sources of fulfillment, meaning, and values is drawn from

association with the peer group and from within these peer relationships. A group identity can

form around these peer relationships, providing a sense of belonging during a time of uncertainty

when one is still new to the work of a new role. While this outcome of belonging can provide

much-needed stability, there is also an outcome of reduced uniqueness, and it may become

necessary to find a balance between belonging with peers and standing out as a unique individual

(Brewer, 1991). Uniqueness may be particularly important in ill-defined roles, as standing out

and getting the attention of a mentor can increase access to their tacit experiential knowledge as

well as provide connections to social ties that can enhance a career (Reilly, 2017).

Aspiring. While peers may provide belonging through sharing incumbency in a role,

predecessors are critical in the transmission of experiences, knowledge, and skills gained from

occupying a role that is handed down to the incumbent (Joshi et al., 2010). Roles provide a basis

for relational self-concept, and the relationship between predecessor, incumbent, and successor

provides motivation for social interaction that is focused on the other's benefit (Brewer and

Gardner, 1996). In the aspiring process, the more experienced mentor provides a guide for

working toward the desired career outcome often carried out through a mentor/protégé

relationship. In mentoring, where there is a relationship between a more experienced mentor and

a less experienced protégé, it is understood that the target of identification is the mentor or an idealized image of that mentor (Humberd and Rouse, 2016). In professional identity construction, role models also provide an observable reference point for considering possible future identities, as well as for patterning behaviors (Ibarra, 1999). In addition to role modeling, mentors help their protégés through career functions, such as sponsorship, exposure-and-visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments, and through psychosocial functions, such as acceptance-and-confirmation, counseling, and friendship (Kram, 1983). Thus, in the aspiring process, role models and mentors have the potential to direct the trajectory of a career.

Mentors and role models help to fill an identity deficit in that they serve as a target for identification. This target helps to provide a consistent source of motivation and increases commitment to the role (Baumeister, 1986). Yet, because this relationship is particularized to the mentor and mentee, there is the potential for inequities to emerge among incumbent peers in terms of availability and the kind of mentoring that is received. For example, women in male-dominated professions experience constraints in terms of their ability to select feasible or beneficial role models due to a lack of female leaders (Ibarra, 1999). Women are also more likely to follow true-to-self strategies experimenting with internal familiar sources of behavior, which limit their growth and possibilities for enacting their aspirational roles (Ibarra, 1999). Women are also understood to be less likely to receive the kind of mentorship in which the mentor advocates and raises the visibility of the mentee, two functions of sponsorship that are important to gaining promotions to leadership roles (Ibarra, Carter, and Silva, 2010). Thus, while role models and mentors can provide an increased sense of commitment, when the role model is a mismatch with other significant identities (e.g., gender, race) or fails to serve necessary functions, a sense of

equity in the availability of opportunities to meet career fulfillment, values, and goals can be reduced.

Advancing. Given the life stages models of adult development, with the maturing of age may come an expectation for how a career has advanced. In the advancing process, an emphasis on predictability suggests a progression through clear milestones that change with increasing responsibility. In a highly structured career path tied to occupational expertise, such as becoming a doctor, these milestones are marked by changing titles, such as the progression from intern, to medical resident, to attending physician. In other professions, promotion to manager acknowledges the ascent into leadership ranks (Ibarra, 1999). Change in life stage (or age) roughly informs at what age range an individual expects to be at a certain milestone in his or her career (Super, 1957).

Life stages of adult development suggest that generally, as age advances, so does stability in career and seniority that provides promotion opportunities (Super, 1957). A career that follows the expected milestones of advancing seniority/promotion at the appropriate time (as perceived by one's own expectations) results in a high level of stability of identity providing coherence in an overall career identity. Yet, with this stability also comes a decrease in flexibility, as life stage advances into maintenance, where the priority of work is to keep the financial stability of home intact, appearances in the community unimpaired, and business profitability consistent (Super, 1957). This view of the stability of life stage and career, however, may be unrealistic in the tenuous nature of the employee-employer relationship in today's workplace (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), and seniority may no longer be the primary factor in determining promotion opportunities, potentially resulting in a mid-life crisis when this career goal is not met (Baumeister, 1986).

Fulfilling. In fulfilling, experimentation is emphasized to allow for autonomy from organizational expectations and prioritize self-driven motivation for determining career fulfillment, goals, and values. Instead of expectations of promotion within organization, individuals may have their own milestones for success. This psychological success is built on personal accomplishment and feeling that a personal best has been achieved (Hall and Mirvis, 1996). A trained doctor, for example, may choose to elect a new career path outside that of a typical independent practice by using his or her expertise for organizations for underserved populations or initiatives such as Doctors without Borders.

Continuous learning becomes an important part of this kind of protean career in which employees remain adaptable to acquiring new skills as the needs of the market change (Hall and Mirvis, 1996). While this kind of protean career can provide an outcome of increased agency, having to relearn new skills at mid-career may be daunting when seeking stability based on life stage (Super, 1957). Organizations are also a source of collective identity that provide a sense of belonging; thus, a focus on fulfilling individual values outside of set organizational or occupational identities may also reduce this sense of belonging. For example, in gig-based work, people often forge their own sense of meaning of their work in the absence of an organization or role models that would typically provide targets for identification (Petriglieri, Ashford and Wrzesniewksi, 2019). Belonging is understood to serve a fundamental need to have social attachment to a group or to relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 1995); consequently, fulfilling may need to be combined with other processes that provide the relational level of self-concept, such as finding a peer group for comparing or a mentor for aspiring through an industry association.

Multiple Constructing Processes

While we have theorized each constructing process discretely, we posit that negative outcomes can be best mitigated and positive outcomes can be enhanced by combining processes. We consider combinations of constructing processes through different levels—collective, relational, and individual—and different emphases of predictability or experimentation to demonstrate dynamic and fluid identity construction in our framework. By doing so, we illustrate how the constraints posed by one negative outcome can be countered by the positive outcomes of other constructing processes.

Assimilating (collective level predictability) with aspiring and fulfilling (relational and individual experimentation). Assimilating can limit adaptability of identity, creating the potential for an identity deficit—or not enough identity (Baumeister, 1986)—when searching for meaning. Although deepening knowledge and experience stabilize the identity within one's occupation, this singularity may lead to unfulfilled values. People may seek to fulfill these values by retaining a forgone identity, or a professional identity that was given up as a choice or due to a constraint (Obodaru, 2017). Enacting a forgone identity can be done vicariously through close others such as friends and family (Obodaru, 2017), or perhaps imagined through observing role models. Combining aspiring with assimilating allows people to remain open to possibilities for their long-term career identity by seeking out role models for their forgone professional identities and aspirations for the future. These role models may be in their immediate environment as a close mentor, or perhaps someone who occupies an aspirational role that is deemed to fill the identity deficit and fulfill sought after values.

Combining processes of assimilating with fulfilling may also provide a way to expand a narrative to include a sense of agency. Assimilating may be thought of as 'paying dues' in order to have autonomy later in a career. For example, a young professional may get their law degree

and work in a law firm to deepen their legal expertise, but later start their own firm or pursue

work in other organizations, such as a government administrator or policy maker, that allows

them to operate autonomously. By thinking of assimilating as a stepping stone, fulfilling can still

be engaged to maintain a sense of agency to construct one's own meaning and applying an

individualized sense of progression through milestones in a career.

Comparing (relational level predictability) with adapting and fulfilling (collective and individual experimentation). While comparing provides belonging, optimal distinctiveness

theory would suggest that people also seek to be seen as a unique individual (Brewer, 1991).

Adapting has a similar challenge of differentiation from newly interdependent collective

identities. Yet, this interdependence with other new collectives may encourage individuals to

form their own individualized narrative to incorporate these new identities into their career

identity. For example, when the identity of expert doctor is expanded to include leadership of

other health care professionals, some doctors may choose to broaden their career identity to

leader, whereas others may prefer to maintain both identities as doctor and manager to develop a

dual career identity as doctor administrator.

The combination of the processes of fulfilling with comparing is particularly

complementary as fulfilling provides agency but limits belonging, and comparing can provide

this belonging. While fulfilling can provide self-driven autonomy for independent career paths,

this freedom can also come with a sense of isolation (Petriglieri, et al., 2019). In gig-based work,

where workers operate outside of traditional careers, organizations, and well-established

professions, finding a cohort can be challenging but when a colleague is found, the relationship

can be reassuring and sooth anxieties (Petriglieri, et al., 2019). Comparing as a complement to

fulfilling can provide belonging through relationships, even if one-on-one rather than through a

readily available cohort of peers in a typical profession.

Advancing (individual level predictability) with adapting and aspiring (collective and relational experimentation). Advancing allows people to pursue upward mobility and rewards that are typically associated with increased responsibility and status. Yet pursuit of these material gains may create a singular mindset where the next promotion or the next step that increases wealth becomes the narrow focus of one's career. In an economy where even well-established companies can no longer offer security of employment over the long-term, the near-sightedness of advancing can be balanced with adapting that keeps an eye to market and customer demands, as well as with aspiring that keeps multiple possible futures in mind. Thus, even if the next promotion does not materialize, aspiring can help people to pivot to a different path that allows for fulfillment.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we develop a theoretical framework of career identity development. Although our framework may suggest that at any given time individuals may follow one particular type of constructing process, we also illustrate how people may move among and between multiple processes simultaneously or adapt across these processes in response to navigating career changes over time. Drawing upon extant definitions of career identity as narrative practice, as growth over time, and motivated by multiple social contexts, we bring to the forefront the notion that career identity is constructed across one's work history. With the different twists and turns that can occur across a career, it is necessary for individuals to be able to blend various definitions of career identity to unify a sense of one's self across multiple workplaces, roles, and even multiple levels of identity. By examining who one is across the whole of a career, individuals can develop narratives over the long-term that enable them to learn

from and overcome immediate challenges to foster intellectual agility and resilience. Below, we discuss how our theorizing advances scholarship and practice and presents opportunities for future research.

Theoretical Contributions and Avenues for Future Research

Our theoretical framework provides several contributions to existing research on career theory, professional identity construction and multiple identities. First, although career theory has considered how careers are constructed over the life course, career identity has not been a central construct in the career construction literature. Researchers that have considered identity have tended to focus on the stability of identity-related attitudes and beliefs (i.e. vocational identity, Holland, Diager and Power, 1980; Savickas, 1985), career salience (i.e. the relative importance of one's career, Greenhaus, 1971; 1973), identity as a characteristic of how one approaches a career (i.e. protean career, Hall, 1996) or identity as subset of career commitment (i.e. CCM, Carson and Bedeian, 1994). In our framework, we synthesize the various uses and definitions of career identity that take into consideration the complexity associated with the varied ways and paths careers are shaped and constructed over time that facilitate a coherent sense of self. In doing so, we bring identity to the forefront of careers research, suggesting it is the central element to understanding how careers are constructed. Additionally, career theories have rarely been linked to the vast literature on professional identity construction that has become prevalent in the management and organizational behavior literature.

Second, we contribute to the growing body of research on professional identity construction. This literature continues to evolve and expand through greater understanding of the complexity associated with establishing a professional sense of self (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006), navigating multiple work roles (Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer and Lloyd, 2006; Pratt

and Foreman, 2000) and negotiating work and family domains (Ladge, Clair and Greenberg, 2012). Yet, a longitudinal and more abstract career identity can provide continuity and greater flexibility (Ashforth et al., 2008) for how people narrate the twists and turns they experience over time as they navigate the dynamic and unpredictable landscape of contemporary workplaces. Understanding the ins and outs of constructing occupational, work, and life roles has great value in discerning the day-to-day enactment to form, repair, maintain, strengthen, and revise identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Yet there is also value in understanding construction processes that guide, regulate, and sustain behavior to create meaning for an overarching career identity. This global coherent sense of self becomes particularly important when facing redefining moments of identity that can fundamentally alter how we understand ourselves in the totality of our work experiences.

While our theorizing provides a framework through which we can understand how people meet this complexity, create meaning, and define who they are in useful ways that allows them to function as effective participants in organizational life, more research is needed to expand our understanding of professional identity in these different career constructions. For example, is a professional identity important to those who have protean career construction and who may be limited in tying their sense of self in the workplace to a particular profession? Do roles outside of work hold more meaning for these individuals? How important is constructing a professional identity to the development of one's overall sense of self? Are there times in one's professional career where identity construction is more salient? What role do other identities play in shaping predictability and experimentation in career construction? Our framework opens many possibilities for expanding our understanding of the development of one's sense of professional self across a career and over several areas for future research.

Third, it is not well understood how individuals interpret and make sense of the extent to which they perceive the various options they have to construct their career. While there is much opportunity to reinvent oneself across a career, the sheer variety of options may be overwhelming and may present a higher likelihood for regret over alternative selves and career paths not taken (Obodaru, 2012). If an alternative self is perceived to be better than one's current professional identity, negative affect may result (Obodaru, 2012), and individuals may continue to pursue the desired alternative self, expanding what is included in their sense of professional identity (Obodaru, 2017). For example, consider the business school student who assumes he will go work for a major investment bank, make a large sum of money in a five- to ten-year time span, and retire early to pursue his dream of owning a real estate business. Or consider the medical resident who assumes she will be able work more flexible hours or a reduced work schedule to balance work and family once she opens her own practice. The professional identities they construct early on may contradict the images of themselves they envision in the future.

Lastly, we contribute to the growing interest in understanding how multiple levels of identity motivate different processes that develop a career identity over time. We know from prior research that social identities are not developed fully in isolation and that one aspect of the self can relate to another (Thoits, 1983; Ladge et al., 2012; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013). The same must be considered in exploring the ways in which a career identity is constructed through multiple work roles and experiences that may be both predictable and experimental. In particular, we consider how individuals simultaneously explore and stabilize their careers by engaging in experimentation and predictabilty at different points in their career. In today's labor market where globalization and technological change have increased the number and nature of career

transitions, individuals need to be able to draw on both predictability and experimentation to develop and maintain a coherent sense of self. Predictability is needed to gain the skills and socialization required for entry by many professional occupations while experimentation is essential for gaining new skills and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise for development.

Our framework of career identity development links these processes to both positive and negative outcomes, and we posit that engaging in multiple processes mitigates negative outcomes to provide coherence in an overarching career identity. One can think of these multiple process as part of a larger set of tools that individuals make use of when developing their career identities. No one tool is appropriate for all the possible twists and turns that an individual may encounter along their career path. Having the ability to draw on multiple construction processes enables individuals to make smoother and more frequent transitions, whether based on reactive or proactive motivations.

Practical Implications

It is important to recognize that careers and identity development do not occur in a vacuum and are largely shaped by others (Bartel and Dutton, 2001). We often look to others as models for identity construction. Mentors who advise on careers may serve expanded functions in these multiple career constructions. While expert construction provides prototypes to support career functions and upon which to model a career, other constructions may require more adaptability from mentors to allow mentees to explore multiple possible selves. Thus, our framework suggests potential for expanding our understanding of mentoring skills needed by career advisers to guide more dynamic career paths. It also raises new insights into positive and negative pathways for identity construction (Alvesson, 2010; Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar,

2010).

Recognizing the importance of these developmental relationships, our framework has useful practical insights that can be beneficial to educational institutions preparing early career individuals for managing the development of their career identity. Rather than assume that individuals will pursue linear advancement, educational institutions may be better positioned to support their students by providing opportunities to explore multiple options for building a career. Institutions that offer cooperative education programs and internships during the attainment of a degree may provide students with an advantage by starting their exploration of provisional selves early in their higher educational experience. Organizations would also benefit from considering multiple ways in which employees can pursue a career in order to retain the best talent, recognizing the value of those individuals who may not always want to follow a linear structured career progression.

In addition, employers are increasingly focused on how to attract, retain, and manage younger workers—particularly in a robust and competitive economy. While Millennials are most often assumed to be disloyal in organizational life and more apt to be a flight risk than other generations, a commonality they share among all workers is a desire to do meaningful work. Our theorizing suggests that managers can facilitate a range of career construction processes in ways that make work more engaging and meaningful, which in turn can improve hiring, retention, and management of all groups of employees. Further, knowledge of the different types of career construction processes may help managers and human resources personnel to craft jobs that suit a range of linear and nonlinear career paths. Understanding the various career construction processes may also help retain working parents and aging workers who may need more flexibility in their schedules, as well as support other employees when life events require

predictability over experimentation and vice versa.

On a more macro scale, better understanding of the link between alternative selves and career construction may bring to light new insights on how people navigate changes in their career paths and how they can develop greater resiliency to unexpected changes. For example, recent research shows that much of the change in skill requirements for various occupations related to shifts in technology or global competition often occurs suddenly during recessions when employers have more flexibility in hiring (Jaimovich and Siu, 2012; Modestino, Shoag, and Ballance, 2016). Individuals who find themselves unemployed during a recession and no longer qualified for their previous position must somehow recognize this shift and find an alternative career path—either by pursuing additional formal education, recertification, or training—or by applying their existing skills to a new occupation. Our model can help explain the different approaches that successful individuals have used to make that transition and can offer clues as to how workforce development policies can be used to provide individuals with the tools to reenter the labor force. Future empirical testing and theory development on the antecedents and outcomes of the various career constructions we outline in our framework can be leveraged to enhance existing career counseling and coaching programs across a variety of contexts.

Limitations

Although we identify several assumptions in our theorizing and acknowledge the complexity associated with multiple processes occurring simultaneously, there are potential limitations in our model. First, our focus on career development is largely attributed to the experiences of college-educated individuals pursuing professional careers. We concede that our model does not incorporate non-professional careers, which may differ from professional careers

in terms of commitment to a given field or organization (Mathieu and Hamel, 1989). A second

limitation of our theorizing is that it is assumed that there is agency on the part of individuals to

construct their careers; yet there may be constraining or enabling features that affect individual

choices. For example, this is often the case across different cultures in which there is no choice

but to be a successor to a family business, to follow the family tradition of a particular trade or

profession, or to choose an occupation that is socially acceptable based on one's gender, race, or

social status. Finally, we acknowledge that precipitating events could lead to a change in

occupational/professional status that is undesirable or forced. For example, changes in workplace

norms such as flextime, or government regulations such as the Family Medical Leave Act, can

expand the choice sets of individuals to allow for greater experimentation with career identity.

CONCLUSION

Building from research on identity construction and careers, we explore the complexity

of career dynamics and the range of processes for career identity development. We explain how

different social contexts can inform an emphasis on predictability or on experimentation at

different points across a career. We also highlight both positive and negative identity outcomes

resulting from different processes that can be mitigated and balanced by engaging in multiple

constructing processes. We encourage future researchers to expand upon our conceptual

framework and/or use it as the basis for empirical inquiry to understand the degree to which

individuals engage in both predictable and experimental career construction over their lifetimes

and what lessons can be learned from these patterns for both scholars and practitioners.

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Table 1: Career Constructing Processes

	Levels of Identity		
Emphasis on:	**Collective**	**Relational**	**Individual**
Predictability	**Assimilating** • Meeting occupational or organizational expectations by progressing through professional milestones and deepening expertise (e.g., pursuing degree or certification to advance expertise)	**Comparing** • Looking to peers for a basis of comparison to determine degree of successful enactment of role (e.g., assessment of being below, in line with, or exceeding peers)	**Advancing** • Pursuing self-interest toward monetary rewards and financial stability through upward mobility (e.g., promotion)
Experimentation	**Adapting** • Responding to demands made of collective identity such as changing customer needs, changes in market, and input from meaningful stakeholders (e.g., changing from clinically-driven to patient-centered care in medical profession)	**Aspiring** • Looking to role models and mentors to gain guidance and understanding of role-appropriate behaviors for desired change (e.g., interns assigned to residents in medical profession)	**Fulfilling** • Satisfying personal values (such as desire for autonomy) and self-directed expectations for career (e.g., working across multiple roles to gain experienced need to start independent business)

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Career Identity Development

Levels of Identity	Processes	Identity Outcomes
Collective Motivated by occupational /organizational expectations	**Assimilating**	+ Stability - Adaptability
	Adapting	+Interdependence - Differentiation
Relational Motivated by peer group, role models	**Comparing**	+ Belonging - Uniqueness
	Aspiring	+ Commitment - Sense of equity
Individual Motivated by self-interest, values	**Advancing**	+ Stability - Flexibility
	Fulfilling	+ Agency - Belonging

----- **From Identity/Careers literature**
▢ **Emphasis on Predictability**
�▨ **Emphasis on Experimentation**

Engaging multiple constructions over time