



## Careers in construction: An examination of the career narratives of young professionals and their emerging career self-concepts

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of young professionals as they move through different career paths and narrate their careers. Drawing primarily from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 40 young professionals with at least three years of professional employment post-graduation from the same program of study as well as data obtained from the subjects' LinkedIn profiles, our findings suggest that young professionals engage in a dynamic process of constructing their career narratives with often complex emerging career self-concepts. While prior research suggests that people move toward an increasingly stable and cohesive self-concept as they attain a professional occupation, we find that there is an interplay between the need for flexibility to explore opportunities and to adapt to challenges, as well as the desire for stability and predictability that drives the construction of young professionals' careers. We also find that the way young professionals communicate their career narrative can differ in substantive ways from their external-facing resume, raising the potential for dissonance. Exploring the intricacies of developing career narratives is important for understanding how young professionals make sense of their career, which can better inform career counselors, recruiters, and hiring managers—as well as young professionals themselves—on how to integrate past, current, and desired future career experiences to allow for continuity and resiliency in their career self-concept and planning.

### 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the attainment of a professional occupation provided predictable career advancement that was roughly associated with advancement in age (Levinson, 1978; Super, 1957). Yet since 2000, the literature has explored the changing nature of careers and career patterns that involve many different transitions across changes in work role, employer, occupation, economic circumstances, and even personal interests (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Sullivan, 1999; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). To navigate these career transitions, a cohesive self-concept can help individuals incorporate changes into self-knowledge that creates continuity for who they have been and who they want to be in their careers (Del Corso & Rehffuss, 2011). Thus, a cohesive self-concept should have elements of coherence (i.e., agency and continuity) (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) as well as enough openness toward change (i.e., flexibility) such that different possibilities can be considered for the future (McAdams, 1996). Prior research suggests that this exploration of self and the work environment are important for being able to make career choices (Flum & Blustein, 2000).

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As careers are conceptualized over time, individuals synthesize past experiences as well as engage in information-seeking for the future (Jiang, Newman, Le, Presbitero & Zheng, 2019). Narratives, or the stories that people tell about themselves, link past experiences to the current emerging self-concept, as well as project into the future (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). These links between past, present, and future aspirational self-concepts allow for change as people navigate their careers (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). The process of narrating these links is both subjective (i.e., driven by individual beliefs, values, motivations, and experiences), as well as socially and culturally situated, where external interactions give meaning to an expressed identity (LaPointe, 2010). Through these career narratives—the stories people tell about themselves in their career—individuals construct their careers by “imposing meaning on their vocational behavior and occupational experiences” (Savickas, 2005, p. 43). Narrative has transformative power, as it enables the decoding of both the predictable and unpredictable collection of experiences accumulated across a career, resulting in both self-knowledge as well as increased understanding of one's self-concept (Bujold, 2004).

In this study, we take a particular interest in the career narratives of young professionals.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, early adulthood is understood to be particularly rife with change (Levinson, 1978), and the complexity experienced in the chaos of careers (Pryor & Bright, 2003) suggests that young professionals may be faced with the daunting challenge of navigating this transition in their life stage, while also grappling with multiple changes in their workplace. In addition, Millennials, who comprise most young professionals at the time of this study, value both time for their private lives and self-expression (Bresman, 2015) as well as opportunities for advancement and good people to work with and for (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). This valuing of their personal and professional lives is reflected in how young people anticipate their future in consideration of both predictable and unpredictable aspects of their workplace and personal circumstances. For example, young people's plans for starting a family and aspirations toward positions of increased responsibility are bound by the observations and expectations set by their industry and workplace, as well as by family and meaningful work relationships (McDonald, 2018). These dynamics show that career narratives that can provide continuity as well as flexibility are especially important to young professionals as they form who they are and deem who they can be in the future across their personal and professional lives.

These observations drew our attention to the need to understand how young professionals construct their career narratives. We conducted in-depth interviews with 40 young professionals, each of whom had recently graduated with an undergraduate business degree. Specifically, we explored their career narratives, the meaning they ascribe to their careers, and the factors that shaped their emerging career self-concepts. We subsequently assessed their actual career movements to better understand how they engaged in their careers—both as perceived by the individual themselves and as portrayed on their resume for prospective employers.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: first, we review the literature that informed our initial understanding of how narratives may be constructed across what is predictable and planned as well as what is unpredictable and unplanned in careers. We then expand our model based on our study findings using the actual lived experience of our interview participants. Finally, we provide a discussion of the research and practical implications that stem from this research.

## 2. Theory informing the study

Narratives suggest an important distinction between how someone experiences meaning in their career versus a work history that lists different jobs someone has occupied. As an observable summary of jobs, work history communicates the sequence of positions that have been occupied over time, whereas a narrative is the meaning one makes of that sequence (Nicholson & West, 1989; Savickas, 2005). In narrating the story of their career, people have the ability to change what could be a negative event that impairs career progression, such as a denied promotion, into a positive event that provides opportunity for growth (Vough & Caza, 2017). The stories people tell about themselves provide a sense of continuity between who they have been in the past and who they hope to be in the future, and these self-narratives also serve as a mechanism for obtaining validation for those identities from others (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). The meaning individuals make for themselves and the story that is communicated to others has important implications for how people understand who they are in their career in the past and present, and what changes they may make in order to transition to the future.

In comparison to the early literature that conceptualized careers in terms of a predictable progression through life stages of adult development (Levinson, 1978; Super, 1957), unpredictability and transitions across multiple work roles are now taken as a given in many careers (Fouad & Bynner, 2008). In careers that follow predictable stages, career progression across a work history may be closely aligned with career narratives. For example, becoming a medical doctor follows a predictable path from higher education pursued in early adulthood to establishing one's practice in mid-career and preparing for retirement in late-career, allowing for a singular career self-concept experienced across a lifetime. Yet, when a career involves multiple work transitions across various professions and roles, work history and career narrative are more likely to be misaligned and require individuals to engage in making meaning out of unpredictable and unplanned events.

As defined earlier, we use the term cohesive self-concept to describe a career self-concept that has elements of coherence as well as openness to change. Coherence is defined as “the extent to which a given story makes sense on its own terms,” (McAdams, 1996, p. 315). Coherence also allows individuals to place themselves as the protagonist of their career story, providing agency to create a common narrative thread and storyline that ties discontinuous transitions together (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This coherence is

<sup>1</sup> We use the term young professionals when referring to our sample, which include individuals who are ages 24–30. We use the term Millennials when referring to the generational cohort these individuals are part of—those born between the years 1980–2000 (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010).

important to how people establish career plans and find meaningful work, as the exploration of self in relation to different work environments is understood to be a critical part of making informed career choices (Flum & Blustein, 2000). Coherence may be increasingly difficult to maintain when greater unpredictability is experienced over the course of a career. This unpredictability in non-traditional boundaryless careers is understood to require certain competencies to manage, including a “knowing-why” competency for maintaining and building motivation and identity (Guan, Arthur, Khapova, Hall & Lord, 2019, p. 392).

In the next section, we consider the predictable or planned aspects of a career as well as the unpredictable or unplanned events that inform how people construct their career narrative.

### 2.1. Planned and predictable phases and tasks informing career narratives

Early literature that examines careers suggests that stability is gained over time in a predictable pattern tied to aging. In this life cycle model of exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline, more emphasis is placed on building a career across an age range of 25–45 years (establishment). People then move toward maintaining their existing career and continuing in a path that provides financial stability as they approach ages 46–65 years (Super, 1957). Levinson provides a similar sequential approach, suggesting that the era of early adulthood (e.g., age 17–45 years) is most marked by dramatic changes and building a career, whereas middle adulthood (e.g., ages 40–65 years) is marked by maintaining and enjoying the “fruits of his youthful labors” (Levinson, 1978, p. 30). Given this predictable progression over the lifecycle, people make plans for their careers as they age. When people begin their professional careers, they are usually completing their college degree and making a major transition in their career—from student, or a temporary role in the workplace such as intern, to becoming a full-fledged professional adult. Plans are made and begin to actualize as people apply to jobs and begin to enter into the workforce.

Based on this literature, we define a planned career path intention as following a traditional trajectory that is sequenced as a result of educational pursuits/major marked by clear progression and milestones. Particularly in the stage of early adulthood, or the novice phase, people experience *entry* at approximately 22–28 years of age and an *age 30 transition* at 30–33 years of age before they can consider *settling down* around 33–40 years of age (Levinson, 1978). The transitions between entry and the age 30 transition are marked by tasks of beginning to live out a dream, forming an occupation, and building important relationships both at work (e.g., mentors) and at home (e.g., spouses/romantic significant others and family) (Levinson, 1978).

Levinson's work suggests the novice phase occurs specifically in early adulthood. Yet, career patterns such as protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope suggest that people may have additional major transitions that return people to this early state of formation of their career. A return to the novice phase may be initiated for self-fulfillment based on values (Hall, 1996); to move across different organizational and occupational contexts (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996); or to address multiple meanings tied to a career, such as balancing work with other important non-work relationships (e.g., family), maintaining an authentic sense of self, and finding challenge in advancement opportunities (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006). The protean career emphasizes personal management of career and making career choices based on self-fulfillment, where the criteria for success is about internal psychological success rather than externally defined markers of advancement (Hall, 1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). In a boundaryless career, the focus lies in the movement between different job functions within an organization, different organizations, or different locations (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). In kaleidoscope careers, people “shift the pattern of their careers by rotating different aspects of their lives to arrange their roles in and relationships in new ways” (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, p. 111).

### 2.2. Unplanned and unpredictable events that inform career narratives

When Levinson conducted his research, the tasks of living out a dream, forming an occupation, and building meaningful relationships were more transparently observable in early adulthood; yet, with varied career patterns, these tasks may be engaged whenever a career has to be redefined due to unplanned or unpredictable events. What is predictable in the novice phase are the tasks that manifest in different career orientations. More broadly, career orientations are defined as preferences that result from the intersection of individual and social factors, including one's own self-concept, meaningful relationships such as family, the work environment, cultural influences, and labor market conditions (Rodrigues, Guest & Budjanovcanin, 2013; Rodrigues, Butler & Guest, 2019). We draw from this career orientations literature, which suggests that individuals can have protean and boundaryless orientations toward a career (Rodrigues et al., 2019), and elaborate career orientations that can be protean or self-driven, be relationally-driven by meaningful work and life relationships, and be driven inter-organizationally by a chosen profession or intra-organizationally by an organization in different forms of boundarylessness (Guan et al., 2019).

Across these different career orientations, the novice phase may include integrating unplanned and unpredictable events into their emerging sense of self. In contrast to a planned career path intention, we define an unplanned career path intention as having no particular trajectory in mind, rather going along with opportunities as they present themselves. This definition takes into consideration how protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope careers reflect the unpredictable nature of careers, which we further expand on in what follows.

To better understand how unpredictability may inform career narratives, we also draw from the literature on chance events and related constructs. While people may approach their career with a particular plan, events can occur that cannot be planned for or predicted. Chance events are defined as “events that were not planned or predictable but had a significant influence on an individual's career” (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996, p. 93). The Chaos Theory of Careers suggests that career development is a complex and dynamic system, a consequence of which is the unpredictability of chance (Pryor & Bright, 2014). People learn from interacting with

this complex dynamic social system and make adaptations, such as reframing their understanding of themselves and others in a purposeful way (Pryor & Bright, 2003). Reflecting this social and purposive response, chance encounters are understood to be situational, accidental, and unintentional, and both chance events and encounters impact behavior and how a career subsequently develops (Rojewski, 1999). In a seminal study, it was found that 69.1% of high school and university students reported that chance events influenced their career decision making (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005), confirming the importance of chance events in the narratives of young people.

While chance events are an important influence in career decision making, extant theories do not fully examine the process by which people perceive and incorporate chance and unpredictability into their meaning-making. As such, Bright et al. (2005) suggest that events that seem unpredictable when observed by someone else may be communicated through a more planful narrative by the individual who experiences them. As the protagonist of one's own story, people create coherence in a seemingly discontinuous career narrative by relating different jobs that lack an obvious link (e.g., by highlighting transferrable skills) or by explaining changes as driven by personal values (e.g., a sense of purpose motivated the change to a more fulfilling career path) (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Thus, while a work history may look to be discontinuous and marked by unpredictable events to someone else, the individual making these changes to their career may experience it as continuous and purposeful. This stands in contrast to individuals whose careers may reflect a work history that appears planned, yet may be wrestling with the desire follow a very different path.

Despite this difference in the meaning derived from observable work history versus subjective career narrative, much of the research on chance events focuses on classifying common categories rather than the process of how chance is perceived and integrated into a career (Rice, 2014). As a common example of typical items used to categorize and measure chance events, Table A1 in the appendix shows the 27 items used by Salamone and Slaney (1981) to test the extent to which chance events versus contingency factors influence career decisions. In their study, contingency factors are defined simply as "personal ability factors," which may explain the broad application of the term to factors ranging from "my father's occupation" or "my religious background" to "being aware of my skills and abilities" (Salamone & Slaney, 1981, p. 27–31).

More recent career theory considers the importance of unplanned and unpredictable and planned and predictable circumstances together. For example, happenstance learning theory suggests that both planned and unplanned situations create learning experiences that result in gaining "skills, interests, knowledge, beliefs, preferences, sensitivities, emotions, and future actions" (Krumboltz, 2009, p. 135). This variation on chance and contingency factors suggests that what informs the current meaning and future action in a career is tied to the extent to which someone learns from the event or encounter. Thus, one could argue that not all chance events or contingency factors are important to a developing career. Another variation on chance and contingency factors is career shocks. A career shock is "a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focus individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career. The occurrence of a career shock can vary in terms of predictability and can be either positively or negatively valenced" (Akkermans, Seibert, & Mol, 2018, p. 4). This definition further indicates that how someone thinks about and makes meaning out of chance events or contingency factors influences whether the experience is positive or negative. Synthesizing across these various constructs that address chance, contingency, cognition, and emotion, it becomes clear that incorporating these factors into a career is not a static state that can be measured, but rather a process that is worked and reworked as individuals form the self-knowledge of who they have been, who they are, and who they want to be in their careers.

While useful to an extent, these various categorizations of chance and contingency factors further demonstrate the importance of understanding the individual's meaning making around the planfulness, predictability, and intent behind these events and encounters. When someone other than the individual seeks to categorize these events and encounters—such as a researcher, a career counselor, or even an employer—the meaning can often be lost (Rice, 2014). While the sequence of events can be captured in work history, understanding the meaning of an event or encounter to the individual experiencing these events can inform why and how these factors get incorporated into their career—something that cannot be learned by simply reviewing the individual's resume. Explicating career narrative construction can provide useful insights into answering the question of how people draw from both predictable and unpredictable encounters and events to form the narrative of who they are in their career. Of specific interest for this paper are the early formative experiences for career narratives. Young professionals are particularly useful for addressing our primary research question: how are career narratives constructed in the context of a major life stage transition, through a variety of orientations, and across many possible chance events?

### 3. Methods

We followed an inductive, interview-based approach common in qualitative research, which involves moving iteratively between data collection, analysis, the literature, and our own emergent theoretical ideas (Locke, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process begins with a focus on participants' lived experiences and then ultimately moves to provide a "conceptual handle on the studied experience" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3).

#### 3.1. Sample

We interviewed a total of 40 graduates from the same university and program of study (business). All participants had been working post-graduation and the average amount of time in the workforce was 4.45 years (see Table 1). The university is a large private institution located in the northeast region of the United States. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Clark &

**Table 1**  
Demographic, education, and labor market characteristics of the sample.

Demographic characteristics	Education characteristics		Labor market characteristics	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	27.35	1.70	Years since graduation	4.45 1.54
Percent of sample:			Percent of sample:	
Gender			Major	
Female	47.5%		Accounting	7.5%
Male	52.5%		Business, management, marketing, & related support	5.0%
Race/ethnicity			Entrepreneurship	5.0%
African-American or Black	5.0%		Finance	30.0%
Asian	20.0%		Human resources	2.5%
Hispanic	2.5%		International business	5.0%
White	70.0%		Management	12.5%
Other	2.5%		Marketing	17.5%
Marital status			Supply chain management	5.0%
Married	30.0%		Other	10.0%
Single	70.0%		Dual or combined major	
Number of children			Yes	27.5%
None	97.5%		Graduate degree	
One	0.0%		Yes	17.5%
Two	2.5%			
Country				
United States	77.5%		Advertising/Marketing	
Other	22.5%		Manager	17.5%
			Sales	12.5%
			Other	10.0%

Creswell, 2008) to intentionally limit the degree of heterogeneity and to focus on studying individual career behaviors that were not driven by differences in context related to institutions (e.g., liberal arts colleges versus research universities) or programs (e.g., sciences versus humanities). We reached potential participants who met our criteria through emails sent to alumni through LinkedIn. To be eligible to participate, individuals were required to have at least three years of professional work experience since graduating, as observed on their current LinkedIn profiles.

Our final sample was composed of 21 men and 19 women ranging in age from 24 to 30 years (see Table 1). The majority of the sample was white (70%) while another 20% identified as Asian and less than 10% was African American or Hispanic. About one-third were married and only one individual identified as having children. More than three-quarters lived in the United States.

On average, participants had graduated from university about 4.5 years prior to the interview. Although participants were almost exclusively business school alumni, they did exhibit some variation in terms of their undergraduate majors and subsequent labor market experiences. The most common majors were finance (30.0%), marketing (17.5%), management (12.5%), and accounting (7.5%), with about one in four subjects having completed a dual or combined major. Less than 20% had completed a graduate degree, with an MBA being the most common.

Since graduating, participants had held 3.7 jobs on average. Although just over one-third of the sample held a position in the banking or finance industry at the time of the interview, the remainder of the participants were employed across a broad range of industries including retail, insurance, IT/software, healthcare, and consulting. The most common occupations included various types of advertising/marketing professionals (e.g., researchers or specialists), analysts (e.g., credit, financial, or management), sales professionals, and managers (e.g., operations or sales). Other positions included chief executives, accountants, event planners, and HR specialists.

### 3.2. Interview procedures and protocol

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, either in person, via phone, or over Skype. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 min, and all of the interviews were recorded with the participant's permission. The interview protocol was developed by two members of the research team, addressing our core research question regarding how career narratives of young professionals are constructed and drawing from prior research on career orientation, professional identity construction and career development. Questions were purposefully open-ended to guide the general discussion and allow for follow-up. We began by asking about their career trajectory and then moved into questions about their career more broadly in terms of how they define success, what skills and experiences they have or need to be successful, and times in their lives when they felt successful. The last set of questions focused on personal and life histories that shaped their career interests, aspirations, and career paths (see Appendix A for the Interview Protocol). When appropriate, we probed with detailed questions to follow up on or clarify participants' stories and perceptions, adapting these probes to each individual's unique narrative. Thus, while the overall topics of each interview remained con-

sistent, questions were varied depending on the insights gained for each particular individual. We also collected participants' LinkedIn profiles to be able to fill in missing demographic data and to compare their personal career narratives to their publicly reported job histories portrayed to potential employers. Comparing these two sources of individual career trajectories allowed us to explore the differences between the two and what they can tell us about how young professionals perceive themselves versus what they choose to portray to others.

### 3.3. Data analysis

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to facilitate the analysis and were reviewed in depth by the researchers using NVivo. We analyzed the data by looking for common themes using an inductive approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Since we were primarily interested in the career narratives of young professionals, we began by searching for themes that addressed this broad issue. To surface these themes and relationships, we approached our analysis with a constant comparative approach by iterating across the data, prior research, and our own emergent theoretical ideas (Locke, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our research was initially guided by a set of definitions that would help us to examine the career narratives of young professionals as we moved through the iterative analysis. However, we adjusted these theoretical insights and emergent coding categories based on respondents' perceptions as reported in the interviews and our own interpretations of the data. As we advanced in our coding, we began to focus more on assessing how participants ascribe meaning to their careers and the factors that impede or facilitate their emerging career self-concept.

We engaged in a collaborative coding process to develop a codebook, and each interview was coded by at least two different authors. To develop the codebook, we began with two of the authors of this paper independently coding four transcripts. These two authors then came together to compare independent coding and to establish common themes across all four transcripts. These common themes were then discussed with the third author by looking together at various excerpts of the transcripts and addressing any differences in how the emerging codes were applied to the data. We repeated this process with all three authors for all transcripts, each independently coding three to four transcripts, coming together to resolve differences in the application of existing codes, and creating new codes as new themes emerged across the data. As we began to abstract from the participants' level of meaning to more theoretical concepts, we would engage with the literature to draw from an existing construct when appropriate or to develop a new construct. We then went back to transcripts coded prior to the abstraction to reengage with the data and ensure that the concepts accurately reflected our data.

The results of our coding process are highlighted in the data structure diagram provided in Fig. 1. Data structures have become a common format (often referred to as the "Gioia method") for explaining coding procedures in qualitative analysis and the development of theoretical process models (Bansal & Corley, 2011; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). In this data structure, we reveal how we moved from general statements that reflect common themes in our data (first order codes) to second order codes, which are derived from our iterative process of moving between our thematic codes and prior research. We followed a similar iterative process for all parts of our data and emergent framework, which moved us from the initial first-order-code level of primarily descriptive statements in the words of participants to a higher level of abstraction by integrating similar statements together into themes that captured the experiences of individuals in the context of their work at a higher level. While we did not have a number in mind as we set out to conduct the interviews, after coding 35 interviews we felt we had reached the point of theoretical saturation as no new codes were being generated (Locke, 2001). However, we continued coding the remaining interview transcripts. Our final stages of analysis focused on understanding the relationships among these emerging themes by grouping the second order codes into the aggregated theoretical dimensions serving as the basis for our conceptual framework as identified in the last column of Fig. 1.

Although our primary source of data were the interviews we conducted, we also used the participants' LinkedIn profiles to further refine our descriptive data and compare how individuals' narratives of their career paths may differ from what they portray to employers on their resumes. Comparing these two sources of data provided additional insight into how individuals articulate different career paths and also how they may conceal or reveal aspects of their career orientation, career self-concept, or choices. Discrepancies between the career narrative and the LinkedIn profile may also indicate the degree of conflict between the individual's self-perception versus how they want to be perceived externally by others.

In addition to providing this additional insight, our use of the LinkedIn data also allowed us to assess the feasibility of using resume data to determine career trajectories based on the movement of individuals across a sequence of jobs listed on their profile. We use the 2010 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System developed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to assess the degree to which an individual's career appears to be planned or unplanned. Movement within an occupational code (e.g., from analyst to assistant vice president) or occupational grouping (e.g., from associate accountant to financial advisor) indicates a profile that is seemingly planned which we previously defined as following a traditional trajectory that is sequenced as a result of educational pursuits/major marked by clear progression and milestones. Movement across occupational groupings indicates an unplanned career path intention which we previously defined as having no particular trajectory in mind but rather going along with opportunities as they present themselves. While not perfect, in this way the structure of the SOC system provides a framework for characterizing an individual's career as planned or unplanned through the lens of an outside observer such as an employer.

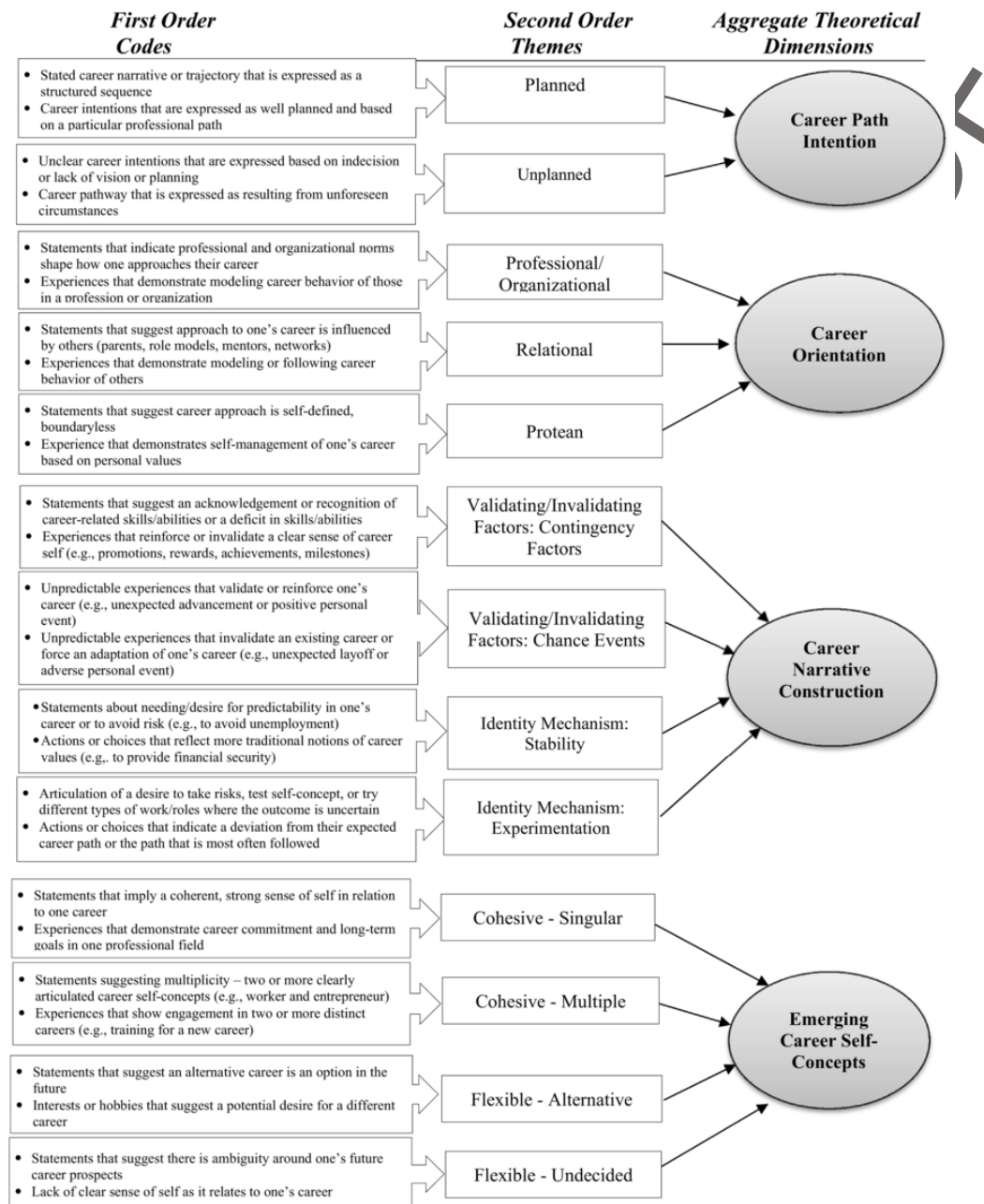


Fig. 1. Overview of data structure.

#### 4. Findings

Our findings are presented in a theoretical model (Fig. 2) that illustrates how young professionals construct their career narratives in the first several years after graduation. As the model indicates, most young professionals' intended career path, whether it be planned or unplanned, plays a significant role in shaping their career narratives. As prior research would indicate, the intended career path and its influence on career construction is in large part also determined by an individual's orientation. Those who ex-

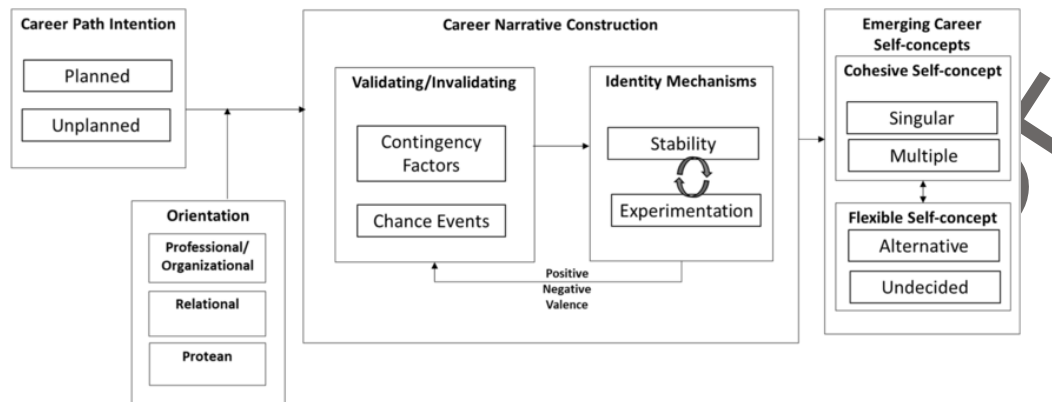


Fig. 2. Career narrative construction and emerging career self-concepts of young professionals.

press “protean” orientations engage in less structured paths, while those with a professional/organizational orientation tend to have a stated career trajectory that is expressed as a structured sequence. We also find that many individuals simultaneously exhibit a relational career orientation in which input from others (e.g., mentors, parents, advisors) or the needs of others (e.g., family members or the anticipation of having a family) expand or bound their career narrative.

Our model highlights our central finding that career narrative construction includes two sequential functions: validating/invalidating experiences and identity mechanisms. Within the first function, we find that contingency factors such as promotions, rewards, achievements, or milestones largely serve to validate and reinforce a more cohesive emerging career self-concept.<sup>2</sup> Chance events such as unexpected advancement, serendipitous encounters that form new relationships, other unpredictable lateral changes in jobs, or even economic circumstances that limit the availability of opportunities tend to be equally likely to be validating or invalidating depending on the positive or negative nature of the event. Within the second function, identity mechanisms, individuals may choose stability or experimentation or cycle between the two. Evidence from our analysis suggests that individuals who seek stability tend to desire predictability in their careers and will make choices that reflect more traditional notions of career values, such as providing financial security or avoiding risk of unemployment. Individuals who seek experimentation articulate a desire to try different types of work/roles where the outcomes are uncertain, and often take actions that deviate from the expected or typical career path. The data suggest that individuals may choose to employ either identity mechanism when responding to a validating or invalidating experience.

Lastly, our model reveals two primary states that emerge from career narrative construction, in which participants form either a cohesive or a flexible career self-concept. A cohesive career self-concept is characterized by having established one or multiple career identities that provides a strong sense of self in relation to one’s career and demonstrates a commitment to long-term goals in one or multiple professional fields. Individuals holding multiple career self-concepts are actively engaged in pursuing multiple careers, such as a full-time employee who is also developing their own business on the side. In contrast, a flexible career self-concept allows for one or more alternative careers or ambiguity around one’s future career prospects. In this state, interests or hobbies might suggest the potential for a new career, but individuals are not actively engaged in pursuing it. Those who are more undecided lack a clear sense of self as it relates to one’s career, with no obvious direction.

In the following sections, we explore these findings in more depth using specific examples from our data. To protect confidentiality, we use pseudonyms when referring to our participants. In addition, following Clair and Dufresne (2004), we also indicate the level of support for our findings in the following way: S = Strong support, many participants were judged to have, or expressed having, this experience and/or reaction; M = Moderate support, some participants were judged to have, or expressed having, this experience and/or reaction; T = Tentative support, a small group of participants were judged to have, or expressed having, this experience and/or reaction. Construct definitions, level of support, and additional representative data for each construct in Fig. 1 can be found in Table 2 listed at the end of the Findings section.

#### 4.1. Career path intentions and career orientation

##### 4.1.1. Planned career path intention

We found that most of the young professionals in our study enter the labor market with an intended career path that is well planned. Indeed, most participants were able to express their career narrative or trajectory as a structured sequence. For example, when asked to describe his career trajectory to date, Dexter replied:

<sup>2</sup> Although the literature broadly defines contingency factors as personal ability factors, based on our data, we focus our theorizing around factors that are most relevant for informing young professionals’ awareness of their abilities in the workplace.



**Table 2**  
Construct definitions, level of support (LOS), and representative data.

Construct	Definition	LOS <sup>a</sup>	Representative data
Planned career path intention	Following a traditional trajectory that is sequenced as a result of educational pursuits/major marked by clear progression and milestones	S	I started at [the University] in the internship program at UBS on a wealth management team. It was a team of 7 and I did all of my internships there. I continued with them because I was enjoying what I was doing and that kind of led me to stay with them, which fortunately led to an opportunity for full time employment when I graduated. I started out with them more in a service type role, which in the past year has turned into more of a financial advisory role. I am starting to bring in clients of my own and build my own book. [Dexter] Okay, it was planned – I initially had two options, so I just chose one and went ahead with it. So yes, it was known that this is what I wanted. And the plan became pretty clear after I finished the second internship, if that's what you're asking. [Sun]
Unplanned career path intention	Having no particular trajectory in mind, rather going along with opportunities as they present themselves	M	I don't think I really had any idea what I wanted. I mean, I think probably what everyone graduates probably is thinking in their head, you know, get a job, make a lot of money. Make money, excel, move forward. I don't really think I had much of an idea specifically of what I wanted when I started. [Alicia] kind of like poking around and seeing what stuck, and when it stuck I pursued it and when I didn't like it I pursued what I did like. A lot of it is luck, it depends on the market, it depends on the positions, it depends on what's available and a lot of those things are things you can account for. [Alexa]
Professional or Organizational career orientation	Transition in careers is driven by expectations and norms of the profession or organization	M	So my goal...my vision for my career is to be a sales leader within a medical device company. [Tess] So transitionally, you can see I went from assistant planner to associate planner to a merchandise planner and then to a director or a VP level planner. [Susan]
Protean career orientation	Transition in careers is driven by individual values and self-fulfillment	S	I always liked the idea of having some sort of business so owning my own business or being part of a business operation that I don't have to clock in clock out every day, that does intrigue me. Trying to grow something, trying to make something, that's what keeps me going outside the money. [Connor] For me, the success would be something that gives me purpose and makes me happy. I feel that it makes me happy and it makes me feel accomplished. I feel like all the hard work I am doing is bringing a great result. So, I would define success as something that gives you gratification, makes you happy, something you actually enjoy doing. [Marlisa]
Contingency factors	Personal ability factors (Salamone & Slaney, 1981) and becoming aware of skills and interests (Bright et al., 2005)	S	Looking back, a lot of things came to me because I was able to demonstrate a certain aptitude for problem-solving, so I got tapped to work in a more of a technology role: data analytics, big data, which I don't have a formal education in. [John] It's an amazing privilege because they pick people from all over the world – they only selected 47 – being able to attend with all the global leaders and CEOs is a great achievement. Seeing that my work has been recognized by someone else on a more global level made me feel more secure that I'm on the right path. [Abeer]
Chance events	Factors that have a significant influence on a career that are unpredictable or cannot be planned for (Rice, 2014)	S	I was the fastest promotion from Analyst to VP, it was only 4 years. They took me into the room, and said that they saw the quality work I was doing, that I was busting my ass 80 h a week. I was ecstatic. To me, I got something that doesn't just happen and I wasn't gunning for it – I was just trying to add value. And being rewarded for that value, meant progress and I felt like I had a major milestone. That was a huge success for me. [John] When I graduated, there was a huge downturn in the real estate market, it was 2008–2009 timeframe. That company was going through a huge downfall. They were shedding employees, shedding business operations, business units. It just wasn't fun to be a part of it anymore, so I took a job as a controller of a small business, a company based in [city] called [employer], they make promotional products, they sell those little tchotchkes. I took that job, quite honestly looking back at it I was surprised I was given the control that I was given. [Connor]
Stability	Desire for predictable career	S	For me, success will be eventually having a family that providing stability to them and making them happy, giving them opportunities like my parents gave to me. [Carlos] Right now, I think what stands in the way is that opportunity cost. The sort of risk/return tradeoff we talked about earlier. Could I polish up my resume and jump ship to go work in a real estate firm? Yea, I think I could. Is it the right time in my career to make that move, is it the right moment to take that risk? I'm waiting to see when that time comes to make the move. [John]
Experimentation	Desire for expanding career that involves taking risks, testing identity, and moving around to try different types of work in different roles	S	I figured I'd give it a try. It was definitely — the past six years of my life have been a whirlwind. I took that role, and it was very challenging. We had a need for help on this team that I started with. And, minimal training; actually, no training at all, really. It was — to be honest, I think I cried every day for like three months. [Alicia]

Table 2 (Continued)

Construct	Definition	LOS <sup>a</sup>	Representative data
			And right now I'm looking into a variety of different roles maybe internal/external work in a company and seeing what other roles that I can utilize my skillset because you can probably tell I have a very heavy accounting/finance background, that's why I went into banking, so I'm exploring what's out there. [Esther]
<b>Cohesive career self-concept</b>	A career self-concept that is easily communicated through a cohesive narrative		
Singular	A cohesive career self-concept expressed through a focused narrative centered on a particular profession	S	I consider where I'm am at [current employer] more of a career and a calling. I've discovered I'm good at sales and managing people and I can see myself working in here in this type of fasted paced rapidly growing company for a long time. I plan to set some roots and stay for as long as I can or until something better comes along. [Jake] So now I have been with [current employer] for 2 years and 4 months or so and I'm a full-fledged insurance broker licensed to do business in the states and have some insurance designations now and I can really see insurance brokerage as my career progresses. I think I've built a very good home for myself and this is definitely what I see myself doing for at least the next several years. [Vlad]
Multiple	A cohesive career self-concept that clearly suggests an emphasis on several active work identities	M	...we have grown the company to a good size and were opening our first retail store this year. We also are launching our own Ecommerce platform this year as well. So about 3 years later the company is still growing. I also still do consulting work with that Mattress Firm company the...company that we sold back in 2013. [Connor] I said, "I'm smart enough to realize when the ship might be going down. I can do a lot better than this." So I left that firm. I was there for about a year and a half. I had a side business where I did photography for eight months. [Douglas]
<b>Flexible career self-concept</b>	An open-ended career self-concept that allows for multiple potential pathways for current and future career prospects		
Alternative	A flexible career self-concept expressed through aspirations that are placed on hold but still retained as a potential next step	T	Like I said I'd love to get to a point where I could start my own business. Like I said I'm still learning so much and I'm happy what I'm doing now, but one day I'd love to do that. [Gwen]  You know I have been in sales and technology for the past 5-6 years, so it would be fun to start my own technology consulting business because I would really enjoy that. It would be cool to teach high school math I would really enjoy that. It would be fun I always wanted to get a master's degree in physics because it's something I find interesting and professionally applicable. I don't really know it would be wacky if I won the lottery I would have to figure it out. [Justin]
Undecided	A flexible career self-concept that is intentionally ambiguous in order to allow for changes in the future	M	It all depends with what you're doing and you kind of have to ask yourself like where do I want to be and I'm still in that stage where do I want to be, I have no clue. I like where I am now but no jobs guaranteed. Never going to be here for 20 years and retire, that's like unheard of. I think that if you're at a place for 3 years that's considered pretty long. So, it's hard, I'm in that halfway point. I still have no clue what the hell I'm doing sometimes. [Cindy] I am most likely not going to stay in finance much longer. I could do corporate strategy (very likely), go into my MBA (not making too much sense). I also want to try my own business. [Todd]

<sup>a</sup> S = strong support, M = moderate support, and T = tentative support.

"I started at [the University] in the internship program at UBS on a wealth management team. It was a team of seven and I did all of my internships there. I continued with them because I was enjoying what I was doing and that kind of led me to stay with them, which fortunately led to an opportunity for full time employment when I graduated. I started out with them more in a service type role, which in the past year has turned into more of a financial advisory role. I am starting to bring in clients of my own and build my own book."

Many of these participants confirmed that their career intentions were well planned and/or based on a particular professional path when asked directly. For example, one graduate, Sun, who had majored in finance replied:

"Okay, it was planned – I initially had two options, so I just chose one and went ahead with it. So yes, it was known that this is what I wanted. And the plan became pretty clear after I finished the second internship, if that's what you're asking."

However, not all young professionals perceive their intended career path as having been planned even if they describe their career trajectory as a structured sequence—a finding confirmed by their LinkedIn profiles. In fact, about half of the participants who followed an expected professional path also stated that their career was unplanned. For example, Vincent described his four years of experience in product management within the healthcare industry with the same firm as "completely titles of product management

in my career” and “solely with [Healthcare Firm].” Yet when asked directly by the interviewer if his career path was planned, he replied:

“Certainly, unplanned. I had taken my initial internship in product management because it sounded good and it seemed like a nice fit and really, it's worked out to be what I like doing and what I'm good at so I think that just going to the internship program at [University] was helpful in determining that. Not to say it's what I'll do forever, but it's certainly what set me on this course right now. But I didn't think that's what I was going to do when I started in business school.”

We surmise that this dichotomy may reflect the tension between the meaning that one makes as described by their own internal career narrative versus the listing of jobs held in sequence as portrayed externally on their resume for an employer. As one participant, Rebecca, put it:

“But to be able to lead a kind of theme or a narrative through your experiences is helpful when you're looking for work. So to be able to, you know, technically one could say that my experience is sort of disaggregated but I have been able to kind of weave the narrative that for a long time I have been interested in financial services or agriculture or social impact. So you know you want to do a bunch of different things but you have to make sure you are your own brand and tell it how you want it to be portrayed. So, don't say ‘I did this’ and ‘I did that and that’ but so just try to, even if it's not terribly connected, try to streamline it so it gives a message.”

#### 4.1.2. Unplanned career path intention

While most of our participants followed a highly structured and or seemingly planned path, some entered the labor market with very little planning despite the high level of career support provided by their university. We find moderate support for participants with unclear career intentions that stem from indecision or lack of clear goals. As one recent graduate, Alicia, admitted:

“I don't think I really had any idea what I wanted. I mean, I think probably what everyone who graduates probably is thinking in their head, you know, get a job, make a lot of money. Make money, excel, move forward. I don't really think I had much of an idea specifically of what I wanted when I started.”

Others intentionally leave their career path unplanned in order to test out different options. Alexa described her career path as:

“kind of like poking around and seeing what stuck, and when it stuck I pursued it and when I didn't like it I pursued what I did like. A lot of it is luck, it depends on the market, it depends on the positions, it depends on what's available and a lot of those things are things you can't account for.”

Another participant, Celia, attributed her unplanned career path intention to a lack of clear goals:

“It was definitely not planned. Well when I got back home I was applying to a bunch of positions, I was all over the place, I even applied to [Large Consumer Products Firm] and a couple of local firms and [Large International Bank] as well and once I got the interview I was actually declined from the job I first interviewed for and then they sent my resume to the equity sales team and that's the job I got so it was definitely not planned and I didn't even know what sales equity was when I first started the job.”

#### 4.1.3. Career orientation

While intentions toward a career path may be planned or unplanned, these intentions and their influence on one's career narrative are often shaped by one's orientation. We found that the young professionals in our sample tend to hold an orientation that is either self-driven (protean), driven by their chosen profession or current organization, or driven by the influence of others (relational). Relational and protean orientations were most strongly expressed by our participants, while we found only moderate support for professional/organizational orientation. We postulate that this is perhaps because these individuals are in the early stages of their careers. Interestingly, individuals with protean orientations tend to engage in less structured paths, while nearly all those with a more professional/organizational orientation had a stated career narrative or trajectory that was planned. As an example of the latter, Tess very deliberately built a career in the healthcare industry, asserting: “So my goal...my vision for my career is to be a sales leader within a medical device company.”

Across both planned and unplanned career paths, many individuals also revealed a relational orientation in which meaningful relationships informed their career narrative. For example, young professionals in our sample often acknowledged their parents as an influence in this early stage of their careers. As one participant, Annie, noted: “So I think always growing up with both of my parents working really shaped my career aspirations.”

Additionally, participants acknowledged the anticipation of family relationships influencing their future career self-concept. For example, one of our participants, Hailey, described the choices she made in planning her career in anticipation of wanting a family in the future:

“But, also I think another way of defining success for me would be to — I mean, as, being a woman, it's always a little more difficult, because we do — like, if you want to have a family, like every day — that's also a reason why I did my MBA as soon as possible, because I plan on having a family, but I still want to work. So, I think another form of success for me would be to be sort of a role model for other women out there, to show them you can do it and you don't need to be dependent. And, you can have your family life and still your career.”

Reflecting the understanding of career narrative as incorporating past, present, and future career orientation, our model is also informed by the future changes that young professionals may anticipate in their lives.

#### 4.2. Career narrative construction: validating and invalidating factors

Our findings revealed that career narrative construction comprises two sequential functions, the first of which is validating and invalidating experiences, which include contingency factors and chance events.

##### 4.2.1. Contingency factors

Participants noted several contingency factors such as promotions, rewards, achievements, or milestones that provided validation in their career pursuits. Our analysis revealed strong support that contingency factors largely serve to validate and subsequently reinforce an emerging career self-concept. For some, these contingency factors manifest as an acknowledgement or recognition of their career-related skills or interests or abilities. Alexa, an HR professional, remarked: "I keep getting more and more responsibilities and it's like you are climbing up the ladder, but it feels so natural that you look back five years ago, and you see change but you don't notice it that much." Similarly, John quickly rose to a vice president role at an investment bank and observed: "Looking back, a lot of things came to me because I was able to demonstrate a certain aptitude for problem solving so I got tapped to work in more of a technology role: data analytics, big data, which I don't have a formal education in."

For others, these contingency factors reflect particular experiences that reinforce or invalidate a coherent career self-concept. Susan, a merchandising specialist, reflected: "My director recognized it and there was a town hall meeting in front of the whole division where there's an employee recognition part and he had a whole segment on me and took time to recognize me." Jake, now a manager, recounted his initial success as a front-line sales person:

"And by the end of the year, totally unexpectedly and I don't think anyone thought I would do it, I not only hit my quota but blew it out of the water by like 50-60% and made a club trip and got to go to Dubai with my wife for free for four days, all-expense paid so that was a pretty successful moment and that has really built my confidence here and [former employer] and anywhere."

Abeer, a financial analyst for a private equity firm, described her experience attending the World Economic Forum annual meeting as validating her career path:

"It's an amazing privilege because they pick people from all over the world – they only selected 47 – being able to attend with all the global leaders and CEOs is a great achievement. Seeing that my work has been recognized by someone else on a more global level made me feel more secure that I'm on the right path."

However, some contingency factors can be invalidating and serve to alter one's career path. For example, early exposure to a profession that is negative may shape the career intentions of professionals, particularly when aspects of the career turn out to be different from what they expected. In these cases, participants explained that they may have selected a particular path, but this changed after an experience that was invalidating. For some, it may have been a negative exchange with a colleague or supervisor, a lack of enjoyment of the work itself, or a realization that their chosen career path was not financially sustaining. One participant, Douglas, explained:

"I graduated with a degree in marketing and planned to work in advertising. I was able to land a job at one of the largest agencies. And so, I did that for about a year and a half, and my starting salary was \$20,000 pre-tax and I was working long hours, making not that much money relative to other career paths you could take, and at the time I said, 'you know, I need a change.' And my roommate was working in financial sales at the time and so I said, 'You know what? I'll try it.'"

##### 4.2.2. Chance events

While most participants experienced chance events, they were not incorporated into their career narratives as often as contingency factors. Chance events, such as unexpected advancement or unemployment, tend to be equally likely to be validating or invalidating depending on the nature of the event. Yet regardless of whether the valence is positive or negative, we found strong support that experiencing chance events also contributes to forming a cohesive career self-concept. For example, John recalled his unexpected promotion from analyst to vice president:

"I was the fastest promotion from Analyst to VP, it was only four years. They took me into the room, and said that they saw the quality work I was doing, that I was busting my ass 80 hours a week. I was ecstatic. To me, I got something that doesn't just happen and I wasn't gunning for. I was just trying to add value. And being rewarded for that value meant progress and I felt like I had a major milestone. That was a huge success for me."

Jorge, a VP of operations for a food service supplier, explained how a chance encounter with the CEO of his current employer due to an unexpected layover landed him on his career trajectory:

"I would say that, to be very candid, I firmly believe that life is all about timing. And to me, it's all about being at the right place at the right time, or the wrong place at the wrong time. Part of it was unplanned in the sense that no, I did not plan to meet my future president/CEO in Hong Kong in 2011."

But not all chance events are positive in nature or lead to validation, particularly for individuals who graduate during a recession, for whom prior literature has shown to have long-term consequences including less stable employment and lower earnings (Kahn, 2010). As Clara recalled:

"It was 2009. I had a job lined up in PR, public relations, and graduated a semester early because I had the job lined up and the company actually went bankrupt. So I graduated early and I didn't have a job so I kind of went off on a completely different path than I thought I would. I ended up going back to the credit union where I used to work part time and then I ended up in an insurance role there which I held for a number of years and eventually got into the compliance sector, got my MBA, and then moved over to [Large Insurance Firm] about two years ago in their compliance department as a senior business analyst. So completely different path than I thought I would but, such is life."

For others, chance events related to their personal circumstances can be invalidating for their emerging career self-concept but inform the adoption of a new career pursuit. For example, Hailey had started a new business with a classmate but needed to return home to Switzerland to help run the family business for her aging father. She noted:

"It's like, you know, like you have a plan in life. You think you're going to do this and that, and then all of a sudden you have the external factors that you cannot control that happen. Like, I didn't plan on returning to Switzerland, but the current situation requires me to. So, you always have to be flexible."

#### 4.3. Career narrative construction: identity mechanisms

The second function of career narrative construction encompasses two core identity mechanisms that individuals use to respond to these validating or invalidating experiences. We find that young professionals are equally likely to respond to contingency factors or chance events by either seeking stability or engaging in experimentation.

##### 4.3.1. Stability

Evidence from our analysis suggests that individuals who seek stability tend to look for predictability in their careers and will make choices based on more traditional career values such as ensuring financial security or mitigating the chances of unemployment. When asked about moving up the ladder at a large investment bank, Carlos stated: "For me, success will be eventually having a family and providing stability to them and making them happy, giving them opportunities like my parents gave to me." In some cases, individuals who desire stability may even hold multiple career self-concepts where they stay the course in their current job despite the desire to change careers. For example, John had dreams of a career in real estate, but worried about the risk involved:

"Right now, I think what stands in the way is that opportunity cost. The sort of risk/return tradeoff we talked about earlier. Could I polish up my resume and jump ship to go work in a real estate firm? Yeah, I think I could. Is it the right time in my career to make that move, is it the right moment to take that risk? I'm waiting to see when that time comes to make the move."

##### 4.3.2. Experimentation

In contrast, individuals who seek experimentation express a desire to try different types of work/roles where the outcomes are uncertain. Yet, they take on this uncertainty in order to continue to learn. Experimentation is seen as a way to connect to a broader sense of purpose in a career or to continue to grow. Debra described her winding path into forensic accounting as an ongoing internal dialog:

"I find that was the biggest struggle, asking myself — Debra, what is your purpose in life? What are you meant to be? Where are you meant to be? Who are you supposed to be? — It dives into your strengths. I was strong in Law and passionate about Business. And I had to find a career that appreciates both backgrounds and an extraverted career. My internships confirmed my passions and helped me in figuring out what to do. It's important to realize, you're never constricted in your job after graduation. I'm still learning things along the way."

Similarly, Jorge talked about his opportunistic journey through different positions as allowing him to continue to stretch the boundaries of his career self-concept:

"I live out of my comfort zone every single day, and so I don't believe this is a calling, per se. I believe that it's leading me to the point of realizing my calling. So, I need to get — in order to get to my calling, I have to go through this. I have to go through all the learning curves of being uncomfortable in a new setting, every single day, to be able to reach my calling, and once I'm there, I think that I'll be able to make the greatest amount of difference."

Some of these individuals even act on their desire to experiment by taking actions that deviate from the expected or customary career path. For example, Alexa talked about taking advantage of an opportunity to leave a less than ideal job situation to try a new role:

“So it's all about making the best of the situation that you are in, but continuing to drive yourself. I could have remained in the HR role I was last in, but the state of the HR department was not what I wanted to do, and this role fell in my lap, I wasn't looking for it, but I pursued it.”

Others find that taking on the risk of experimentation may create challenging circumstances and struggle. Alicia talked about the emotional toll from taking a job as a data analyst while having only a marketing background:

“I figured I'd give it a try. It was definitely — the past six years of my life have been a whirlwind. I took that role, and it was very challenging. We had a need for help on this team that I started with. And, minimal training; actually, no training at all, really. It was — to be honest, I think I cried every day for like three months.”

Overall, our analysis reveals a model of career narrative construction for young professionals where individuals experience contingency factors or chance events and respond either by seeking stability or engaging in experimentation. Somewhat surprisingly, we find that individuals are equally likely to engage in stable singular advancement, multiple experiments, or combine elements of both. In the next section, we discuss the emerging career self-concepts that arise from these essential functions.

#### 4.4. Emerging career self-concepts

The final piece of our model reveals two primary identity states that emerge during the process of career construction in which participants form either a cohesive or a flexible career self-concepts.

##### 4.4.1. Cohesive career self-concept

Our analysis suggests strong support for the ability to form a cohesive self-concept early on in one's career with over three-quarters of our young professionals establishing one or multiple career self-concepts. With respect to a singular focused career self-concept, Sonya articulated a clear sense of who she is in her career and her commitment to her company, despite the different roles she has experienced at her current employer:

“It's definitely not just a job. It's something that I think, you know, especially as seeing I now have worn a lot of different hats here at [current employer], I do see myself growing with the company and so, you know, no matter what title I have, I do see myself continuing to move forward. Whether it be merchandising or HR, something that's continuing to progress and it goes way beyond just coming in and getting a paycheck and going home. It's definitely a career.”

Similarly, Jake's narrative has clarity even while he keeps open the potential for a future change:

“I consider where I'm am at with [current employer] more of a career and a calling. I've discovered I'm good at sales and managing people and I can see myself working in here in this type of fast-paced rapidly growing company for a long time. I plan to set some roots and stay for as long as I can or until something better comes along.”

An important observation is that individuals are able to form a cohesive career self-concept even in the face of negative chance events such as graduating during a recession, suggesting some degree of resiliency. For example, Vlad, a finance and marketing graduate who took a job in an insurance company after being unemployed for seven months, stated:

“So now I have been with [current employer] for two years and four months or so and I'm a full-fledged insurance broker licensed to do business in the states and have some insurance designations now and I can really see insurance brokerage as my career progresses. I think I've built a very good home for myself and this is definitely what I see myself doing for at least the next several years.”

Some individuals also form a cohesive career self-concept despite their engagement in multiple careers across multiple organizational contexts. For example, Hailey reveals that in addition to working for her family back in Switzerland, she also wants to take a position managing assets for another family:

“So, I kind of want to work for another, like, family office and learn from them. You know, like, because they might be a little bigger than us, so there would be people who have more experience who can show me how to do this. So, I just decided to do this, so I'll be doing three jobs, if you will.”

From these narratives of the young professionals in our sample, we see that a cohesive career self-concept can emerge even from multiplicity of roles, organizations, or possibilities for the future. Next, we explore the formation of a flexible career self-concept, in which participants hold less clarity around who they are and who they hope to be in their careers.

#### 4.4.2. Flexible career self-concept

In contrast to a cohesive careers self-concept, we find only moderate support for young professionals to hold a flexible career self-concept that allows for one or more alternatives or ambiguity around one's future career prospects. In this state, interests or hobbies might suggest the potential for a new career but individuals are not actively engaged in pursuing it. For example, Gwen, a senior manager of global communications for a software company mused: "Like I said I'd love to get to a point where I could start my own business. I'm still learning so much and I'm happy with what I'm doing now, but one day I'd love to do that." For others, there is more than one alternative. Justin, a regional sales manager at a cloud storage company, said:

"You know I have been in sales and technology for the past 5–6 years, so it would be fun to start my own technology consulting business because I would really enjoy that. It would be cool to teach high school math; I would really enjoy that. It would be fun, I always wanted to get a master's degree in physics because it's something I find interesting and professionally applicable. I don't really know, it would be wacky if I won the lottery, I would have to figure it out."

Other young professionals that hold a flexible career self-concept are more undecided and lack a clear sense of self as it relates to their careers with no obvious direction. Moving from client services to operations in her current firm, Cindy lamented:

"It all depends with what you're doing and you kind of have to ask yourself like 'where do I want to be' and I'm still in that stage, 'where do I want to be,' I have no clue. I like where I am now but no jobs guaranteed. Never going to be here for 20 years and retire, that's like unheard of. I think that if you're at a place for three years that's considered pretty long. So, it's hard, I'm in that halfway point. I still have no clue what the hell I'm doing sometimes."

After moving from a two-year bank management program focused on back-office operations to a front-office residential finance team, Todd noted: "I am most likely not going to stay in finance much longer. I could do corporate strategy (very likely), go into my MBA (not making too much sense). I also want to try my own business."

We posit that these two states—cohesive and flexible—are not necessarily permanent, particularly for young professionals early on in their careers. In fact, it is likely that individuals cycle in and out of each state as they progress through each life stage, with periods of cohesiveness punctuated by periods of flexibility as they transition from one career path to another. After working for four years as a consultant for the same firm, Sun described the importance of being flexibly minded in response to the ongoing adaptation of her career over time:

"Your career is not really a sprint, it's a marathon. So definitely you need to learn to pace yourself and try to make the right balance of still having the right amount of motivation but still having the time to reflect and rethink and readjust to your career path. So, for me, that is a really good thing to learn, because then even if there is disappointment in your career, you'd be able to adjust and cope just fine."

#### 4.5. Assessing career narrative construction using resume data

In a post-hoc analysis, we compared the career paths and experiences described by our participants with their LinkedIn profiles. We initially had intended to use the LinkedIn data to fill in any employment gaps when outlining the career trajectories of each participant. In doing so, we found that their online presence diverged significantly, especially among participants who had expressed an emerging career concept that was flexible. For example, Justin had expressed a flexible career self-concept that suggested quite a bit of ambiguity around his future career prospects, musing about multiple possibilities that included starting his own technology business, teaching high school math, and getting a master's degree in physics. This flexible career self-concept was also exhibited in his narrative about his career path to date:

"So I started as a music industry major, but then I thought I wasn't going to make any money. Then two semesters in health sciences planning on going to med school, but then I realized it would take a very long time to get out of school so I didn't want to do that. Then I figured finance always seemed like something I had an inclination towards and that was in 2008 when the housing market crashed and the financial industry collapsed so I don't want to just do that...So I ended up sticking with the finance major, but then pivoting to marketing as well and then ended up with a position in sales, which is totally separate from any of it."

Yet looking at his LinkedIn profile, most employers would walk away with the impression that Justin was following a stable or traditional career path in sales where the sequence of job titles fits consistently within that occupational grouping as defined by the SOC codes. For example, his profile lists a series of jobs he has held that appear to form a cohesive career self-concept around the sales profession, all within the Marketing and Sales Managers occupational grouping (SOC 11-2020). His promotion from business development associate to federal account manager after only one year with his first employer certainly suggests a more traditional path. From there, he became a senior account executive at a larger company and was subsequently promoted to regional sales manager two years later in that same firm and has been in that role for the past two years.

We also found that individuals exhibiting coherent career self-concepts that were expressed as multiple were not reflected as such on their LinkedIn profiles. For example, despite John expressing a cohesive career self-concept in finance doing data analytics, he is also weighing when it will be the right time to "jump ship" and seek a new career in real estate. Yet nothing on his LinkedIn profile

would indicate any interest in real estate whatsoever. Instead, all of the job titles listed reflect a stable upward trajectory within the same occupational groupings over the past seven years from analyst to vice president at the same investment banking firm with no mention of his having obtained his real estate license.

We take away two important lessons from this comparative analysis. First, we suspect that young professionals are highly sensitive to employer expectations regarding the ability to portray oneself as fitting into a particular profession. One participant noted that “to be able to lead a kind of theme or a narrative through your experiences is helpful when you’re looking for work.” Thus, it appears that there is both a career narrative that helps individuals make sense of their career experiences to date and informs their future trajectory, as well as an external portrayal that helps employers quickly assess a candidate’s viability for a particular role. While the idea that individuals do not reveal everything about their careers on their resumes may not be new, we believe it is a novel contribution to show *how* the individual’s career narrative differs from that which they display publicly to an employer when seeking a job.

Because of this dichotomy, our second takeaway is to caution researchers when using resume data alone to study career construction or even career pathways. Indeed, other researchers have also tested the validity of using LinkedIn as a screen and selection tool by hiring managers (Roulin & Levashina, 2019). While one may observe a series of jobs held by the individual within the same occupational grouping, one cannot always assume a logical or natural progression from one position to the next, as there may be intermediary steps in between such as contingency factors or chance events that dictate one’s career path. This is important for career coaching and workforce development practitioners who may seek to infer common pathways that can be suggested to similarly situated individuals. This potential for asymmetry between the inner career narrative and outer portrayal also has important consequences for individuals. When individuals believe others have an inaccurate view of their meaningful self-concept, dissonance can result, which may create stress and impact well-being (Meister, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2014). We discuss this application of our research further in the next section.

## 5. Discussion

Our findings suggest that young professionals engage in a dynamic process of career narrative construction with often complex emerging career self-concepts. Prior research on identity construction suggests that people move toward an increasingly stable and cohesive self-concept as they advance in their career (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006). In our sample of young professionals, we find that even those whose work history suggests a singular cohesive career self-concept may characterize their trajectory as unplanned. Thus, there is an interplay between predictable and unpredictable forces in a career, and we examine these dynamics between unplanned and planned career intentions, chance and contingency factors, and stability and experimentation that are navigated in the career narratives of young professionals.

Our analysis further reveals that a young professional’s intended career path, whether it be planned or unplanned, plays a significant role in shaping their career narratives. As people narrate their careers, they gain self-knowledge that incorporates various work roles into a cohesive self-concept and informs their career decisions. Not surprisingly, we find strong support for cohesive career self-concepts among participants who were able to describe their initial career path intentions as planned—this is despite having only graduated within the past 3–5 years (see Table 2). For these individuals, success was often a straight line marked with professional milestones. Yet we also find moderate support for cohesive career self-concepts among participants who exhibited unclear career intentions as they entered the labor market. Similarly, a cohesive career self-concept is also the most likely outcome for young professionals regardless of their orientation, although to varying degrees. Nearly all participants who exhibited a professional/organizational orientation and most who exhibited a relational orientation had developed a cohesive career self-concept. In contrast, over one-quarter of participants with a protean orientation had a flexible career self-concept. For these individuals, studying the validating or invalidating factors and identity mechanisms that shaped their decision-making can be particularly instructive for enhancing our understanding of the process by which people make meaning out of their careers.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

Our research makes several contributions to existing literature. First, this research contributes a process-based understanding of how young professionals construct their career narratives. While existing research provides insight into career orientations, chance events, and contingency factors, we put these constructs together as part of an overall process of career narrative construction. We also extend the literature on identity construction by incorporating constructs from the careers literature that are largely contained within a separate stream of research. From the identity construction literature, we incorporate mechanisms of stability and experimentation to understand how the complex career self-concepts emerge. By taking a process-based approach, we are able to integrate across these areas of research to present a more complete understanding of the career narratives of young professionals.

Taken together, these three contributions of mapping the process of career narrative construction, exploring the links between predictability and unpredictability, and expanding the use of narrative for career counseling provides meaningful insight into career theory and practice. For example, during the Great Recession it was important for individuals to be able to use a more narrative approach to address the unpredictability associated with losing a job and to make sense of how this chance event fit into their career narrative construction. This process also enabled individuals to weave a narrative through their collective experiences that could be used to explain their career trajectories to date as well as where they saw themselves in the future—a useful skill when searching for



a job during a long spell of unemployment. Additionally, this narrative process could be a useful tool for career counseling in response to other chance events or even during periods of career transition that are more self-driven.

Our inductive qualitative analysis of career narratives provides deeper insight into the lived experiences of young professionals. While seminal reviews in the careers literature have considered the different ways in which careers may be constructed over time, few empirical studies have qualitatively addressed these concerns. Indeed, most of the empirical work has tested the effects of protean career attitudes (Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2009; Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012; Chay & Aryee, 1999; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Direnzo, Greenhaus, & Weer, 2015), nonlinear career paths (Cabrera, 2007; Valcour & Ladge, 2008), and boundaryless careers (Briscoe et al., 2012; Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003); yet we know little about the actual lived experiences of how individuals navigate career transitions and how their career is narratively constructed across varied career paths.

Our process-driven model provides new insight into for researchers seeking to understand professional identities in the context of today's ever-changing labor market. Professional identities are understood to provide a target identity that allows individuals to develop a career by progressing through clear milestones of doing the work of the profession (Pratt et al., 2006). Given the stability that this target provides, studies of professional identity construction implicitly convey a traditional, set career path. Yet extant literature suggests that career trajectories may vary based on self-driven ideals (Hall, 1996) or in relation to others (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), leading to a variety of approaches to navigating through multiple paths. The contrasts between the professional identity construction and the careers literature may suggest that individuals either follow a stable singular path toward gaining a professional identity or navigate multiple paths as a more self-driven or relationally motivated career orientation. In this study, we find that there is a both/and—that is, careers can have singular advancement, multiple experiments, or combined elements of both.

Second, we contribute to better understanding how people make meaning out of both predictable and unpredictable aspects of their careers. The literature capturing career patterns, such as life stages, protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope, provides insight into enduring and predictable aspects of careers, including advancement in age and different career orientations. In large part, this literature develops separately from the constructs of chance events and encounters in careers. Both predictability and unpredictability have important influences in the process of constructing a career narrative, and we take an integrative approach to developing our process model of career narrative construction.

Individuals in a more traditional career trajectory initially may have a clear plan for success and seek to follow that plan based on what is salient to them, such as earning a steady income or climbing a corporate ladder. However, they may simultaneously wrestle with what could be possible as they envision their future (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and what could have been had they chosen a different path (Obodaru, 2012). Thus, even people with more predictable factors in their career may still have a complex career self-concept, as those participants with a cohesive self-concept may have had multiple possibilities they were considering for their career. The findings of this study contribute to emerging literature on these alternative selves as we add several dimensions of predictability (planned intention, career orientations, contingency factors, and stability mechanisms) and unpredictability (unplanned intention, chance events, and experimentation mechanisms) to the how young professionals form their career narratives.

Third, our findings expand on a narrative approach to career counseling (Savickas et al., 2009) that fosters the development of self-knowledge and continued exploration in the careers of young professionals. Our theory and model could be used as a framework for advancing the development of this self-knowledge and continued exploration in the careers of young professionals. While complexity and holding multiple roles may present challenges to communicating a cohesive and authentic sense of self (Caza, Vough, & Moss, 2017), this multiplicity may also provide an increased sense of excitement and ownership toward work (Caza & Moss, 2015). When working with individuals to communicate their career self-concept, career counselors may better support young professionals by allowing some chaos and unpredictability to be part of their narrative and enabling individuals to be more flexibly minded.

This narrative approach also allows people to have an active role in designing a more holistic approach to their career and life development (Del Corso & Rehffuss, 2011). By taking time for reflection and gaining this self-knowledge, young professionals will be well-positioned to have a clear understanding of their strengths that can be communicated to hiring managers and to human resources professionals. Organizations in turn can more effectively engage and retain young professionals by allowing them to make meaningful connections between their past career experiences and future career aspirations within the firm. The one thing young professionals can count on is that there will be unpredictability in their careers that will change their plans. Thus, making the process of career narrative construction more explicit can greatly benefit both young professionals and their current and future organizations by accounting for this unpredictability in a more direct and conscientious way.

## 5.2. Practical implications

Our findings also have several practical applications for organizations and higher education institutions. For organizations, career counselors and human resources professionals will need to ensure there are factors of both stability and experimentation for young professionals in order to improve recruitment and retention of top talent. Indeed, employers often state that they are looking for workers that can grow and adapt as their businesses change in response to external forces such as changes in technology or increasing global competition (Modestino, Shoag, & Ballance, 2016). Much attention has been paid to the Millennial generation and their different expectations and approaches to engaging in their careers (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). While the media and research suggest that Millennials expect better work/life balance, more social connection, and opportunities for career advancement (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010), how Millennials engage in their careers and form their careers in response to these expectations has not been fully explicated. Our study contributes to understanding the career experiences of these young professionals by providing insights into the complexity of their career self-concept. Millennials may serve as a preview of what is to come as future generations

engage with the complex dynamics and multiplicity of careers such as those examined in this study. Yet at the same time, there may be certain social norms that are resistant to change over time. For example, in a study of Millennials and their work/life expectations, gendered norms around women having more interrupted career patterns continued to persist among young professionals (McDonald, 2018). A fruitful line of future research would explore the intersectionality of different demographic identities, such as gender and generation, to better understand what social expectations continue to inform the boundaries of career self-concept and what changes occur as new generations enter into the workforce.

For colleges and universities, providing meaningful experiential learning opportunities can help prepare students and alumni to be more agile in navigating today's ever-changing labor market. No longer is it the case that having a bachelor's degree guarantees a lifetime of employment in the same role or even at the same firm. In addition to the ups and downs of the business cycle, employers have raised the skill requirements for a variety of professional jobs, as tasks that are easily automated or outsourced are eliminated from job descriptions (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011; Modestino et al., 2016). Expanding the curriculum within higher education institutions to incorporate experiential learning that allows students to explore different careers and apply their skills to a variety of positions within the structure of their chosen field of study has the potential to develop resiliency with respect to career self-concept over the life course.

### 5.3. Limitations and avenues for future work

This study is based on a small sample of recent graduates from one school within one university interviewed at one point in time. Although we deliberately focused on graduates of a business school for which there are many career paths, some of which are structured and others not, one can imagine that different fields of study may offer more opportunities for experimentation (e.g., humanities) than others (e.g., the sciences). In addition, because our subjects are recent graduates, many have only experienced one or two job transitions. As such, given the limited sample in this paper, it is difficult to say whether our findings are generalizable to graduates of other schools, other majors, and other cohorts. Thus, we encourage future research that explores how individuals develop their career identities across a variety of contexts that are subject to different constraints.

Our small sample size was also limited in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic differences, and family and marital status. Career narrative construction may be influenced by personal and social identities as expectations in both the social and work environments can differ across demographic groups. We encourage future researchers to broaden the demographic characteristics of their samples in an effort to determine how career patterns may be differentiated across a variety of social identity groups. Large datasets inclusive of resume data may be the starting point to uncover some of these differences.

However, we suggest proceeding with caution when making use of novel new sources of career trajectories such as that provided by resume data for several reasons. First, individuals may not keep their profiles up-to-date which would then yield a dataset that is of limited use—although this is less of a problem for recent college graduates who are frequently searching for new job opportunities, even while currently employed. In terms of our study, all of our subjects' LinkedIn profiles were current since this was the method that we used to recruit them for interviews. A second limitation is in the usefulness of the data that can be gleaned from the profiles for assessing career trajectories and/or identities. As our comparison of coding based on the interviews versus the LinkedIn profiles demonstrated, relying on resume data may mask some of the unpredictability in an individual's career path. As such, it will also be important to collect more narrative data to assess the attitudes and processes by which individuals have constructed their careers—either through surveys or additional interviews—that can be used in conjunction with resume data to accurately map out individual career paths. This finding has important implications for workforce development policy which is currently using career trajectories gleaned from resumes to guide program investment without any understanding of the role that unpredictability or chance events play.

Another limitation of our data is that it is cross-sectional, having been collected at only one point in time. Thus, we relied on retrospective sensemaking of our subjects' experiences.

While the combination of using the LinkedIn data along with the interviews provided a mechanism to fill in any gaps, we suggest that future researchers expand on our theorizing by obtaining longitudinal data. Collecting data over time from the same subjects would capture additional career transitions, potentially revealing different career patterns as well as which factors influence career patterns over the lifecycle versus those that are specific to a particular life stage, such as early career. In addition, future work might explore how young professionals integrate their career self-concepts with their personal identities. While our focus was exploring the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of career narrative construction, future research might also explore the affective dimension (e.g., feeling "scared", "hopeful") of careers narrative construction.

Lastly, all of our subjects had completed one or more long-term internships as a requirement of their undergraduate studies. These six-month engagements may have underscored a greater sense of career flexibility. Future research may conduct a comparison of young professionals who completed similar internships during their transitional development in undergraduate studies with those who did not in order to better understand whether there are common career patterns across young professionals or if experimentation conducted through internships is a determining factor in how decisions are made around career paths and career changes. Additionally, this study was conducted in the United States, which may include more individualistic cultural influences that informed the extent to which individuals engaged in a sense of agency in their career decisions. Thus, future research may also collect comparison data from international countries, particularly those that may be more collectivist, to see if different career patterns emerge.

## 6. Conclusion

Young professionals face a daunting transition when taking their first steps to join and to establish themselves in the workforce. They are making major changes in their adult development as well as facing an ever-changing job market. While this time of change can be full of opportunity and promise, there can also be unexpected hurdles that have the potential to fragment their self-concept and to derail a planned career path. In the face of these trials and tribulations, our theoretical model of career narrative construction can help piece together what may seem fragmented in the immediate moment into a more continuous understanding of career planning and development over time. By taking this long-term view, young professionals may be better equipped to face uncertainty and unpredictability as well as potentially stagnating predictability in their careers with an adaptability that is critical to maintaining resilience across past, present, and future work experiences.

## Appendix A

**Table A1**  
Contingency factors and chance events from Salamone and Slaney (1981).

Construct	Item
Contingency factors	My father's occupation
	My educational level
	My sex
	My ethnic or racial background
	My social standing
	My vocational training opportunities
	My religious background
	My financial responsibilities to others
	Having enough money for my schooling or training
	Being aware of vocational opportunities
	My physical capacities or limitations
	Being aware of my own intelligence level
	Family, community, or cultural influences on me
	Being aware of occupations open or not open to me
	Being aware of my skills and abilities
	My physical or mental health
	Other personal qualities about me
Chance events	National or local economic situations
	Having to serve in the military
	Strikes
	Local disasters—floods, hurricanes, etc.
	Getting unexpected information about job openings
	The level of unemployment in my community
	Unexpected information about schooling or training
	Receiving unexpected financial support
	Unexpected personal events in my life
	Other personal qualities about me

### Interview protocol

1. Tell us/me about your career trajectory to date?
2. Was this trajectory planned or unplanned?
3. Why do you work?
4. Do you consider your work a job, a career or a calling?
5. How do you define success? What does it mean to you?  
What skills did you develop at [University] that you feel have contributed to your success? What skills do you wish you developed at [University]?
6. Can you tell me about a time when you felt successful? What was the situation? Who was involved?
7. What was your major? What activities, work or other extracurricular activities at [University] fostered skills you use in your career today? Did any faculty or courses influence your path?
8. If you could change anything about your time at [University] what would it be? What would you do differently that might have guided your career?
9. May I ask you questions about demographics?
  - a. Gender, age, graduation year, race/ethnicity, marital status/kids

- b. Are there aspects of your life history, life events or background that have shaped your career interests or aspirations?
  - c. What is the most important career lesson you've learned so far?
10. What life lessons have you learned from work/or from your career to date?
  11. What else do you think I should have asked about how you think about your career? Do you have anything else to add?

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