



When career paths cease to exist: A qualitative study of career behavior in a crisis economy[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Using grounded theory methodology, this study examines the ways young professionals describe their career paths in the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis. We interviewed a sample of 29 Greek women professionals (24 to 32 years old) to examine their career behavior during this recession. Findings reveal prevailing effects of professional identity and profession-consistent learning goals on participants' career behavior. Specifically, those individuals without a strong professional identity or profession-consistent learning goals are more likely to anticipate and engage in career activities unrelated to their professions, a group whom we refer to as Shifters. In contrast, Sustainers, a group having strong career identity and profession-focused learning, are far more likely to anticipate and engage in career activities tied to their profession. Based on these findings, we develop postulates regarding career behavior in contexts of severe austerity and recession where conventional career paths have broken down.

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1. Introduction

The Global Financial Crisis ("the Crisis") that began in 2008 and the unemployment that followed have posed extraordinary challenges for both individuals and communities. Research on the global recession indicates fundamental changes in the nature of employment opportunity (Stiglitz, 2012). But to date, far less is known about how individuals actually deal with such changes in times of crisis. Pre-Crisis studies of employment opportunity have identified many adverse consequences from reduced employment opportunities, notably a decline in personal well-being if unemployment lasts longer than six months (e.g., Reininghaus et al., 2008; Sadeh & Karniol, 2012). However, past research largely addresses how the formerly employed react to job loss or employment uncertainty (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Little is known about the experience of new labor market entrants such as university graduates at the outset of their work lives when faced with little opportunity for regular employment. The present study investigates the experiences of young professional women in the Greek Crisis economy, confronting limited employment opportunities and few future prospects.

This study differs in several ways from existing research on careers and un/underemployment. First, it addresses the consequences of the Crisis for young educated professionals attempting to enter an unstable labor market, in contrast to the typical study of un/underemployment among the previously employed (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Sadeh & Karniol, 2012). As such it addresses the perceptions, interpretations and career-related behavior of young professionals to deepen our understanding of how new labor market entrants make sense of their careers during crisis conditions. Second, it examines the experiences of young professional women.

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Women's careers have been found to have different, more heterogeneous trajectories than men's (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), influenced by a broader range of life roles (Burke, 2002; Hochschild, 1989) and a stronger relational focus (Fletcher, 1996). Third, these experiences are investigated in a society offering little unemployment protection, posing more extreme challenges with which individuals must cope. In countries with strong unemployment protections, the negative effects of unemployment on individuals can be mitigated (Paul & Moser, 2009; Wilkinson, 2000). Fourth, it takes a grounded theory approach to investigate how would-be labor market participants make sense of the adversity they encounter and how that sensemaking might relate to their career behavior (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In doing so, it brings an unusual perspective to research on un/underemployment by using participants' own words and stories to identify the conceptual categories underlying their sensemaking, experiences and related career behavior. As such it can help build a theory regarding the effects of a job market-upending financial crisis on career-related perceptions, beliefs and behavior, particularly for young professionals. Last, it is a study of career behavior in an unstable economic environment, in contrast with previous research anchored either in stable environments with established career structures (e.g., Barnett & Miner, 1992; Feldman & Ng, 2007) or in transitional situations where new economic logics replace earlier ones (e.g. the shift from stable employment with internal career paths to boundary-less careers; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

The present study was undertaken in Greece five years after the 2008 start of the Crisis. Greece, at this point in time, had the highest rates of youth unemployment in the EU. In 2014, approximately 3.5 million Greeks were employed compared with 4.7 million unemployed. The largest proportion of unemployed was under age 25 (27.2% in May 2014, 59.4% for females; [Countryeconomy.com, 2015](#)). Prior to the Crisis, young professionals often entered the public sector as civil servants in government ministries or public education. Since the Crisis, public sector employment has been drastically reduced with pay cuts for those still employed. Since 2010, European Union requirements have restricted hiring such that one person can be hired only if 10 public sector employees quit or retire (Matsaganis & Leventi, 2011). In the context of public education, only a few hundred people are appointed every year, with short-term contracts from 3 to 9 months, with limited likelihood of renewal. One consequence of the shrinking Greek public sector is reduced demand for goods and service from private firms, a systemic effect reducing employment and wages in that sector too. This distinct socio-economic context allows study of young female professionals who have never worked in a stable labor market and face distinctive difficulties in pursuing their career aspirations.

2. Career-related literatures informing our study

A career is broadly defined as a lifelong process of work-related activities (Hall, 2002), and its development is an on-going series of stages characterized by unique concerns, themes and tasks (Greenhaus et al., 2000). This study is informed by research in three career-related domains: women's careers, professional identity, and under/unemployment.

Women's careers comprise more than "work" in contrast to men's careers as they are shaped by women's larger life contexts (O'Neil, Hopkin & Bilimoria, 2008). In comparison to men, women's career paths reflect a wide range and variety of patterns. Evidence suggests more snake-like rather than ladder-like careers for women, particularly as a function of work/family balance at mid-career stages (Burke, 2002; Hochschild, 1989; Kram, 1996), gender constraints on career progress, particularly at higher levels (Ely, 1995; Kanter, 1977), and the greater emphasis women place on relationships throughout their life spans (Fletcher, 1996). In their study of US professional women in their 20s through their 50s, O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) found that while some women followed traditional career ladders, others followed what the authors called an "emergent career pattern", characterized by a more reactive than proactive series of job/career moves, interruptions for non-career activities, and accommodation to other aspects of women's lives. Particularly relevant to the present study, the predominant focus of women in early phase of their career (ages 24–35), the typical pattern is a focus on career achievement, satisfaction and positive impact on others. Women in this phase tend to see themselves in charge of their careers, taking strategic steps to ensure their career progress. They believe their futures hold unlimited possibilities to realize their dreams. This idealistic set of beliefs contrasts with the pragmatic focus characteristic of the mid-career phase (ages 36–45), where women tend to confront issues of work family balance and dissatisfaction if their careers have stalled, and the reinventive contributions to organizations, families and communities characteristic of the latter (ages 46 and beyond). In the context of the present study, the tendency of young professional women to engage in a self-directed focus on career-achievement will be considered in relation to our observations in the Greek Crisis context.

Career identity refers to how individuals define themselves in the context of a career and can provide an internal compass promoting self-direction in career-related behavior (Fugate et al., 2004; McGreevy, 2003). The more general notion of identity as a cognitive model constitutes a higher-order mental construct that increase the likelihood that an individual will respond in goal-consistent ways to ambiguous situations and sustain the pursuit of one's goals despite distractions and competing pressures (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In turbulent economic situations, a strong career identity may be useful in helping individuals pursue their career interests even in the absence of a regular job, as in the case of independent contractors or the unemployed (Hall et al., 1997).

Important to our study is the repeated finding that identity development is an important task in the early phase of a career. By way of example, teachers entering the first years of that profession demonstrate a continued deepening of the professional identity begun during university training (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010). We note also that Taber and Blankmeyer (2015) also found that among American female university students, the individual mental models of a future work self-impacted their proactive skill development and career networking. Prior work has suggested that the professional identity describes a process through which people develop coherent biographical narratives of the self (for example Czarniawska, 1997; Giddens, 1991). While narratives of professional identity have been found to be fairly stable in some social situations (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), in dynamic situations— as is the case of the present study — identity can evolve or change when individuals attempt to make sense of their new place in the social world (Beech et al., 2008). Finally, Ibarra (1999) describes how individuals can experiment with different kinds

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