



Does career type matter? Outcomes in traditional and transitional career patterns



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ABSTRACT

Labor market segmentation theory and new career theory differ in their appraisal of the long-term consequences of career mobility. In this article we examine career outcomes of different career types and review their correspondence to both theories. The analysis is carried out in two steps. First, we construct a career typology using Optimal Matching Analysis, utilizing data covering entire individual careers. Second, we compare these career types on a set of measures pertaining to objective and subjective career success. The results indicate that neither of the two theories is fully able to explain the data. Instead, they can be combined to provide a more adequate model of career mobility outcomes in the context of flexibilizing labor markets.

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1. Introduction

Career mobility can be an ambivalent phenomenon. For some individuals it entails a welcome progression of work experiences accompanied by success in terms of finances, personal accomplishment, and even life meaning. For others, it can mark years of uncertainty about daily existence, a balancing act on the verge of poverty, and persistent dissatisfaction with a series of low-quality jobs with little prospect for improvement.

Two theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding the consequences of mobility; namely labor market segmentation (LMS) theory on one hand, and career theory on the other. Each of these perspectives makes a basic distinction between what can be termed the traditional stable career pattern unfolding in one or two organizations (Sullivan, 1999) and the transitional career pattern that by definition must entail multiple organizations and relatively high career mobility (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996a; Baruch & Bozionelos, 2010; Kalleberg, 2003; Tolbert, 1982).

The two perspectives differ, however, in their view of the consequences of mobility. Within the framework of the LMS theory, mobility is largely associated with employment instability and therefore with less favorable objective and subjective outcomes (Fuller, 2008; Hodson & Kaufman, 1982; Kalleberg, Wallace, & Althaus, 1981; Tolbert, 1982). Recent career theory, on the other hand, largely assumes a positive view on career mobility, seeing it as instrumental to career development in contemporary transitional labor markets (DeFillippi & Arthur, 2001; Gerber, Wittekind, Grote, & Staffelbach, 2009; Hall, 1996a; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012).

In this article we focus on the objective and subjective outcomes of career mobility, with the goal of juxtaposing both theoretical perspectives. We proceed in four steps. First, we review the conflicting theoretical perspectives in more detail. Second, we construct a typology of career mobility patterns using Optimal Matching Analysis (OMA), utilizing data covering entire individual careers. Third, we analyze the effects of these career types on subjective and objective career success, indicated, for example, by career satisfaction and salary in the last job. Finally we discuss the implications of our findings for the seeming controversy between the LMS and career theories.

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In our comparison of the two perspectives we consider several factors that could potentially influence the analysis of mobility outcomes, and thus obscure the logic of the relationship between the two theories.

The first factor pertains to the difference in temporal scope within which career mobility history is registered. Short-term range mobility measurements only estimate immediate outcomes arising from one or two events, ignoring or downplaying the cumulative effects over time. This distinction can make a crucial difference in the direction of the effects obtained (Fuller, 2008). In addition, career mobility is known, on average, to be unevenly distributed on the individual timeline, with more events in the early career stages and with relative stability towards the end stages (Dustmann & Pereira, 2005; Lam, Ng, & Feldman, 2012; Tolbert, 1982; Topel & Ward, 1992). When this phenomenon is combined with a short-term measurement range, bias may occur in the registration of mobility in later career stages. Both arguments are in favor of using data describing prolonged, if not complete, career periods.

Second, the historical period of measurement can play a substantial role, as the socio-economic context in which careers develop changes over time. The LMS theory originated in the early 1970s, whereas the so-called *new career* theory, focusing on mobile careers, emerged in the 1990s. Therefore both theories may place undue emphasis on the phenomena specific for these periods.

The third factor is a logical alternative to the previous one: instead of focusing on two different historical periods, both theories may refer to qualitatively different career types responsible for the varying dynamic of career outcomes, depending on the context of mobility. The LMS theory largely equates relatively high mobility with unstable and less favorable working arrangements (Fuller, 2008; Hodson & Kaufman, 1982; Kalleberg et al., 1981; Tolbert, 1982), which may not hold for all mobile careers, regardless of the historical period. The *new career* theory, on the other hand, assumes that between-employer mobility is driven and controlled by individual agency, often ignoring the structural component that invariably co-defines personal career trajectories (Arnold & Cohen, 2008; Inkson et al., 2012).

Finally, the conjoint analysis of both genders may mask the differences in mobility patterns between men and women. Existing research indicates that men and women may substantially differ in regard to work and career, both in objective and subjective terms (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Edgell, 2006; Forret, Sullivan, & Mainiero, 2010; Marler & Moen, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). A separate analysis of mobility patterns may better capture unique components of gendered careers.

Our approach contributes to the existing empirical literature on the consequence of career mobility in five ways.

First, to construct career mobility patterns we use longitudinal retrospective data covering the entire career course, as our data contains older cohorts that are either retired or in their last career years. Using long-term data provides a methodological advantage for the reasons outlined above.

Second, most existing studies use aggregate indicators of mobility; e.g. a number of job transitions in a certain period (e.g., Wille, De Fruyt, & Feys, 2010). Through the use of sequence analysis techniques we are able to improve the measurement by considering the entire career pattern, including not only the number of transitions, but also their timing and placement in relation to other transitions on the career timeline.

Third, the study contributes to the understanding of gender differences in the distribution of career types and the connection between them and career covariates. Fourth, we explore the link between career mobility and subjective career success, addressing a lacuna in the empirical literature (Fasang, Geerdes, & Schömann, 2012).

Finally, our analysis addresses the scarcity of empirical research on career mobility patterns in Europe. Even though several pertinent studies have appeared recently (e.g., see Biemann, Zacher, & Feldman, 2012; Kattenbach et al., 2014), the majority of respective studies in career literature still concerns the Anglo-Saxon countries (Borghans & Golsteyn, 2012).

2. Theory and previous research

The link between career mobility patterns and their outcomes is informed by several theoretical perspectives, two of which are particularly relevant for our analysis. Both theories postulate a certain form of conceptual stratification between the stable traditional and mobile transitional career patterns, but approach that dichotomy from different standpoints. The first line of thinking pertains to the labor market segmentation theory, which has been used extensively to model labor market processes (Dickens & Lang, 1992; Hudson, 2007), including some recent applications to the study of career mobility in the post-Fordist economy (DiPrete, Goux, & Maurin, 2002). The second line of thinking stems from the career-oriented literature, postulating a segmentation of career patterns based on their external mobility (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996a; Sullivan, 1999), sometimes in combination with other concomitant characteristics pertaining to the psychological, ethical or organizational dimensions (Briscoe, Hall, & Fruitschy DeMuth, 2006; Hall, 1996a). Different outcomes and covariates are tied to the different career types within both frameworks. Even though both perspectives are similar in proposing the dichotomy of career patterns, their predictions for objective and subjective career success differ. In the course of our analysis we will use these differences to interpret various types of transitional careers.

For this purpose we discern two career outcomes: objective and subjective career success. Following Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom (2005), subjective career success is defined as “the individual’s internal apprehension and evaluation of his or her career,” whereas objective career success refers to “an external perspective that delineates more or less tangible indicators of an individual’s career situation” (p. 179).

3. Labor market segmentation theory

The main proposition of the LMS theory is that to answer the need for numerical flexibility individual working arrangements are divided into more stable core jobs with high organizational attachment, greater job security, good working conditions and higher rewards in terms of wages and benefits; and, on the other hand, peripheral jobs with weak organizational ties, poor working conditions,

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