



'What Next'? Career narratives of women university graduates in times of precarity

Journal:	<i>European Management Review</i>
Manuscript ID	EMR-OA-19-0337.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Methodology < Methodology, labor mobility < Human Resources < Organization, small-n < Methodology
Additional Keywords:	careers, resilience, women, post-crisis economies

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Abstract

Building on emerging research on women’s careers and precarious employment, we conducted a longitudinal qualitative study of 16 young educated women over two years in the Greek post-crisis economy. Tracing their career trajectories, we examine the subjective meanings they attach to their career transitions. We find evidence of five career narratives, indicating paths followed and meanings attributed in pursuit of stable employment. Each path is a trajectory, more cyclical than linear, with activities in line with goals pursued at the time, influenced by both situational constraints and coping responses to professional identity threat. We observe dysfunctional effects of persistent old career identities along with resilient adjustment and pursuit of new identities. Results advance our understanding of career decisions in the context of economic crisis. They underscore the need to contextualize the study of career narratives and how they can change over time in accordance with shifting personal goals and opportunities.

Keywords: careers, identity, qualitative research, precarity

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The global recession starting in 2008 disrupted employment opportunities and posed extraordinary challenges for workers. It also compromised gender equality by undermining integration of women in the workforce (INE-GSEE, 2016; Vassilopoulou et al., 2018). Although careers traditionally are conceptualized as predictable sequences of work experiences and advancement (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009), the job instability created by the global financial crisis altered these sequences, introducing periods of transition and disruption. Unstable economic conditions lead to career setbacks and downward career transitions where long periods of unemployment alternate with assorted part-time, casual or fixed-term jobs. Although past research highlights the psychological reactions to job loss (e.g. Gabriel et al., 2013; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), as well as the resilience workers can display during unemployment (Aamaas et al., 2012), little is known about how new workforce entrants deal with crisis conditions and limited career prospects. The few extant studies on career behavior of young professionals (e.g., Authors; Van Hoyer et al., 2015) are cross-sectional, unable to account for the evolution of career goals and experiences. In unstable economies, new entrants are challenged to make sense of their place in a changing environment, make career decisions, and build a cohesive self.

New university graduates in crisis economies are at a vulnerable career stage. Unlike older job seekers, they lack established reputations to aid their job search. With limited work-related networks, these graduates often rely on family friends and acquaintances to find jobs. In contrast to stable economies where networking aids job seeking (Van Hoyer et al., 2009), the utility of networking can be quite limited in crisis economies due to the lack of available jobs. Often lacking personal savings, the financial strain young job seekers experience is tied to family income. At the

same time, they often have no dependents, allowing longer unemployment periods with family financial support.

The present study contributes to career scholarship by examining the narratives and career strategies of young female graduates faced with crisis conditions over time. Our central questions are: i) How do they make sense of their career experiences? ii) How does their understanding change over time? What career strategies do they use to cope? These questions lend themselves to qualitative longitudinal research. This study makes several contributions: First, it captures dynamic career trajectories reflected in the women's narratives, in contrast to prevailing cross-sectional research. Second, it explicates how they interpret and cope with limited employment opportunities early in their career, a phase seldom studied in under- and unemployment research; and third, it examines the nature of young women's career resilience, the forms their positive adjustment can take, in the context of sustained economic crisis, contrasting with the short-term downturns of past research.

Theoretical Background

Research on career management

Career management refers to the activities that shape individual's career transitions and related experiences (Wang & Wanberg, 2017). Over the last decades, research increasingly focuses on the self-management of careers in the light of the changing employment relationship (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) where risk has migrated from employers to workers (Rousseau, 2006). New career paradigms, intelligent, protean and kaleidoscopic (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), construe individuals to be responsible for their own careers, assuming diverse job opportunities and flexible career pathways. With a focus on individual processes, this self-management focus ignores societal conditions including employment opportunities (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017; Baruch &

Rousseau, 2019). The present study arises out of the need for more systematic attention to the context of career behavior.

Research on career management tends to assume that career transitions are voluntary and tied to advancement (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Nonetheless, the limited job options of unstable economies can curtail career pathways and occupational choices. Work experiences in this context entail frequent transitions between jobs and professional activities (which we call ‘trajectories’) interspersed with periods of unemployment. In more stable times, transitions entail a move “from an existing clarity of understanding to doubt, uncertainty and/or ambiguity, and ultimately to a state of renewed clarity” (Corley & Gioia, 2004, p.174). In unstable times, “renewed clarity” may be less likely given lateral or even downward transitions into low-status work or unemployment.

Research on responses to unemployment (e.g. Gabriel et al., 2013) tends to be situated in stable economies, raising questions regarding the generalizability of its findings to crisis economies. In a rare study of employment seeking in a crisis economy, Authors identified career-related activities (i.e. volunteer work, emigration plans) that contrast with those found in stable economies (e.g., training, networking; van Hove et al., 2009). Yet, how career-related behavior changes over time in a crisis economy remains unknown due to that study’s cross-sectional nature.

The careers of women tend to display complex patterns of continuity, interruption and exit due to multiple life roles and unequal domestic responsibilities (O’Neill & Jespen, 2019). Throughout their lives, the occupational choices women make are formulated in conjunction with other life choices (McMahon et al., 2012). As a result, women often pursue casual and part-time work (Bimrose et al., 2008) in their attempt to accommodate life roles (O’Neill & Jespen, 2019). In this regard, career interruptions can sometimes be adaptive with respect to career and personal goals. This may be especially true in crisis economies since women are more directly affected by

cuts in public expenditure both as workers in and beneficiaries of public services. Such circumstances are unaccounted for in research on boundaryless careers, largely predicated on assumptions of agency and voluntary career transitions (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). In crisis economies, an adaptation regarded as unsuccessful during economic prosperity may be seen as successful. Taking a low skilled temporary job may lead to reduced well-being in a stable economy but meet critical goals in an unstable one. The potential for effects of career adaptations to differ across economic conditions motivates us to study of how young female professionals navigate their careers over time in a crisis economy.

Research on career dynamics

Traditional career models portray careers as an uninterrupted linear sequence of work positions within an occupation. They view career development in terms of stages and associate advancement with age (e.g. Super, 1980). More recent research views careers in terms of a series of transitions between jobs, occupations and employment status (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). These transition studies address school-to-work, retirement or upward transitions, with a focus on their antecedents and/or outcomes, leaving processes of career transition under-studied (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). The present study uses a longitudinal design to examine these processes among early career job seekers in unstable economic conditions.

In particular, informed by Career Construction Theory (CCT; Savickas, 2002; 2005), the present study captures how individuals adapt their career behavior in context-specific ways by identifying how career choices and transitions are made and understood. CCT posits that individuals connect past experiences with their current situation in order to make plans for their future career. It views career development as a continuous adaptation wherein individuals navigate opportunities and constraints in attempts to meet the demands of their context. In the process,

career construction influences both the self and the career. According to CCT, the context in which career development takes place provides boundary conditions that affect how people construct their careers (Savickas, 2002, 2005). Work role transitions are known to be key occasions for identity work, whereby people adjust and adapt their professional identity to sustain feelings of authenticity and continuity (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Such transitions can require different skills, behaviors and attitudes, and induce changes in self-definition. CCT extends this notion of identity work to address how individuals reflect upon their past and present career experiences, cope with transitions, interpret and choose career options in order to maintain a cohesive identity.

Career-related identity work is especially relevant in the face of austerity and limited career prospects because the transitions experienced tend to be downward. Such conditions put new market entrants at high risk of finding no work in their chosen profession, creating a challenge to expression of professional identity. Downward career transitions can induce changes in self-definition as individuals take jobs unrelated to their skillsets or interests. These circumstances challenge individuals to find adaptive strategies, make use of resources and redesign their roles (Bimrose & Hearn 2012). Work-related transitions in a crisis economy thus challenge an individual's career resilience and adaptation.

Resilience and adaptive strategies in the context of career transitions

Career resilience is an individual's resistance to career disruption in a "less than optimal environment" (London & Stumpf 1986), thus reflecting the ability to cope with negative work experiences. It involves tactics for overcoming difficulties and resuming adaptive functioning. Previous work on women's career resilience follows a neo-liberalist perspective, focusing on what women need to do in order to be successful in contemporary firms. It tends to focus on how

proactive women display high resilience in order to succeed in competitive organizational cultures and male-dominated professions (e.g., Khilji & Pumroy, 2019; Miller, 2004).

The present study examines resilience as a process in which the individual interacts with her context. Consistent with Mishra & McDonald (2017, p. 216), resilience is conceptualized as a developmental process of “flourishing in one’s career despite challenges”. It entails on-going daily effort in the face of challenging situations (e.g. Caza & Milton, 2012). Through the resilience process, individuals resume adaptive functioning, rebounding from stress in the face of limited career prospects, to adjust, take initiative and adapt, consistent with core characteristics of resilience (London & Stumpf, 1986). We use two indicators, general well-being and outlook for future career, to identify the extent of resilience associated with our respondents’ narratives (cf Bimrose & Hearne, 2012).

Methods

Research setting

Our study took place between 2013 and 2016 in Greece. Following the 2008 inception of the financial crisis, Greece had the highest youth unemployment in the European Union, averaging 34% from 1998 until 2015, reaching 60.50% in 2013. Greek women had much higher unemployment than men: for women under 25, unemployment rose from 36.6% in 2009 to 65.0% in 2013, dropped to 51.4% in early 2016. Among employed people, there has been a 44% reduction for women in 2015 compared to 2013. In this context, fewer than 1% of unemployed over a year were eligible for benefits (INE-GSEE, 2016). Shrinking public sector employment, where women are traditionally employed, has continued since 2010. Similar private sector cuts remained ten years after the crisis. Decreases in public spending led to deteriorating social benefits (e.g. support for elder or childcare), further burdening women as traditional caregivers (Ayudhya et al., 2019).

University enrollment has been on the rise in Greece, reaching 35% in 2012 from 26% in 2005, suggesting an attempt to gain additional qualifications due to poor job prospects, despite the low earnings potential associated with university education (OECD, 2014). We note that university studies confer a distinct effect on career identity in Greece. Greek graduates tend to assume that their degree aligns with their future occupation. Traditionally graduates in Greece have not sought work outside of the profession associated with their degree, indicative of the limited flexibility.

Research strategy and sample

Our research design follows Gioia et al.'s (2013) inductive methodology, in line with the need for qualitative research on career transitions and development (O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019). With its sensitivity to context, longitudinal qualitative design is used to map the career-related activities and trajectories of our research participants. This design captures how individuals integrate past, present and future career outlooks and construct the chapters of their career story.

Sixteen educated young women were interviewed twice at a two-year interval. Part of a wider research project on precarious employment, we sought participants through a theoretical sampling based on age range, a variety of university degrees, and differences in personal circumstances (i.e. residing with parents, a partner, or alone). The sample was derived from the authors' academic networks (see Table 1). All were Greek citizens with at least an undergraduate degree. Each lived in Athens, ruling out regional differences in employment opportunities.

By collecting qualitative data at two points in time, we investigate both continuity and changes in career narratives and capture dynamic career trajectories reflected in these narratives, which have not been examined by prevailing cross-sectional research in this field. Two authors conducted the first face-to-face interviews in 2013 and 2014 and interviewed each participant two years later. The Time 1 interview asked about employment history since graduation, career-related

activities, goals and future prospects. The Time 2 interview focused on interim career activities and employment experiences, as well as current career goals and future plans.

Analysis

Our analyses moved from data description using participants' words to more abstract theoretical constructs (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Transcripts were analyzed in five stages. Initially, the first two authors coded the full set of interviews (N=32). Each wrote a case summary consisting of a) an overview of the career moves the interviewee described, and b) factors affecting any changes in her career goals or activities. We then compared these summaries and interpretations. Second, we identified recurrent narratives across interviewees. Third, to establish inter-coder reliability, case summaries of four interviewees were independently coded by the third author. In the fourth stage, each woman's story (as narrated at two points in time) was examined to see how she reported navigating an array of career opportunities, tensions and alternatives. In the final stage, we identified common patterns across the stories. Throughout, we approached data analysis without any preconception of a 'right' or 'wrong' career move.

Findings

Table 1 illustrates the five narratives reported at both Times 1 and 2 and the ways respondents made sense of their circumstances during the two-year period between these interviews. All held casual low paying jobs, underutilizing their skills. Most had been unemployed at various times. The survival goal of making a living was generally foremost in their narratives.

TABLE 1

Career Trajectory Narratives

Respondents described cyclical rather than linear pathways, often shifting among an array of activities based on their goals at the time. We refer to these activity sequences as “trajectories”. The accounts our respondents give to make sense of these sequences fall into five categories we label ‘*opening a new door*’, ‘*taking a hiatus*’, ‘*expanding horizons*’, ‘*fighting the good fight*’ and ‘*holding on to the original plan*’. All respondents expressed at least one of these narratives at some point. All altered their career activities during the two years of our study, often returning to a former trajectory when it seemed suited to emerging goals. Our analysis characterizes these narratives (Figure 1) and associated career moves to explore the adaptive responses in each narrative.

FIGURE 1

Opening a new door

This narrative was used by participants who had entered a totally new occupation. By developing a new downwardly adjusted career goals, some reported looking for different types of jobs in the hope of more stable, long-term employment, despite the job’s low skill requirements. Such downward career adjustments have been reported elsewhere (e.g. Hu et al., 2018).

Antigone, after alternating unemployment with casual work, is in the process of becoming a manicurist. During her first interview and for about a year after that, she adhered to her original career goals (the ‘*holding on to the original plan*’ narrative, below), taking extra training to find a job in her original skillset. She began studying for a Masters in education to increase opportunities in that field. By the second interview, Antigone began casual work as a manicurist, finding clients through friends and word-of-mouth. She reports:

“I’m about to finish my M.Sc. in education in the Open University [but] I’m not so much interested in this to be honest... At the same time, I’m doing a 4-months training in manicure-pedicure... I’m changing direction (laughing).”

Over time, other participants explored alternative occupation and eventually changed career identity. Unemployed at Time 1, Dorothea then worked in casual unrelated jobs (telemarketing, administrative staff, and finally, sales) punctuated by unemployment. In describing her experience as an administrator (a position which appeared at the time to have long-term prospects), at Time 2 she describes exploring a new career identity hoping for stable employment:

“I liked the administrative part...I know that it was a compromise, but still there were aspects of this job that I really liked... I have always been a well-organized person. Equally important, I had increased responsibilities; I was the owner’s personal assistant and the company was doing well financially. So I thought the job would be long-term [...] I was devastated when they fired me. I was making plans for my new life, accommodating my personal and social life around my evening shifts.”(Dorothea)

Taking a hiatus

Between Time 1 and 2, two respondents gave birth, prioritized their role as mothers and stopped looking for work. Prior to motherhood, both had changed their original career goals and attempted, without success, to find stable jobs. Both were in a relationship and at a life stage that a baby would be welcome. A baby’s arrival affords a way to avoid dissatisfying jobs outside one’s skillset:

“I thought that it is much more meaningful to give birth to a baby and dedicate myself to her upbringing rather than wasting time on these petty jobs that take me nowhere”
(Efterpi)

According to their narratives, these career interruptions are temporary. Both intend to return to work when the child starts state-owned nursery school (i.e., they will not have to pay for private kindergarten or childcare). However, plans to return to work are vague:

“Until the baby goes to the nursery, I’ll figure out what I’ll do next. I may apply for a job as a cook locally or even work as part-time babysitter for a friend who may need me”

(Rania)

Expanding horizons

Some women reported that their career goals were unchanged since graduation, despite lack of professional employment. After being involved in deskilling jobs or unemployment, they lost hope of finding employment related to their skillset. Instead, they repositioned themselves, broadening the skillset they considered professionally relevant. Extra training was often required to do so. Adopting this broadened view of their original profession, these participants came to apply their professional skills in novel ways, exploring career options in-breadth rather than in-depth. This finding is at odds with findings in conventional economies where individuals often narrow their career choices as they progress in their careers (Porfeli et al., 2012).

Melpo is a translator with long periods of unemployment between causal contracts in call centers. At Time 1, she worked as an administrator in a large organization, hoping to incorporate translation tasks into her job description. Losing hope, she quit and now freelances in subtitling *“...not something I ever thought of doing as a profession, even though I now realize that it’s related to what a translator is trained to do”*. She considered the extra training required to do so to be worthwhile since her pay was adequate to make ends meet.

Two women expressing this narrative emigrated in order to take jobs related to their professional skillset. Vaia, an immigrant to the UK says: *“I now work as a sales manager, training*

employees which may well lead to my aspired job [as an HR professional]”. Ioanna, a Canadian immigrant, sought work as an educator, pursuing extra training in special education to create opportunities. At Time 2, she was casually employed in education. A common feature among these respondents is that this broadening came after they had found work in a job somewhat related to their original profession, a practice which contrasts with the narrowing characteristic of young professionals working in stable economies (Liu, Hang & Wang, 2014).

Holding on to the original plan

Women expressing this narrative maintain the same career goal since graduation—finding a job directly relevant to their skillset. To do so, they rely at least in part on family income (see Figure 1). Depending on the length of unemployment and the family’s financial circumstances, some report choosing to be unemployed briefly, or taking casual employment (i.e. as personal tutors, bartenders or salespersons) to meet survival needs. At Time 1, the most popular narrative was adhering to the plan to find a job directly relevant to their skillset (deployed by eleven out of the sixteen interviewees). By Time 2, only three respondents continued to express this narrative. Each used an alternative narrative between Time 1 and Time 2 (either ‘*expanding horizons*’ or ‘*opening a new door*’ narrative). To pursue their original career goal, these respondents see a need to enhance their expertise by further training or volunteer work in their domain of expertise, either in a non-governmental organization or unpaid work in a private firm.

Fighting the Good Fight

This narrative was used by three interviewees, two in Time 2. Both have maintained their original career goal (i.e. Zoe as a psychologist, Stella as a graphic designer), seeing themselves as professionals embedded in an occupational community. At Time 1, they were either unemployed or in part-time casual jobs. At Time 2, they have decided to work full-time, either because the

family could not continue financial support (Zoe) or they no longer want to rely on family income (Stella). In contrast to those with the *'opening a new door'* narrative and despite working in jobs unrelated to their skillsets (full-time administrator and cook), Zoe and Stella each persist in the goal of finding a job in their original profession. In the past two years, they pursued their survival and career goals simultaneously, working part-time and recently full-time in unrelated jobs. Despite a recent pay raise and prospects of indefinite employment with a company, Zoe spends far more time describing her hopes to continue in her chosen profession including getting another M.Sc. as a prerequisite for a PhD. Stella, working as a full-time cook, constantly looks at ads and applies to skill-related jobs. To maintain attachment to their professions, both undertook either extra training or volunteer work. Zoe says: *"My previous volunteer experience helped me gain acceptance to my current M.Sc. course. However, I had to return to full-time employment to earn a living, so I had to drop out"*.

The same career activity can apply to more than one narrative. Thus working in a job unrelated to a university education is associated with both *opening a new door* and *fighting the good fight*. In line with CCT perspective, these patterns suggest that it is not the actual career move per se but the way each woman makes sense of it that influences her narrative and the reasoning behind her choices. Most interviewees changed narratives between the two interviews. A narrative change is evident when participants a) revise their career goals during our study, or b) keep the same career goals while undertaking highly divergent activities (e.g. becoming a mother rather than look for another deskilling job).

Adaptation strategies in the face of limited opportunities

We now explore how our respondents use various adaptation strategies in response to their career challenges. During downward career transitions, individuals often adapt their professional

identity to sustain feelings of authenticity and continuity (Ashforth, 2001; Authors, 2018). We identified four such strategies indicative of the participant's level of resilience: (a) *exploring a new self*; b) *refashioning oneself*; (c) *enhancing existing skills*, and (d) *role distancing*. Each strategy involves identity work, links with a specific narrative and illustrates varying levels of resilience.

 TABLE 2

Exploring a new self

Respondents who moved away from their original career goals and deployed the 'opening a new door' or 'taking a hiatus' narratives abandon their original professional identity. In both narratives, they report self-reinvention, which became more common by Time 2. Some explored alternative, sub-optimal career-possible selves and reported moving away from their previous work-related reference groups. Both findings are in line with existing research on involuntary career transitions (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014). Originally trained as a teacher in classics, Antigone explored her new identity at Time 2 and talks about her new career as a manicurist:

"I like it and I find it interesting. It's something pleasant and fun [...] it's good in terms of work-life balance. When I'll have a baby, I will be able to work from home."

Despite exiting an original professional identity, respondents often sought to maintain some continuity with it, integrating some of its features into their current job. This tactic can be labelled *integrative*, reflecting a resilient career identity (Vough & Caza, 2017), apparent in Antigone's narrative: *"I've always liked to do tasks with an emphasis on detail while having an artistic taste, which is also relevant to manicure."*

Those who become mothers used this adaptive strategy as their professional identity gave way to being a mother and nurturer:

“This new role has brightened my life. I’ve given the baby my full attention and that’s the only way I believe you can be a good mother. All the worries about unemployment look so unimportant right now [...] in a couple of years, I could really use a job.”(Efterpi)

These respondents typically reported increased life satisfaction and a positive future outlook. Being happy with their current role and generally positive about the future, they are conscious of having postponed addressing threats to their professional identity. Frustration over the downward adjustment of their goals remains apparent:

“I will probably be doing more or less what I have been through the last couple of years, but there is a hope that the financial crisis will be over by then.”(Efterpi)

In general, “exploring a new self” appears to foster adjustment and pliability in the face of adversity, core characteristics of resilience, and creates a “feeling of relief”.

Refashioning oneself

Respondents who remained loyal to their original career goals and found a job in a somewhat related field (*‘expanding horizons’* narrative) refashioned or expanded their sense of self to build on their on existing professional identity. Their main challenge is ensuring that employment overlaps their original profession and supports identity maintenance. Melpo voiced a revised version of what being a translator means:

“I currently supervise other people’s subtitling work. It’s not only correcting typos; it means having a good command of English, knowing all the jargon, and making corrections when needed. This is like what a translator is trained to do.”

Respondents using this strategy report high well-being in terms of career satisfaction career progress, and optimism. Flexibility and resourcefulness, both characteristic of resilience (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012), help them re-fashion their careers.

Enhancing existing skills

Enhancing existing skills is a strategy used by respondents who remain loyal to their original career aspirations though unemployed or in casual part-time work (*'holding on to the original plan'* narrative). They do so primarily through further training to enhance their skills or build new ones in the face of an uncertain labor market (e.g., Vuori and Vinokur, 2005). Some volunteered or served in apprenticeships to gain relevant experience. Thalia, a classics teacher, explains her rationale for how extra training can help her find work: *"a good teacher needs to be able to provide individualized learning, especially to pupils with reading disabilities."*

Overall, women adopting this strategy (and who also deployed the *'holding on to the original plan'* narrative) report increased stress over time and greater pessimism about the future, both indicators of low career resilience. These negative outcomes particularly apply for women using this narrative at both Time 1 and 2. Their optimism declined as their career aspirations continued to be frustrated, despite their best efforts:

"I've given myself a deadline until September. Afterwards, I don't plan to work in this cafeteria any longer... I would only consider working as a waitress if I find a part-time job as a tutor... I'm scared. What if I go on being a waitress for the rest of my life?"

(Flora).

Role distancing

Finally, respondents using the *'fighting the good fight'* narrative display strong attachment to their original career identity and goals (in the first and even more so in the second interview). They attempt to protect this identity through what we call 'role distancing', borrowing from Goffman who described the term as 'actions which effectively convey some disdainful detachment of the [real life] performer from a role he is performing' (Goffman, 1972, p.234). Respondents who used

this strategy worked in a full-time deskilling job while actively looking for work within their skillset. Participants displaying role distancing differentiated their sense of self from what they did for a living, a way of preserving professional identity. For example, Dorothea separates her primary professional identity from her current casual work role: *“In my current part-time job, I haven’t told them that I’m media graduate. I don’t want to reveal any personal information.”*

Respondents refer to the temporary nature of the current job, downplaying its importance *“in my administrative job, I’m doing great, my supervisors are happy with me, they keep my self-esteem high...but it’s a no-brainer job”* (Zoe). Shared frustration, skepticism regarding their career future and low resilience are apparent in their narratives. Distress is apparent in their narratives:

“Last summer, I quit my job as a cook [...].I started sending off my CV like crazy, waited a month but got no positive answer so I moved back to my previous job. Now, three months later I worry again if this is what I’ll do for the rest of my life. There are times that I think of committing suicide (laughing).”(Stella)

Women expressing this narrative at Time 2 report greater distress and lower well-being relative to the rest of our sample, evidence of less resilience in face of adverse conditions (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012). They express the fear that this career trajectory is not feasible much longer:

“In the past, I felt everything would work out. Now my mind is telling me that things aren’t going well for me. All this psychological ‘toing and froing’ from one job to another has exhausted me.”(Zoe)

Finally, we observe that adaptation responses can change over time as circumstances shift and a different narrative is adopted. As Table 2 indicates, each adaptive strategy is associated with a distinct level of career resilience. Levels of resilience differ both across interviewees and for the same interviewee over time as individuals struggle to attain career goals while making ends meet,

consistent with the dynamic nature of resilience (Caza & Milton, 2012). At Time 1, *'enhancing existing skills'* was the strategy linked with greater well-being while *'re-inventing oneself'* was characterized by decreased well-being. By Time 2, this pattern reverses: Attempts at *'enhancing existing skills'* were associated with greater stress and more pessimistic future career outlook relative to responses focused on exploring alternative professional identities.

Factors affecting career trajectory narratives

We traced how self-reported factors affect career narratives change over time. As Figure 1 illustrates, adherence to or revision of career goals is central to career decisions. Family financial support creates some flexibility but does not alter how participants understood their circumstances. More important is the duration of unemployment, which motivates initiation of new career trajectories: some respondents respond to unemployment by returning to their original goals while others abandon those goals. Finally, the prospect of a job offering stable employment contributes to the career trajectory chosen (in both *'expanding horizons'* and *'opening a new door'* narratives).

As opposed to typical resilience findings (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012; London & Stumpf, 1986) where protective and risk factors consistently operate, we find that these factors can function differently over time. The protective role of family support for example initially aids persistence in search for professional work:

"I don't have to pay for rent or daily food since my parents provide for that. As long as there is daily food on the family pot, I can concentrate my efforts on looking for a job within my skillset."(Antigone)

However, as time progresses, this support can have adverse effects. Many respondents report feeling a burden and willingness to settle for an underpaid or low skill job in order to contribute to family income.

Unemployment duration (subjectively evaluated) affects initiation of a new career trajectory but does not predict *which* trajectory. It motivates some respondents to take a deskilling job, while for others it motivates a return to original career goals:

“Having remained unemployed for few months in a row and relying solely on my parents’ pocket money, I started spending hours looking at job ads, applying for any type of full-time job: receptionist, administrator, call center operator, even door-to-door salesperson, you name it! No job is a shame.”(Antigone)

Above we saw how unemployment duration and family support motivate choices that give rise to different levels of resilience. The same is true for retraining. Although training can increase the likelihood of finding a job within a skillset, it takes time and money, which can undermine resilience. This finding is in line with research showing that sunk costs of training (money, time and effort) can make people unwilling to explore new opportunities (Zacher et al., 2015). Lena at Time 1 explains her rationale to continue applying for jobs related to her degree:

“All these years of training in media & communication studies, at undergraduate and then postgraduate level, all this investment in time, effort and money!! I cannot let all this go and work on an unrelated field.”

Discussion

Our study contributes to career research by examining career transitions as processes unfolding over time. It addresses diverse career transitions across professions and employment status, beyond the upward and voluntary transitions traditionally studied (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). We identify five narratives indicative of how young women experience career-related challenges during economic austerity. All narratives manifest degrees of pliability and adjustment.

We believe they should be viewed as adaptive strategies that help our respondents stay engaged in the labor market and experience a sense of career progress.

In line with the CCT framework (Savickas, 2002) where context provides the boundary conditions which frame how young professionals construct their careers, we find that career-related decisions and resilience are highly dependent on the opportunities the context provides. Under conditions of economic austerity, a context which has rarely been studied, we observe value in broadening the conceptualization of resilience beyond conventional notions of recognizing and seizing “opportunities” (London & Stumpf, 1986). During economic downturns, resilience involves adaptive responses to a lack of jobs. We observe that our participants made efforts to adapt to changing circumstances, constructing a cohesive sense of self by re-integrating fractured identities (Savickas, 2005).

Resilience as on-going adaptation means that diverse career-related behaviors can support adaptive life choices. These adaptive choices promote individual well-being by enhancing sense of control, self-efficacy and future outlook, central dimensions of resilience. By permitting successful adaptation to be defined by the social and economic context, our study identified both protective and risk factors that lead to effective adjustment or maladjustment respectively (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012) in the narratives of women facing adversity. As opposed to findings from cross-sectional research (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012), our longitudinal findings suggest that the protective and risk factors associated with resilience can function differently across career trajectories. As we discover, persistent initial career identities can foster early well-being that erodes as precarity continues; and investments in training can create sunk costs that make pivoting toward new opportunities difficult.

Implications

Our research makes several contributions. First, it provides a process-based understanding of how young professionals construct career narratives. Although existing cross-sectional research provides insight into the separate functioning of career goals, professional identity, and contingency factors, our longitudinal study of career narrative construction integrates these constructs. Our respondents report that their career goals, unemployment duration, family support and training considerations all affect whether they remain loyal to their original career goals or shift attention to new ones. These factors provide the basis for theory building regarding the conditions under which career choice narratives arise- factors overlooked in studies limited to conventional economies.

Our findings provide new insights into the dynamics of career behavior in the context of unstable labor markets. Our participants display diverse understandings of their own career behavior in exploring the possibility of occupational change. Becoming a manicurist, although a relatively unskilled occupation for an artistically inclined university graduate, can be construed as an opportunity to work creatively, rather than a downward move into casual work. Deliberately entering an occupation entails exploration and adoption of a career identity, something absent in casual work. Scholars to date may not have appreciated the meanings career narratives provide in coping with occupational constraints, despite recognition of the importance of identity work in career management (LaPointe, 2013). We observe that changes in career narratives coincide with new adaptation strategies that help workers facing precarity find their place in the world. Findings suggest that resilience can be a product of these adaptation strategies.

Our study contributes to identity research through the evidence it provides for how individuals cope with identity threat. We find that strategies that enhance resilience at one time can hinder it later. The extent to which women associate themselves with their original profession

appears to affect how they manage the identity pressures created by limited employment opportunities. In their attempt to protect their self-esteem and maintain their original career goals, some engaged in distancing, separating their current (paid) job activities from their efforts to find their aspired job. Although in the short-term we find that distancing can improve well-being and optimism (Time 1), it appears to reduce them both in the longer term (Time 2) consistent with previous research (e.g. Michel, 2011). Thus, we observe that adaptive strategies can change over time, altering both the individual's level of career resilience and the career narrative she uses.

The career narratives we identify reflect a phenomenon previously identified: how employment and personal life intertwine in women's career moves (O'Neil et al., 2008). '*Taking a hiatus*' is a gendered narrative. While acknowledging the effect of the particular economic context on the employment opportunities available to interviewees, reliance on casual, part-time jobs can also be seen as gendered given that women historically engage in such jobs more frequently than men (Mayrhofer et al., 2008). All respondents expressing '*opening a new door*' engaged in downward mobility, that is, casual employment, rather than entering another occupation. Their new chapter was either a job unrelated to their skills or motherhood, in line with findings on women's careers (O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019). Some women redefined both themselves and their occupation in order to use their university education in their work ('*expanding the horizons*' narrative). This recurrent narrative conveys pliability and resilience, in line with past findings that professional identity provides individuals with an explanatory framework for making sense of their career trajectories (Gupta et al., 2015). Few women remained committed to the initial career goals related to their education ('*holding on to original plan*'), even when they worked full-time in non-skill-related jobs to earn a living ('*fighting the good fight*'). Others tried alternatives in attempts to re-connect with their original profession. As time progressed, participants adhering

to their original professional plans, manifest considerable distress relative to other two narratives. Not surprisingly then, the majority of participants had changed their narrative by their second interview. All interviewees report being agentic in their career moves. Despite constraints, their agency manifests in adapting new career choices in line with changes in their goals.

Gender may also be linked to distinctive ways of enacting career transitions. We confirm prior findings that in the context of career change, identity work is gendered; identity work is not limited to professional and career identities alone; non-work identity positions, such as feminine gender identity (though at times in conflict with the career identities), also function as a resource for adapting to various career transitions (LaPointe, 2013). Women are more likely than men to fit their paid work around the needs of their partner, parents, children and other family members or take career breaks (O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019). Research targeting young men can help to shed light on the relationship between gender and career transitions, noting that our findings may not be applicable to males since women have generally been found to more readily adapt to career changes (Mayrhofer et al., 2008) and better able to cope with casual employment (EIGE, 2017). Yet, identity work may become a gendered struggle for men too when one cannot meet the masculine expectations embedded in professional and career discourses (LaPointe, 2013).

Respondents who maintained their original career goals or returned to them after pursuing alternatives (*'holding on to original plan'* narrative) manifest the most strategic approach to job search. They continued to invest in skill building at the risk of staying unemployed. They engaged in training and volunteering tactics. In the absence of opportunity, such proactive long-term planning may meet with little success - the typical experience of our crisis economy respondents. In contrast, the majority of respondents, who used the other three narratives, either redefined their original profession (*'expanding horizons'* narrative) or re-invented themselves through

explorations unrelated to their skillset (*'opening a new door'* narrative). Though seemingly more reactive, respondents deploying the other three narratives appear to have better outcomes in terms of employment and adjustment to adversity.

Contrary to traditional recommendations that job seekers narrow their search in line with personal preferences and fit (Swider et al., 2011), our findings suggest that broadening of job search may be more adaptive in crisis conditions. However, some respondents came to reject this broadening to return to the *'holding on to original plan'* narrative. This phenomenon may explain previously conflicting findings regarding flexibility as a functional (e.g. Koen et al., 2010) or dysfunctional strategy for the unemployed (Vansteenkiste et al., 2016).

The powerful and sustained effects of the global financial crisis argue for greater attention to the career strategies it prompts. Our findings regarding career redirection and reconfiguration support the need to better contextualize career research (McMahon et al., 2012). Since educated young women can sustain, broaden or abandon their original profession-related plans in the context of limited job availability, we need to better understand why some might stick to their original career goals rather than change. The extent of financial need, together with unemployment duration, needs to be accounted for in terms of a potential joint effect on job motives and search behaviors (e.g. Van Hove et al., 2015; Vansteenkiste et al., 2016).

Resilience tends to be ignored in policy discussions (Bimrose and Hearne, 2012), which focus on employability rather than well-being. However, precarious labor markets call for developing professionals committed to continuous learning and re-constitution of self (Council of the European Union, 2008). Career counsellors can help develop capacities among the workforce to adapt to disruptive circumstances. Networking and volunteering can foster career resilience and reduce the psychological distress from frustrated job seeking. Nonetheless, involuntary career

disruptions often represent enduring structural problems, requiring societal solutions beyond individual agency. Practical responses to the insecurity economic downturns induce help support on-going professional development and growth. In particular, opportunities for young people to perform paid and unpaid work while continuing their skill development are crucial to avoid a lost recession generation.

Finally, the relativism of 'effective adjustment' in the face of adversity argues for greater use of qualitative methods in studies of people facing adversity, to allow both risk and protective factors to emerge, and permit success to be defined in the actor's social and economic context. Like most qualitative studies, we used a small sample to advance analytical depth rather than generalizability. The effects of individual and contextual factors we identify can now be tested to establish generalizability using quantitative research designs informed by our findings. Our findings underscore the need to pay attention to societal context in the scientific debate on careers, especially in turbulent economic environments.

Conclusion

Careers are becoming increasingly complex and less predictable. Our findings point to need to reconceptualize career progression and pathways in recognition that traditional indicators of career progress may not always apply. Our findings point to the importance of pursuing valued personal goals in fostering human well-being in times of precarity. Goal pursuit itself is a source of resilience in adverse conditions. We observe that career and employment-related sense making continues in times of insecure employment, underscoring that understanding how best to support goal fulfillment in uncertain times is critical to long-term human adjustment and well-being.

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Table 1. The study participants

(Pseudo)-name	Age-Time 1	Highest Degree Obtained	Time 1 Employment Status	Narrative (Time 1)	Employment Status in the period between Time 1 & Time 2	Main Narrative between Time 1 & Time 2	Employment Status at Time 2	Narrative (Time 2)
Olga	24	B.A in Architecture	Unemployed	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Part-timer in fashion design	<i>Expanding horizons</i>	Part-timer in fashion design	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>
Lena	26	M.Sc. in Media Studies	Voluntary worker	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Freelancer, salesperson, part-timer in online platforms	<i>Expanding horizons</i>	Full-timer in skill-related field/online platform	<i>Expanding horizons</i>
Ioanna	28	B.A. in Nursery Education	Part-time babysitter	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	unemployed	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Part-time private tutor	<i>Expanding horizons</i>
Calliope	24	M.Sc. in Communication	Part-timer in online newspaper	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Part-timer in online newspaper	<i>Expanding horizons</i>	Full-timer in online newspaper	<i>Expanding horizons</i>
Vaia	25	B.A. in Psychology	Salesperson	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Salesperson	<i>Expanding horizons</i>	Sales manager	<i>Expanding horizons</i>
Melpo	31	B.A. in Civilization	administrator	<i>Expanding horizons</i>	Call centre operator, unemployed	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Freelance translator	<i>Expanding horizons</i>
Pandora	32	B.A. in Fine Arts	Part-time school tutor	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Part-time school tutor	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Part-time school tutor	<i>Expanding horizons</i>
Antigone	27	B.A. in Classical Studies	Part-time private tutor	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Unemployed, part-time	<i>Expanding horizons</i>	Manicurist	<i>Opening a new door</i>

					receptionist, private tutor			
Rania	32	Degree in Culinary Arts	Unemployed	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	part-time cook, unemployed, babysitter	<i>Opening a new door</i>	Unemployed/ mother	<i>Taking a hiatus</i>
Efterpi	32	B.A. in Tourism	Part-time secretary	<i>Opening a new door</i>	Unemployed	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Unemployed/ mother	<i>Taking a hiatus</i>
Ismini	24	B.A. in Sociology	Part-time salesperson	<i>Opening a new door</i>	Part-time salesperson	<i>Opening a new door</i>	Part-time salesperson	<i>Opening a new door</i>
Flora	25	M.Sc. in Media Studies	receptionist	<i>Opening a new door</i>	unemployed, part-time tutor	<i>Opening a new door</i>	Part-time waitress	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>
Zoe	25	M.Sc. in Psychology	Unemployed	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Part-time salesperson & secretary	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Full-time secretary	<i>Fighting the good fight</i>
Dorothea	25	M.Sc. in Communica tion	Unemployed	<i>Opening a new door</i>	Salesperson, Personal assistant, estate agent	<i>Opening a new door</i>	Unemployed	<i>Opening a new door</i>
Stella	29	M.Sc in Design	Part-time teacher	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Waitress, cook, graphic designer	<i>Expanding horizons</i>	Part-time cook	<i>Fighting the good fight</i>
Thalia	28	B.A. in Classical Studies	Part-time private tutor	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>	Part-time private tutor, administrator	<i>Expanding horizons</i>	Part-time private tutor	<i>Holding on to original plan</i>

Table 2. Adaptation responses associated to each career trajectory narrative

<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Career Choices</i>	<i>Adaptation strategies</i>	<i>Resilience level</i>
Holding on to original plan	unemployed precarious part-time jobs	Enhancing existing skills	Low
Fight the good fight	full-time deskilling job	Role distancing	Low
Expanding horizons	job broadly associated with original skillset	Refashioning oneself	High
Opening a new door	deskilling job (full or part time) with a possibility of turning into long-term employment	Exploring a new self	High
Taking a hiatus	motherhood	Exploring a new self (temporary)	Medium

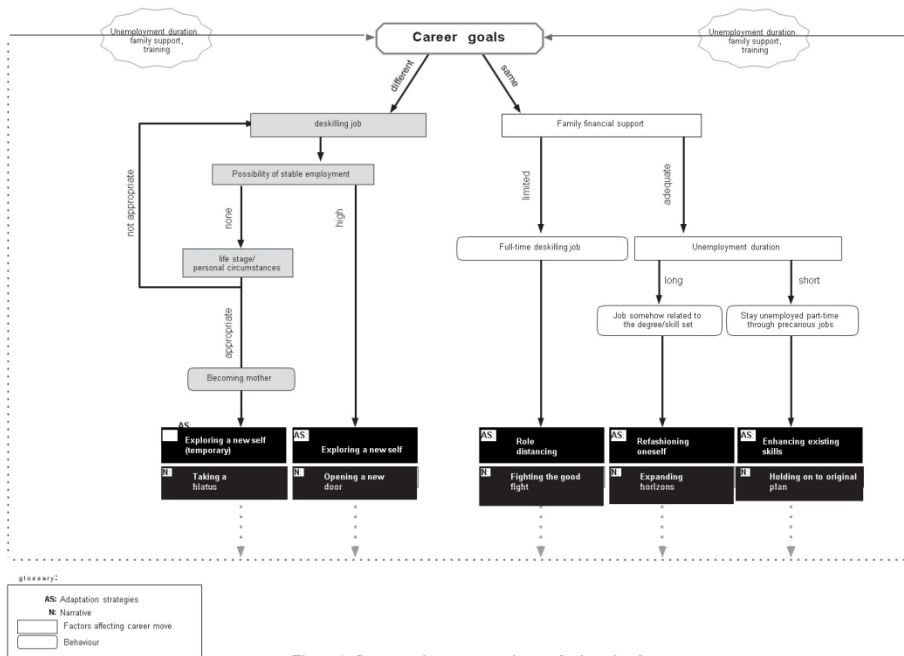


Figure 1. Career trajectory narratives and triggering factors

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