



## Vulnerabilities and Psychological Adjustment Resources in Career Development

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The work conducted by our LIVES research team on *professional paths* is rooted in a long tradition of career development research dating back to the 1950s and the work of Super (1957) and other researchers. In our framework, career development has been conceptualised as an integral part of the life of individuals and as a process that evolves over time and cannot be dissociated from other spheres of life, such as family, leisure, and citizenship (see the chapter of this volume by Schüttengruber, Krings, & Freund). Career can thus be defined as ‘a combination of sequences of roles played by a person during the course of a lifetime’ (Super, 1980, p. 282). The globalisation and tertiarisation of our economies and the

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rapid technological evolution have deeply transformed the landscapes in which career development takes place (Urbanaviciute, Bühlmann, & Rossier, 2019a). Work environments are changing rapidly, thereby placing pressure not only on workers' adaptabilities and skills but also on the education system that prepares them for the labour market (Masdonati et al., 2021). For example, automatisisation tends to accelerate labour market dualisation by decreasing midlevel jobs and increasing the number of insecure and atypical employment contracts, such as part-time, fixed-term, casual and seasonal work (ILO, 2016). The digital platform economy also promotes atypical employment or informal jobs that are sometimes neither declared nor subject to social contributions and offer no social benefit. This type of outsourcing, which is subject to less regulation, clearly increases workers' precarity (Vallas & Schor, 2020). In this context, the future of work seems difficult to predict, and such uncertainty may exert a profound impact on career path sustainability.

In this changing environment, traditional career development models can no longer adequately address the challenges of contemporary careers (Savickas et al., 2009). People are facing an increasing number of career transitions that must be considered moments of particular vulnerability, viewed as a multidimensional, multilevel, and multidirectional 'dynamic of stress and resources across the life course' (Spini et al., 2017, p. 5). Career paths are less predictable, offering vast opportunities for some, increasing uncertainty for all, and intensifying the dualisation of the labour market, which exposes part of the population to potential precarity. To describe how people navigate a plurality of life spheres and narrate their career paths, the different layers of the *self* (as an actor, agent, and author; McAdams, 2013) should also be considered. The development of the self is the result of a lifelong process influenced by various life experiences (corresponding to the intraindividual level of the life course cube; Bernardi et al., 2019). With fewer social markers available in late modernity, this development becomes a lifelong 'reflexive project of [the] self' (Giddens,

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1991, pp. 32-33). The reflexive lifelong process is based on two important aspects: ‘the perception of the selfsameness and [the] continuity of one’s existence in time and space’ (Erikson, 1968, p. 50), with its ‘most obvious concomitants’ being ‘a feeling of being at home in one’s body, [and] a sense of knowing where one is going’ (Erikson, 1980, p. 127). This perspective describes how people link their past, present, and future to develop a sense of intentionality, use their contextual, proximal, and personal resources to develop agency, and narrate their journey to give meaning to their paths (Rossier et al., 2020b).

The abovementioned challenges are clearly reflected in recent policy work as well. The United Nations’ Agenda 2030 emphasised the importance of promoting access to education and decent work, and a recent report by UNESCO (2020) on the future of learning mentioned that the issue of sustainability will also become crucial for education. Indeed, education is a key issue for building capacities that help our societies to make the necessary transformation more sustainable. In times of uncertainty, exacerbated by—for example—the COVID-19 pandemic, the future of work is very difficult to predict (OECD, 2020). Access to decent work relies on several socioeconomic, community, and personal factors that can promote integration or marginalisation. Given that the cumulative (dis)advantage theory states that inequalities in terms of capital (financial, social, psychological, or health) tend to increase over the life course (Dannefer, 2003), we need to support the most vulnerable in particular, as they tend to be underserved. This necessity implies the importance of developing public policies and guidance practices that offer tangible means of securing career transitions, thereby improving the sustainability of career paths.

### INCREASING COMPLEXITY OF CAREER TRANSITIONS: IMPLICATIONS

One of the consequences of the destandardisation of career paths is an increased frequency and complexity of career transitions (Widmer & Ritschard, 2009). Career transitions—e.g., the passage from school to work, opting in and out of the labour market, turnovers, and career changes (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2020)—imply complex adaptation processes, such as the development of new competences, ability to make sense of career changes, and the re-narration and the re-development of a new

social and personal (work) identity (Masdonati & Zittoun, 2012). The magnitude and risk of this challenge depend on multiple factors. According to Anderson et al. (2012), a transition is understood as an opportunity and leads to positive outcomes when it is intentional and anticipated, when the socioeconomic context is favourable, and when people benefit from psychosocial and environmental resources in experiencing uncertain times. In contrast, transitions are particularly risky when they are unexpected, unintentional (and potentially nonnormative) and when people lack the agency, resources, and support to cope with transition challenges (Fournier et al., 2017). In the latter case, career transitions are associated with risks of marginalisation and are therefore a source of labour market precariousness and social vulnerability.

Two types of career transitions seem particularly challenging within the contemporary world of work: 1) youths' passage from education to employment and 2) adult workers' involuntary career changes. The first type of transition, also referred to as the school-to-work transition, is indeed a crucial moment in individuals' life courses since it can affect their careers in the long term. Contextual, institutional, and psychosocial factors influence the smoothness of this transition (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). Among them, the 'transition regime' of the school system, the socioeconomic situation, and young adults' qualifications and social status are among the main predictors of sustainable labour market integration. For example, in Switzerland, low-qualified (those who have not completed compulsory school or professional training) and socially disadvantaged young people (coming from families with very low socioeconomic status) have a high risk of experiencing floundering transitions and falling into the NEET group (not in education, employment, or training), which in turn leads to economic and social exclusion (Vuolo et al., 2014). To combat potential exclusion, macro-level actions have to be taken, such as the development of integration policies or the application of measures aimed at helping the most disadvantaged. These socioeducational measures can strengthen psychosocial resources such as adaptability, a sense of identity, and self-efficacy and buffer the impact of contextual or institutional constraints on the school-to-work transition process and outcomes (Masdonati et al., 2021).

The second type of particularly challenging career transition is adult workers' involuntary career changes, or job changes that they did not actively choose. For example, such changes can occur following a layoff, an accident, or a health issue, which can also lead to nonvoluntary early

work exit, and unemployed older workers are particularly vulnerable (Oesch & Baumann, 2015). Unlike voluntary transitions, which commonly represent an opportunity to grow, unintentional career changes tend to put the person in psychologically and socially vulnerable positions (Fournier et al., 2017). Such changes imply a challenging process of occupational identity loss and recovery and force workers to confront the obsolescence of their skills and the obligation to build new ones (Masdonati et al., 2017). This vulnerability is even higher when transitions are not only involuntary but also unexpected, since people experiencing such changes often go through periods of uncertainty and unemployment (Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018). In these cases, career changes can be qualified as a negative career shock (Akkermans et al., 2018) and imply a precarisation of the career path and the subsequent risk of social exclusion (Fournier et al., 2017).

#### ADAPTABILITY AS A RESOURCE FOR COUNTERACTING OCCUPATIONAL VULNERABILITIES

The quality of career transitions and of individual working lives are largely shaped and influenced by macro- (e.g., labour market characteristics, economic crises) and meso-level (e.g., organisational transformations, job design practices) factors (Tomlinson et al., 2018). The work environment broadly interacts with micro-level factors, defined as personal characteristics of resilience, agency, flexibility, proactivity in crafting one's career, and use of contextual resources (Urbanaviciute, Bühlmann, & Rossier, 2019a). These different factors must be considered to understand employees' well-being. They also provide information about the sources of various disadvantages and vulnerabilities that threaten access to high-quality jobs and sustainable career development. The LIVES *Professional Paths Survey* (Maggiori et al., 2016) aimed to systematically study the direct and moderating effects of the professional context (e.g., working conditions), individual differences (e.g., personality characteristics, self-regulatory skills), and other resources (e.g., social support) on individuals' professional paths and career development. Based on a large representative sample of Swiss workers and unemployed people, this 7-year longitudinal panel study focused particularly on human agency, which 'suggests intention, volition, will, purpose, and some modicum of personal control in life' (McAdams, 2013, p. 276), in dealing with disadvantages and

vulnerabilities along the career path. According to the conceptualisation of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000), being an agent implies making self-determined and goal-directed choices throughout the life course. In this context, we studied how agency manifests in personal resources that help workers cope with adversities in the world of work and proactively construct their working lives.

*Career adaptability* is a personal resource that has gained considerable attention in the last 10 years (Johnston, 2018) and can be defined as ‘a psychosocial construct that denotes an individual’s readiness and resources for coping with current and imminent vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and personal traumas’ (Savickas, 2005, p. 51). Career adaptability includes four dimensions—career concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—that reflect specific abilities to manage the work-related challenges mentioned above (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Our LIVES research team has offered compelling evidence regarding how career adaptability may promote well-being within and outside of the work domain. For instance, a study by Fiori et al. (2015) investigated adaptive psychological mechanisms in the workplace and demonstrated that adaptability resources were related to higher job satisfaction and lower work stress over time through affect regulation. In addition, Maggiori et al. (2013) revealed that career adaptability maintained its positive effects on work-related well-being even in cases of adverse working conditions (i.e., job insecurity and job strain). Our study also showed the broader role of career adaptability in general well-being either via direct impact or by reducing the detrimental effects of the work environment, which notably hints at career adaptability as a transversal resource. In line with the theoretical literature (e.g., Rossier, 2015), the results of our research have generally shown that adaptability resources may mediate the relationship between the work environment or personal dispositions and well-being by reducing the detrimental effects of environmental factors and potentiating people’s positive dispositions.

To further explore how career adaptability helps people counteract work- and career-related challenges, we tested the so-called activation hypothesis (Rossier, 2015), which defines career adaptability as a ‘dormant’ resource or reserve that is activated in precarious or otherwise demanding situations. For instance, in our study of the long-term benefits of career adaptability for work and life outcomes, we observed that the presence of career difficulty (such as a lack of career opportunities in the present study but also difficulties in the workplace or unemployment in

other cases) might activate career adaptability resources that are used to overcome this difficulty (e.g., looking for alternative opportunities, setting new goals, or engaging in other career-development activities) and foster well-being (Urbanaviciute, Udayar, & Rossier, 2019b). Furthermore, we examined different professional trajectories (i.e., stable employed, stable unemployed, changing employment, moving from unemployment to employment) and concluded that activated career adaptability resources may be a precursor to career changes, which suggests that people who anticipate such changes proactively activate their career resources (Johnston et al., 2016). Finally, separate career adaptability dimensions have been shown to have some specific effects. Notably, the dimensions of career concern and control were found to be particularly relevant in regulating the dynamics of job insecurity among employees with varying levels of employability and financial status (Urbanaviciute et al., 2020), which draws attention to the utility of specific aspects of adaptability in managing uncertainty.

To gain a holistic understanding of career development, we also considered the abovementioned aspects in conjunction with contextual factors that exert a substantial impact on people's career paths. Recent data have unequivocally underlined the role of macro-level factors, such as the increase in nonstandard employment, the development of digital labour platforms and other changes in the quality of working conditions (ILO, 2016). Structural boundaries and these new challenges in our contemporary and globalised world of work may substantially alter one's career options, thereby creating space for (increasing) inequalities and precarious employment (Van Laer et al., 2019). Thus, it is necessary to understand not only career-specific but also broader resources that help people adjust to these complex psychosocial situations and counteract the risk of precarity.

## BROADER PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT RESOURCES

Knowing about relevant resources that accompany the successful negotiation of work- and career-related vulnerabilities or allow for positive career development might not only help identify at-risk populations but also shed some light on the required skills for positive adjustment when facing challenges. However, the study of career development should consider not only what resources prevent specific vulnerabilities but also what resources promote overall thriving in working lives (e.g., enjoyable,

engaged, and meaningful careers). While a broad array of such resources has been discussed, including social support or other determinants of agency, a large body of research has specifically examined the role of broad personality dimensions, such as the Big Five personality traits, in predicting career-related outcomes and has predominantly identified the major role of conscientiousness (Shanahan et al., 2014).

At the same time, it has been argued that other, more specific personality traits beyond the Big Five might also be relevant for predicting relevant criteria in the work context. Peterson and Seligman (2004) offered their ‘values in action’ classification, a framework for studying these more specific and positively oriented traits. This classification comprises a set of 24 stable but malleable traits (‘character strengths’) that are expected to contribute to a ‘good life’ and to produce desirable outcomes (including competence or satisfying work) but also to represent protective factors when facing adversity. With regard to work and careers, specific character strengths (e.g., perseverance, honesty, teamwork, kindness, zest, hope, or creativity) have been found to accompany career ambitions, task performance and positive organisational behaviours, or satisfaction with work and life in general (Gander et al., 2012; Heintz & Ruch, 2020). Furthermore, research has shown that character strengths are associated with better coping and reduced stress or less burnout, and there is evidence that current levels of character strengths predict future levels of job satisfaction (e.g., Gander et al., 2020; Harzer & Ruch, 2015).

In addition to such potential direct effects, personality traits might also play a crucial role in social resources (e.g., social support), which have often been reported to promote positive effects, such as career engagement or mitigate work stress (e.g., Hirschi et al., 2011). On the level of character strengths, those such as zest, love, hope, humour, or social intelligence are associated with greater perceived social support (Martínez-Martí & Ruch, 2017).

## IMPLICATIONS

To promote career development in a more sustainable and fairer world, we assert that we need to secure career transitions through a combination of macro-, meso-, and micro-level actions. Against the backdrop of the changing world of work, both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have stressed that social protection must be adapted to changes in

employment and offer security not only to traditional workers but also to self-employed, temporary, and part-time workers and those affiliated with digital platforms. Considerable efforts must be made to regulate atypical employment and to combat unfair competition. As the destandardisation of career paths is associated with an increase in precarity and insecure transitions that remain periods of vulnerability, it is important to develop tools for sustainability that career paths can no longer offer through the provision of support during these transitions. Such support should include not only life-long learning but also life-long guidance, aimed at helping people take advantage of their contextual and personal resources and strengths. As researchers and practitioners, we need to become political actors to promote the development of public policies that secure access to lifelong learning and counselling for all (Rossier et al., 2020a). For this reason, we need to develop our critical consciousness (Freire, 1993) and collective actions, which implicates professionals, associations, NGOs, and international organisations in the need to commit jointly to promoting social justice and sustainable development (Carosin et al., 2021).

Macro-level actions may be taken to develop new employment and social policies and legislative responses. Such actions may concern, for example, nonstandard, nondeclared, or informal employment (ILO, 2016), the development of lifelong learning and guidance (Rossier et al., 2020a), measures that support older workers' reentry to the labour market (Oesch, 2020), or measures specifically devoted to overcoming specific crises. A few examples of specific crises and associated measures include climate change—with the *Green New Deal* or the *Climate Bonds Initiative*—or the COVID-19 crisis—with the bridge credits for companies in need, measures for the partially unemployed, or support for the self-employed. Macro-level actions have to be implemented at the meso level with organisations' policies and procedures or community action programs to promote well-being, inclusion, or reciprocal support. The highly positive impact of social resources as social support is well documented and has also been seen as a powerful factor at this level (e.g., Wang et al., 2003). At the micro level, we need to be able to provide effective support and guidance for all, considering a diversity of needs (Sampaio et al., 2021). Helping a highly skilled professional, an older jobseeker, or a young NEET person may require quite different measures or interventions. For this reason, we need to develop contextualised interventions. Moreover, career interventions have to increase counselees' reflexivity (need for meaning), intentionality (need for continuity), and agency

(resources) (Rossier, 2015). Developing people's resources allows them to exert a stronger impact on their environment (adaptability and crafting resources) and be agents of change. Considering specific resources, such as career adaptability or character strengths, might offer an important starting point for practical applications. Both might be considered when identifying at-risk groups in selection decisions for increasing person-job fit (e.g., Gander et al., 2020; Urbanaviciute et al., 2020) and may provide a starting point for deliberate interventions (e.g., Harzer & Ruch, 2016). Overall, numerous resources that accompany better psychological adjustment at the micro, meso, and macro levels have been identified in recent years and might be used in a variety of ways to prevent vulnerabilities and promote thriving.

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