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How uncertainty affects career behavior: A narrative approach

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Abstract

Despite increased uncertainty in the environment, the role of uncertainty in people's careers is poorly understood. Those few theories that account for uncertainty portray it as a negative influence on people's career and should therefore be reduced or avoided. This paper presents an empirical study that investigated the impact of uncertainty on people's career behavior using a narrative approach. The findings reveal that people have different understandings of career uncertainty, which leads to distinct differences in subsequent career behavior. Specifically, we identified four qualitatively different meanings of career uncertainty we have called Stabilizer, Glider, Energiser and Adventurer. The findings add to the existing literature by showing how each meaning of career uncertainty affects career decision making, criteria to gauge career success and meaning, and negotiating transitions. This significantly broadens current conceptualization of career uncertainty and its impact on career behavior than existing literature.

Introduction

Uncertainty features prominently in careers today and is likely to increase because of rapid changes in the nature of work such as globalization (Burke & Cooper, 2006; Pink, 2005), advances in information and communication technologies (Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017; Pelps, Heidl, & Wadhwa, 2012; Susskind & Susskind, 2015), and a shift towards more knowledge- and service-based industries (Alvesson, 2004; Phelps et al. 2012). Moreover, identifiable organizational career paths are no longer assured (De Cuyper, De Witte, & Van Emmerik, 2011; McElroy & Weng, 2016), leaving individuals with greater responsibility to direct their career paths and be adaptable and proactive in their career behavior (Hall, 2004). Yet, for many people full-time work is hard to find as under-employment rises (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016).

Despite the prevalence of career uncertainty in the environment, it rarely features in existing career theory. Prevailing career theories, whether matching or developmental process theories (Dawis, 2002; Super, 1990), or the more recent Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, 2005), Relational Career Theory (Blustein, 2011), and Kaleidoscope Career (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) largely ignore the role of uncertainty. Those few that do acknowledge uncertainty, such as career decision theory (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996) and Career Construction Theory (Savickas et al., 2009) assume that uncertainty means the same for all people (usually negative) which people try to avoid.

This paper reports an empirical study that used a narrative approach to investigate the impact of uncertainty on people's career behavior. The paper is structured as follows. First, we review current career theory with a specific focus on how these theories respond to uncertainty in career behavior. We then detail the narrative approach and methodology used to investigate people's lived experience of

career uncertainty. Third, we present the findings that suggest that people hold different meanings of uncertainty, which result in distinctly different career behavior. Finally, we discuss the implications for career theory and suggest possible future research directions.

Uncertainty in Career Theory

The career field has focused on certainty rather than uncertainty since the founding work of Frank Parsons (1909), who argued that the purpose of career theory is to create *certainty* in career choice and to ensure the best match between the person and the environment is made. His ‘matching theories’ were critiqued for being static in time and ignoring contextual factors, and the emphasis has shifted to explain processes and actions of occupational choice at different life stages (Gottfredson, 1981, 2002; Savickas, 2002; Super, 1953, 1984, 1990). However, the focus remained on to provide certainty as careers unfold over time.

The dramatic changes in the nature of work (discussed above), gave rise to theories explaining career construction in an uncertain environment (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996b; Brown & Lent, 2016; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003; Savickas et al., 2009), such as Boundaryless career theory (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996b). Changes in traditional employment boundaries do generate uncertainty for individuals to construct their career within and across physical and psychological boundaries (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). The focus on the contextual uncertainty of careers is complemented by approaches that highlight the uncertainty of the *process* of career construction (e.g. Lent, 2005; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996). Career decision making usually involves great uncertainty (van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2009, p. 299). A general state of indecision may influence the multi-faceted processes of career construction (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2003; Osipow, 1999). A discrete set of difficulties

in the decision making process includes the roles of emotions (Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008), individual differences (Gati, Landman, Davidovitch, Asulin-Peretz, & Gadassi, 2010), and cognition (Kleiman et al., 2004), which together assist understanding career related decisions (see also Amir, Gati, & Kleiman, 2008; Bimrose & Brown, 2015; Ceschi, Costantini, Phillips, & Sartori, 2017; Gati et al., 1996).

A focus on the internally held subjective career criteria (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005) highlights the uncertainty of individual career behavior. Three particular aspects have been noted: (1) identifying and pursuing career success (Hall & Kahn, 2002); (2) forming, establishing and enacting a working identity (Ibarra, 2003; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010); and (3) searching for meaning in work (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). These approaches have emphasised subjective notions of success on identity, meaning and purpose, yet the nature and effect of uncertainty have only been alluded to (e.g. Savickas et al. 2009).

In sum, career theorising has focused on certainty rather than uncertainty in careers. Even when uncertainty is recognized, it has not been problematized. Furthermore, a persistent assumption is that it has the same predominantly negative meaning for all people. To address these shortcomings we investigated two questions: *(1) what meaning do people ascribe to career uncertainty? and (2) how do these different meanings affect their career behavior?*

A Narrative Approach to Understand Career Uncertainty

We used a narrative approach to investigate people's meaning of career uncertainty and how it affects their career related behavior. Forming part of the interpretive research tradition, the narrative approach focuses on how people make sense of their reality through the narratives they tell (Bruner, 1987; Gabriel, 2000; Gergen & Gergen, 1984;

McAdams, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative has a rich tradition in both career theory and practice (e.g. Cohen & Mallon, 2001; Ibarra & Lineback, 2005; Reid & West, 2011; Savickas et al., 2009; Severy, 2008). It is used extensively in the career field to investigate career change (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005; Perren & Morland, 1999), unemployment (Loyttyniemi, 2001), entrepreneurial careers (Sinisalo & Komulainen, 2008) and specific professions (Valkevaara, 2002).

Similar to other interpretive approaches, a narrative approach focuses on people's lived experience (Polkinghorne, 1995; McAdams, 2001). It has however two additional features of particular relevance for investigating what meaning people ascribe to career uncertainty, and how that meaning affects their career behavior. First, it situates uncertainty within the context of individuals' broader working life, thus acknowledging an holistic view of career (Bujold, 2004). Career, defined as a person's sequence of work experiences over time (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996a), suggests that career uncertainty may occur at specific episodes within, as well as across, an entire career. The holistic focus of a narrative approach makes it possible to capture how people's career narratives organise their lived experience of uncertainty and the meaning they attribute to it (Bruner, 1991; Christensen & Johnston, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Second, a narrative approach specifically emphasizes the plot of a narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995; Todorov, 1977). The plot is the "organizing theme of a story" (Bujold, 2004, p. 472) that allows meaning of a person's whole career story to be understood in light of its constituent parts (Bruner, 1991), which in our case was the role of uncertainty. Specifically, career is *objective* in the sense of a sequence of jobs or occupations and simultaneously *subjective* as people weave their needs, preferences, and desires, into their lives (Hall, 2002). A narrative approach addresses the

subjective/objective dichotomy by integrating people's career experiences with the meanings that they ascribe to them through a narrative career plot (Cochran, 1990). Thus, a narrative approach makes it possible to investigate *when* people experience uncertainty, what the uncertainty *means* to them, and their *behavioural* response.

Method

Selecting Research Participants

To investigate how people make sense of career uncertainty we selected 'professionals', which we define broadly to include people engaged in a form of knowledge work, typically with high degree of autonomy (Alvesson, 2004; Susskind & Susskind, 2015). We regarded professionals as particularly relevant because of the salience of uncertainty in their career construction (Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007), which is notable in four areas. First, professionals often identify themselves with multiple groups, such as their organisation, profession or industry, which create high levels of uncertainty (Allen, 2011; Grote & Raeder, 2009). Second, professional work provides many alternate employment arrangements that generate uncertainty about how best to structure one's career (Gallagher, 2002; Kunda, Barley, & Evans, 2002; Vaiman, 2010). Third, professionals face ongoing knowledge obsolescence (Florida, 2008; McKercher & Mosco, 2007; Pazy, 1990; Pink, 2005), which creates career uncertainty. Finally, professionals typically have greater opportunities to *customize* their career (Valcour et al., 2007), and, as a result, experience a wider range of uncertainties.

To ensure we captured the maximum variation in meanings of career uncertainty, we selected participants based on following four criteria: gender (50/50 split), age (ranging from 27-60), education level (secondary school to PhD), and industry background (for further detail, see Table 1). We recruited the research participants through the network of an Australian based human-resource consulting firm

using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990). Twenty-one research participants were identified and selected based on the four selection criteria.

Insert Table 1 about here

After interviewing twelve participants we conducted a preliminary individual analysis of each transcript, and a comparative analysis to explore different meanings of uncertainty. Most participants appeared to share four meanings of career uncertainty. We continued to collect data to ensure maximum variation of meanings. After twenty-one interviews no new meanings of uncertainty emerged, which suggested we had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Collection

Our narrative interviews (Bruner, 1987) began with a broad question: “tell me about your career”. The answers generated a complete career narrative and provided context for the more specific questions that followed. Second, we asked participants to define what a career meant to them. We assumed that the way a person defined their career would reflect the enactment of their career and so their definition was used in the analysis to interpret their career. Third, we asked participants to identify and elaborate on three or four of the most important career decisions that they had made. We expected these examples might reveal heightened levels of career uncertainty (Denzin, 1989). We asked several detailed follow-up questions to deepen our understanding of uncertainty in each event such as, “*can you tell me more about when you were uncertain or certain during that time? How did you cope with it? How did the uncertainty change over time?*” Finally, respondents answered additional questions including “*how has your experience of uncertainty changed in your career over time?*” And “*what uncertainty*

do you think you will face in the future?" Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, producing 700 pages of single-spaced text.

Analysis

We analysed the data in three stages. In stages I and II, we focused on the first research question (i.e. what meaning people ascribe to career uncertainty?), while in stage III, we focused on the second research question (i.e. how do different meanings of career uncertainty affect career behaviours?).

Stages I and II: what meanings do people ascribe to career uncertainty?

In order to identify what meanings people ascribe to career uncertainty we conducted a two stage analysis. First, we analysed of each participant's career narrative to identify their specific meaning of career uncertainty. Second, we compared each individual's meaning of career uncertainty to further identify and clarify the possible variation of meanings of career uncertainty among the participants.

Stage I: Individual analysis. To identify the meaning of uncertainty each person held, we first carefully read each transcript several times to ensure a deep understanding of the career narrative (Czarniawska, 2004) and to surface the formative experiences and main career themes. During these readings, we specifically focused on the notion of uncertainty to identify at what points it was, or was not, experienced in their careers. Practically, we highlighted the text at each of these points to facilitate quicker reference and analysis of what specific meaning they ascribed to career uncertainty. We paid particular attention to the key transition episodes in each career history in line with Todorov's (1977) plot structure to identify their meaning of career uncertainty in each of those career episodes. This entailed an iterative process involving analyzing the meaning of career uncertainty in each transition episode and comparing it to their overall career plot. We continued this iterative process until each individual's meaning

of career uncertainty had been firmly identified and established. We thereafter created a summary for each person's meaning of career uncertainty and used these summaries as a basis for the comparative analysis in stage II.

Stage II: Comparative analysis. Here we examined possible variation in meanings of career uncertainty by comparing each individual's meaning of career uncertainty identified in stage I. This comparison took place through an iterative process in which we identified individuals that expressed a similar meaning of career uncertainty and grouped them in a specific category (Polkinghorne, 1995). Through this iterative process four different meanings of career uncertainty emerged, ranging from those who regarded uncertainty as something negative to those who regarded it as something positive. We tentatively labeled these four meaning categories of uncertainty *Stabiliser*, *Energiser*, *Glider* and *Adventurer*. We thereafter compared the individuals within each meaning category more closely to further articulate their shared meaning of uncertainty. Specifically, we re-read and analysed each individual transcript, looking for similarities and differences in the participants' meaning of career uncertainty (e.g. excited by uncertainty or frustrated by uncertainty). Following this crosschecking process, only one interviewee moved into a different category. We conducted two further steps to crosscheck the results (Sandberg, 2000). First, two other researchers independently replicated the process to ensure communicative validity of the results. Second, we sent a short summary of each meaning of career uncertainty to participants and asked them to rank order the summaries according to the degree with which they resonated with them. All the responders ranked first the same group to which we had allocated them.

Stage III: How do different meanings of career uncertainty affect career behaviours?

After having identified what meanings individuals ascribe to career uncertainty in stages I and II, we examined in stage III how the different meanings of career uncertainty may affect their career behaviors. The affect analysis was conducted in two related steps. First, we went back to the transcripts in each category (i.e. Stabiliser, Energiser, Glider, Adventurer) and identified what main career behaviors the participants expressed in regard to episodes of career uncertainty. In total, we identified seven different career behaviors among the individuals, namely career decision making, career structuring, handling job insecurity, career identification, sense of success and meaningfulness, agency, and managing self-uncertainty. Second, we critically examined each career behavior across the four meaning categories of career uncertainty looking for confirmatory and contradictory evidence that this behavior was markedly different between the four groups of meanings. As a result, three of the seven career behaviours emerged as clearly differentiated between the participants from each meaning category of career uncertainty: career decision making, sense of career success and meaningfulness, and career structuring.

Findings: Meanings of career uncertainty and its effect on career behavior

What meaning, then, do people ascribe to career uncertainty, and how does that meaning affect their career behavior? We identified (a) four different meanings of career uncertainty (Stabiliser, Energiser, Glider, and Adventurer), and (b) that they affect three main career behaviors, namely career decision making, sense of career success and meaningfulness, and career structuring in distinctly different ways. These findings are summarized in Table 2 and further elaborated subsequently. We first describe the different meanings of career uncertainty identified, and thereafter how these different meanings affect career behaviors.

Insert Table 2 about here

Meanings of Career Uncertainty

As shown in Table 2, the four different meanings of career uncertainty identified - *Stabiliser*, *Energiser*, *Glider*, and *Adventurer* - can be seen as representing a continuum of meanings of uncertainty: from being regarded as something purely negative to being seen as something mainly positive. We develop each meaning of career uncertainty in more detail below.

Stabiliser: *Uncertainty seen as negative and to be avoided wherever possible.*

Stabilisers experience career uncertainty as something essentially negative and truly uncomfortable. As one interviewee summarised: *“I think for me to be truly happy, I need as little ambiguity as possible [in my career]”* [P3]. Because of their negative experience of uncertainty, they try to constantly avoid it in their careers. This occurs in a number of ways. Some Stabilisers try to actively avoid career uncertainty by establishing various buffers against potential uncertain situations in their future career. These buffers could take myriad forms such as: building a financial buffer; having a trade or skill to easily find different work; having a particular character trait; or developing expertise in a particular knowledge area. As one participant stated: *“it’s just a matter of positioning yourself so that you remain employable for the next opportunity”* [P4]. Similarly, another participant says that in order to avoid career uncertainty *“I’m going to be one of those perpetual studiers”* [P8].

Other Stabilisers did not directly plan to avoid career uncertainty in the future, but tried to avoid career uncertainty on a more ongoing basis, resulting in a risk-averse career behavior. As one interviewee noted: *“sometimes I get sick of work or want to do something different and then, I think well, am I going to find anything that I like better?”*

I'm a risk-averse person in all aspects of my life" [P18]. Furthermore, in order to avoid uncertainty, Stabilisers thoroughly researched any options before making a career decision: *"it had to be the right role, it had to be the right move and one of the things that people will say is that you really have to have good companies on your CV"* [P4].

Stabilisers also often try to avoid career uncertainty by choosing to work in established organisations, which provide an inherent sense of security and stability, which often meant they remained in one and the same organisation for a long period of time. As one participant put it: *"I'm a bit of a stayer"* [P18]. The stability of the context in which their career is enacted suits their desire to avoid uncertainty in their career: *"I prefer to know what I'm doing so that I can advance, and do my job properly rather than take a risk."* [P21]. Stabilisers therefore tend to shy away from risky entrepreneurial ventures. *"I suppose that it goes back to that security factor, that, look at the end of the day, my money is paid every month and I don't have worry about invoicing or chasing...debts"* [P12] said one person who was asked why they didn't go into business themselves.

Stabilisers tendency to constantly try and avoid uncertainty can cause significant tension in their careers, particularly when their uncertainty avoidance behavior is at odds with their environment or desires. For example, one participant noted that while he had always been a professional he thought he would enjoy a trade-based career more. *"I had the opportunity to break away, and I was too scared of doing something that was unfamiliar, that I was uncertain of. There is an uncertainty that I wouldn't make big money. There was an uncertainty that I could actually handle the lifestyle. There is a lot of uncertainty of whether or not it would pay off, or whether it would be just the biggest gap in my resume going forward"* [P21]. Similarly, another participant described this tension between uncertainty avoidance and a desire for a career change as, *"I looked for*

a couple of years and sort of resigned myself to not being able to find another job that I liked” [P18].

Glider: *Indifferent to uncertainty and do not see it as a career influence.*

Gliders are indifferent to career uncertainty as they are typically not aware of experiencing uncertainty. Uncertainty is not important to them, and they do not give it much attention. Their perspective is neatly encapsulated by one participant: *“the uncertainty of not working or the uncertainty of, you know, this, that and whatever...I don’t think about it” [P2].* During times of career uncertainty, Gliders smoothly slip through the situation and are mostly unconcerned about the ambiguity of potential outcomes. The metaphor *water off a duck’s back* describes this indifference as uncertainty rolls off Gliders without having much impact. As a result, Gliders found it difficult to talk about uncertainty: *“The uncertainty of not working and the uncertainty of not being able to pay off the mortgage, the uncertainty of you know not being able to take my girlfriend to dinner, the uncertainty of um, you know this, that and whatever... I don’t think about it.”[P2].*

Gliders’ indifference to career uncertainty means they often happily pursue their passion for specific occupations without worrying much about their future career prospects. For example, one Glider [P6] confessed that the airline industry *“was something always to me [that] captured my imagination”*. She went on to note that *“I think a career is fulfilment as person...you need to do something that gives you personal satisfaction”*. Furthermore, another participant viewed her career as a starting point of a professional journey *“because it’s in this avenue that I want to work in, that once you get into there are so many possibilities that you can grow with it” [P5].*

Consistent with their indifference to career uncertainty, Gliders do not dwell on the potential outcomes of their career. Instead, they respond to opportunities which arise and decide upfront whether it is a good opportunity and then rely on their confidence and ability to make the situation successful. As one participant describing her move to a new company said, *“I just thought well I am going to do it. I know there was (sic) heaps of friends and all sorts of people thought I was crazy, you got to be crazy at your age... changing positions, you know. But it was just something that I truly believed in”* [P6]. Similarly, in response to an opportunity, one participant said *“great I’ll take it. It wasn’t like ‘oh, there might be something better’. It was just more that I need a job, I’ve been offered a job I’ll take it”* [P5]. The opportunity was seen as something she could build on for the future.

Energiser: *Prefers stability but is energised by moments of uncertainty.*

Although Energisers are not particularly comfortable experiencing career uncertainty, they see it as an impetus for change and the energy to move to the next level. How uncertainty provides the impetus that pushes Energisers to another level was clearly expressed by this participant: *“I think uncertainty is very valuable because it gives you the energy to make the changes that need to be made. So, I always try and phrase it positively. It comes from a vague feeling that something’s a bit out of kilter. And then it forces that introspection about what do I want that I’m not getting or what am I getting that I don’t want. And it does build up some momentum to act”* [P10].

As Energisers see uncertainty as an opportunity, they are excited by the experience and see uncertainty with a sense of optimism about what potential change it may bring. *“To me it means uncertainty, the point of flux. When things are whirling in uncertainty has always meant opportunity and so here is an opportunity.”* [P14].

Although Energisers see uncertainty as something positive, they do often not actively go after uncertain situations. Instead, they typically rely on a base level of security that may come from sources such as a specific organisation, knowledge or network, which provide a platform for them to explore career opportunities, if they come up. *“I still have a substantive position, so it's pretty safe but what else is there? So, let's mosey down here and have a look and see if there's something interesting down this path.”* [P14]. For another participant, working in a large firm provided this security: *“the financial security with being with a bigger firm and having the training opportunities were important”* [P9]. Furthermore, because Energisers do not actively go after uncertain career situations, they exude a level of patience in their career but can make quick decisions when necessary. Although some decisions may seem spontaneous and fast to others, a period of considered thought precedes them. *“Being quite a structured person, you have more of a methodology as well. You can say okay, well I made the right decision last time, this is the reason that I made the right decision, so apply those principles again.”* [P9].

Adventurer: Thrives on uncertainty and actively seeks it

Adventurers thrive on uncertainty in their career and actively seek uncertain situations. As one participant said: *“I would say that most times I thrive on uncertainty and change”* [P11]. Uncertainty provides the impetus to keep moving forward for Adventurers. *“I thrive on it. I'm one of those crazy people that, I get my rocks off on what might happen. Like, if you buy a lottery ticket ... the thrill of winning it is great, but the thrill of planning for it and being successful...you know what you are trying to do, what you are trying to achieve, is far more exciting”* [P17].

Adventurers often share a belief in something that shapes their perspective on the world. More than optimism, this belief provides a sense of hope that despite what

happens they will be looked after. This belief may be outwardly focused such as a spiritual belief or values. For example, some participants trusted that when “*certain elements [come] together something has got to happen and you don't know exactly what that is. So, I think my career is more about accessing...it's almost like a destiny. It's almost like you're destined to do things*” [P16]. For others, their belief was internally driven. “*It's what your innate talents are that are really useful to your employer and to yourself. And if you can align your strengths and talents to your job and to your life for that matter, you're maximizing your chances of success*” [P17].

Challenge and uncertainty are symbiotic for Adventurers' careers: challenges provide the uncertainty while the uncertainty provides the energy to tackle the challenge. “*I think that I am an intellectual person, and life is filled more with challenges. I think a career for me is addressing those challenges because of what those challenges give to me at a deeper level. It's like, if you earn income from that, that's great*” [P16]. Uncertainty is “*more a challenge than a threat. I don't, I can't tell you an example of when I felt threatened by uncertainty. I can be frustrated by it, but I'm not sure that I ever felt threatened by it. So, what does it mean to me? Just another challenge*” [P11]. A lack of challenge affects Adventurers: “*career choices have purely been reactionary, boredom, what next, with no thought of the consequences*” [P11].

Among Adventurers, there is a shared sense of curiosity and creativity. Creativity is inherently uncertain, as the purpose of a creative process is to devise something innovative. “*I keep getting leveled as that creative person...most of my jobs I've gone in setting things up*” [P11]. This appeals to Adventurers as they find the uncertainty of the process exciting and engaging. “*I will see something that needs to happen and no one will buy it. And a few years later, everyone is buying it, but by then I've moved on to the next thing*” [P16]. Hand in hand with creativity is a natural

curiosity about life and, again, the uncertainty of what may be discovered or learnt while being curious and investigating something. The journey of discovery is more exciting than reaching the destination.

How meanings of Career Uncertainty Affect Career Behaviour

As described above, we identified four qualitatively different meanings of career uncertainty. In this section, we describe how the different meaning of career uncertainty affect people's career behaviors during times of uncertainty. The key differences were in career decision-making (i.e. decisions central to their career); sense of career success and meaningfulness (i.e. what they regard as career success and a meaningful career); and career structuring (i.e. how they try to shape and structure their careers). These findings are summarized in Table 2 and further elaborated below.

Career Decision Making

Stabilisers made decisions that reflected their preference to avoid uncertainty.

Decisions were clear and made quickly to escape from an inherent discomfort with the uncertainty of the process. Furthermore, decisions were designed to avoid the likelihood of experiencing uncertainty in the future.

- “Sometimes I want to do something different and then, I think, am I going to find anything that I like better? I’m a risk-averse person in all aspects of my life” [P21]
- “...but I suppose that it goes back to that security factor that look at the end of the day my money is paid every month” [P12].

In contrast, *Gliders* made opportunistic decisions and had the confidence to capitalise on the immediate situation and opportunity. While other types perceived such decisions as ‘risky’, *Gliders* were confident that the result would be fine and were therefore usually unperturbed.

- “I thought at the time like, if the opportunity came up to work tomorrow, take it. Because I didn't know when the next time would be” [P15].
- “I’m the type of person who if something new comes in I’m the one who grabs it” [P6].

Energisers were careful decision makers. They described times of uncertainty as exciting and an opportunity to improve their situation, motivating them to make quick decisions when the occasion demanded. An apt metaphor for *Energisers*' decision making is the punctuated equilibrium model of change where extended periods of stability are interrupted by short bursts of radical change (see van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

- “I made the right decision last time, this is the reason that I made the right decision, so apply those principles again” [P9].
- “I was a bit tired of the big corporate life and for some reason the notion came into my head that I could do further study. So almost within a few hours I'd gone from I don't know what I'm going to do to I'm going to do a PhD. It was just this exhilarating feeling. It was such a contrast because if someone had said to me a week before, would I ever do a PhD, I would have said no you're crazy” [P10].

Adventurers were spontaneous decisions makers who tended not to think things through carefully. Although *Adventurers*' decisions may appear to be automatic reactions to opportunities, they thrived on rapid change. *Adventurers* experienced indecision on occasion but preferred to operate without the certainty and closure imposed by making a decision.

- “Uncertainty, I mean I thrive on that. I'm one of those crazy people that, I get my rocks off on what might happen” [P17].
- “I can't say that I failed in that I didn't find as a result of anyone of those quick decisions that I was out of a job, out of money, out of pocket, out of anything. And I think part of me was if I'm going to do it, I will make it work” [P11].

Sense of career Success and meaningfulness

Stabilisers reported career success when they crafted their working life to avoid uncertainty as much as possible. They derived a sense of meaning from a consistent, stable career and often described barriers put in place to prevent uncertainty. Their sense of career success could be challenged by the frequent tension between a desire for stability and the inherent uncertainty of their vocation or their work environment.

- “I had the opportunity to break away, and I was too scared of doing something that was unfamiliar, that I was uncertain of” [P21].
- “I just came to the conclusion that I would wait and see... you know give it another year and see what happens” [P18].

Gliders’ career success and meaning was not contingent on experiencing or avoiding uncertainty, but rather drawn from their inner convictions and beliefs. A strong sense of confidence in one’s own abilities was central and coupled with a compelling sense of agency believing they are in control of their own career.

- “But if you are reasonably talented and you are having a great time, you are going to shine” [P1].
- “You can sit back and do nothing or you can create those challenges for you” [P15].

Similar to Stabilisers, *Energisers* reported experiencing career success within a stable and predictable working environment. A sense of meaning was derived in part from the balance between stability and moments of change. Times of change were seen as challenges that provide a sense of motivation.

- “It was new challenges. It was a completely different ball game. I’ve got this. I can keep playing this for a while” [P14].
- “So I think uncertainty is good as it does give you the energy to reassess and to think about what it is that you want. So it’s an uncomfortable feeling. So it gives you some incentive to reduce the discomfort” [P10].

Adventurers spoke of uncertainty as a positive and experiencing uncertainty provided a sense of meaning. Success came from being constantly challenged in ever-changing situations. Career meaning was derived from being curious and using their creativity and passion.

- “And the element of surprise too, that I actually I think I like that. I love some elements of uncertainty” [P16].
- “Career is about how you want to spend the passion in your life” [P11].

Career Structuring

Stabilisers preferred traditional career structures in stable environments such as those provided by large organizations. They found the uncertainty of career transitions daunting and were apt to exhibit low levels of psychological and physical mobility. When a transition was unavoidable, they preferred a structured process to minimize the uncertainty of the transition and move quickly to a new state of stability.

- “I’d been with a pretty big firm, a good firm in London, and wanted to get in with the same over here” [P8]
- “I am a bit risk adverse. And a lot of that is due to the fact I think that when I was a child, I lived a lot overseas, that was quite scary as a young teenager, as a young adult, and then came back here and I was always looking for some sort of security” [P3].

Gliders did not show a distinct structural pattern in their career, which ranged from small private businesses to large public corporations. They crafted their career structure on factors other than uncertainty, such as preferences or experience, and were comfortable making transitions across both physical and psychological boundaries. Their understanding of uncertainty as inconsequential allows them to operate effectively in uncertain and non-traditional environments.

- “So whether I worked on some board or consulted or maybe even do one last stint as, someone heading a business up. I’m actually quite relaxed about it. I think it’ll be what looks the most appealing at the time” [P1].
- “A career is starting because it’s in this avenue that I want to work in, that once you get into there are so many possibilities that you can grow with it” [P5].

Energisers preferred the stability provided by large organizations. However, they were not afraid to work for smaller companies or run their own business if they could derive a sense of stability from another source, such a strong knowledge base. Energisers were unlikely to choose boundaryless careers because of their discomfort with the potential uncertainties. They preferred to avoid career transitions but, when

necessary, made the most of the opportunities, while endeavouring to shift as quickly as possible to the new state of stability.

- “I liked the professional standing of the subject matter. It was defined and well-established body of knowledge” [P10].
- “I was very slow in getting that promotion and it took me eventually years” [P14].

Adventurers adjusted their career structure to experience uncertainty. They tended toward non-traditional career structures in which objective markers of career progress were less visible. They were comfortable with a range of structures as long as there was sufficient uncertainty and challenge. Career transitions felt easy for *Adventurers* as they allowed them to change when the job or situation did not meet their needs. They exhibited high levels of psychological and physical mobility and thrived on ever-changing career structures.

- “Around the year I was graduating with my doctorate, my management consultancy firm did the best it's ever done. It just flew ahead. I made more income in one year, I was so busy and I thought, ‘That's the time to shut it down.’ So in its heyday, I shut it down” [P16].
- “if you want something enough...you'll make it happen” [P11].

Discussion

Our study addressed the following two research questions: “what meaning do people ascribe to career uncertainty” and “how do these different meanings affect their career behavior”? We identified four different meanings of career uncertainty that affect people’s career behavior in distinctly different ways, and specifically in three key areas: career decision-making; career success and meaningfulness; and career structuring. We discuss the theoretical implications of the narrative accounts regarding how meaning of career uncertainty affects career behavior below and conclude with limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical implications

Meaning of career uncertainty and career decision-making. Our findings that people's understanding of uncertainty guides their career decision-making behaviour in distinct ways, advances the existing literature in three ways. First, these findings add nuance to existing career decision-making theories, which typically assume that decision-making is a critical task of career actors and focus on fashioning that within a career journey. For example, Gati *et al* (1996) offer ten categories of difficulty that prevent individuals from reaching a decision. Similarly, Germeijs and De Boeck (2003) drew on decision theory to develop a prescriptive decision making model to identify the ideal decision, or the option with the largest expected utility. In contrast, our findings suggest that making a decision is not necessarily an ideal outcome for all people and need not be the goal of decision-making. In our sample, *Gliders* were comfortable not to make a decision, and *Energisers*, who anticipate positive outcomes from uncertainty, framed those periods as an impetus to career progress. Decision-making literature that questions the aim of making a decision support our findings (Chia, 1994; van Vianen *et al.*, 2009).

Second, the findings extend process decision-making approaches (e.g. Savickas *et al.*, 2009; Severy, 2008; Wade, 2015) by making explicit different ways people understand uncertainty and, subsequently approach decision making. *Stabilisers* who prefer certainty act intuitively to avoid making decisions that compromise it. *Gliders* who seemed indifferent to uncertainty were more accepting of pragmatic career decisions with a short-term focus. *Energisers* associated career decisions positively although engaged in a considered process to arrive at a decision point. *Adventurers* who framed uncertainty as exciting were likely to create situations that demand career decisions. The different decision making behaviour stemming from the meanings of career uncertainty suggest distinctive processing systems. These may be similar to the

differences in intuitive processes that may be rapid and unconscious for some, yet deliberate and rational for others (Dane & Pratt, 2007).

Third, the findings show that uncertainty differs from, and is more generic than, the notion of indecision, which is one of the most studied constructs in vocational psychology (Gati et al., 2011). Indecision relates to a specific situation such as making a particular career decision and is both context-specific and time-bound (Germeijs & Boeck, 2002). However, our findings show that career uncertainty is a broader construct, highlighting a more general orientation that appears to be stable across context and time. Nevertheless, uncertainty and indecision are not mutually exclusive. People who are comfortable experiencing uncertainty may also experience moments of indecision related to a particular situation.

Meaning of career uncertainty and career success meaningfulness. The findings indicate that people's meaning of career uncertainty affected the way they defined and pursued career success, and also searched for meaning. First, the findings suggest that people embed their understanding of uncertainty into subjective definitions of career success. For example, *Gliders* and *Energisers* inherently include uncertainty as a positive influence on career success rather than something to cope with, whereas *Stabilisers* need stability to experience success in their career. This result adds nuance to studies that report people derive career satisfaction and achieve 'optimal functioning' through employability, rather than the certainty of job security (De Cuyper et al., 2011).

Second, different understandings of uncertainty affected the way people *pursued* career success. Most existing research on career success focuses on outcome measures (e.g. Dries, Pepermans, & Carlier, 2008; Nash & Stevenson, 2004; Schein, 1996). However, our participants explained their sense of success derived from the uncertainty of the journey, rather than the certainty of reaching an outcome as the focal point of

success. These findings support the growing call to address the contextual and dynamic nature of career success and extend findings that support thriving careers for those who engage in proactive career behavior (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003) or the increased ability to adapt to the turbulent environment through multiple role changes (Zhu et al., 2013).

Third, people seek meaning and purpose from their career to align with their understanding of uncertainty. Meaning refers to how much a person's career contributes to (or may be a conduit for) his or her purpose in life (see Steger, 2009). The search for meaning is a central purpose of life (Frankl, 1984) yet is imbued with uncertainty. The results suggest a tentative relationship between meaning of uncertainty and 'calling', which is defined as a sense of purpose and clear direction in the work one engages in (Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010; Hall & Chandler, 2005). In our results, *Gliders* had a clearer sense of their future than the other groups. Although not everyone exhibited a true 'calling', those who held a clear picture of the future were less concerned with uncertainties experienced in the pursuit of their future goal. Drodge (2002), argued that a sense of meaning and purpose arises when someone is certain about something. *Gliders* who focused purposefully on the present and drew confidence from their abilities and experience of life's flow behaved as if their situation "called them". This evidence supports the assertion that people with a sense of purpose display greater agency through their action orientation and proactive career development behaviors (Elangovan et al., 2010; Hirschi, 2011; Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015).

Meaning of uncertainty and career structuring. The meaning people ascribed to uncertainty affects their career structure and experience of career transitions in distinct ways. First, the findings suggest that people prefer and select employment relationships

and career structures consistent with that meaning. The most stable career structure remains the traditional sequence of full time jobs in one or more (usually large) organisations. *Stabilisers* and *Energisers* were best suited to this structure because of their natural inclination toward certainty. However, a range of career structures have emerged beyond the traditional structure, including contracting (Inkson, Heising, & Rousseau, 2001; Kunda et al., 2002), temping (Theodore & Peck, 2002), portfolio careers (Mallon & Duberley, 2000), entrepreneurship (Sinisalo & Komulainen, 2008), and boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996b). The inherent uncertainty of less well defined structures and alternative employment arrangements are better suited to *Gliders* and *Adventurers*.

The meaning ascribed to different career structures may parallel the way a person understands uncertainty in uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007). Uncertainty-identity theory (UIT) proposes that groups, such as organizations, occupations, or career communities (Parker, Arthur, & Inkson, 2004) can reduce self-uncertainty, the ‘subjective sense of doubt or instability in self-views, [or] world views (van den Bos, 2009, p. 198) by guiding people how to behave, be treated by others, and describe oneself (Hogg, 2009). For example, people such as the *Stabilisers* in this study, regard uncertainty negatively and therefore are likely to be attracted to groups that offer a sense of belonging with others and a clear identity thus reducing uncertainty. *Adventurers* and *Gliders* may be better suited to career structures with less clearly defined markers of behavioral guidelines such as boundaryless careers or individual contracting.

Second, our results showed that people’s ascribed meaning of uncertainty led to different behaviors when transitioning across physical boundaries such as jobs or organizations. Specifically, people’s understanding of uncertainty affects how they

adapt to, and make sense of, transitions across psychological boundaries, which involves sensemaking processes such as identity formation (Amundson, 1994; Ibarra, 2003). It is during transitions that people's self-concept is most at flux. Many career theories rely on a clear self-concept (or related term) as a central component of career development (e.g. Gottfredson, 2002; Heslin, 2005; Savickas, 2002). Our results suggest that those who view uncertainty positively, such as *Adventurers* and *Gliders*, are likely to display greater psychological mobility and adapt their self-concept more than those with a negative perception of uncertainty. Different understandings of uncertainty and their preference (or otherwise) for stable self-concept may affect how career theories are applied. Although fluctuations in self-uncertainty have been attributed to individual differences such as emotions (see for example, Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Hartel, 2002) and contextual factors (van den Bos, 2009), the role of different understandings of uncertainty has not been addressed in existing career theory.

Limitations and future research

Our results suggest that the particular meaning people ascribe to uncertainty affects how they construct, enact and experience their career. We recognise three limitations to these findings. First, our sample was restricted to professionals as we considered they experience the greatest uncertainties in their career. Further studies could investigate the phenomenon of career uncertainty in blue-collar workers and semi-professional workers. Second, the present study was restrained by a single cultural context, namely, Australia. Future research in other cultures could explore whether meanings of career uncertainty can differentiate careers across cultures in a similar way to House et al.'s (2004) Uncertainty Avoidance construct, which differentiates societal cultures (e.g. similar to Benson, McIntosh, Salazar, & Vaziri, 2013). Third, the results propose that people's understanding of uncertainty remains relatively stable over time. However, as

this was not a longitudinal study we could not investigate whether the meaning of career uncertainty changes across the lifespan. Further research could investigate whether people change from one meaning to another and, if so, which factors trigger the shift.

We identify two particularly fruitful directions for future research. The first is to explore sources of variation in meanings of career uncertainty. The present study suggests that demographic factors such as age, gender or marital status did not have a discernable impact on each meaning of career uncertainty. However, other factors, such as personality or values may influence the meanings people ascribe to uncertainty. For example, people who prefer a structured lifestyle may share the *Stabilisers*' and *Energisers*' understandings while those who embrace a more unstructured approach to life may tend toward the other understandings. Second, the meanings people ascribe to uncertainty also implications for organizational practices including talent management, succession planning, recruitment, engagement, retention and career development. Further research in these areas could investigate how different the meanings of career uncertainty contribute to an organization's culture and effectiveness.

Conclusion

In this study, we applied a narrative approach to investigate the meaning people ascribed to career uncertainty, and how those meanings influenced their career behaviors. We identified four distinct meanings of career uncertainty, namely *Stabiliser*, *Glider*, *Energiser* and *Adventurer*. Our findings show that uncertainty does not mean the same thing for all people in their career, as assumed by existing theory. Second, our findings showed how the specific meaning people ascribe to uncertainty affects their career behavior in distinctly different ways, particularly in the areas of career decision-making, career success and meaningfulness, and career structuring. The *Stabilisers* perceived uncertainty as a negative experience that affects their career and they sought

stability that aligns with existing literature. However, we found that there were distinct differences among other participants and meanings expressed by *Energisers*, *Gliders*, and *Adventurers* present new and nuanced responses to current understanding of uncertainty. The findings offer a significantly broader conceptualization of career uncertainty than existing literature and provide nuance into how career theory can explain how meanings of uncertainty affect career behavior.

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Table 1: Demographics of Sample

Age	Gender	Education	Industry	Current job title
53	F	Secondary	Retail	General Manager
28	M	Undergraduate	Government	Director Investment Attraction
47	F	Post Graduate	Health	HR Advisor
33	M	Post Graduate	Mining	HR Manager
34	F	Undergraduate	IT	Sales Support
60	F	-	Transport	Manager Logistics
33	M	Undergraduate	Law	Lawyer - Industrial Relations
27	M	Undergraduate	Finance	Financial Planner
47	F	Doctorate	Government	Consultant
55	F	Post Graduate	Arts	Sculptor
51	F	Masters	Education	Manager Training Services
33	F	Diploma	Mining	Human Resources Advisor
50	M	Undergraduate	Government	Marketing and Comms Director
43	F	Undergraduate	Tourism	Human Resources Advisor
52	M	Doctorate	Professional Services	Principal Consultant
49	M	Doctorate	Science	CEO
43	F	Diploma	Professional Services	Senior HR Manager, South East Asia
30	M	Undergraduate	Property	Senior Valuer
46	F	Doctorate	Religion	Reverend
27	M	Secondary	Finance	Finance Broker

Table 2: Meanings of Career Uncertainty – description and effect on career behaviour

Meanings of Career Uncertainty	Stabiliser	Glider	Energiser	Adventurer
Description	Uncertainty seen as negative and to be avoided wherever possible.	Indifferent to uncertainty and do not see it as a career influence.	Prefers stability but is energised by moments of uncertainty.	Thrives on uncertainty and actively seeks it.
Effect on Career Behaviour				
Decision Making	Risk averse approach to minimise the uncertainty of the decision making process itself as well as the end outcome.	Opportunistic decision making.	Considered and patient during the decision making process but will not hesitate to respond quickly when required.	Spontaneous decision making that is less planned than other genres.
Career Success and Meaning	Success achieved when uncertainty is avoided as much as possible. Wants firm sense of meaning. Meaning derived from stability.	Success driven by inner convictions and beliefs, not uncertainty.	Career Success derived from stability punctuated by periods of uncertainty and experiencing challenges.	Success achieved when experiencing uncertainty and in state of flux often underpinned by facing a challenge. Search for meaning as important as finding meaning.
Career context and transitions	Prefers traditional career structures in stable environments	Indifference to uncertainty allows boundary-crossing career structure.	Prefers large organisations or stability derived from another source. Capitalises on transitions but will not actively pursue them.	Prefers non-traditional career structures and proactively pursues boundary crossing opportunities.