**When Career Paths Cease to Exist:**

**A Qualitative Study of Career Behavior in a Crisis Economy**

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**Abstract**

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

**Introduction**

The Global Financial Crisis ("the Crisis") that began in 2008 and the unemployment that followed have posed extraordinary challenges for both individuals and communities. Research on the global recession indicates fundamental changes in the nature of employment opportunity (Stiglitz, 2012). But to date, far less is known about how individuals actually deal with such changes in times of crisis. Pre-Crisis studies of employment opportunity have identified many adverse consequences from reduced employment opportunities, notably a decline in personal well-being if unemployment lasts longer than six months (e.g., Reininghaus et al., 2008; Sadeh and Karniol, 2012). However, past research largely

addresses how the formerly employed react to job loss or employment uncertainty (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Little is known about the experience of new labor market entrants such as university graduates at the outset of their work lives when faced with little opportunity for regular employment. The present study investigates the experiences of young professional women in the Greek Crisis economy, confronting limited employment opportunity and few future prospects.

This study differs in several ways from existing research on careers and un/underemployment. First, it addresses the consequences of the Crisis for young educated professionals attempting to enter an unstable labor market, in contrast to the typical study of un/underemployment among the previously employed (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Sadeh and Karniol, 2012). As such it addresses the perceptions, interpretations and career-related behavior of young professionals to deepen our understanding of how new labor market entrants make sense of their careers during crisis conditions. Second, it examines the experiences of young professional women. Women's careers have been found to have different, more heterogeneous trajectories than men's (O'Neil & Billmoria, 2005), influenced by a broader range of life roles (Burke, 2002; Hochschild, 1989) and a stronger relational focus (Fletcher, 1996) Third, these experiences are investigated in a society offering little unemployment protection, posing more extreme challenges with which individuals must cope. In countries with strong unemployment protections, the negative effects of unemployment on individuals can be mitigated (Paul and Moser, 2009; Wilkinson, 2000). Fourth, it takes a grounded theory approach to investigate how would-be labor market participants make sense of the adversity they encounter and how that sensemaking might relate to their career behavior (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In doing so, it brings an unusual perspective to research on un/underemployment by using participants' own words and stories to identify the conceptual categories underlying their sense making, experiences and related career behavior. As such it can help build theory regarding the effects of a job market-upending financial crisis on career-related perceptions, beliefs and behavior, particularly for young professionals. Last, it is a study of career behavior in an unstable economic environment, in contrast with previous research anchored either in stable environments with established career structures (e.g., Barnett and Miner, 1992; Feldman and Ng, 2007) or in transitional

situations where new economic logics replace earlier ones (e.g. the shift from stable employment with internal career paths to boundary-less careers; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996).

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

**Career-Related Literatures Informing Our Study**

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

Women's careers comprise more than "work" in contrast to men's careers as they are shaped by women's larger life contexts (O'Neil, Hopkin and Bilimoria; 2008). In comparison to men, women's career paths reflect a wide range and variety of patterns. Evidence suggests more snake-like rather than ladder-like careers for women, particularly as a function of work/family balance at mid-career stages

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

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

Important to our study is the repeated finding that identity development is an important task in the

early phase of a career. By way of example, teachers entering the first years of that profession demonstrate a continued deepening of the professional identity begun during university training (Kelchtermans and Ballet, 2002; Le Maistre and Paré, 2010). We note also that Taber and Blankmeyer (2015) also found that among American female university students, the individual mental models of a future work self-impacted their proactive skill development and career networking. Prior work has suggested that the professional identity describes a process through which people develop coherent biographical narratives of the self (for example Giddens, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997). While narratives of professional identity have been found to be fairly stable in some social situations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), in dynamic – as is the case of the present study- identity work has been found to take place during which individuals make sense of their new place in the social world (Beech et al. 2008). Finally, Ibarra (1999) describes how individuals can experiment with different kinds of professional identities, something young people may be particularly inclined to do, particularly as they transition through different roles. However, we note that career identity typically has been studied in situations where transitions are voluntary and the role of identity in involuntary transitions or particularly adverse circumstances is less well-established. Nonetheless, its relevance to goal attainment and goal persistence in difficult situations can be particularly relevant in the context of our study. In our focal sample of young professional women, the dominant theme of identity is associated with a profession, that is to say, an occupational community as in education, journalism or social work, to which entry is gained by higher-education and where shared principles exist governing professional conduct. Thus in our context, career identity constitutes "professional identity."

Unemployment and underemployment are commonly understood to be undesirable personally and socially (Gabriel et al., 2010); unemployment refers to an individual's status of not working but wanting to work, while underemployment refers to inadequate employment characterized by low-wage and involuntary part-time work (Clogg et al., 1986). Research on the un/under-employed has traditionally focused on the effects on career opportunity of human capital, such as education and skill levels, and

resources such as social networks (Becker, 1962; Granovetter, 1973). Although human capital and resources are commonly linked to career opportunities, both may have less relevance in accounting for differences in the career behavior of professionally educated young women due to their similar levels of education and comparable social resources.

During economic downturns, research on the un/under-employed largely focuses on differential coping with the effects of job loss and limited opportunity for employment on personal, family and communal life (e.g. Feldman and Leana, 1989*)*. Job loss, unemployment and subsequent career strategies have also been studied in the context of corporate restructuring and acquisitions/mergers (e.g. Blustein et al., 2013; Gabriel et al., 2010). The latter studies indicate that for some, job loss is seen as an industry decline, leading them to radically altered career behavior. These studies also highlight how informal social support particularly from family and institutional benefits from government can be important determinants of quality of life. However, the experiences of new labor market entrants faced with un/under-employment may differ. One differential factor is that new entrants are not a recognized social group to whom benefits tend to be targeted. Another is that new entrants may hold less well-developed notions of work and careers affecting the meanings associated with their un/under-employment as well as their career-related behavior.

One study examined how the previously employed responded to unemployment in a time of financial crisis. Gabriel et al. (2010) studied the narratives of the unemployed professionals in mid-career managers and professionals in order to examine how they sustain their selfhood and re-construct career paths in times of crisis. These narratives indicated that some individuals viewed job loss a temporary interruption and anticipated an intensive job search followed by a return to their previous career. Some viewed unemployment as an unjust end to their career. A third set of narratives indicated that some individuals viewed their job loss as a breakdown of traditional career opportunities. They engaged in temporary paid and unpaid work and often sought further education and training as they entered a new stage of career-related experimentation. In the context of current financial crisis, our study will extend on

such work by examining the narrative constructions of new entrants to the labor market who have not yet had the opportunity to have an existing career disrupted.

**The Present Study and Research Question**

The research question motivating this study is how young female professionals conceptualize, plan, and pursue careers when conventional paths are cut off. We seek to identify how these new labor market entrants make sense of their careers. In doing so, we seek to identify factors influencing their career behavior in order to better understand the phenomenon of early career development under adversity. In identifying these factors, we seek to develop theory for future empirical test that can inform our understanding of the career-related behavior of young professionals entering the labor market under crisis conditions. Our participants face serious challenges in managing their individual careers. Familiar employment channels such as referrals by current employees (Granovetter, 1973) may be non-existent, ineffective or irrelevant. Traditional job search research highlights tactics such as narrowing one's search in line with personal preferences and screening out jobs and employers based on fit (Boswell et al., 2011). However, such jobs must exist in order to be ruled out; our participants lacked this option.

Because of the extreme conditions associated with the Crisis, grounded theory methodology is used, allowing our data collection and analysis to be unfettered by constructs derived from more stable times. In this regard, we recognize the potential relevance of previous literature as reviewed above, but use a methodology that allows relevant constructs to emerge from the participants' own words.

**METHOD**

Grounded theory, introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), uses data gathered via qualitative methods. Although it neither applies nor tests existing theory, it uses current literature as a basis for identifying new meanings for existing constructs, as well as differences between data and existing models. It is a data-oriented, interpretative methodology that leads to new theory, construct development, and expansion or revision of existing theory and constructs. Consistent with grounded theory methods, we

adopted a reflexive approach to data collection and analysis. Our research process was iterative, focusing on the core phenomenon and relationships that emerged within it (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We identified core concepts across participants' narratives and organized them into general categories that described efforts to manage career behavior and outcomes. Following advice by Glaser and Strauss (1967), data collection, coding and analysis were undertaken concurrently to assist theory generation. Theory was then developed in the context of relevant research to identify commonalities and divergence.

*Sample*

A total of 29 Greek female professionals (ages 24-32) participated in the study. We used theoretical sampling while relying on the researchers' network of former students. All had some work experience and held a bachelors or masters degree in a professional area. Each lived in urban areas where opportunity to find professional employment was greater than in rural Greece. Table I describes each individual.

*Interview Process*

Six researchers, including two of this paper's authors, conducted the interviews in 2013. Typically, our semi-structured interviews lasted one hour and was tape-recorded and transcribed. The authors conducted the first seventeen interviews. After initial training conducted by the first author, other interviewers conducted three interviews each, using the questions developed by the first author through the process described below.

Data collection was driven by concepts and research questions that emerged in the course of the interviews, a process referred to as 'theoretical sampling' (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Interview questions were gradually refined as the research progressed to address emerging issues. Initial interviews focused on the participant's career activities since graduation and her anticipated employment situation in the near future (six months) and the distant future (after several years). We inquired about participant concerns and responses regarding the Crisis and its implications for them personally. During the first interview, as the

participant described her future anticipated career behavior she began talking about her professional identity, which we understood to be important to her sense of self. Early interviewees raised similar issues and we wondered whether their experiences would differ were they un/under-employed for a longer period, or whether their age mattered. To answer these questions, we sought to interview younger professionals with longer un/under-employment history, as well as those who were a bit older, relative to our initial interviewees. After a few more interviews, we realized that neither age nor length of un/underemployment mattered to how interviewees spoke of their experiences. However, we did encounter interviewees who made no link of their sense of self to a profession in contrast to early participants. In consequence we probed whether how they spoke of their future career plans to compare with those more identified with their professions. Our choice of participants was thus informed by the themes emerging from the data and thus subject to theory-in-construction. Data collection ended when we concluded that data 'saturation' had been reached and adequate depth attained regarding the concepts that emerged in our interviews (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In the course of writing this paper, we realized that the distinction among participants with a strong vs. weak professional identity was related to indicators of well-being, that is, stress levels and sense of self-efficacy. We decided to conduct follow up interviews, two years after our primary interviews to see whether the effects of identity on well-being persisted. Out of the 14 interviewees whose contact information was available to the lead researcher, 12 interviewees agreed to participate in the follow-up.

*Analysis*

Once all the interviews were complete, specific or descriptive categories were the first to emerge in the coding process. The first author coded the full set of interviews into descriptive categories and inter-rater agreement was established with the third author. These categories were then coded into more abstract, underlying themes (Table II), consistent with Goulding (2002), who noted that increasing levels of abstraction upgrades an analysis from a descriptive to a more conceptual, interpretative level. In this

process four interview excerpts from each theme the first researcher identified were given to a team member who independently assigned them to the first researcher's thematic categories. Complete agreement was attained.

**RESULTS**

Through the above coding process, descriptive categories were collapsed to form five general theoretical categories (Table II). Professional identity and goal targets emerged as the main themes in our respondents' narratives, both of which relate meaningfully to other theoretical categories emerging from the analysis (Glaser, 1978).

***Professional identity.*** Many interviewees referred to themselves as a professional. In speaking of their future plans or strategies to find employment, they described how their profession contributed to their self-concept. Slightly more than half conveyed a strong professional identity while the remainder expressed a weak or in some cases absent professional identity. The main distinguishing feature between strong vs. weak identity interviewees was the formers' sense of being a professional embedded in a particular occupational community as opposed to merely working in a sector (see Table II).

This excerpt from Maria, trained as a nursery school teacher, exemplifies the experiences of a 'strong identity' professional:

*"Being a [nursery] teacher means everything to me. Two years ago I worked in a nursery school, part-timer as an assistant teacher; I've enjoyed every moment of it [..] It is so important the feeling that you are actually moulding young persons' souls, teach them discipline, good manners, principles to follow in their lives such as cooperate with other people, respect them make friends [...] I was feeling that toddlers really liked me. Having said that I still remember instances that I would end up my working day almost in tears, that I would feel that I had failed to instill them any notion of discipline and respect to their fellow colleagues; but I guess this is all about teaching: a constant process of learning by trial and error, experimenting and slowly becoming a better professional [..] I was spending all this time outside of work revising the educational models and practices that I had learnt in the Uni, experimenting on how I*

*can put them in practice.. I look forward to discussing these issues and sharing experiences when I meet up with my colleagues from the Uni who practice this profession [..]  I often prepare new material to use when I get back in the profession... sometime in the future." (Maria)*

Fully engaged in her identity as a teacher, Maria refers to key principles of her profession and how she uses them in developing her professional skills. Strong identity professionals tend to describe current part-time work as temporary and refer to their career activities as a means of staying engaged in that profession. At times they downplayed their current work, often with a humor that might be an attempt to offset identity threat. Importantly, instances of un/under-employment didn't necessarily detract from professional identity. To those with a strong professional identity, taking a job outside that profession can even be reinforcing of that identity:

*"I have been doing a series of petty jobs which had nothing to do with my profession... I know that I was not good at them...more proof that my choice of profession is a good one." (Vicky)*

Interviewees were coded as 'weak identity' professionals when their overall discussion of their work experiences downplayed or ignored the profession in which they had been educated. Individuals might still mention their (original) profession without interpreting their present activities or anticipated futures in terms of it. In some instances, individuals mentioned exploring alternatives to their original profession. Moreover, their work experiences contained more stories indicative of disruption and a questioning of their professional self. Christina, a secondary school teacher, relates her work history:

*"After graduating, I worked for a year at this organization which offers private tuition to groups of students. Three hours per day, the pay was low. It was related to my degree; had groups of ten students; a lot of marking at home. There were three more teachers like me working there. My weekly contract hours were minimal.  I was not happy with the way I was treated by management. By the end of academic year, I quit." (Christina)*

Even though Christina's overall narrative indicates that she remained professionally engaged, she neither elaborates on her profession's principles or its practices nor expresses a sense of belonging to a professional community.

In another case, a business administration graduate conveys that the value she once attached to her profession has diminished:

*"There are no businesses left in Greece; which business am I supposed to run? I don't know what I was thinking when I chose this degree; certainly a wrong choice." (Sotiria)*

Even women coded as having a 'strong identity', at times expressed fear and confusion when working at non-preferred jobs. Lillian, a journalist describes her fears:

*"I thought I was going to do this job only for a short while [..] there are lots of moments that I just say to myself: it's only a bad dream. I'll wake up and this is going to be over. But it's not.. and the days, weeks and months pass by.. This has ended up being my 'true' life.. I'll end up being the girl who assists with the 'gossip' column.. not journalism at all. It maybe better to realize this and start coming to terms with it." (Lilian)*

**Goal Targets.** In discussing their future plans, interviewees linked particular kinds of goals to their career-related activities. These goals fell into three categories: a) survival goals (reported by all 29 interviewees), b) specific learning goals consistent with their professional skillsets, and c) general learning goals unrelated to a professional skillset. Although learning goals have been associated with proactive career behavior in university students (Taber and Blankemeyer, 2015), our analysis revealed differences in the specificity of learning goals as a function of the strength of the individual's professional identity. Participants with a strong professional identity held profession-consistent learning goals. These appeared, in turn, to translate into focused career strategies. In this extract, the participant has a plan that lets her continue her professional development:

*"It was my intention to work there [part-time as a teacher in art in a school] this year, even though the money I am paid is minimal…It is relevant to my degree and more importantly, I wanted to*

*find a job which will give me time to improve my English, since that's my primary goal for this year.You*

*see, I plan to go abroad in a couple of years." (Angela)*

Individuals with strong identities expressed direction and purpose and were able to outline a career plan. Their learning goals were consistently specific and related to their profession, a finding detailed below. We refer to these individuals as 'Sustainers' in the sense that they appeared able to resist maintain their career aspirations despite the challenging circumstances. Those individuals with weak identities had more general learning goals; we labeled them 'Shifters'. They often pursued personal development unrelated to the profession in which their education had been. Shifters appeared more skeptical regarding their career opportunities, were less inclined to believe they would find a job in their profession, and often characterized their learning activities as 'something to fill the time.'

***Strategies That Link Main Themes with Career Outcomes***

The strategies that our interviewees used in order to find a job were aligned with the strength of their professional identity and the nature of learning goals to which that identity was tied. Importantly, when Sustainers and Shifters reported using the same strategy, the meaning that they ascribed to it tended to be different.

***Career-sustaining activities.*** Sustainers reported five career sustaining activities (see Table II). These activities allowed them to pursue their career goals by applying or developing their professional skillset and included a) involvement in professional networks; b) skillset enhancing training; c) volunteer work; d) emigration plans to permit participation in the profession and e) 'broadening the categories'. Although the first two categories have been reported in research on unemployment broadly, the remainder (volunteer work; emigration plans; 'broadening the categories') appear to be particularly useful when career opportunities are severely limited. Note that broadening the categories reflects efforts to creatively apply profession-related skills in new ways. At the same time, it allows individuals to bring a part of their

existing professional self forward in their new activities. This expansive thinking regarding professional activities promotes expanded possibilities for future jobs where their skills might apply:

*"While I really enjoy teaching, I have recently started considering proofreading and editing for newspapers and magazines, as well as looking after young children." (Helen)*

In this case, Helen maintains her identity as a Greek language teacher while expanding her sense of self as a language expert. The result is an expanded identity based on her identity as an educator.

Sustainers were also inclined to volunteer in their chosen profession, and even those who had not volunteered acknowledged its importance and reported plans to do so:

*"The truth is that I've kind of regretted these past two years that I've wasted working as a waitress. Because if all this time I'd been working as a volunteer instead, I'd have had some relevant experience for my field, which I don't presently [..] Having said that, the way I see it is that doing volunteer work is actually being unemployed." (Vicky)*

Although Sustainers did not necessarily use all learning strategies at the same time, they tended to use several strategies simultaneously and others sequentially:

*"I am trying to meet up with other psychologists and thus build up a network. I recently met somebody working in a psychiatric hospital and I'm trying to see if I can work there on a volunteer basis. In the meantime, I have registered for a 2-month training course in art therapy." (Dionysia)*

As applies in any sense making process, coherence and ambiguity can co-exist in interviewees' narratives. Sustainers sometimes questioned the appropriateness of broadening their categories:

*"Even though most of times, I do think that this is the right thing to do, there are times that I cannot help wondering whether I am spreading myself too thin, looking for this wide range of jobs..*" (Georgia)

***Career-shifting activities.*** Shifters reported activities reflecting a 'shift-away' from their initial career plans. A common activity was pursuit of general forms of training, especially courses believed to aid finding a job. These efforts were typically unrelated to their current skills, and often were thought of

as a way to keep busy. Their narratives describe pursuit of additional formal education (such as a Master's degree) or short courses with the general goal of "becoming better" and more readily employable:

*"I don't regret the Msc course [in Communication Studies] that i've recently finished; most probably it won't help me towards finding a job, but it made it a better person. Now I can appreciate better all the social dynamics happening in a workplace or in a personal context [..] If I don't succeed in finding a job soon, I may do a course on Tourism.. this is more likely to help me in my job hunting" (Rea)*

Shifters seldom undertook volunteer work. They tended to view volunteerism as a form of exploitation (i.e., providing services without being paid). When they considered doing voluntary work, they saw this as a way to pass the time, rather than a career-enhancing strategy. Moreover, a few Shifters did muse about possible emigration but with the goal of finding a job rather than pursuing a specific career. Not surprisingly, Shifters also were more inclined to look for work locally that was unrelated to their profession. They found it difficult to identify any options available within their skillset. Although we originally entertained this to be a 'broadening the category' strategy, we came to realize that it involved dropping initial career ambitions in order to find other employment. Thus we label this activity 'looking for alternative careers'.

*"I have stopped actively trying to find a job as an elementary schoolteacher. I've realized how difficult it is to find a job in this particular field. However, lately I am directing my efforts towards working as a music teacher. Nowadays, I tend to prefer it as compared to my degree subject. I have given my CV to the Head of the Auditorium (Music school) in case he can find something for me." (Jenny)*

Another Shifter described how after working as a salesperson for a couple of years, she had begun exploring sales as an alternative career.

*"Even though I was working as a salesperson in a fashion clothes shop, I really enjoyed it. I was very productive and it is a satisfying job in the sense that you get to take on a lot of responsibilities.*

*Because, when working in retail, there are so many things you can do: you take part in the positioning of the mannequins, window-making, you are on the team receiving the goods"* (Marina)

Note that Marina appears to be engaged in identity work as she begins to identify with her role in ways that enhance her sense of self-efficacy.

Finally, we interpreted several interviewees with weak professional identities and no learning goals as having *'given up'* or *'going with the flow'* without necessarily pursuing any alternative career.

### *Anticipated Career Outcomes*

Participant expectations for future employment and personal well-being also emerged in our analysis; each appeared in the context of discussion of the themes and strategies described above.

***High vs. Low Employer Expectations.*** In thinking about their future once full time employment were to be obtained, Sustainers referred to both its monetary aspects (i.e. pay, social security, benefits) as well as socio-emotional factors (i.e., a friendly atmosphere in the workplace, supportive environment, and trust). They also expressed little difference from their past and present expectations, although some had experienced abuse and disappointments in previous employment. Strikingly, some Sustainers actually reported that their expectations had increased since graduation. One woman underemployed for almost two years, reported:

*"You see, you have certain expectations when you are a student. But you have even more expectations when you are a post-grad! It's normal. You think of all the years and effort you've devoted to becoming a professional, the money that your parents have invested in your studies and I think all of this keeps you from lowering your expectations. Moreover, when you are 24, you are just starting out, but when you are 28, you've gotten a Masters in Science, you are fluent in a foreign language…you are [supposed to be] a better professional; it's just normal to expect more."* (Georgia)

Sustainers also appear to have more elaborate, detailed work-related mental models particularly with regard to benefits they expected from their future employment:

*"For me, it's important that there is an ideology, a good purpose behind the organization that I'll be working for…so we can all work at realizing a common vision. I don't want to work in a place that is only interested in making a profit. It's also important to me to work in a good work environment, where you bond with your colleagues, and feel at ease with your supervisor so that you can express your worries, to have a supportive relationship. Money is also an issue; I don't want to be rich but I do want a salary which would allow me to live decently." (Dora)*

In contrast, Shifters reported having lowered their aspirations since graduation. Instead, they focused on the basics of what a job offers, often with relatively vague future employment expectations:

*"I'd like for the company to care about the employee's well-being. However, due to the current financial situation, I can understand that companies see that employees are easily replaceable, so any of my work-related expectations are diminished… I am learning to compromise and not to have dreams… " (Stefania)*

***Well-being***. Another career outcome we derived from the narratives was the individual's manifestation of what we assess to be well-being. This outcome is tied to three dimensions interviewees describe, a) their positive beliefs regarding career future, b) level of stress and c) sense of personal control (as opposed to fatalism). Overall, Sustainers conveyed a greater sense of well-being, tended to have more positive beliefs about their future employment and confidence in their ability to create their desired outcomes rather than being controlled by the situation:

*"The time will come when l find the job that will further develop my abilities. I still have hope. Actually, it's not just hope, it's an inner belief in myself." (Lilian)*

Shifters tended to have more negative views regarding their career future. Some expressed an optimism that appeared baseless, a form of blind faith. The phrase "God will provide" appeared several times while others expressed a sweeping sense of deservingness. The contrast between Shifters and

Sustainers is reflected in the latter's grounding their positive anticipation of the future in terms of their self-efficacy and personal capabilities, whereas the Shifters did not substantiate their optimism:

*"I have a good feeling about myself and my professional future; I believe that I'll finally get an opportunity. In any case, the crisis will be over in two, three or five years at most. I am not going to stop looking for a job." (Sofia)*

Responses of Shifters also more often appeared to be evasive, to entail a change of focus toward having a family, or to express self-doubt:

*"It's very difficult to enter my profession. You either need to have personal connections or to be extremely good at what you are doing. I'm just adequate, I know that I have the potential for further development but I'm not that good."(Dimitra)*

Shifters also expressed a deep sense of distress making it painful to even talk about the future:

*"Are you kidding me? I don't know what will happen tomorrow so how can I tell you what will happen in a year's time? (laughing)  I'm just trying to adjust to what I have for the time being and probably in a month's time, when this job finishes, then I'll see what I can do. That's the way I am going to think of my life from now on... since day-to-day, the situation gets worse." (Jenny)*

Interviewees' well-being was assessed through follow-up interviews two years after our primary interviews. Out of the 14 interviewees whose contact information was available to the lead researcher, 12 interviewees agreed to participate in the follow-up. Five interviewees were Sustainers and seven were Shifters; interview questions centered around their current employment status and well-being. Overall, irrespective to their current employment status (un/under-employed), Shifters continued reporting lower levels of well-being, as compared to Sustainers as indicated by contrasting quotes from Dina, a weak identity interviewee, underemployed at the time of follow-up, and Helen, a strong identity interviewee, also underemployed:

*"As you can tell, I'm totally at a loss. I am unable to think about my future. Does it mean that I'm*

*scared? I don't know. I feel I'm trapped in a vicious circle...*the future looks terrifying.*" (Dina)*

*"Things look brighter now. I'm working more hours [in a skill-related job]. This has made both*

*my life and soul full. I'm more relaxed now" (Helen)*

### *Considerations Examined*

We also considered but rejected three other explanations for above patterns. First, we investigated whether negative treatment by a current or previous employer affected professional identity, goals, aspirations for future employment, etc. We found no evidence of this. Although violation experiences did not alter young professionals' aspirations, it did help them to become more aware of what they wanted from future employers, specifically respect and supportive relationships. Second, we considered whether the women's aspirations for their future employment might vary with their professional identity or goal targets. We found no evidence of this. Last, we found no indication that age differences (a narrow range from 24 to 32) factored into the findings.

### DISCUSSION

In this Discussion we address our grounded theory discoveries. First we identify a set of career constructs and strategies characteristic of our sample. We next specify theoretical propositions reflecting the relationships that emerged from our analysis. We then address this study's limitations and future research implications.

Our findings suggest that prolonged economic crises can make notions of career paths and conventional job seeking approaches irrelevant. What emerges in the career behavior of young professionals is what might be labeled a "bricolage", a mixed bag of available short-term work and volunteer activities that when supported by strong professional identity can give rise to adaptability and sense of well-being. As our analysis illustrates, for those with strong professional identities (the 'Sustainers'), career-sustaining strategies are pursued despite doubts and challenges. Their career-

sustaining strategies enable them to take some of the historical sense of self in their career endeavors and promote a sense of well-being. Sustainers work within the framework their strong professional identity and professional skillset provide in order to pursue their career goals. In contrast, Shifters with weak professional identities tend to pursue gainful employment regardless of its intrinsic attraction and are less guided by overarching purpose. For young professional women at a point in life where developing their professional identity and making career progress tend to be salient (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), the less coherent strategies Shifters pursue undermine a sense of goal progress and are a possible cause of their sense of personal well-being. In both cases, the process of career and employment-related sense making is both cognitive and emotional, and is likely to continue as long as individuals confront discrepancies between goals and actual experiences. In the present context, we cannot make specific assertions regarding the long-term outcomes of the strategies the young professionals used, although our follow-up findings suggest that the above patterns continue almost two years later.

**Grounded Theory Propositions**

Based on our grounded theory findings, we propose (Figure I) an adaptive process that young professionals undergo in pursuing employment in crisis situations. Despite crisis conditions, over half our sample manifest a salient professional identity and learning goals focused on their professional skillset. Strong identity we argue can promote a sense of well-being by providing purpose and creating a sense of goal progress. This concurs with a previous finding in a sample of MBA students of the relationship between career identity and effective goal-setting (Anakwe et al., 2000). The objective of learning goals is to keep a professional's focus on employment supported by these goals despite distractions and competing goals which give structure and meaning to human actions (Brunstein et al., 1999). Thus, they have an effect on a professional's knowledge, emotions and resulting behaviors. Along these lines, entrepreneurs and self-employed people who persist in their goal pursuit were found to cope better and persevere in the face of uncertainty (Patel and Thatcher, 2014). Tenacious goal pursuit is theorized to help professionals develop strategies and alternative solutions in adversity (Brandstädter and Rothermund,

2002). In our study, those with general/unfocused learning goals channeled their efforts toward jobs *outside* their skillset and were less likely to reflect on how best to use or develop their skills. Although Patel and Thatcher's study (2014) found no link between flexible goal attainment and self-employment persistence, where people must adapt to long periods of uncertainty and unemployment, flexibility in pursuit of skillset-related goals can be important. Our findings highlight how strength of identity can impact sustained pursuit of learning goals in line with career focus. Thus our first proposition is:

Proposition 1a: *The strength of their professional identity affects the career behavior of new workforce entrants under Crisis conditions.*

Proposition 1b:  *The relationship between professional identity strength and career behavior under crisis conditions is mediated by learning goals. Among individuals with strong professional identity, profession- consistent learning goals lead to behaviors that enhance their professional skillset and self-efficacy. Among those individuals with weak professional identity, the more diffuse or general learning goals individuals pursue lead to behaviors that undermine the development of their professional skillset and their self-efficacy.*

Professional identity as a central component of career management is not new (e.g., Fugate et al., 2004; Ashforth, 2001; Weick, 1996). It gives direction to the career decisions and behavior of under- and unemployed individuals (McArdle et al., 2007). It also shapes how professionals present themselves to others (Ibarra, 1999). What is new is the recognition that identity *strength* contributes to career-related flexibility and adaptability.  Flexibility and adaptability in one's professional identity helped individuals in the Crisis setting to reconcile the discontinuities they encounter in their efforts to enter the labor market. Despite instability in the environment, strong professional identity can help create a sense of continuity when attempting novel approaches to career pursuit, permitting one to be adaptable while experiencing goal progress. Strong identity that is nonetheless able to adapt and expand, a flexible "appropriation of past, present and future" (McAdams, 1999, p.486), that provides a basis for innovation

in the face of challenge and frustration, while sustaining meaning and purpose. This innovation takes the form of broader notions of what activities are consistent with the professional identity as individuals experiment with new types of work and development opportunities that can be construed as part of their profession. Thus we posit:

Proposition 2: *Strong professional identities tend to become broader in crisis conditions.*

Faced with Crisis conditions, young professionals with a strong identity are better able to proactively construct ways to build their skill sets and sustain efforts toward careers in their chosen profession than their weak identity counterparts. This construal helps foster a sense of continuity that is important for learning (Weick, 1996). By adopting specific-to-skillset learning goals, un/underemployed individuals with strong professional identities are better able to act in ways that sustain pursuit of a specific career. In contrast, un/under-employed individuals with weak professional identity tend to adopt general learning goals, which direct their attention toward activities that increase the likelihood of employment generally as well help them to kill time. Thus we propose:

Proposition 3: *In crisis conditions, engaging in activities related to the profession reinforce the pursuit of a career in that profession, while engaging in activities unrelated to the profession shift the individual's attention and efforts away from the profession.*

Participants talked about their notions of what constitutes a 'good employer,' based on prior work experiences, family or social background, media or industry norms; in this sense, their vision of a future employment arrangement coincides with Rousseau's (2001) higher and lower categories in the psychological contract. In general, an individual learns which behaviors result in progress towards a goal and as a consequence, s/he develops more elaborated hierarchical schemas to attain it. These then influence the individual's thoughts, perceptions and behavior (Carver and Scheirer, 2001), in our context vis-a-vis the employer. Individuals tend to associate these more elaborated schemas of employment with

other higher-order cognitive structures such as values and personal or professional identity, particularly when this association generates a sense of well-being and progress towards goal attainment (Lord et al., 2010; Trope and Liberman, 2010). Participants who held general or unfocused goals appear less likely to develop elaborated employment schemas. Instead, the schemas they hold regarding employment contain a more limited number of beliefs with fewer interconnections.

Individuals hold employment schemas that originate with early family and work experiences (Rousseau, 2001). These schemas develop with subsequent work experiences and can form the basis of expectations of future, resulting in more complex schemas composed of many interrelated beliefs. In crisis situations, Sustainers appear more likely to develop mental models of future employment incorporating an array of aspirational features. Because an individual's motivations and goals favor accuracy over the maintenance of old employment schema (Crocker et al., 1984), we suggest that the career sustaining strategies sustainers engage in provide input into their mental models of future employment. In contrast the limited expectations for the future articulated by Shifters are likely to reflect the more utilitarian nature of their career strategies (pursuit of general training to increase odds of employment and killing time). Thus we posit:

Proposition 4: *Strength of professional identity is positively related to the degree of elaboration in employment schemas regarding future employment.*

Individuals' goals and their expectations for the future may have a reciprocal relationship. How people envision the future affects the goals they tend to pursue based on their perceived likelihood of goal attainment. In the context of crisis, having specific skillset-related learning goals may be a factor in shaping how people think about the future, based on the directed efforts undertaken to realize that future. Such individuals are expected to make more ambitious plans and thus be more able to picture themselves in this future. Thus career-related goals and future employment beliefs are expected to reciprocally reinforce each other:

Proposition 5: *Individuals' outlook of their future affects their career-related goals.*

Proposition 6: *Career-related goals shape individuals' outlook for the future.*

In all, our findings highlight the importance of goals for maintaining a sense of progress in managing one's career during the Crisis. In particular, specific/focused learning goals support the adoption of career-sustaining activities. Among the unemployed, training and networking are effective both for coping with stress and increasing the likelihood of looking for and finding jobs (see Blustein et al., 2013). Similarly, job search activities by the unemployed have been examined as a self-regulatory process during which individuals may accomplish or abandon employment goals (e.g. Kanfer et al., 2001; Van Dam and Menting, 2012). In the Crisis context, by pursuing career goals through volunteering in profession-related activities and broadening one's notion of what constitutes professional activities, the young professionals we classified as Sustainers manifest an adaptability and flexibility that appears to reinforce their professional self-efficacy. In contrast, Shifters, who pursued work and life goals unrelated to their University education and previous professional interests, placed greater reliance on fate and external forces in coping with a future anticipated to be limited.

**Limitations**

We must note several limitations of our study. First, loss or erosion of career identity might be construed as a more 'threatening' experience for our highly educated respondents. Maintenance of a professional identity may serve other functions beyond those considered here, including the promotion of self-esteem. Second, individual differences we could not detect here might exist between unemployed and underemployed young professionals. We included both unemployed and underemployed people because during recessions, people often alternate between not having any work or holding jobs not related to their interests or skills. Comparable debilitating effects on both physical and psychological well-being have been found under both circumstances (Dooley, 2003; Blustein et al., 2013). Nonetheless, a larger sample might detect possible differences. Related, our participants share the same cultural context and are likely to have initially similar preconceptions and values regarding employment. However, individual differences in initial preconceptions and values were not measured or controlled.

No causal conclusions can be made given our cross-sectional study. Longitudinal research is needed to test the effects we posit. The present study cannot address the factors leading some young professionals to have and maintain a strong career identity while for others do not. A longitudinal study could also shine a light on the evolution of job search strategies as periods of unemployment become more prolonged. For instance, does the *'broadening the category'* strategy emerge from the outset of the job search period, or does it follow use of other 'adaptive' strategies? Do individuals maintain adaptive strategies over lengthy periods of unemployment?

**Research Implications**

In the post-Crisis environment young professionals face, we find important connections between professional identity, career-related goals and aspirations as they relate to job search activities and future employment. These relationships are in line with the self-regulation framework of career behavior (e.g. Kanfer et al., 2001; Van Dam and Menting, 2012). Systematic testing is needed of the propositions identified in this study, in the context of economies experiencing crisis conditions that erode established career paths. The long-term implications of post-crisis career experiences also warrant investigation, particularly whether the *'career sustaining activities'* we identify lead to success in the long-run.

Our study calls attention to how individuals might sustain or abandon their professional identities in times of crisis. Future research might profitably address the notion of possible selves (Ibarra, 1999) where individuals explore alternative career opportunities based on changing perceptions of fit between what they would like to become and their beliefs about future opportunities. Because new roles require new skills, behaviors, attitudes and patterns of interactions, new roles may produce fundamental changes in an individual's self-definitions. Crisis economies are characterized by constraints in the roles available, however, those new roles individuals do encounter can offer opportunity to select behaviors for trial, and direct their assessments of efficacy or success.

Last, given the stress inherent in crisis economies, the individual's capacity to cope with stress can be an important contributor to career behavior. Dysfunctional coping strategies among the

unemployed have been found to be the result of financial hardship or health problems (see Blustein et al., 2013). In our study, strong family support appeared to contribute to female young professionals' successful attempts to maintain their professional identity. This finding may be more relevant in the case of young female professionals since it may be more culturally acceptable for women to continue to live with parents after graduation. Thus, both the individual's ability to cope with stress as well as situational factors affecting coping strategies are important issues for research on career behavior in crisis situations.

**Conclusion**

During economic crises, the career-related sense making activities of young professional women are found to differ as a function of the strength of their professional identity. Moreover, their career behavior is closely tied to their capacity to be both flexible and persistent in the face of the career path breakdowns. Sustained pursuit of career opportunities in crisis situations appears to be enabled by both broadened professional identities and pursuit of profession-related learning through an array of paid and unpaid work. The attributes of persistence and flexibility need to be extended to established constructs in career research where crisis conditions apply. Constructs such as career-related identity, learning goals, and strategies apply but manifest new dynamics in the absence of conventional career paths.

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**Table I. List of study's participants**

| *NAME* | *AGE* | *HIGHEST DEGREE OBTAINED* | *CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS* |
|--------|-------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Christina | 28 | B.A. in Classical Studies | Part-time private tutor |
| Maria | 28 | B.A. in Nursery Education | Part-time babysitter |
| Helen | 27 | B.A. in Classical Studies | Part-time private tutor |
| Fay | 32 | Degree in Culinary Arts | Unemployed |
| Vicky | 26 | M.Sc. in Media Studies | Voluntary work |
| Marina | 24 | B.A. in Sociology | Part-time salesperson |
| Dina | 25 | M.Sc. in Media Studies | Unemployed |
| Dora | 30 | M.Sc. in Media Studies | Unemployed |
| Natassa | 32 | B.A. in Tourism | Part-time secretary |
| Katia | 31 | B.Sc. in Accountancy | Unemployed |
| Athena | 31 | B.Sc. in Accountancy | Part-time secretary |
| Lilian | 24 | M.Sc. in Communication | Part-timer in online newspaper |
| Dimitra | 25 | M.Sc. in Psychology | Unemployed |
| Anna | 29 | B.Sc. in Communication | Unemployed |
| Rea | 25 | M.Sc. in Communication | Unemployed |
| Irene | 26 | B.Sc. in Medicine | Voluntary work |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dionysia | 24 | B.A. in Psychology | Unemployed |
| Jenny | 24 | B.A. in Primary Education | Part-time private tutor |
| Angela | 23 | B.A. in Primary Education | Part-time school teacher |
| Sofia | 27 | B.Sc. in Marketing | Part-timer in law firm |
| Georgia | 27 | B.A. in Biology | Part-time private tutor |
| Vivian | 30 | B.A. in Shipping | Unemployed |
| Sotiria | 24 | B.Sc. in Business Administration | Part-timer in coffee shop |
| Stefania | 30 | B.A. in French Literature | Unemployed |
| Despoina | 32 | B.Sc. in Economics | Part-time private tutor |
| Chryssa | 27 | M.A. in Political Science | Part-timer in communication dept. |
| Danai | 25 | M.A. in Law | Unemployed |
| Alexia | 28 | B.A. in Architecture | Unemployed |
| Penelope | 29 | B.A. in Fine Arts | Part-time teacher |

**Table II. Data Structure of Career Behavior Drivers during Crisis**

| Data Slices (examples) | Specific Categories | Main Themes |
|---|---|---|
| "it's part of my profession to develop young persons' personalities." <br> "developing as a professional is closely related to my soul" <br> "I'm meant to be in this profession; that's the only one that I'll do well at" | *Strong Professional Identity* | PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES |
| "they [i.e., chefs] need to work long hours, keep standing on their feet the entire day.. You don't get to see your family or friends when you are a chef or sous-chef [..] I liked my experience of working as a part-time nanny two years ago. I've always like to take care of people; it feels like all the love you give returning back to you somehow [..] I've learnt to become patient and more kind to people, qualities which are important to me." | *Weak Professional Identity* | |
| "I need to make ends meet" <br> "this part-time job pays my bills" | *Survival goals* | GOAL TARGETS |
| "took this part-time job on purpose so as I can have some free time to finish with my professional course" <br> "attend an energy conservation seminar in order to apply for a job in this field" | *Specific growth/learning goals* | |
| "I haven't made up my mind as yet what I'd like to do next" <br> "the more you learn, the better professional you become" | *Unfocused growth/learning goals* | |
| "attend meetings of the National Psychological Society" <br> "going to Career Days and meet my university alumni" | *Professional networks* | STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINERS AND SHIFTERS |
| "attend classes in Swedish which will enable me to find a job in Sweden" <br> "started studying in a foreign language which may prove handy in the future" | *Training activities (specific and generalized)* | |
| "volunteered to work in a radio station" <br> "to me, volunteerism is a form of exploitation" | *Volunteering* | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| "started looking at ads for proof-readers"<br>"there are more things than working on a TV show; I can look for a job in a newspaper or weekly magazine" | *Broadening the career category* | |
| "practicing the language so I can go abroad" | *Emigration* | |
| "it's quite difficult to find a job in my field; I decided to try my luck with finding a job as piano teacher"<br>"working as a salesperson can also be rewarding" | *Focus outside the skillset ('looking for alternative careers')* | |
| "for the time being, I have the unemployment benefit so I don't need to look for anything else as yet"<br>"summertime is approaching and it is quite difficult to find any job right now; in autumn, I'll seriously think what to do next" | *No strategy ('giving up')* | |
| "I expect to be paid on time"<br>"social security benefits need to be covered" | *Transactional (tangible) expectations* | EXPECTATIONS OF FUTURE EMPLOYER |
| "to be supportive of me"<br>"To value my opinion" | *Relational Expectations* | |
| "I'll eventually find a job""<br>"things always turn to be right at the end" | *Positive/negative beliefs regarding career future* | WELL-BEING |
| "I feel l am in a dead end regarding my career" | *Stress Level* | |
| 'I'll persist until I find a good job'<br>'God will help when job hunting' | *Sense of self-control/Fatalism* | |

**Figure I. A Process Model/Framework for Career Trajectories in Crisis Environments**