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An ideological analysis of sustainable careers: identifying the role of fantasy and a way forward

Ideology and
sustainable
careers

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Abstract

Purpose – Scholarly and general interest in sustainable careers is flourishing. Sustainable careers are focused on the long-term opportunities and experiences of workers across dynamic employment situations, and are characterized by flexibility, meaning and individual agency. The current paper analyzes and challenges the underlying ideological assumptions of how sustainable careers are conceptualized and advocates the inclusion of the ecological meaning of sustainability and the notion of dignity into the sustainable careers concept.

Design/methodology/approach – Using Slavoj Žižek's (1989, 2001) conceptualization of ideology as fantasy-construction, the authors explore how the use of sustainable careers is influenced by fantasies about the contemporary workplace and the role of the individual in the workplace. This is a conceptual method.

Findings – The authors argue that the concept of sustainable careers is grounded in the neoliberal fantasy of the individual. The paper concludes by presenting an alternative concept of sustainable careers grounded in a dignity-perspective on sustainability, which offers an alternative theoretical understanding of sustainable careers in the contemporary workplace, sharpening its contours and usefulness in theorizing careers.

Originality/value – This paper is the first to systematically analyze the use and conceptualization of sustainable careers in the literature and to expose the ideological underpinnings of the concept. Propositions are developed to be explored by future research.

Keywords Sustainable careers, Ideology, Critique, Meaning, Dignity

Paper type Research paper

Research on sustainability at work and sustainable careers has flourished over the last years, as evidenced by a growing number of publications devoted to the topic (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015; Ehnert and Harry, 2012; Newman, 2011; Pfeffer, 2010; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). This is reflective of the rapid changes in society and the workplace, which cause employees to focus on becoming more proactive and employable in order to sustain continued employment over their careers (Parker and Bindl, 2016). As employees can no longer trust in the employment model where loyalty to the organization was exchanged for lifelong job security (Rubery *et al.*, 2016; Vallas, 1999), new career models are emerging (Lawrence *et al.*, 2015).



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The concept of sustainable careers, therefore, has been introduced to explain and to describe an ideal construction of contemporary careers, including the transfers between jobs, and changes from employment to unemployment, education, eldercare and return to the workplace (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015; De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). Sustainable careers have been defined as “the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p. 7).

Research on sustainable careers is increasing in popularity, underpinned by the need for individuals to develop their own sustainable careers (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015; Valcour, 2013). It has also been claimed that “[I]t seems unlikely that any person [...] would disagree that sustainable careers are good for workers as well as organizations” (Lawrence *et al.*, 2015, p. 444). Yet, concepts that seem to be universally agreed upon are precisely those that need to be assessed critically as these are most likely to have unexplored ideological underpinnings on which there may be much less agreement among both scholars and practitioners (Žižek, 2014). Therefore, an analysis of the underlying assumptions of sustainable careers is needed to improve our understanding of the implications of sustainable careers for individuals, workplaces and society.

In this paper, we adopt an explicit problematization strategy (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011) to critique the underlying assumptions of contemporary scholarship on career sustainability. To do this we engaged in a “dialectical interrogation” of the taken for granted assumptions of the sustainable careers concept and the careers literature more generally. Such interrogations require theorists to adopt a “counter-stance,” or an unfamiliar theoretical position from which their own assumptions will appear problematic (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). We identify the ideological anchoring point of contemporary literature on sustainable careers in neoliberalism and offer a counter-stance anchored in the concept of dignity (Bal, 2017; Kostera and Pirson, 2017). Using the lens of ideology, we focus on not just the visible, intentional attempts to create a particular image of a concept and its understanding (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016) but also more fundamentally the lesser known, unconscious understandings of the social order itself which affects the conceptualization and use of the concept (Žižek, 1989). The specific model of ideology used is that of Žižek (1989, 2001, 2014). We chose Žižek’s model due to the utility of the concept of *fantasy*, a key concept in his work, which explains how hegemonic beliefs about a concept are maintained, de-contested, and thus persist in a field of science as well as more generally in society. In so doing, the problematic ideological features of scientific concepts are often ignored.

Our aim is to open up the concept of sustainable careers to alternative conceptualizations and encourage pluralism within this research domain (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017). First, we consider what is excluded from, or underplayed within, the dominant conceptualizations of sustainable careers in order to explore new opportunities for theory development. We explore *what* and *who* are excluded from this conceptualization. Subsequently, we investigate the ideological “anchoring point” of the sustainable careers concept. Finally, we consider the possible consequences of the current conceptualization of sustainable careers and consider the extent to which these may be problematic. Subsequently, we develop an alternative conceptualization and propositions for further research on sustainable careers. Through this approach, we offer the following contributions to the literature. First, by analyzing the ideological underpinnings of the sustainable careers concept, we elucidate the ways through which the more implicit meanings and manifestations of concepts can be understood. While the sustainable careers literature tends to convey the inherently good nature of the concept (Lawrence *et al.*, 2015), the more contested aspects can be investigated using our

critical approach. Secondly, we also elucidate the ways through which concepts, such as sustainability or careers, may have multiple meanings dependent on their anchoring point (Žižek, 1989). In the future, researchers may more explicitly discuss such anchoring points, depending on societal goals or values of researchers themselves, such as humanism or planetary survival.

Ideology in sustainable careers

While a dominant perspective within research on sustainability and sustainable careers may claim to be “culturally neutral and politically inert” (Banerjee, 2011, p. 726), it is the unarticulated assumptions, or that which is *unsaid*, which matter in determining the more hidden and rarely discussed effects research on sustainable careers has both on academia and practice. To disentangle the ideological underpinnings underlying sustainable careers, we use the work of philosopher Žižek (1989, 2001, 2014) to understand the problematic nature of the concept.

While discussion on the role of ideology has been somewhat absent from the careers literature (see for exceptions Coltrane, 2004; Roper *et al.*, 2010), it contributes to our understanding of how sustainable careers are researched. Ideology constitutes not only the explicit, intentional attempts within the social order to create an image of society and the workplace as it *should* be, but also the lesser known unconscious understandings of the social order itself (Glynos, 2008; Žižek, 1989, 2001). Ideology, as a system of beliefs, is not simply externally imposed on people, but exists as people’s spontaneous reaction to, and fantasies about, the social world (Žižek, 1989). Thus, ideology is about the interplay between what is explicit and implicit (Žižek, 2014). Analyzing this interplay is useful as it enables us to convey the ways in which implicit messages have an impact, even though they are absent from the public discourse.

Ideology as fantasy construction

Žižek’s work (1989, 2001, 2011) describes ideology as a “fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real, social relations” (Žižek, 1989, p. 45). Hence, according to Žižek, there is no sharp distinction between fantasy and reality, as people use fantasy to construct their perceptions of reality. Moreover, Žižek (1989) argues that ideology does not offer people an escape from reality, but offers reality itself. The relationship between ideology and reality is therefore complex, as the former may be constructed to support the existence of the latter, while at the same time, reality is constructed on the basis of ideology. Fantasy is important for people as it offers a straightforward solution to make sense of the world in complex situations, such as those in the contemporary workplace (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017).

An important part of ideology pertains to what constitutes the dominant rhetoric in society and the workplace. Hegemonic ideologies can be promoted by governments and powerful groups in society, but can also be adopted and reinforced more widely by the media, corporations, and scientists into a publicly accepted discourse. The question is, however, why and how the commanding rhetoric gets widely accepted in society and is able to impact the structures and practices in society and the workplace.

The role of ideology, according to Žižek, is to present an appealing narrative about the state of affairs in society to the public, notwithstanding the impossibility of realizing certain ideas or the potential contradictions inherent within an ideology. Žižek (1989) explains that as experiences of reality can be too uncomfortable for people, ideology provides an appealing alternative. Thus, the fantasmatic portrayal of society for the public represents the ultimate description of reality rather than what is actually happening in society. These fantasies may

also function as ideological underpinnings of scientific concepts. We argue that the current construction of sustainable careers constitutes such a fantasy, as it is unlikely that everyone in society is able to achieve a sustainable career.

Žižek (1989) uses the term anchoring point (quilting point or *le point de capiton*) to illustrate how ideology operates. More specifically, the anchoring point is the perspective through which people understand particular concepts, such as the sustainable career. In other words, ideology may cause people to have a specific interpretation of and perspective on concepts. Concepts such as freedom, democracy and justice can have very different meanings depending on context (Žižek, 1989, 2001), and ideology offers an anchoring point, or an anchor, to interpret the meaning of concepts in a specific way. For instance, freedom has very different meanings in market economies and planned socialist economies, depending on how freedom is “anchored” in the dominant ideology. While in market economies, freedom denotes economic freedom and autonomy from the state, advocates of planned socialist economies maintain that this formal freedom is merely a form of slavery, and that only a socialist revolution can bring real freedom (Žižek, 1989). Hence, through ideology, concepts which in themselves are interpretable in multiple ways, obtain a specific meaning in a context. This applies to the concept of sustainable careers as well, and in the subsequent analysis we will explore the anchoring point underlying sustainable careers.

An ideological analysis of sustainable careers

The concept of sustainable careers is derived from a broader interest in sustainability at work (Haugh and Talwar, 2010; Parkin Hughes *et al.*, 2017; Pfeffer, 2010). De Lange *et al.* (2015) present four dimensions of sustainability at work: (a) preservation of resources, (b) fairness and equal priority for all, based on protecting the ability of all people to meet their needs, (c) social and technological innovation to achieve progress and (d) the interconnectedness of multiple actors within a system. However, sustainable careers as a concept is much narrower and appears to be less concerned with exploring how careers are embedded within a system of interconnected multiple actors and how they contribute towards the fairness of that system or how well that system preserves resources for future generations.

Newman (2011) was one of the first to describe the concept of sustainable careers (see also Iles, 1997), as careers that have renewal opportunities, are flexible in nature, include opportunities for integration across life spheres and can provide individuals with meaning. The handbook on sustainable careers (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015) provided the most comprehensive overview, and includes the following definition: “the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p. 7). Subsequent work, most notably present in a recent Special Issue on sustainable careers, reiterated this definition and emphasized the role of agency, meaning, proactivity and adaptability (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). These definitions share overlapping features including notions of continuity (Newman: “renewal opportunities”; Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015): “patterns of continuity over time”), and meaning (Newman: “integration that leads to meaning”; Van der Heijden and De Vos: “providing meaning to the individual”). Moreover, Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), De Vos *et al.* (2020) and Van der Heijden *et al.* (2020) also added the importance of individual agency in managing sustainable careers, while this is somewhat less explicitly discussed by Newman (2011). Newman adds flexibility (“flexible and adaptable”), while Van der Heijden and De Vos consider “crossing several spaces,” which is a facet of flexibility. In the current analysis, we will focus on the elements of flexibility, meaning and individual agency. While continuity is important in the context of sustainability, it should also be perceived as inherent to the concept of “career” itself, and therefore we do not

consider it to be unique to sustainable careers, but indicative of careers more generally (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997).

Thus, the sustainable career as defined through flexibility, meaning and individual agency carries implicit meaning, which manifests itself through projecting the universal need for workers to “assume primary responsibility for managing their own careers” (Valcour, 2015, p. 21). While individual agency may be a requirement for people to be able to obtain a sustainable career in the contemporary workplace, the ideological dimension within the concept manifests itself through what is and what is *not* mentioned as part of its conceptualization. As sustainability is portrayed as an inherently appealing concept, it implicitly assumes a positive connotation. However, the more contested aspects of its manifested meaning in the literature are usually not discussed. This is because sustainable careers is an empty concept in itself that needs to be anchored using an ideological interpretation. Ideology is manifested in the current conceptualization of sustainable careers in the fantasy that building a sustainable career is a matter of choice, that people are free to choose to be flexible, to find meaning in their work, and to exhibit individual agency. As it is unlikely that all people globally will be able to achieve a sustainable career, we need to ask the question *what* and *who* are excluded from developing a sustainable career.

What is excluded from sustainable careers conceptualizations?

The first way through which ideology manifests in the concept of the “sustainable career” concerns the absence of an explicit integration of *what* the term “sustainability” entails in relation to contemporary careers. Research on sustainability has drawn primarily on the definition of sustainability presented in the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, i.e., meeting of needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations (WCED, 1987). The needs of the current generation and future generations will only be met by responsibly managing the stock of capital that contributes towards human welfare, which consists of five types of capital: natural, social, human, manufactured, and financial capitals (Porritt, 2007).

Sustainable careers has to date focused on human capital (Newman, 2011) but largely ignored the relationship between individual careers and their effects on the sustainability of the other four capitals. By better understanding the relationship between careers and the five capitals, we will be better able to unpack how some careers can contribute toward sustainability. Many careers will contribute towards the accumulation of manufactured and financial capital in one form or another, which may contribute towards the depletion of natural capital (Cairns, 2003; Langhelle, 1999) and social capital (Jackson, 2009; Speth, 2008). If this is the case, these careers may not be considered to be sustainable. For example, a project manager working on a deep-sea drilling operation for an oil industry can contribute to manufactured and financial capital but their project is likely to destroy natural capital through destabilizing sea-beds that are critical to maintain marine biodiversity and producing a product that contributes to further destabilizing the climate system through global warming (Blühdorn, 2017).

There is a hierarchy among the five capitals that is essential to an understanding of sustainability, in which manufactured and financial careers are embedded within social and human capital, and social and human capital are embedded within natural capital (Porritt, 2007). Given that social, human, manufactured and financial capital are embedded within natural capital, a rigorous understanding of natural capital is essential to the concept of sustainable careers. The “Planetary Boundaries” framework (Rockström *et al.*, 2009), adopted by the World Council for Sustainable Business Development (WCSBD) in 2012, establishes the environmental conditions within which humanity can exist sustainably. It details nine natural boundaries which constitute a “safe operating space” for humanity and shows how four of these boundaries have been transgressed in the current globalized environment

(Rockström *et al.*, 2009; Steffen *et al.*, 2015). Thus, for a career to be considered sufficiently sustainable, a minimal condition is that it must not contribute to the (further) transgression of these boundaries. For a career to be truly sustainable, it would strive towards a net positive contribution to natural capital. An example of a truly sustainable career would be a career in the natural capital restoration sector, such as the engineers working on drones used to plant tree seeds to restore depleted forests or the bankers directing capital into projects restoring natural capital (Bal, 2017; Faruqi *et al.*, 2018).

A whole range of careers are inconsistent with sustainability, defined as living within planetary boundaries. Whether humanity makes the transition toward sustainability or not, the current climate crisis will dictate that whole industries will cease to exist or need to be transformed (World Bank, 2012). In either scenario, numerous careers that we are familiar with today will need to be redefined with many becoming obsolete. For example, the fossil fuel industry and the careers it supports will no longer be viable in a world that has transitioned towards sustainability. In the worst case scenario, economic activity will be significantly more constrained by environmental limits than at present (Meadows *et al.*, 2005). In such an eventuality, the wide variety of career opportunities currently available will most likely have significantly contracted as economic activity is constrained to the provision of basic human needs, such as food and health care provision (Randers, 2012; World Bank, 2012).

Inter- and intragenerational sustainability concerns balancing the needs of multiple generations, which makes sustainability first and foremost an *ethical* concept based on the principle of solidarity (Blühdorn, 2017; Shearman, 1990). Ostensibly, the concept of sustainable careers draws upon the ethical framework of sustainability. For example, Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015) refer to the ethics underpinning sustainability in the introduction to the Handbook on Sustainable Careers but the ethical relationship between the concepts of sustainability and sustainable careers needs clearer articulation.

There does not appear to be an explicit consideration of the contribution that sustainable careers make towards inter- and intragenerational sustainability. Indeed, the ethical dimension appears to be missing from the concept of sustainable careers with the concept shifting from the sustainability of humanity's stock of capital to the sustainability of an individual's career. The concept of sustainable careers is concerned with the individual to the extent that other people and natural capital become merely instrumental to the achievement of one's individualistic career goals. While *sustainability* originally refers to protecting resources to preserve them and ensure a sustainable future for next generations, ethical – in the relational, societal and ecological sense – perspectives are absent from the conceptualization of sustainable careers.

The only future that is generally considered in the literature is the future of the (career of the) individual. This omits the intergenerational considerations and the creation of replicable and sustainable career paths. Further, how careers contribute toward equitable access to capital in the present is similarly ignored. This individualist focus (Bal and Dóci, 2018) means that there is a potential paradox at the heart of the concept. Individuals may be able to sustain a career throughout their working lives but may have contributed towards the depletion of the capital stock needed to meet the needs of future generations and contributed to intragenerational inequity in the present. Such careers would be considered sustainable according to the current concept of sustainable careers but unsustainable according to the broader ethical framework of sustainability (Banerjee, 2011). The recognition of this paradox provides us with the opportunity to re-conceptualize sustainable careers with a more explicit focus on the contributions they make towards sustainability. Thus, the sustainable careers literature is problematic as it does not yet fully put the ethical, intergenerational dimension of sustainability at the heart of its conceptualization. Moreover, there is a second ideological implication of the current sustainable careers literature that is problematic in terms of

sustainability, specifically the exclusion of particular groups of people from sustainable careers, which is inconsistent with the principle of intra-generational equity.

Who is excluded from sustainable careers conceptualizations?

The intragenerational dimension of sustainability postulates equity across the world to the stock of capital upon which human welfare depends. In terms of sustainable careers, intragenerational equity would mean that everybody in the world has the opportunity to have a sustainable career. However, the concept of sustainable careers appears to be based on the questionable assumption that contemporary capitalist societies are meritocracies (Bal and Dóci, 2018; Littler, 2013), which entails the belief that those who work hard, will be rewarded accordingly (Su, 2015). The meritocratic fantasy offers an appealing narrative that everyone has a fair chance to climb the corporate/societal ladder and to become successful (Su, 2015). However, there is increasing evidence that this constitutes a myth, and that the vast majority of people are unable to thrive within the current system, as indicated by increasing inequality (Putnam, 2016; Stiglitz, 2012; Wisman, 2013). Hence, in the workplace a minority of workers will actually succeed and experience objective success, while an increasing number of workers are confronted with low-quality jobs and precarious employment (Caldbeck *et al.*, 2014; Standing, 2016), high job insecurity (Bidwell *et al.*, 2013), wage stagnation (Wisman, 2013), and reduced unemployment, healthcare and pension benefits (Harvey, 2005). Hence, despite the rhetoric, the “average” worker may have very different work experiences to what is ideologically implied (Wisman, 2013; Žižek, 1989, 2014).

While ideas of meritocracy belong to the dominant discourse underpinning interpretations of sustainable careers, the workplace itself is structured around the illusion of meritocracy (Jost *et al.*, 2003). The consequence of this is that people perceive workplaces as fair institutions where everyone “gets what they deserve,” contributing to people’s sense of control, optimism and belief in a just world (Jost *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, it may manifest itself through an increasing focus on individual responsibility over collective solidarity (Brown and Tannock, 2009; Burke, 2013).

In an era where individuals are expected to take full responsibility for their own individual careers (Akkermans and Kabusch, 2017), an increasing number of workers globally are deprived of the possibility of doing so, being locked into suboptimal working conditions without security or opportunities for intrinsically meaningful work (Bidwell *et al.*, 2013; Görg and Görlich, 2015; Stiglitz, 2012). Substantial evidence suggests that many workers do not have the prospect of a sustainable career, i.e., patterns of long-term meaningful jobs characterized by individual agency (Siegmann and Schiphorst, 2016). Many people are excluded from the possibility of having a sustainable career because they are the ones doing the “dirty work” (see, e.g. Gregson *et al.*, 2016), which is increasingly organized within the modern “gig-economy” (Friedman, 2014). As these jobs become increasingly specialized and monotonous, the extent to which these jobs provide objective meaning seems to be limited. As a result, workers in low-quality jobs may have few prospects to actually obtain work that is meaningful to them.

Moreover, while the careers literature has drawn attention to careers in non-western contexts (Baruch and Forstenlechner, 2017; Roper *et al.*, 2010), it does not take into account that many people across the world do not have prospects of a (sustainable) career, and are forced into insecure and unstable employment (Standing, 2016). Unfortunately, it is not clear from the sustainable careers literature how those without sustainable careers in both the global North and South can acquire them. More striking, it does not appear to be of significant interest, as indicated by the absence of literature on sustainable careers in non-western contexts, and the absence of non-western perspectives in the recent literature (e.g. De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, the opportunity to craft a sustainable career of one's choosing is a form of privilege, as it implies a career trajectory that involves initial access to social and cultural capital and is characterized by the maintenance and accumulation of social and economic capital over its course. The concept of a "career" is an exclusive concept in itself in the sense that it implies the sequence of meaningful jobs during one's lifetime that may be accessible only to a limited number of educated and skilled professionals. On the structural level, however, this trajectory can only be realized by relying on the low-paid, low-status and insecure work of less fortunate individuals and social groups (Kalleberg, 2009; Rubery *et al.*, 2016), who are thereby excluded from the opportunity of building sustainable careers. Therefore, the realization of sustainable careers is only available to certain, privileged individuals and groups in global society.

To understand the exclusive nature of the sustainable career, a closer look at its dimensions is needed. Flexibility, meaning, and agency can be considered more advanced needs which can only be met when less advanced needs, such as physiological needs, needs for safety, need for care and reproduction are satisfied. In contemporary society, it is claimed that due to continuous economic growth and accumulated welfare, its members no longer need to fight for survival but have the freedom and possibilities to pursue their higher needs and realize self-actualization (Bal and Dóci, 2018; Harvey, 2005). However, as the COVID-19 crisis has also shown, organizations and societies are organized in a manner where gender, ethnicity, class and other structural factors still largely designate the place one occupies in the societal division of labor and in the social stratification system (Bahn *et al.*, 2020; Risman, 2004), and thus shapes one's chances to meet higher needs such as realizing meaningful, fulfilling, sustainable careers. Presently, such sustainable careers are under pressure, with the heightened risk for increased inequalities and a greater division of labor (Fouad, 2020; Özkazanç-Pan and Pullen, 2020).

For example, contemporary society still largely relies on women's reproductive work in social reproduction (albeit to a varying degree in terms of their geographical location, class, ethnicity etc.; Bahn *et al.*, 2020), social reproduction here being defined as "the social processes and human relations associated with the creation and maintenance of the communities upon which all production and exchange rest" (Bakker, 2003, p. 67). However, such work is associated with low status and low or no pay, and does not offer the chance to realize a sustainable career (Bahn *et al.*, 2020), and provide scarce opportunities to experience flexibility, meaning and agency through one's work over the lifespan. Moreover, precisely by providing this (often non-paid or low-paid) service, the societal group to whom reproductive work is assigned on the structural level gets deprived from the benefits of sustainable careers, such as flexible work conditions, opportunities for integration across life spheres, or self-realization. In sum, sustainable careers may be problematic in terms of the creation of the myth that they are accessible to everyone, whereas access to sustainable careers is more exclusive in reality. But why is this myth so central to the dominant conceptualization of sustainable careers? To answer this question, we analyze the anchoring point of sustainable careers, to understand the dominant perspectives and interpretations of sustainable careers.

What is the anchoring point of sustainable careers?

The dominant conceptualizations of sustainable careers is organized around the exclusion of the inter- and intragenerational dimensions that are central to an ethical conceptualization of sustainability. They also uncritically accept some problematic myths that justify the unsustainability of our current political economy, which is not able to give everyone the opportunity to enjoy a sustainable career, such as the myth of meritocracy. But how do dominant conceptualizations of the sustainable career become exclusive in these ways? We argue that it is because sustainable careers has its anchoring point in the neoliberal

construction of the self-sufficient individual (Bal and Dóci, 2018; Harvey, 2005; Roper *et al.*, 2010). Neoliberalism is defined as a political-economic ideology which postulates that to enhance human well-being, it is necessary to maximize individual economic freedom (Bal and Dóci, 2018; Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017). Sustainable careers are conceptualized primarily through the emphasis on economic freedom for the individual. As a consequence, characteristics of a sustainable career (meaningfulness, agency, flexibility) are attributed to the individual as their free choice and responsibility. This entails the belief that those employees who have developed a sustainable career have done so as the sole result of their own hard work and efforts (Littler, 2013). Such ideological underpinnings imply that people are expected to be fully self-reliant and have sole responsibility for managing their own sustainable careers (Valcour, 2013).

The three main elements describing sustainable careers align closely with neoliberal ideology: flexibility, meaning and individual agency. First, sustainable careers are expected to be flexible (Newman, 2011), but even more so, the ideology underpinning sustainable careers implies that *people* need to be increasingly flexible (Bal and Jansen, 2016). In other words, workplaces are not expected to become more flexible to accommodate the diverse needs and capabilities of workers. Indeed, the trend is quite the opposite, with many workplaces becoming less flexible and accommodating (Bahn *et al.*, 2020). The societal expectation toward stable employment has dissolved in neoliberal capitalism, and instead of organizations adapting to the changing needs of society, people must adapt to the changing needs of the market economy and become more flexible themselves, to be able to swiftly change jobs, skills and vocations when the labor market demands such changes. This also corresponds to what has been referred to as the need to become “an entrepreneur of the self” (Bauman, 2000; Žižek, 2014): the individual is expected to be a capitalist, and invest in themselves through development and education. Therefore, it is not surprising to observe how flexibility has become another axiomatic feature of the contemporary worker (Bal and Jansen, 2016). Presently, the COVID-19 crisis actually deepens the neoliberal logic, whereby individuals in times of crisis have even greater responsibility for the sustainability of their own careers in the light of the deepening of the precariousness of work (Fouad, 2020).

In addition, the emphasis on “meaning” in sustainable career implies a norm where the modern worker is expected to be engaged in employment and activities that provide meaning, and enhance one’s own development and expertise (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). A lack of meaning in a job implies one has to change and become flexible and to look for other jobs which may provide meaning. An important aspect of “meaning” in the literature concerns the individualized nature of it (Greene, 2008); the employee is both self-reliant in finding meaning at work, and postulated to be solely interested in providing meaning to one’s own job. The relational nature of meaning is largely neglected within the sustainable careers literature (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). While meaning may be individually generated, it is often ignored how the meaning of work is something that is both social in how it is constructed, i.e., people may jointly find meaning in their work through dialogue (Bal, 2017), as well as how meaning is shared within communities and is a result of interactions with other people (Rosso *et al.*, 2010).

Finally, the contemporary individual employee is perceived and expected to be agentic (Valcour, 2015; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Careers are constructed as the result of deliberate, individual choices made by people. Aligning with a neoliberal perspective on the individual as primarily responsible for one’s own career and well-being (Greene, 2008), these choices are supposed to be made in line with one’s individual aspirations and needs, without much attention paid to the social circumstances that outline and constrain the choices available to an individual. The individualistic construction of agency is also normative, hence, the anchoring point does not merely imply that individuals *are* agentic, but that all individuals *should* be agentic. The result is that the societal, political and economic responsibility to ensure sustainable careers for people is de-emphasized, and reference to

governmental or organizational duty to create the conditions for widely available, meaningful and sustainable careers is absent from the literature.

In sum, the anchoring point of sustainable careers and the constitutive elements (i.e., flexibility, meaning, and individual agency) revolve around the individual responsibility to develop one's career. This aligns with neoliberal ideology (Greene, 2008), which constitutes the dominant ideology in contemporary Western society (Glynos, 2008; Roper *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, it ignores the inter- and intragenerational responsibility inherent to the concept of sustainability, which implies that careers are only sustainable if they contribute to the sustainable management of humanity's stock of capital in order to ensure the welfare of current and future generations. The effect of the neoliberalization of society and scientific research is that the focus has shifted to the individual and subsequently, any reference to collective needs, collective representation or collective identity is absent or suppressed (Bal and Dóci, 2018). The impact of an individualistic anchoring point underpinning sustainable careers is that, on the one hand, vulnerable groups of people are structurally excluded from sustainable careers, while on the other hand, those who have a privileged status are more likely to secure sustainable careers. For instance, even though the conceptual paper of De Vos *et al.* (2020) discusses the systemic context of sustainable careers, its primary focus remains on the individual and how this individual can obtain a sustainable career.

Moreover, even if the individual employee does not directly exploit others and does not treat them as means to realize their own career needs, on the structural level, sustainable careers are realized through the instrumentalization of the work of low-power societal groups. As a consequence, members of low-power societal groups are locked into rigid work trajectories with a low chance for social mobility. The question is then: why do people who do *not* benefit from neoliberal organizing accept their disenfranchised position, and how can an unfair system remain largely unchallenged? According to Žižek (2001), the response to this is the internalization of appealing narratives. The narrative of meritocracy implies that those who are deserving (because they are agile, competent, agentic etc.) have fulfilling, sustainable careers (Bal and Dóci, 2018). Those without successful, sustainable careers do not have them because they do not deserve them, that is, they did not work hard enough for it, and/or they are not competent, flexible or agentic enough. For example, the slower advancement of women in their careers is often explained by their lack of flexibility (because of being "too" involved in childrearing, home duties, caring commitments) and agency (i.e., lower ambitions, lower risk-taking, less agile networking, less earning power; Eckel and Grossman, 2008). By internalizing this narrative, and applying it to explain one's own career trajectory, the *status quo* – in which the sustainable career is an ideal only achievable for some – is perpetuated, and unequal power relations remain unchallenged.

The emphasis within the conceptualization of sustainable careers on flexibility, meaning and agency is not unique to sustainable careers. In an overview of the broad careers literature, Akkermans and Kubasch (2017, p. 586) stated that "all of these topics exemplify the importance of the individual taking responsibility for their own career success". This is not merely projected as a societal desire to empower citizens to become more agentic and take greater responsibility, but it represents a withdrawal of governmental and organizational responsibility to ensure a career to people, and thus a shifting of responsibility towards self-reliance (Bal, 2017; Bal and Dóci, 2018).

Those not excluded by previous criteria still face challenges in constructing sustainable careers. Notwithstanding the possibilities for people to be self-reliant and their capabilities to manage a sustainable career, an increased pressure on people to do so increases inequality in the workplace through differentiating between those workers who are able to self-manage and those workers less able, or unable, to do so (Stiglitz, 2012). Without protection within a governmental and organizational framework (e.g. through law, labor regulation or HR-policies), the latter group of people may be less able to develop a sustainable career, and in contrast, are forced into

contractual employment without job security and with low wages (Friedman, 2014; Rubery *et al.*, 2016; Wisman, 2013). Hence, in reality workers may have experiences which are in direct contrast to the promise of sustainable careers and employment, including meaning and continuity (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015), and fairness and equality (De Lange *et al.*, 2015). It is now well-documented how an increasing number of jobs in the gig-economy are precarious, offer little or no job security, provide little (intrinsic) meaning to workers and transfer flexibility from the job to the person (Kalleberg, 2009; Rubery *et al.*, 2016; Standing, 2016).

Yet, individuals may still fantasize about having a sustainable career, and may act as if their careers are sustainable, even when they are faced with the precariousness of their working lives. A Žižekian analysis would identify such a dynamic as disavowal or dis-identification (Žižek, 1989). Dis-identification in this context refers to being in denial about the possibility that one's career may not be sustainable for oneself or for others, including future generations. Through perceiving one's career and work as meaningful, people may uphold positive self-identities, and avoid alienation (Villadsen, 2017). In such ways, people can avoid confronting existential questions such as what changes they would need to make in their careers and lives for those to become "truly" sustainable.

At the same time, individuals are held solely responsible for their career-management. When individuals fully internalize the idea of self-reliance, there is the risk that they become self-blaming and prone to experience burnout, due to the fundamental attribution error to locate responsibility to an individual, ignoring structural factors (Best *et al.*, 2005). This may lead to the supposition that one belongs to the category of "losers," or those workers who are unable to obtain and develop a sustainable career. Hence, people blame themselves if they do not succeed in obtaining a sustainable career, while the organization and society gets exempted from their responsibility to provide meaningful and sustainable careers to people. In other words, people may continue to believe in the system, and actively justify the system (Jost *et al.*, 2003), but their belief in the system also requires them to accept personal accountability when failing in the system. Self-blaming can therefore be regarded as a response where reality is internalized as a personal failure, structural inequalities are ignored, and therefore one needs to work harder, exert more effort, be more proactive and self-managing to be able to develop a meaningful and sustainable career.

In sum, when the concept of sustainable careers is exclusively conceptualized on the basis of an individualistic anchoring point, it has the potential to undermine one of the key principles of sustainability, namely preservation of the various forms of "capital" (Banerjee, 2011). Not only does it not safeguard the welfare of those in current pursuit of sustainable careers but it has the potential, in its current form, to undermine the welfare of future generations by not taking into account those dimensions of sustainability that are not consistent with the ideology of neoliberalism. Should the concept of sustainable careers then be thrown away? We argue that the concept should be critically revised, and possibly conceptualized around an alternative "anchoring point" to retain its value.

Towards an alternative conceptualization of sustainable careers

We advocate a pluralist approach toward the study and practice of sustainable careers (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017). Pluralism allows for the coexistence of multiple paradigms at the same time, thereby allowing scientific debates to take place about the various (implicit) assumptions that drive our research (Matthews *et al.*, 2016). The intention of this paper, therefore, is not to advocate *against* the concept of sustainable careers, but to conceptualize its value in the contemporary workplace. To do this, we explore how careers can be more strongly aligned with the ideal of sustainability, particularly the dimensions of intra- and intergenerational responsibility. To emphasize the importance of sustainability in sustainable careers, we offer "collective dignity" (Bal, 2017; Kostera and Pirson, 2017) as one

alternative anchoring point for the conceptualization of sustainable careers. It should be noted before proceeding further that collective dignity is different from collectivism, which makes individuals instrumental to the needs of the collective. In contrast to collectivism, collective dignity respects the dignity of each individual.

The original idea of sustainability was primarily concerned with the preservation of resources; fairness, equal priority for all, the fulfillment of the needs of all people and the interconnectedness of multiple actors (De Lange *et al.*, 2015; Porritt, 2007), therefore taking an ethical, relational perspective on society and the planet, whereby people and nature are respected for their inherent worth and their interdependent nature is recognized. From the concept of sustainable careers, however, this ethical, relational perspective is absent, and is replaced by an individualistic perspective (Blühndorn, 2017). To bring sustainability back into sustainable careers, we suggest to reintegrate it in an ethical paradigm, and one way through which this could be achieved is the dignity framework on workplace relations (Kostera and Pirson, 2017). Within this paradigm, people and nature have an intrinsic worth, and therefore they ought not to be used as mere means towards the career goals of an individual. A dignity paradigm where people and the planet are postulated to have *intrinsic worth*, distinguishes itself from a neoliberal, instrumental perspective, where exploitation of people for the achievement of individualistic goals is conceptually allowed, and even promoted (Žižek, 2014). A collective dignity approach entails the notion that social practices in society and workplace should strive towards respecting and promoting the intrinsic worth of *all* individuals and of the planet itself. Our focus on dignity as anchoring point for sustainable careers has the potential to lead to contributions towards each of the five stocks of capital (Porritt, 2007). This leads to our first proposition:

Proposition 1. A career anchored in collective dignity will be more likely to contribute to sustainability of the five stocks of capital (especially social and natural capital) than a career anchored in neoliberalism.

Envisaging the sustainable career through a dignity-perspective integrates the ethical and collective dimensions of sustainability into the concept. Within this paradigm, the individual's career cannot be sustained at the expense of present and future generations, or at the expense of non-human nature. If a career is realized at such costs, it cannot be considered sustainable. Hence, the individual gives way to the "individual embedded in the global community" (as an anchoring point), whereby the needs of all people are equally protected (De Lange *et al.*, 2015). People are respected for their inherent worth (Bal, 2017), as is nature, and therefore may not be regarded – neither directly, nor indirectly – as means to realize anyone's individual career goals and higher order needs. This leads to our second proposition:

Proposition 2. A sustainable career anchored in collective dignity is more likely to contribute towards a net positive contribution to both intra- and intergenerational welfare, than a sustainable career anchored in neoliberalism.

Within this framework, the concept of sustainable careers becomes conditional: a career may only be considered sustainable if it protects and promotes the dignity of people and the planet. From this perspective, the minimal condition for a career to be considered sustainable is that one's work or sequence of job experiences do not harm or exploit people or the natural environment (*cf.* Blühndorn, 2017). Moreover, anchoring the concept of sustainable careers around the notion of collective dignity implies a linkage between the individual career and those of others. Hence, as careers are inherently relational and embedded within the constraints of a global system, a systemic approach is necessary to understand how sustainable careers may relate to collective dignity.

The neoliberal anchoring of the (sustainable) career conceptualization implies that a career is competitive *per se* (i.e., individuals compete with each other for the best jobs and possibilities for a sustainable career; Bal and Dóci, 2018), while also emphasizing the individualistic nature of sustainable careers. In contrast, anchoring the concept in the notion of collective dignity prioritizes collaboration as the foundation of sustainable careers. Such collaboration may unfold at both the societal and the organizational level, whereby decisions need to be made as to how careers can be facilitated collectively, taking into account the interdependent nature of careers. More specifically, governments and organizations are able to incentivize careers that promote the preservation and accumulation of the various forms of capital, whereas careers that deplete *any* form of capital (and in particular natural, human or social capital) may be discouraged. This can be done for instance by higher income taxation (on governmental level), or lower salary (on organizational or sector level) for jobs that deplete capital. The additional governmental or organizational income that is generated through this approach can be reinvested in intra- and intergenerational equity, such as investment in jobs that contribute positively to human, social or natural capital. This leads to our third proposition:

Proposition 3. Sustainable careers anchored in collective dignity are more likely to contribute towards the sustainable management of humanity's stock of capital (natural, social, human, manufactured and financial) upon which the welfare of current and future generations depend, than sustainable careers anchored in neoliberalism.

Reconceptualizing sustainable careers within the ethical perspective of collective dignity, and anchoring its components around the individual embedded in community and nature, imply that the meaning of flexibility, meaningful work and agency will also change. Flexibility, within this paradigm would be the indicator of an open society (Popper, 1966), where flexible career trajectories and social mobility are attainable for most people, regardless of their place in the social structure or their geographical location. Flexibility, in this sense, is something that is not something that is required of individuals for organizational benefit, but in a collective dignity paradigm, organizations become more flexible towards the needs of individuals and collective groups of workers (see, e.g. Bal and Izak, 2020).

Moreover, work may be considered meaningful – in a sustainable way – if it contributes to collective well-being. The central emphasis of meaning is on its social aspects, or in other words, how meaning is both socially constructed (in a collective way by people), and how meaning is elicited not only for individuals but more widely for communities of people. Finally, the concept of agency would also broaden within this paradigm (or reconnect with its original meaning), and would refer to people's capacity, freedom and power to make their own career choices and shape their work circumstances to meet their needs, without being limited by socio-structural factors, and without limiting others' chances for a sustainable career and a life where one is treated with dignity (Bal, 2017). Agency would furthermore refer to the individual's capacity to have an influence on work conditions and cultures so that they meet the wider community's needs. Moreover, agency is no longer only constructed as an individual attribute, but also conceptualized collectively. Agency represents the possibility for communities to exercise power and to strive for greater dignity of people and the environment (Bal, 2017). Hence, the central elements of sustainable careers may be re-conceptualized such that they emphasize the contribution to both individual and collective dignity. This leads to our final proposition:

Proposition 4a. Meaning anchored in collective dignity, as central element of a sustainable career, is more likely to contribute to individual and communities' meaningfulness than meaning anchored in neoliberalism.

Proposition 4b. Flexibility anchored in collective dignity, as central element of a sustainable career, is more likely to be available to individuals and to be required of organizations, than flexibility anchored in neoliberalism, where flexibility is more likely to be required of individuals and available to organizations.

Proposition 4c. Agency anchored in collective dignity, as central element of a sustainable career, is more likely to be defined both individually and collectively, and to contribute to individual and communities' well-being than agency anchored in neoliberalism.

Implications for future research

We identify two primary implications for future research on sustainable careers on the basis of our analysis. First, a dignity framework is important in relation to the conceptualization of meaning, flexibility and agency. While these elements of sustainable careers are neutral in themselves, they become ideological through a specific connotation with individual responsibility (Greene, 2008). When explicitly anchored to the notion of the individual embedded in communities and nature, and thus to the aims of achieving collective welfare for present and future generations, these elements may obtain a specific meaning which differs from the individualistic conceptualizations currently present in the literature. Consequently, the question no longer pertains to how individuals are required to be flexible, find meaning and be agentic to pursue their own individual career, but how systems may support people's need for flexibility and agency to enhance collective welfare. Consequently, future research may shed more light upon this issue.

Moreover, the meaning of work is not just an individual experience, but something that is inherently shared and collective (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Despite the collective nature, there still is little research on the role of collectives in eliciting meaning. Hence, new questions can be formulated on the basis of how people as part of collective groups (e.g. teams, organizations, societies) can sustain the viability of careers through flexibility, agency and meaning-related activities. When meaning is something that does not merely unfold individually, but is inherent within collective settings, how can people support and help each other in finding and realizing meaning in their work and their careers? Moreover, individual agency in a collective welfare paradigm no longer merely serves the interests of the individual to develop a sustainable career, but becomes important in relation to how agency may support the collective welfare of people (Bal, 2017).

Second, collectivity is important to address the unequal balance between people who are unable and who are able to have access to sustainable careers (Coltrane, 2004). What is often neglected is the notion that careers are inherently relational and social. Hence, a career of one person may develop at the expense of others. When individuals gain access to organizational resources to build sustainable careers, it may deplete the resources available to others in the organization (e.g. employees on temporary contracts), which may stifle their opportunities for obtaining sustainable careers. Future research on such careers would help us to better understand the relational and social nature of careers, which in turn will help us to better evaluate the extent to which a career can be considered to be truly sustainable.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the concept of sustainable careers from an ideological perspective. Using Žižek's (1989, 2001) model of ideology, we ascertained how the current construction of sustainable careers offers a fantasy, particularly when it is conceptualized as careers which are attainable for everyone, and views all people as being flexible, agentic and able to give

meaning to their careers. This anchoring of sustainable careers in neoliberal ideology is far from unique, and can also be traced in the boundaryless career literature. This concept has also been critiqued in the literature (e.g. Budtz-Jørgensen *et al.*, 2019; Roper *et al.*, 2010), such as being anchored in neoliberal normativity, presuming individual agency and responsibility for individuals to manage their careers *as if* there are no boundaries to their career wishes.

Ideological analysis helps to understand why a concept such as the sustainable career may actually not be so beneficial to each and every worker, despite the promise that sustainable careers are inherently good to everyone (Lawrence *et al.*, 2015; Valcour, 2013, 2015). To understand this, Žižek's thinking provides an insight into what or who is excluded as a result of an ideological use of the sustainable careers concept, through projection of norms on people, who may be more or less successful in actually obtaining a sustainable career.

Moreover, we showed how neoliberal ideology functions as the anchoring point for the conceptualization of sustainable careers. In contrast, a collective dignity-perspective on sustainable careers (Bal, 2017; Kostera and Pirson, 2017) may offer an alternative anchoring point of the individual being embedded in the community and nature, where sustainable careers obtain new meanings, and where they more directly address the need for contemporary careers to contribute to collective welfare, not only of people but also of the environment. Such a dignity perspective may help to better integrate the meaning of "true" sustainability within the concept of sustainable careers and it is the hope of the authors that our conceptualization of sustainable careers will help future research and practice on sustainable careers to deliver important contributions to the greater sustainability of work, careers, the planet and its peoples.

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