

A Psychology of Sustainable Career Development

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Sustainable career development is a great priority for organizations, governments and individuals alike. Facing the grand challenges of our global world, careers and their development have to be re-designed to incorporate more sustainable ways of living and working.

Keywords: sustainable careers ; ideology ; psychology

1. Introduction

Contemporary careers in and across organizations are no longer supposed to be linear, stable and secure, but are increasingly required to be 'sustainable' ^{[1][2]}. Individuals in the contemporary economy are therefore no longer expected to be focused on having a stable job and continued employment across one's career, but to be an 'entrepreneur of the self' ^[3]. In the current neoliberal world, the 'flexible human being' has become fetishized, projecting a worldview of the contemporary individual as being agentic, proactive, flexible and capable of managing and steering one's own life. Human beings are no longer merely the product of their circumstances, either genetic or social, but are expected to take matters into their own hands and lead their lives as healthy, happy and productive citizens and workers ^{[4][5]}. Absent from such notions are deliberations around what this 'productivity' requirement entails, why it has become so central to projections about the contemporary human being and how the proposed benefits to be 'productive' materialize for individuals in terms of development of a sustainable career. Nonetheless, it is posed as a sine-qua-non for the contemporary worker, and similar descriptions have been found in relation to sustainable careers ^[4]. Sustainable careers are also a function of agentic behaviors, individual responsibility and flexibility, while at the same time supposedly ensuring happy, healthy and productive workers ^[4]. The intellectual underdevelopment underlying such models requires a one-dimensional supportive empirical approach: cases and statistics are sought to support such models, whereby successful employees who have gained sustainable careers are successful because they have been flexible and agentic, while the absence of such actions and attitudes cause individuals to miss out on the possibility to build a sustainable career ^[6]. There is no critical approach towards these models, and thus scholarship only looks for support for these models while ignoring the contexts and causes for the absence of sustainable careers. For instance, when individuals can only have a sustainable career when they are agentic, scholars do not question *why* agentic behaviors are absent or impossible within many contexts. Hence, the logic behind sustainable careers research is onefold and without complexity: individuals in the contemporary workplace need to be flexible and agentic so that they can have a sustainable career, which is denoted by an individual being 'happy, healthy and productive'. Those who refuse or have no option to be flexible are excluded from having a sustainable career. The simplicity of such theorizing dictates an approach that is prone to confirmation bias: positive examples of sustainable careers are looked after, while reasons for the absence of sustainable careers are neglected.

This also points to the exclusionary nature of sustainable careers. Bal and colleagues ^[6] analyzed *who* and *what* are excluded from sustainable careers. A sustainable career is exclusively conceptualized around the possibility for an individual to be a productive citizen in neoliberal society and to play their role as loyal citizens fulfilling their 'productive duty': to be employed throughout one's career, to refrain from long-term absence from work (e.g., because of illness, voluntary work or other priorities such as caring responsibilities) and to be perpetually flexible in light of a rapid changing society. However, lines of exclusion cross along privilege (i.e., only privileged individuals obtain sustainable careers) and anthropocentrism (i.e., economic logic, by definition, trumps concern for the environment and the planet). These lines of exclusion delegitimize the very concept of sustainable careers as any use of the term manifests at the expense of those unable to obtain a sustainable career, including those who are unable to express their voice (e.g., animals, nature).

2. Introducing a Psychology of the Sustainable Career

Thus far, sustainable careers have merely been treated as an organizational concept; they are supposed to be of primary benefit to organizations (i.e., careers are only sustainable when they are associated with productivity ^[4]). There is no

psychology of sustainable careers, as only some attitudinal and behavioral tendencies are related to sustainable careers (e.g., proactivity, flexibility). To do so, researchers will formulate a psychology of sustainable careers based on the identification of the basic human needs throughout their lives, using both a dignity lens [7] and a capability approach [8]. These theories postulate that in the face of the fundamental absurdity and meaninglessness of human life [7], people search for their dignity to be respected and protected while they look for the opportunity to exercise their capabilities. While the sustainable careers literature maintains that careers are only sustainable when they are defined by agency and meaning, an opposed perspective is presented by Bal et al. [7] in their theory of the absurd workplace; on the basis of their analysis of the contemporary world and workplace as absurd, lack and loss of meaning is central to organizing, and, as a result of the dissolution of proposed meaning into the absence of meaning, the illogical and the absurd define the state of our contemporary world. It is no surprise, then, to observe a rise in experienced burnouts, as this represents the maladaptive responses to an inherently alienating and absurd system and workplace.

One of the core problems around the use of 'sustainable' in relation to careers is not the notion that careers are limited in scope and cannot be described sensibly over the course of many years without creating some post-hoc rationalization of the randomness of choice and human decision-making, but that 'sustainable' is used all too freely. Despite it being an empty concept, it has the connotation of something inherently desirable, which masks its exercise of biopower, control and symbolic violence projected upon individuals who are expected to have a 'sustainable career' in an increasingly unstable world, while being blamed for not surviving and thriving in the disintegrating contemporary capitalist system. Hence, the contemporary existence of 'career' is deeply traumatic for most people globally in the absence of any kind of sustainability, which makes the sustainable career a fantasy construction [9] that functions more as a projection (i.e., as something to fantasize about rather than being rooted firmly in the everyday experience of the majority of people). Using the term obfuscates the more traumatic reality that 'cannot be symbolized' in public discourse [9]. In other words, the reality of unsustainable careers (or total lack of any career prospects) is denied through the projection of the sustainable career on organizational reality as well as on policy frameworks. The sustainable career thereby functions as authoritative discourse, which may be fundamentally opposed to reality. After all, how many people on this planet will truly experience their careers as sustainable, and not subject to volatility, turbulence and rapidly changing societal and organizational realities, and has this not been the case throughout history? The notion of a stable career (i.e., the lifetime employment model of post-war social democracies) functioned as an anomaly, and the current fundamentally unstable reality is the actual 'normal'. Hence, rather than speaking of the sustainable career as ensuring ontological security [10], it is more appropriate to recognize the fundamental ontological insecurity of the contemporary career. While the Western world has broken down its social democracy, including its protective framework, to a void neoliberal state, there never was such social democracy in most of the world (or only for brief spells). Consequently, the notion of a 'career' always had limited applicability to most of the world's nations and would be driven primarily by a need for (ontological) security, that is, a security about one's identity and sense of self, which is perpetually endangered as a function of societal unrest and global upheaval. Hence, the notion of sustainable careers is hypernormalized, and would better be understood from the psychological perspective of dignity and capabilities. In so doing, it is about recognizing the inherent unsustainability of our contemporary ways of living, which are hypernormalized (i.e., the Western, neocolonial, patriarchal, capitalist mode of existence that continuously threatens the sustainability of the planet [7], and the resulting traumatic impact on the individual. This trauma of a broken planet that cannot be healed easily through (collective) human agency (which constitutes a fundament of human existence) has been rather ignored in the literature and only received attention during the last years, as evidenced by research on climate trauma or climate grief [11][12].

The possibility of a stable sustainable career therefore constitutes an absurdity in the face of climate destruction and associated with it global migration, wars, poverty and inequalities [7]. This reflects not just a collective understanding concerning the predicament of the world but can also be understood as an individual psychological response: there is either disavowal or trauma response. On the one hand, a psychology of the sustainable career holds the possibility of cynical disavowal [9]. In this case, the individual denies the traumatic reality of our profoundly unsustainable and unstable societies and lifestyles and becomes the neoliberal citizen by focusing on one's own outcomes, utility and self-centered behaviors to ensure a sustainable career in the rather narrow way defined conceptually (e.g., to be agentic, proactive and flexible to sustain one's own individual health and career success). The philosopher Žižek [9] refers to this process as disavowal or reversing the well-known Marxist formula of 'Sie Wissen nicht was Sie tun, aber Sie tun es' into 'they very well know what they are doing, but nonetheless are doing it'. In other words, there is an 'enlightenment': people are (even though at times at a very basic level) aware of the unstable global society surrounding them, which delivers news of wars, climate destruction, poverty and inequality on a daily basis, but nonetheless they pretend as if all is normal [7]. The hypernormalization of the absurd becomes cynically disavowed, such that people can cope with the traumatic realities by denying them, and to hold on to privileges that have been gained or inherent to one's make up as a human being (e.g., being white). In this way, those people who, because of their privileges already had access to sustainable careers, simply

deny reality in favor of a more fantasmatic symbolic reality (i.e., that they have obtained their sustainable careers because they worked hard for it, despite all the others worldwide who worked just as hard or harder but never had any possibility for a career at all).

On the other hand, those who have experienced their 'absurd moment' [7] may see through the smokescreen of authoritative discourse, opening up the possibility for 'seeing reality as it really is'. The absurd moment occurs when an individual becomes aware of the meaninglessness of life, discourse and social practices. This unmasking or exposing of a more traumatic reality behind the symbolic features of society is a breaking through hypernormalization, the absurd moment that was linked already by philosopher Albert Camus to feelings of despair, anxiety and a total loss of hope [7]. It represents the moment when the void is opened up and an individual asks the 'why' of a meaning system [13]. It is that moment when an individual realizes that despite any rhetoric of the actually achievable sustainable career, there is no such possibility, and one is confronted with the Lacanian Real, or the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized [9]. This Real is the void, that which cannot be captured through authoritative discourse, that which falls outside the scope of the agentic, proactive, flexible human being, and in fact refers to actually existing people and their experienced lives. These people are alienated from a patriarchal, neocolonial, capitalist global system and experience the trauma of this alienation, the existential separation from the Other, which could also be referred to as the well-known experience of burnout. Recent research on climate trauma, grief and anxiety underpin the relevance of these absurd moments and their effects, especially for younger generations [11]. These are moments where individuals realize that all securities and certainties of our contemporary world are all but certain, and such moments may cause great stress and anxiety. While there may still be ideological and libidinal investment into a fantasized sustainable career, its effective functioning ceases to be operative, and cracks emerge within the perception of reality and the void behind this reality. The absurd moment dictates that careers are unsustainable and that sustainability as a concept is hypernormalized; while it is treated as something that belongs to the aspirational level of (Western) countries, the world as a whole is on another path and does not treat sustainability as a truly meaningful anchor for political decision making. Unsustainable human behavior is the default, and psychologically this is processed by individuals not through scientific analysis, amplifying the hopelessness of our predicament, but through investment, either in the fantasized status-quo or in some uncertain alternative while trying to survive and postulating one's marginalized position within the current economy as a 'career', which in fact is nothing more than a sequence of random jobs and opportunities granted or forced through external circumstances. At the moment, there are over 108 million individuals who have been forced to leave their countries because of climate change, conflicts or other reasons [14]. Referring to their migration as a search for a sustainable career is absurd, and the question, therefore, is how to formulate and conceptualize a more inclusive sustainable career.

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