

**"There's a lot of opportunities - if there aren't,  
you can make them, make or break them".**

**A contextual view of career opportunities in two dif-  
ferent age cohorts.**

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**"There's a lot of opportunities - if there aren't, you can make them, make or break them"<sup>1</sup> – A contextual view of career opportunities in two different age cohorts.**

## **1. Careers and opportunities, opportunities and careers**

Opportunities are not only sung about by the Pet Shop Boys in the 1990ies but have a fixed place in career theory since several decades (e.g., White, 1970; Baron, Davis-Blake & Bielby, 1986). The notion of 'opportunity structure' as originally shaped by Merton (Merton, 1938) and developed by (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) never became a dominant stream in career theory, though, which was focusing on a person-centred perspective. Nevertheless, its use by authors like Roberts (Roberts, 1968; Roberts, 1981) brought meaningful insight emphasising the importance of the social context for explaining careers. During the last decades, a sometimes heated 'structure *versus* action' debate turned increasingly into a more synergetic 'structure *and* action' discussion (see, e.g., Archer, 2000; Barley, 1989). The influence of both levels on careers seems now to be well accepted by most career researchers. The core of the current debate deals with the search for an adequate theoretical framework allowing the integration of both dimensions. Although the opportunity structure approach has been primarily developed by structuralist scholars, a look at its conceptual core reveals interesting possibilities and issues for this debate.

Opportunity structure designates the scale and distribution of conditions that provide various probabilities for acting individuals and groups to achieve specifiable outcomes. Over time, the opportunity structure expands or contracts, as do segments of that structure. The time dimension is one basic element of the opportunity structure. This corresponds to the importance of time for conceptualising careers. Careers are often defined as actors' movements through a social structure over time (Becker & Strauss, 1956), as „the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time“ (Arthur, 1984: 4) or in a very similar way as „the sequence of work-related experience one has over the course of one's working life-time“ (Adamson, Doherty & Viney, 1998). One's location in the structure may change over time, whatever the level considered. At a macro-societal level, for example, demographic changes can strongly contribute to better working opportunities for specific segments of the work force, e.g., people over 50. At the organisational level, a merger between two companies may bring unexpected career opportunities or new constraints. Location in the social structure strongly influences, though it does not fully determine, the extent of access to the opportunity structure. In this way, opportunity structure is not a deterministic concept, but a probabilistic one. Agency is not predetermined, since having access to opportunities tells little about the way individuals deal with these opportunities (Merton, 1995).

'Opportunity' refers to a double meaning. On the one hand, it is associated with the idea of probability. For example, emigration, whether from country to big cities or from poor countries to richer ones, is largely triggered by the belief that the new context will offer far more opportunities. But on the other hand, 'opportunity' also refers to a chance, or to a favourable juncture of circumstances. Therefore, an opportunity can hardly be calculated nor planned.

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<sup>1</sup> Pet Shop Boys: "Opportunities (let's make lot of money)", from: Disco, Label: Capitol, 1990.

However, it may be influenced by moves within the social structures. Hence, it is in opposition to the specific rationality of the bureaucratic career but seems to be a central value for boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), nomad (Cadin, Bender, de Saint Giniez & Pringle, 2000), chaotic (Peterson & Anand, 2002) or chronic flexibility (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer & Meyer, 2003) careers, which are supposed to have dramatically expanded during the last years. More generally speaking, compared to the 1950ies, 60ies and 70ies, careers seem to have lost much of their predictability (Jacoby, 1999). Consequently, non-predictable and chance related aspects of careers have gained importance. Add the frequent changes which characterise many types of new careers and you can argue that the location in the social structure and the opportunities associated with it possibly have more occasions to evolve and become important than in traditional, more stable organisational careers. Following this, new careers may also gain an interesting ‘democratic’ aspect through a more egalitarian distribution of opportunities. A further discussion of these thoughts not only has to identify the basic dimensions of the opportunity structure, but also to analyse their possible hierarchy and therefore to estimate the possibility for individuals to influence them. Being too optimistic in this respect would equal an ignorance of the irony of the Pet Shop Boys’ song which satirically describes the British Thatcher years and the accompanying spirit of the late 80ies.

Given this background, the current paper focuses on the organisational level of the career opportunity structure and asks how various elements of the organisational level opportunity structure are linked with objective career success. Such elements contain, for example, the size of the organisation where people start their careers, the overall economic situation or the job change opportunities within the organisation. In answering this question, two groups of individuals in different stages of their careers – mid and late career, respectively – are analysed.

## **2. Dimensions of opportunity structure**

Much of the career literature focuses on psychological and individual centred factors when describing and explaining various facets of careers. Nevertheless, there is a substantial number of contributions from different disciplines like sociology, economics, or management that cover a broad range of contextual factors. Relating to different ‘spheres’ of closeness the individual one can distinguish between factors related to the origin of the individual, the work context, the national society and culture and the global context and developments.

### **2.1. Individual origin**

#### *Class and social origin*

A frequent topic of contextually based career contributions is the role of class and social origin for different aspects of careers. Two major themes emerge.

First, the influence of different aspects of class and social origin on various facets of career development and success are researched at a macro-level. In a landmark study, Blau and Duncan (1967) analyse the effects of the familial socio-economic background on career success of individuals in the U.S. They find that socio-economic background of the family of origin affects the type and length of education that individuals get. In turn, this influences the occupational entry and career achievements. However, in later stages of their careers, individuals’ socio-economic background seems to be less important for career outcomes. Previous jobs

and work experiences have greater significance during these stages. Focusing on top-level managerial positions in Germany, the UK and France, Hartmann (1996; 2000) finds that in all three countries more than three quarters of top managers are of upper middle class origin. Furthermore he shows that in France and Britain selection also works via exclusive education and titles, whereas in Germany personal characteristics associated with the upper middle class are primarily important. Those who grow up in "upper middle class" families therefore know the unwritten habits and rules for elite positions better than those from a different social background. A number of studies use socio-economic background as control and differentiating variables for different facets of careers and career success. Examples include the effects of career mentoring on promotions and compensation received by early career managers and professionals (Whitely, Dougherty & Dreher, 1991) or career success in early career stages (Whitely, Dougherty & Dreher, 1991), differentiating factors between executives and lower managers (O'Donovan, 1962), the development of organisational commitment of medical technologists (Blau, 1999), the influence of social capital on income (Parks-Yancy, 2002), the development of work patterns in different career stages (Raelin, 1984) or occupational choices of MBA students (Sonnenfeld, Peiperl & Kotter, 1988).

A second theme refers, more general, to inter- and intra-generational mobility. Especially from a sociological viewpoint (e.g., Gelles & Levine, 2001), this topic has received considerable attention. It is closely linked to the stratification of society, for example, according to economic wealth, gender or ethnicity. Giddens et al. (2003) argue that class is of major importance in industrial societies and derive from inequalities in possession and control of material resources and access to educational and occupational opportunities. In general, upward mobility entails only small steps and is of limited range. Most people remain close to the level of their family origin. Given new developments during the last decades, e.g., the expansion of white-collar jobs or the opportunities for start-up companies due to new IT-technologies, the opportunities for short-range upward mobility have considerably increased. A number of studies cover different aspects of this kind of mobility. These include occupational mobility (Warner & Abegglen, 1955; Warner & Abegglen, 1968), upward mobility and the problems linked with it for specific ethnic groups (Cole & Omari, 2003) or the interplay between class, race and ethnicity in females' working careers (Jones, 2003).

#### *Educational socialisation and individual work history*

Closely linked to the individual work history are aspects dealing with the formal education of individuals and their work history.

The role of education for work careers has many facets that have been dealt with in career research. It includes aspects like the role of education for the entry of minority managers to management positions (Brown & Ford Jr., 1975), for career change (Cabral, Rhodes & Doering, 1985), the learning of new jobs for surface warfare officers in navy ships (Morrison & Brantner, 1991), the gender related differences in individual career development (Solomon, Bishop & Bresser, 1985), the differences in managerial career advancement for men and women (Tharenou, 2001), the influence on job rotation and career outcomes (Campion, Cheraskin & Stevens, 1994) or the differing career orientations of engineers and scientists (Katz & Allen, 1991).

Likewise, the individual work history is seen as an important factor contributing to opportunities within individual career development. Besides the job history within the current organisation (see below), this includes the previous personal job history in terms of number of employers, mobility rate, frequency and pattern of upward mobility, changes in functions, em-

ployers and industry or the relationship between times of employment and unemployment. The importance of work history for career opportunities has been especially researched in connection with the determining factors of managerial career success (Cawsey, Nicholson & Alban-Metcalf, 1985; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Vardi, 1991). In addition, the effects of employment gaps in early and mid-career for career outcomes has also been researched (Schneer & Reitman, 1990).

### *Current status*

Not only the family of origin, but also the current life situation including factors like family situation or marital status frames the opportunity structure for individuals. Studies include the influence of these variables on the intention to search for job and career alternatives and to change careers (Cabral, Rhodes & Doering, 1985), on work efforts and merit increases (Lobel & St. Clair, 1992), the time devoted to work (Major, Klein & Ehrhart, 2002), the mobility of managers (Veiga, 1983), the willingness of different types of employees to relocate (Gould & Penley, 1985) or the chosen career paths of MBA graduates (Schneer & Reitman, 1993).

## **2.2. Organisations**

At the organisational level, various aspects of the opportunity structure that individuals face when joining an organisation (Markham, Harlan & Hackett, 1987) have been at the centre of attention. Three themes have gained special importance: internal labour markets, tournament processes and career plateaus.

The potential importance of career paths to career success is suggested by internal labour market research (Brüderl, 1991; Weber, 1989; Pfeffer & Cohen, 1984). Six career path characteristics have been suggested by previous research to be particularly important to career development and success: 1) line versus staff job assignments (Whitely & Coetsier, 1993, 2) organisational mobility (Martin, Harrison & DiNitto, 1983), 3) the degree of functional specialisation and job mobility (Whitely & Coetsier, 1993) 5) employment gaps (Dreher & Ash, 1990) and 6) work experience/tenure (Naff, 1994).

Tournament processes pointing towards the importance of early phases of organisational careers and the competition with other individuals for future career opportunities have a prominent place in the career discussion. Tournament theory (Rosenbaum, 1979; Rosenbaum, 1984) shows that the shorter the time individuals spend in their first jobs in an organisation the higher up the hierarchical ladder they end. The theory suggests that when individuals start work at an organisation, they join a tournament in which players must win rounds at each stage of the career to advance to the next. If individuals fail to earn a promotion at an early stage of the competition, they are less likely to progress to further stages. This rapidly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: Winners receive ability signals that affect their prospects of participating in the next round of the competition. Promotion leads to more promotion, new jobs create more development and networking opportunities and signal ability, creating “career velocity” (Rosenbaum, 1990). Several variants of tournament models and selection criteria exist (e.g., Brüderl, Diekmann & Preisendörfer, 1991; Sheridan, Slocum, Buda & Thompson, 1990; Forbes, 1987). Related research focuses on effects of the importance of the department in which the new employee started his or her career (Sheridan, Slocum, Buda & Thompson, 1990), the effects of early and late career entry for career attainment (Hurley, Wallay, Segrest, Scandura & Sonnenfeld, 2003), the importance of higher level entry position

for further promotion (Cox & Harquail, 1991) or the self reinforcing effects of promotions (Hurley & Sonnenfeld, 1994).

The existence of career plateaus is an important element of further career opportunities. Career plateaus are the point in one's career at which the probability of a vertical assignment or of a promotion in the near future is not very likely (Appelbaum & Santiago, 1997; Tremblay, Roger & Toulouse, 1995; Nicholson, 1993; Tremblay & Roger, 1993; Chao, 1990). Conditions for the development of career plateaus like demographic developments or organisational structure characteristics (Slocum, Cron & Yows, 1987; Dawson, 1983) as well as consequences at the individual and the organisational level like dissatisfaction or 'waste' of human potential (Stout, Slocum & Cron, 1988; Carnazza, Korman, Ference & Stoner, 1981; Ference, Stoner & Warren, 1977) are discussed in order to be able to manage careers more effectively (Slocum, Cron, Hansen & Rawlings, 1985).

### **2.3. Work environment**

Beyond opportunity elements linked with the individual's origin and the respective organisation, the work environment that individuals face is an important part of the opportunity structure.

#### *External labour markets*

Not only the internal, but also the external labour market, consisting of the occupational and the secondary labour market, is essential for individuals' opportunity structure. Research include aspects such as analyses concerning the type of labour market that IT professionals are in (Boh, Slaughter & Ang, 2001), the impact of labour market demands on the decision to change careers (Cabral, Rhodes & Doering, 1985) or the importance of information about labour market opportunities for subsequent careers during job search (Ullman & Gutteridge, 1974).

#### *New forms of working and organising*

In the management literature, new forms of working and organising have been a prominent theme not only during the past decade, but date a long time back. Some aspects of these new forms seem to have a certain amount of career relevance. This includes the changing organisational environment that is constituted by new information technologies (Gattiker & Coe, 1986), the career consequences of project form organisations (Reeser, 1969), the career competition of managers belonging to different strategic business units (Gupta & Seshadri, 1994) or the career opportunities linked with the creation of a new business environment for one's own career through founding new firms (Reynolds, 1988).

#### *Social relationships*

Careers are also shaped by the opportunities for networking and mentoring that individuals experience in their work, either within or outside of organisations.

Networking refers to the process of building and maintaining a set of informal, co-operative relationships in the social structure of an organisation (Burt, 1992). Networks provide opportunities which increase the effectiveness in negotiations and the number of options and choices available. Studies analyse the importance of social networks for the likelihood of

promotion, further managerial advancement and higher salaries, (Burt, 1992; Orpen, 1996), the role of interpersonal support for management advancement from entry to upper level (Tharenou, 2001), the influence of various types of social relationships like role models, advisors, mentors and sponsors on career advancement (Wood & Hertz, 1982) or the effects of social capital on career outcomes such as salary, promotion and individual satisfaction (Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001).

Linked to the networking topic is the issue of mentoring. It is a particular kind of interpersonal relationship in which protégés receive a broad range of career and psycho-social help from a senior person, frequently a manager (Kram, 1988). Several studies analyse the role of mentoring for career aspects, including the link between mentor presence and managers' pay and frequency of promotions in the early stages of the career (Whitely & Coetsier, 1993), effects of early career for the frequency of promotion (Whitely, Dougherty & Dreher, 1991), for the development of career attitudes (Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000) or the determinants and career effects of mentoring relationships (Turban & Dougherty, 1994).

## **2.4. National society and culture**

At the national societal and cultural level, four major aspects can be mentioned that shape the opportunity structure for individual's careers: gender, ethnicity including the issue of minorities, overall population demography and the issue of communal and societal ties.

### *Gender*

When discussing gender in the context of career opportunities, it is not the sex of individuals that is of interest. Most of the studies involving men and women use gender as a control variable and in many career studies, this is reflected, too (see, e.g., Kilduff & Day, 1994; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). For opportunity structure it is the gender perspective or the role of gender as a major variable that matters most as this perspective reflects the societal conditions that provide the career opportunity structure in this respect (for an overview about the different types of contributions to career research from a gender perspective see Hermann, 2003). Specifically, a number of empirical studies take such a perspective and analyse the career oriented or gender based reasons for differences in jobs held (Konrad & Cannings, 1990), the effects of gender for managerial promotion and advancement (Cannings, 1988; Tharenou & Conroy, 1994; Tharenou, Latimer & Conroy, 1994) and performance outcomes (Lobel & St. Clair, 1992), the significance of female role models for the formation of perceptions of justice in promotion decisions (Lemons & Danehower, 1996) or the influence of gender on the rating individuals get from their superiors (Tsui & Gutek, 1984).

### *Ethnicity*

The importance of ethnicity as providing a contextual component of career opportunities is a widespread topic. The question of discrimination based on race or the membership to an ethnic minority group has received special attention. One crucial reason for such a kind of reduction of opportunities is the tendency towards homophile reproduction. Homophily is the degree of demographic and identity similarity of interaction individuals (Ibarra, 1993). One effect of these homophile reproduction processes results, for instance, in a minority based (e.g. Pfeffer, Davis-Blake & Julilus, 1995) hierarchy. Studies deal with the significance of race for the rating of managers' promotion potential (Landau, 1995), the organisational experiences,

job performance evaluations and career outcomes (Ibarra, 1995) or the income differences between black and white individuals (Parks-Yancy, 2002).

### *Community factors*

Some studies pay attention to an element of the opportunity structure often overlooked. The role of community factors, i.e., the integration of individuals into the local context of the civil, political and religious community seems to be a relevant factor for individual careers. These factors have been researched in connection with the willingness to relocate (Shamir, Landau & Arthur, 1990), barriers to managerial mobility (Veiga, 1983) or the idea of serving society as a whole and building prestige in the local community (Koch, 1973).

## **2.5. Global context and developments**

Due to the increasing amount of doing business at an international level, career opportunities are enhanced, too, through the global career fields that emerge (Mayrhofer et al., in print 2004). Global career management covers a number of different aspects like the individual characteristics of global managers, global career systems or the HRM aspects linked with global careers such as expatriation and repatriation, compensation or training and development (for an overview see Baruch, 2004: 210 ff.)

A number of studies, especially from the expatriate literature, have dealt with various aspects of opportunity aspects linked with global careers. This includes the efforts that individuals take to access international labour markets (Vance, 2002) or the consequences that individuals face after repatriation (e.g., Linehan & Scullion, 2002).

As showed by this brief overview, many authors dealt with contextual factors of careers considered at different levels. Although most of them do not make use of the Mertonian notion of ‘opportunity structure’, they nevertheless bring meaningful insights allowing a better understanding of the complexity of the social structure in which careers take place. The opportunity structure suggest the existence of a deeply accepted goal in a given society. In Merton’s (1938) seminal paper on deviance, this goal was success. In other words, there is a social pressure for trying to fulfil the high valued and almost mythical American Dream. Looking at careers, especially at their evolution during the past decade, one could argue that legitimate goals are increasingly plural, whether an individual gives more or less importance to his/her professional achievement, or privileges the work/family balance. This may be one reason for the disaffection of the notion in current career research. Another reason is that an important part of new career literature promotes “the idea that people are constructors of their own actions and meanings” (Evetts, 1992: 10), i.e. that careers – what they look like and how they evolve – are increasingly in the hands of individuals. This individualisation of careers tends to focus on the ways to reach at the best career objectives, rather than on contextual factors which may be seen as out of reach for individual agency and thus influence. As a matter of fact, one can hardly take influence e.g. on his/her year of birth, which may lead a young graduate into a world war, a dramatic recession or economic flourishing years. This is the “chance aspect” of the opportunity structure we mentioned above. Nevertheless, and this is certainly an ambiguity of the “new careers” literature, success in its rather traditional meaning – and the best ways to reach it – is still very present, based on occupational recognition, financial prosperity and high degree of responsibility. In this regard, this paper is certainly not innovative. In the same way, looking at organisational factors of influence on career is not



properly a new topic. Focusing on the organisational level remains nevertheless particularly meaningful, since it leads to a mix of elements which reflect the mentioned double aspect of opportunity, i.e. chance and probability. If to be sure, determining the significant element of influence will not make the opportunity structure foreseeable, it may give valuable information for e.g. individual career planning.

### **3. Methodology**

Starting in 2000 with the support of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), the Vienna Career Panel Project (ViCaPP) attempts to explore the professional careers of business graduates in Austria. In addition to a sample of about 650 graduates who successfully completed their study at the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration (WU Wien) between 2000 and 2002, data were also collected from two cohorts of former graduates of the WU Wien. In 2002 members of these cohorts were asked to participate in a survey that consisted of a mail questionnaire as well as a highly standardised questionnaire about their professional development that was filled out during a face-to-face interview. The cohorts consisted of graduates that finished their studies around 1970 and around 1990 respectively, in most cases starting their professional careers soon thereafter. Up to now, 358 former WU graduates have participated in this part of ViCaPP, 110 belonging to the 70s cohort and 248 to the 90s cohort.

Based on a curriculum-vitae-like list of professional activities for each person, their professional development was charted for each year since their graduation along several variables, such as income, career satisfaction, and attributed career success. Among many other variables that were collected, the survey resulted in a total of twelve time series per individual, with a sampling frequency of one year, and number of subordinates as frequently used objective success measures, a number of individual related variables (e.g., social background, personality structure), and various elements of organisational opportunity structure variables (e.g., size of organisation, membership in crucial decision making bodies, sectoral characteristics, and position in the organisational life cycle).

#### **3.1. The opportunity structure in the organisational context**

In order to get deeper insights into the organisational level opportunity structure for individuals starting their professional careers in 1990 and a comparative group starting their professional careers in 1970, we focused for this paper on the influence of different organisational and job characteristics for “career success”. Career success is measured through objective factors: financial income and managerial responsibility (see Table 1). While a direct comparison of e.g. career satisfaction between the two cohorts would be possible, the comparison of income requires some adaptations because of the time difference between the cohorts and the different power purchase parities. Therefore, the net growth of income between an earlier career state and a later career state was chosen. The same procedure was also used for the comparison of managerial responsibility, expressed through the number of employees one is directly responsible for.

<b>Determinants of objective career success</b>	<b>Indicator</b>
Income	Net growth of financial income between the first two and last three years of the ten year period.
Managerial Responsibility	Net growth of the number of employees under ones responsibility between the first two and last three years of the ten year period.

**Table 1: Determinants of objective career success**

Given the fact that the graduates of the 1990 cohort started their occupational career only about ten years ago (we did not take in account the former experience some of them may have collected before graduating), the observation period for the 1970 cohort had also to be limited to the first career decade. Thus, the calculation of the net growth of income and managerial responsibility takes place within this period and is built on the difference between the first two career years and the last three years of this decade. Different time combinations like e.g. the first and last three years or the first and last four years have also been calculated, but without bringing notably different outcomes. For each period the mean income and the mean number of employees under one's responsibility were calculated.

Our purpose is to look whether organisational and/or job characteristics of the early career years have an influence on later career success. In other words, do the first steps in occupational life such as starting a career in an expanding branch of industry or a large organisation influence later success? In order to answer this question, we took measurements from the first two career years for the following elements of the opportunity structure:

- Size of the organisation (number of employees).
- State of the organisation (self rating on a five point rating scale between expanding and declining).
- Position of the organisation within its branch (at the top, middle ranked, or clearly dominated position).
- State of the branch of the organisation (self rating on a five point rating scale between expanding and declining).
- Integration within the decision centre of the organisation (self rating on a three point rating scale).
- Number of organisational job transitions.
- Further vocational education and training (two self-ratings on a five point rating scale: first the importance of vocational training and second the evaluation of it).

The influence of these elements of the opportunity structure as well as the cohort membership (1970 vs. 1990) and the gender factor on later career success were tested using Chi Square Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID). This method can be used to define subgroups using the predictor variables (job characteristics, cohort and sex). The subgroups – if they actu-

ally exist – differ significantly in career success and are arranged within a hierarchy of importance.

## 4. Results

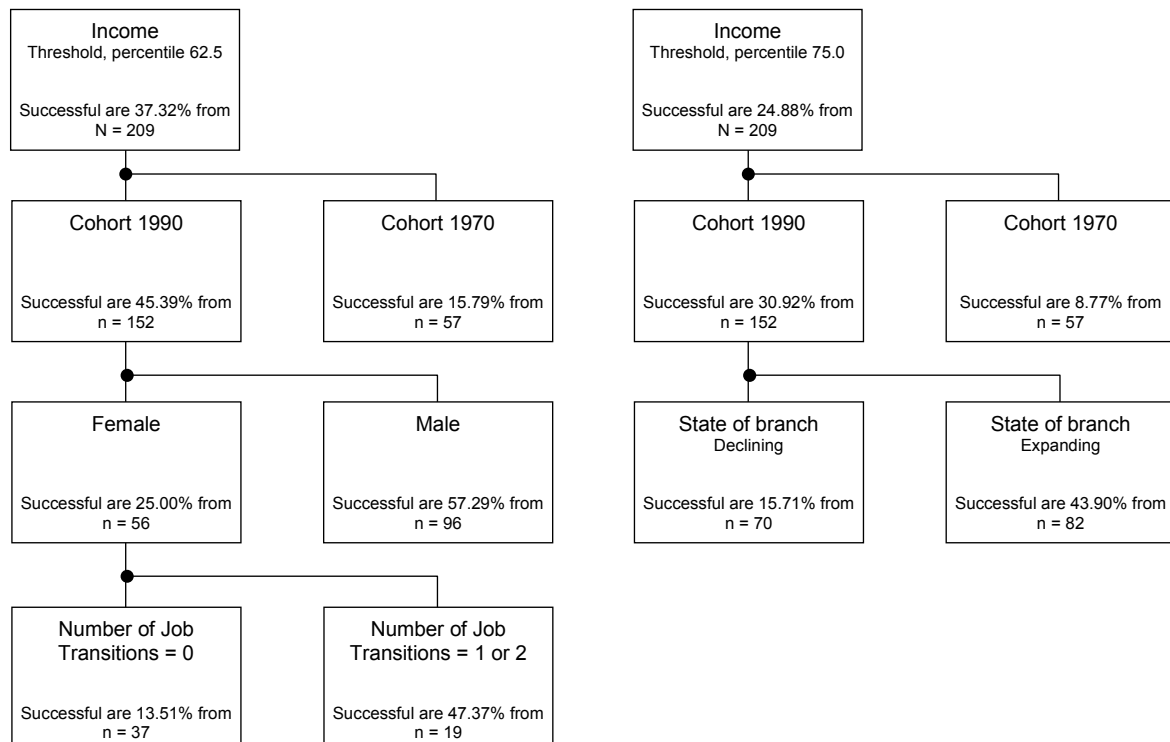
Table 2 gives an overview for the measurements on career success for different percentiles. In the following analyses we are referring to the percentiles by using them as thresholds for defining a career as successful or as unsuccessful.

Career success	Percentile			Mean (Standard Deviation)
	62.5	75	87.5	
Net growth of income	28160.72 €	33792.87 €	45420.52 €	23302.43 € (±19903.37 €)
Net growth of managerial responsibility	4.25	6.81	12.53	13.16 (±69.29)

**Table 2: Career success after seven years of career**

### 4.1. Financial income

As can be taken from Table 2, the average yearly income for the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> career years is about 23,300 € higher than the average start income (mean income of the first two years). For the “top 25” (percentile 75) of our sample, the income increase during this period is nearly 33.800 €.



**Figure 1 : CHAID-Analysis for income with a threshold of 62.5 and a threshold at 75.0**

As shown by Figure 1, the cohort determines the net growth of income. Compared to the 70ies, the 90ies offered obviously better possibilities for financial wealth. This may be related to the development of more flexible (and thus also more risky) forms of monetary rewards for managers, linked e.g. to the results of the company or a stronger individualisation of salaries. For the 1990 cohort additional factors lead to differences in career success. When defining success by a stronger net income growth as given by percentile 62.5, gender differences can be found. Men are much more successful than women. Additionally, we find a positive effect of job transitions for women. None of the other characteristics mentioned above leads to segments of different success.

If success is more strictly defined by a net growth higher than percentile 75, we find another important factor. The result indeed clearly shows the influence of the state of the branch at the beginning of the career. An individual starting his/her vocational life (i.e. the two first years of occupational activity) within a company belonging to a production branch, which was rather declining during this time, has great difficulties to reach the top 25 (the 25 strongest income progressions). Indeed, only 16% of them succeed. In contrast, starting a career within an organisation which belongs to an expanding branch leads 44% of the concerned graduates of our sample into “top 25”. The state of the organisation and its position within the branch shows a nearly same influence on the development of the financial income. Using different thresholds and different periods of observation does not lead to notable change in the findings. Most of the analyses (not presented here) are showing strong influences of the three economic characteristics (state of branch, state of organisation, position of organisation) for the 1990 cohort. Generally speaking, these three economic characteristics show a positive correlation with the income evolution. To put it briefly: The better the economic situation, the higher the income increase. To determine which of those characteristics has the strongest influence is difficult. Various analytical steps have shown that depending on the reference point in the time span analysed, e.g., first two years compared with 9<sup>th</sup> year or first three years compared with 10<sup>th</sup> year, the importance of these factors vary without any recognisable pattern.

The position within the organisation, i.e. the proximity to the decision makers, only shows some influence when extending the observation period from the first two years to the first four years. This time is obviously necessary to reach such kind of position. Nevertheless the influence of this characteristic is only visible for the 1970 cohort. Indeed, within this cohort nearly 30% of the persons reporting having had regular interactions with top management during their first career years belong to top 25. Only 4% of the persons who have not can reach top 25.

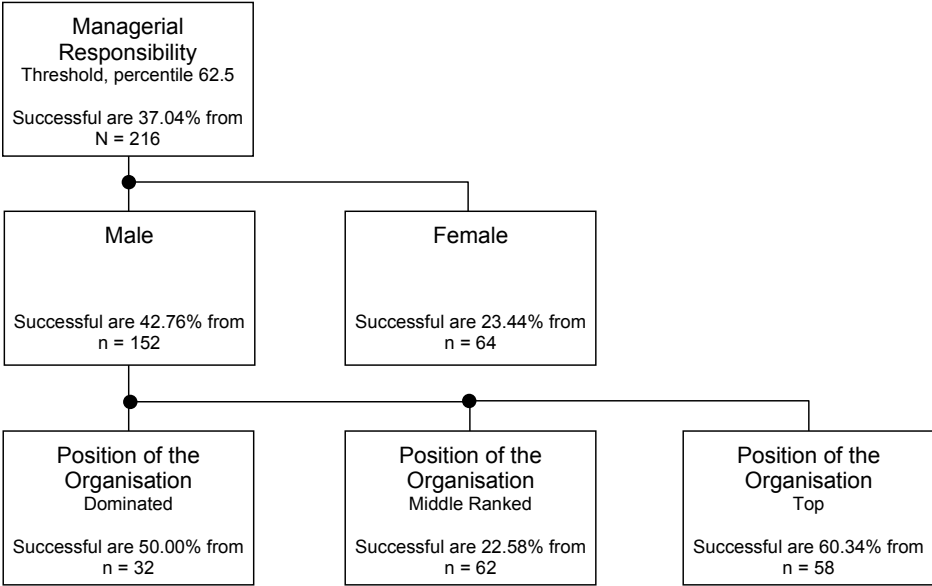
Another specificity of the 1970 cohort is – although not as visible as the other findings and therefore not appearing in Figure 1 – the influence of the first career years on the personal development and on income progression. Indeed, when the four first career years are positively related to personal development (participation to further education and training programs and positive valuation of them) by the asked person, the chances for an important income progression is strongly higher compared to those which had a negative estimation of their personal development during their first career years.

Interestingly, the characteristic “number of job transitions” shows a significant influence of the progression of financial income only for women. More precisely, the important seems not to be the number of changes but rather the fact that at least one change occurred during the two or three first career years. The probability for such women’s start income to strongly increase is more than three time higher, when compared to women who did not have any job transition during their very first career years.

The other selected characteristics do not show any notable influence on the financial income.

**4.2. Managerial responsibility**

The degree of managerial responsibility, i.e., the number of employees one is directly responsible for, shows no clear relationship to the selected elements of the organisational opportunity structure. Nevertheless, though not spectacular, some of the results tend to indicate gender related differences. Only the calculation of the net growth between the first and last two years of the ten year period shows significant differences at the threshold of 62.5 (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: CHAID-Analysis for managerial responsibility with a threshold at 62.5. Net growth was calculated between the first and last two years of the ten-year period.**

If graduates start their careers in organisations that at this time are in a dominant or a dominated position within their branch, men have in both cases a higher possibility to increase their managerial responsibility than women. This result may mean that wealthy organisations tend “naturally” to boost young male managers, while a state of crisis also tend to promote men as “savers” of the organisation. In both cases, women face the opposite situation, i.e. lower chances for getting more responsibility. However, in a medium situation neither at the top nor in crisis, their chances increase. To be sure, other time reference points do not show this differentiation. If the net growth concerning the number of employees under one’s responsibility is calculated as a difference between the first two and the last two careers years of the 10 years period, no differences in success based on our predictors occur.

**4.3. A gendered opportunity structure?**

As has been shown above, the gender factor plays obviously an important role in the access to and the processing of organisational opportunity structure. Few organisational researchers, if any, will be surprised by these findings. Nevertheless, we were intrigued by the role of gender and the question whether organisational opportunity structure can be viewed as “gendered”.

In a first step we formed matched pairs (‘virtual twins’) to keep constant as many possible differentiating factors as the ViCAPP data allowed that might cause a difference in career outcomes for men and women. The following characteristics were chosen to create these virtual male and female ‘twins’:

- Age.
- Social origin (prestige of father’s and mother’s employment, educational level of father and mother, size of town where the graduates have grown up).
- Personality (emotional stability, conscientiousness, achievement motivation, leadership motivation, flexibility, openness for social contacts, self-monitoring, post-organisational career Aspiration).
- Career tactics (networking, demonstrating power and status, self-promotion and self-assertion, making friends and allies, knowing and enhancing one’s market value).
- Graduation success (mark at final examination)

The results confirmed the previous findings (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Men generally have a higher income during the first ten career years than women, and the increase of their income is also stronger. The same may be observed related to managerial responsibility. These differences appear particularly clearly when considering the variation in time. Indeed, the differences between men and women at their career start as well as during their first two career years have no statistical significance. Past these two first years, their levels of income and managerial responsibility rapidly diverge. However, men and women differ in terms of employment gaps. Nearly half of the women of the panel had an employment gap, mostly due to maternity during their ten first career years. This leads to an average gap length of 8 months for women. Men, however, had on average only 1 month (this result is actually based on a single man of the panel who had such an employment gap). 40% of the women in the panel had at least one job interruption due to maternity during the 10 first career years.

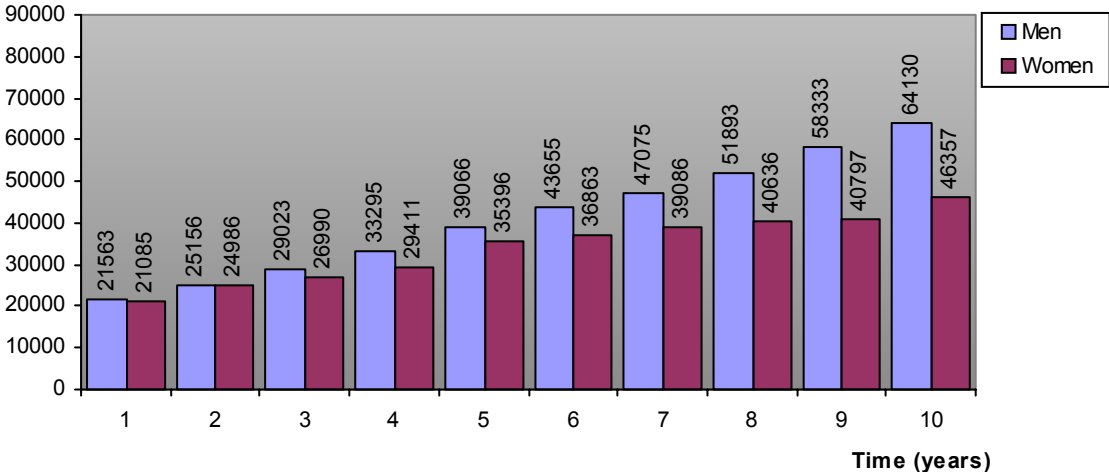
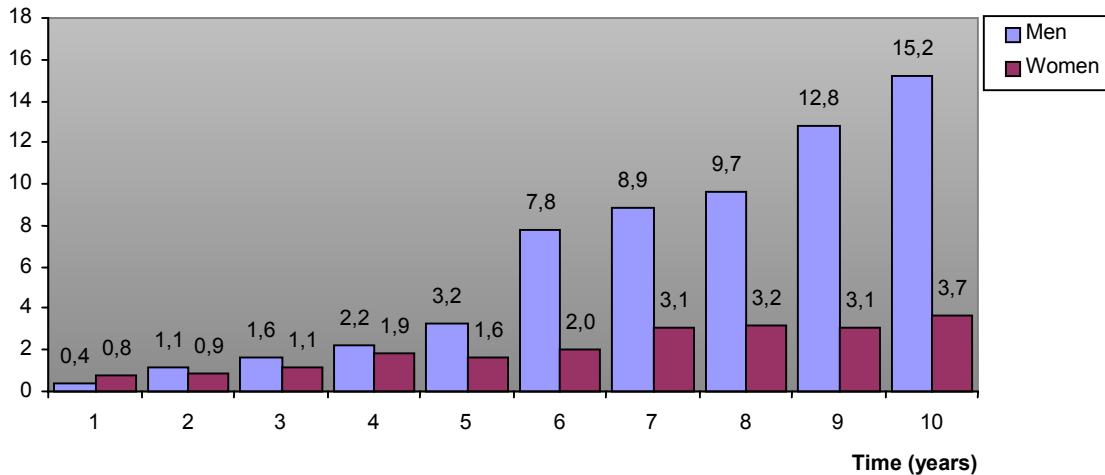


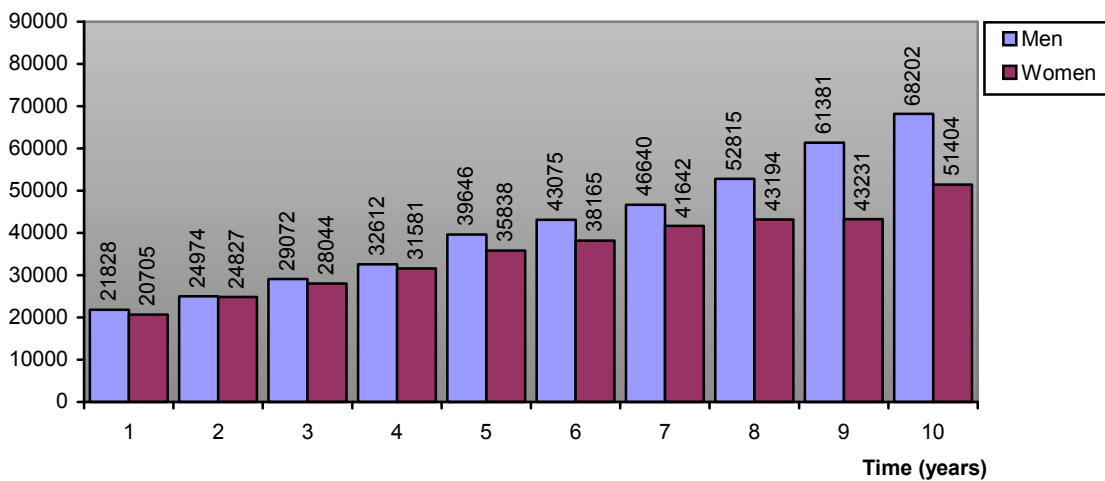
Figure 3: Income of men and women in Euro (1990 cohort, first ten years)



**Figure 4: Managerial responsibility for number of employees (men and women, 1990 cohort, first ten years)**

Applying these ‘virtual twins method’ meant that both men and women selected do not differ regard these characteristics, most of which were measured by psychometric questionnaires as part of ViCaPP. 52 virtual twins (104 graduates) within a sample of 82 female and 126 male graduates from the 1990 cohort could be created. For both men and women the development of career success was recorded every year within a period of ten years. In a second step, we excluded from the calculation the individuals who had one or more job interruptions because of maternity (as seen, paternity is a rarity). It decreases the number of persons considered to 34 women and 34 men.

Analysing the 34 virtual twin pairs, the following picture emerges (Figure 5 and Figure 6). The differences in the progression of income and managerial responsibility still remain. Looking at the progression of managerial responsibility, having job interruptions or not does not seem to make any differences for women. Even the expected decreasing of the difference amplitude is not to be found. Such a decreasing may be found for the progression of financial income, but it nevertheless remains minimal. One may at least in the case of income observe a regular progression for women. At the contrary, while managerial responsibility shows a take off after 5 years, the female one is characterised by stagnation.



**Figure 5: Income of men and women in Euro (1990 cohort, first ten years, identical twins, without graduates having a career interruption)**

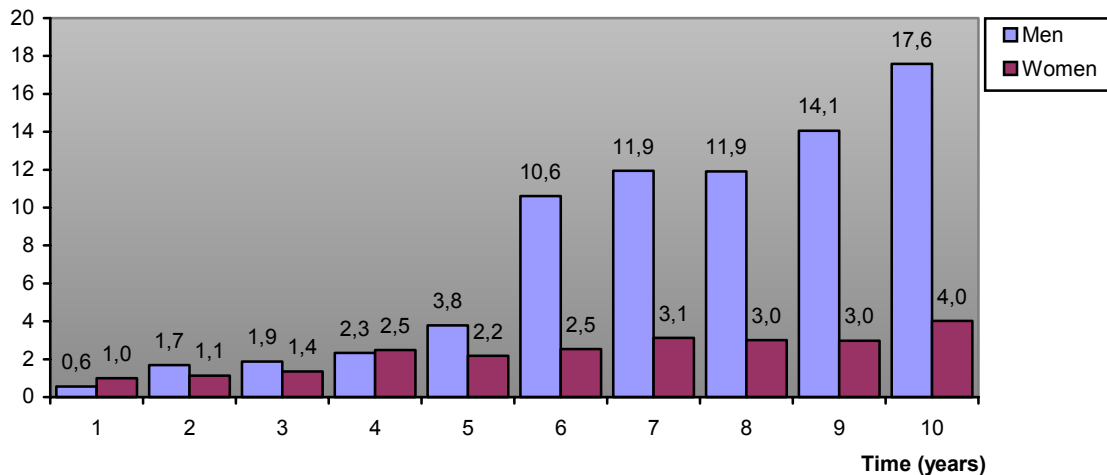


Figure 6: Managerial responsibility for number of employees (male and female, 1990 cohort, first ten years, without graduates having a career interruption)

## 5. Discussion

Given the results shown above, three main points can be made at the empirical level.

First, compared to the 1990 cohort, the opportunity structure in the 1970ies contained more career success relevant elements which could be influenced by the individuals. Personal development, i.e. occupational training and education, as well as the proximity to decisions makers offered the best chances and opportunities for career progression for the 70 cohort. For the 90, the determinant factors are the economic situation of the organisation and the branch. In other words, the influence of the economic environment at large and the economic situation of the organisation contribute most to positive career opportunities for graduates of the 90ies.

Second, the first years in one's professional careers are important. This is true not only in classic organisational careers but also in more volatile careers resembling at least in part 'new careers'. For both cohorts, the very first years are crucial for the access to further opportunities. Thus, a certain *hysteresis* of careers seem to take place indicating that early experiences and results have strong significance for the future career path even if the context is not one single organisation.

Third, gender seems to be an important variable for the effects of given opportunity structures. While men and women alike face similar opportunity structures, the reaction to those opportunities are different. Thus, opportunity structure creates gender specific effects, often to the disadvantage for females. Beyond other possible determinants of the opportunity structure, being a woman obviously remains – at least in Austria – a major handicap for accessing career opportunities.

At a theoretical level, these core results seem to indicate that analysing the structure and effects of opportunity structure allows new aspects of determinants of careers and the interplay between individual and the context to come into the equation. When Merton wrote about the opportunity structure, his aim was to give an sociological explication of deviance (Merton, 1968). While values like success are prevalent across society, legitimate means to pursue these values are not equally accessible, given the different possibilities for seizing career opportunities. This leads to different types of adjustment. "Conformity" is one of them, i.e. the



acceptance of both goals and institutionalised means. Among the deviant alternatives is “re-treatism”, a rejection of the goals and means of a society. Particularly interesting for our purpose is “innovation” as possible type of adaptation. It refers to the acceptance of goals but the rejection of means. Innovation within occupational career, e.g. new ways of defining career success, new mixes between work and family, new careers patterns etc. could be an alternative way for women to compensate for a lack of opportunities within an obviously gendered opportunity structure.

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