

# **Universal wiggling? Perceptions of the career field at different points in time – an empirical study.**

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## 1. Introduction

Careers are embedded in time – arguably, this is a generally accepted dictum among career researchers and reflected in career research. Widely used definitions of careers encompass the time aspect, looking at careers as an evolving sequence of work experience over time (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989) or a “sequence of positions occupied by a person during the course of a lifetime” (Super, 1980: 282). Time is also crucial for a number of discussion streams within the career discourse. Two prominent examples include the developmental perspective at the individual level and the issue of ‘traditional’ vs. ‘new’ careers at the contextual level. Regarding the former, a number of prominent stage models of career have been developed, describing typical stages that individuals go through during their evolving careers (e.g. Super, 1957; Hall & Nougaim, 1968; Levinson, 1979; Schein, 1978). Typically, these stage models implicitly refer to quite stable career contexts and little changes in individuals’ career preferences. Time in this respect refers to different development stages in the individual life course.

In terms of ‘traditional’ vs. ‘new’ careers, there is a plethora of literature about career related consequences of changes in the macro-context. Change drivers such as globalisation, virtualisation etc. (Djelic & Quack, 2003) have not only led to new forms of organisations (Scott, 2004), but, so goes the argument (for critical voices warning against a change hype see, e.g. Guest & Davey, 1996; Jacoby, 1999), also to ‘new’ forms of careers. They frequently bear little resemblance to traditional career patterns (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Feldman, 2000) and affect both individuals and organisations (Gunz, 1989; Minor, Slade, & Myers, 1991). Career research provides many flashy terms for “new careers” such as boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), protean (Hall, 1996b), nomad (Cadin, Bender, de Saint Giniez, & Pringle, 2000), chaotic (Peterson & Anand, 2002; see also Gunz, Lichtenstein, & Long, 2002), spiral (Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth, & Larsson, 1996), post-corporate (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997b) or chronically flexible (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Meyer, 2003). The time dimension here denotes the general career context, i.e. the societal, political and economical conditions within which careers unfold.

While there are a lot of conceptual and case-study like contributions to both the developmental and the contextual changes over time, there is less quantitative research available than one would expect given the prominence of the topic (a notable exception is, for example, the classical study by Abele & Stief, 2004; Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974; Reitman & Schmeer, 2003). The scarcity of such studies is due to two major reasons. First, tracking changes over time or comparing changes across different points in time puts high demands on the data used. Ideally, data generated by using a panel and multi-cohort design provides the background for such analyses. However, building such a database is resource-consuming and fraught with difficulties. Second, there is little conceptual consensus on core elements of careers. Depending on your conceptual lens, very different aspects of careers come into view, making it difficult to compare different results.

Against this backdrop, the current study is interested in individual perceptions of the career field at different points in time. Using a field and habitus perspective of careers (Iellatchitch et al., 2003), it looks at how individuals view the two core dimensions of career field, i.e. coupling and configuration, during different periods of their individual work careers and in different general career contexts, i.e. different periods of recent history. Thus, the paper addresses how individuals in different stages of their careers and during different times of the past decades perceive issues such as flexibility and change, independence, degree of long-term perspectives or uncertainty and insecurity. Specifically, this paper investigates the following two questions:

1. How do career stages and general career context influence perceptions of the core characteristics of the career field?
2. Do the effects of general career context and career stages interact?

By investigating these questions, this study contributes to the discussion about change in careers over time in several ways. First, by using the concept of career fields it provides a conceptual tool for analysing unfolding careers at the individual and contextual level. Second, it investigates how core dimensions are perceived during different phases in recent history, i.e. the past three and a half decades. Third, it analyses how these core dimensions of career fields are perceived in different career stages. Finally, the paper looks at potential interaction effects between general career contexts and career stages. Empirically, the study is based on a sample of three cohorts of business school graduates who have graduated from a large Central European university around 2000, 1990, and 1970, respectively.

## **2. Theoretical background**

Theoretically, this study uses three streams of work on (1) career fields and its dimensions as developed in the field and habitus perspective of careers; (2) different stages of individual career development; and (3) general career context providing the background for careers and career fields.

### **2.1. Career field and its core dimensions**

For Bourdieu a social field is a patterned set of practices which suggests competent action in conformity with rules and roles. It constitutes a network of positions. In this playground or battlefield various actors, endowed with a certain field-relevant capital, try to advance their position by following individual strategies. Playing according to the rules of the game as defined by the specific set of capital most valuable for holding power within the field contributes to the reproduction of the fields (Bourdieu 1977, 1986).

Careers as the sequence of positions influenced by work related individual efforts are not a field, but unfold within a field. Career fields are the social context within which individual members of the work force make their moves. Owning a specific portfolio of field-relevant capital, individuals try to maintain or improve their place in the given and unfolding network of work related positions. This is done through a patterned set of practices enabled and constrained by the rules of the field and, in turn, contributing to the shaping of these rules. Career fields have a dynamic quality. This reflects the focal relationship between work and time (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989a).

Four different sub-fields of careers – company world, free-floating professionalism, self-employment and chronic flexibility (Iellatchitch et al., 2003), each of them characterised, among others, by specific rules about promotion, the value of career capitals – are resulting from an interplay between two basic dimensions of career fields: tightness of coupling (Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1969; Weick, 1976) and stability of configuration (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967) between actors.

Coupling focuses on the closeness of relationship and the degree of mutual influence between the focal actor and the other actor(s) in the configuration (e.g. Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1969; Weick, 1976). Tight coupling indicates that the actors are closely linked with their decisions, while loose coupling indicates a type of relationship where the decisions of one actor

have very little consequence for the decisions of the other(s). The configuration dimension focuses on changes over time in the configuration of relationships between the focal actor and other relevant actors. A stable configuration expresses a low rate of change in the actor configuration and or work related tasks. Contrary, an unstable configuration implies that there is a frequent change in the configuration of actors and/or work-related tasks. This dimension describes more about the rate of change in the configuration than the number of actors which are relevant for the focal actor.

Coupling and configuration therefore provide a parsimonious yet universally applicable framework for conceptualising career change – across general career contexts, career stages, but also different economic sectors, forms of employment etc.

Preliminary analyses (see Meyer, Schiffinger, Mayrhofer, & Schmidt, 2006 and further analysis in Appendix 1) show that empirically the coupling dimension splits into two sub-dimensions: career reliance and independence. *Career reliance* unites security and calculability of career-related prospects and how easily another adequate job could be found. *Independence* refers to the subjection of career-related prospects to specific external actors and/or constraints. The dimension of configuration combines two aspects of *changeability*, the perceived changeability of work content and of professional relations.

These three dimensions can be used to determine the locations of actors within the career field. Both the general career context, e.g. societal images about what constitutes a proper career or labour market situations, and the career stage, e.g. early or later career, potentially influence perceptions of career reliance, independence and changeability.

## **2.2. Career Stages**

Career research has always been influenced by concepts of adult development (Levinson, 1979; Levinson, 1986; Super, 1994), which is closely linked with occupational life especially in Western societies (Hall, 2002: 170).

These concepts mainly deal with the changes in values, needs, and skills in different career stages (Feldman, 1989: 135) and how these stages influence individuals' attitudes and perceptions of careers (e.g., Cron & Slocum, 1986). Such models of career development were highly connected to traditional career conceptualisations (Sullivan, 1999: 462). Hall (2002) points out that the view on career stages of individuals changed in two ways during the last decades.

First, there is a greater asynchronicity between life and career stages: "...the stages of our career and our life stages do not line up together as neatly as they did before". Second, there is also a change of how cycles of work and life stages interact and experiences are felt differently. He concludes that "career and life stages are still relevant to modern careers, but they have more complex interactions and overlays, like harmonic overtones in music" (90ff.). Referring to new career contexts, Mirvis and Hall (1994) offer a description of multiple, shorter learning cycles within individual career development.

Following Levinson (1986) who discusses "eras" of the life cycle: early adult, mid-life, and late adult assuming periods of transition-in, stability, and transition-out, we distinguish between three career in our study: (1) entry, (2) main, and (3) late career stage.

*(1) Entry career stage – year 1-5.* This career phase is the starting point of occupational life. It focuses on the first years of occupational life which are characterised by establishing oneself, aiming for security, gaining recognition, fitting into and making efforts integrating in occupational life (Hall, 2002: 100f.).

*(2) Main career stage – year 6-20.* This phase includes an increase in valuing achievement, esteem (Hall, 2002: 101), and also promotion (Glaser, 1964). Careers are also more likely to plateau in this stage (Slocum, Cron, Hansen, & Rawlings, 1985; Slocum, Cron, & Yows, 1987).

*(3) Late career stage – year 21-30.* This phase is connected to the final years of occupational life (Hall, 2002: 111) Individuals are focused on developing a self-image and a self-concept that are independent of and separate from work (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006: 325).

Using these three stages as a rough structuring criterion does not imply a revival of the original stage concepts assuming stable careers and little turbulence. However, we would argue that even in turbulent contexts with multiple careers, spiral trajectories, boundarylessness and protean characteristics of careers etc., individuals' working lives still are characterized by these three stages in a meaningful way. The entry career stage with its characteristic uncertainties irrespective of the concrete career, the main stage with the unfolding of career patterns and personal development, and the late career stage with its anticipation of closing one's work biography and the transformation to a post-work – or at least: a new portfolio of work-non-work activities – are, we would argue, still adequate descriptive categories.

### 2.3. General context of career

Careers are always embedded in a broader societal, political and economical context (Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007; Collin & Young, 1986; Kanter, 1989) which has changed over the last years (Arthur et al., 1999). The influence of the general context of careers on career fields and careers is reflected in the career research discourse over the last decades. Career literature reflects on changes of career context and forms by emphasising the following topics. The literature on new careers talks about increased flexibility (see e.g., Derr, 1987; Hall, 1996a; Mayrhofer et al., 2005; Peiperl & Baruch, 1997a; Wright & Snell, 1998; Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & Rittmann, 2003), the perception of increased changeability (see e.g., Applebaum, 2004; Brousseau et al., 1996; Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004; Derr & Laurent, 1989; Feldman, 1988; Ibarra, 2004; Johnson & Stokes, 1999; King, 2003; Mallon & Cohen, 2001; Marks, 2004; Minor et al., 1991; Mitch, Brown, & Leeuwen, 2004; Nortier, 1995; Pringle & Mallon, 2003; Schein, 1978; Valcour & Tolbert, 2003; Warren, Sheridan, & Hauser, 2002), referring to psychological contracts (see e.g., Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004) an increase in individual independence (e.g., Guest, 2004; Guest, Oakley, Clinton, & Budjanovcanin, 2006; Hall & Moss, 1998) but also increased uncertainty (see e.g., Brown & Humphreys, 2003; Callister, Kramer, & Turban, 1999; Connell & Nord, 1996; Doyle, 2001; Evans & Gunz, 1996; Kramer, 1993, 1996; Pelsma & Arnett, 2002) and insecurity e.g., (Millward & Kyriakidou, 2004; Swaen, Kant, van Amelsvoort, & Beurskens, 2002). The career literature discusses concepts of employability (e.g., Fugate & Ashforth, 2003; King, 2003: 5) with particularly the career counselling literature promoting lifelong learning as one answer to constant change (see e.g., Matejka & Dunsing, 1993; Sluis, 2002; Tamkin, 1997) and suggesting possible coping strategies for uncertainty and overcoming career obstacles (see e.g., Pelsma & Arnett, 2002).

Against the backdrop of this literature and starting with the 1970s, three main periods can be differentiated when looking at the general context for careers: (1) stable, (2) transitory, and (3) new career context.

*(1) Stable career context.* Looking back more than 30 years, organisations are the almost exclusive point of reference (see, e.g., Glaser, 1968; Schein, 1978). Researchers mainly assumed organisations to be enclosed in a stable environment and career development is to a significant extent influenced by organisations which are primarily responsible for the entire career management. Consequently, careers are conceptualised as progression of linear career stages

within few organisations (Levinson, 1979) and associated with a mechanistic ladder system where “age and seniority is highly correlated” (Nicholson, 1996: 45).

(2) *Transitory career context.* During the mid-1980s the context of work changes as organisations starting to react to environmental conditions like increasing competition (see e.g., Hamel & Prahalad, 1994), internationalisation (see, e.g. Perlitz, 2004) etc., which also has consequences for organisations and employees (Krüger, 1995). Research dealing with these issues focused on job loss (e.g., Latack & Dozier, 1986; Locker, 1997) downsizing (e.g., Evans, Gunz, & Jalland, 1997; McGovern, Hope-Hailey, & Stiles, 1998), employee relocation (e.g., Hall & Isabella, 1985), organizational restructuring (Goffee & Scase, 1992), inter alia (see e.g., Feldman, 1989).

(3) *New career context.* Throughout the 1990s transition trends seems to intensify, increasing competition through internationalisation (Arthur et al., 1999), globalisation (see, e.g. Michie, 2003), and deregulation (see, e.g., Aufderheide, 1990), which left their footprints at the macro-level of societies and economies (see e.g., Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Strunk, 2004). Specifically, the context of work changed on a macro level in 1995 as Austria joined the European Union, and the enlargement of the European Union during the last five years had consequences on the labor market, too (Biffl, 1997).

Career research seems to reflect these changes of career contexts and patterns (Baruch, 1999) and the issue of new careers arguably contributes to a sharply rising number of career-related publications in the 1990s (Kelly, Brannick, Hulpke, Levine, & To, 2003: 416). Many contributions to this debate have an implicit notion of liberation, freedom and independence (see, e.g., Moses, 2000; Arthur et al., 1999; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996b; Hall & Associates, 1996), thus emphasising the positive effects. More sceptical observers, however, point towards a lack of predictability and therefore less career reliance, insecurity, overload of the individual in terms of responsibility for career success, increased feelings of insecurity (e.g., Littler & Innes, 2004; Littler, Wiesner, & Dunford, 2003; Nicholson, 1996) leading to negative stress reactions and lower job satisfaction (Latack, 1989; Reitman & Schneer, 2005) and a risk shift from organisations to individuals who increasingly carry the cost of increased flexibility (see e.g., Bridges, 1994). Some even stated: “The only constant in workplace appears to be change” (Locker, 1997:16).



### 3. Hypotheses

The hypotheses relate to both the effects of career stages and different career contexts on perceptions of the career field as well as to interaction effects between stages and contexts.

#### 3.1. Career stages and career field

In the career entry stage individuals adapt to occupational life. This phase is characterised by exploration and building an initial occupational structure (Hill & Miller, 1981: 115), seeking for orientation in terms of accomplishment of tasks and social contacts. Stress is a crucial factor in this period, caused by need for achievement and less perceived security in the first years of job performance and when entering an new organization (Hall, 2002: 110). We therefore assume that career reliance is lower in the entry than in the main career stage.

In the main stage a level of professionalisation is attained, work-related networks are built and individuals focus more on establishing, advancing and maintaining their position. Additionally, they define themselves more by their position and professional experiences and accomplishments, clarifying their self-concepts and their notions of what they can reach (Schein, 1996). Knowing their track record and their strengths and weaknesses increases their confidence in finding another job if necessary and their feeling of career security and starting to focus on developing roles more outside occupational life (Super, 1994: 232).

In later career stages, career reliance decreases to a lower level again in terms of security and perceived alternatives. Competition with younger employees might decrease career security. More importantly: a reduced willingness to change jobs, knowing that by now it will probably be a change for the worse, markedly reduces career reliance towards the end of career. Overall, these considerations lead to the following hypothesis:

*H1a: Perceived career reliance is highest in the main career stage, lower in the entry and lowest in the late career stage.*

In the initial career stage, even the jobs of well-educated business school graduates are comparatively highly structured and closely monitored and the novices are eager to “learn the ropes” and pay considerable attention to existing rules. As their career progresses, their leadership, budget, and decision making responsibilities and learning experiences lead to higher self-assurance (Schein, 1977) and feelings of autonomy.

Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1b: Progressing career stages lead to higher perceived independence.*

As mentioned above, individuals experience comparatively little autonomy and variety in early career stages. They start to work at lower hierarchical levels within organisations, and relevant professional relationships are mostly limited to the organisation. As occupational experience especially in management is gained, changeability increases. Tasks get more complex and cover a broader range of functions, and the range of professional relationships widens.

Additionally, in the career entry stage individuals expect a lot of change and variability (although not necessarily justified) as they are "thrown in at the deep end" of their profession. These considerations are the basis for the following hypothesis:

*H1c: Perceived changeability is lower in the entry than in the main or late stage.*

### **3.2. General career contexts and career field**

In a stable context the expectations of employees and employers were characterised by the mutual agreement on loyalty for job security (Sullivan, 1999: 458). During the transitory period the implicit promise that organisations care for their employees' employability by offering career systems were "cancelled", as were well-established psychological contracts, leading to confusion and feelings of insecurity. The "survivors" of change, witnessing layoffs in their immediate proximity, experience career insecurity and feelings of having no career alternatives. This is even more the case for victims of organisational restructuring. In the new career context, the dust has settled somewhat. People learn to cope with the new rules in the labour market (or their absence), and career reliance rises again. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H2a: Career reliance is lower in the transitory career context than in a stable or new context.*

In new careers with less boundaries and more free up and down, sideways and international movement (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1998), individuals are increasingly responsible for their own career. Positive aspects of this are enhanced opportunities for individual learning and the diffusion of ideas and personal reinvention (Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2002: 59). This may also lead to greater independence perceived by individuals compared to contexts

where organisations were seen as more responsible for career management (Sullivan, 1999: 458).

The loosening of psychological contracts between employers and employees arguably affects independence perceptions, too. As organisations no longer offer employment security, people no longer feel obliged to stay with "their" company but simply strive to increase their personal benefits, without any loyalty ties to an organisation. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H2b: More recent career contexts lead to higher perceived independence.*

Recent career contexts are said to be more diverse than ever in terms of career trajectories, transitions, interruptions, and changes of career course (i.e. Arthur et al., 1999; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan, 1999; Sullivan, Carden, & Martin, 1998). From the perspective of objective careers, the rate of change concerning frequency and magnitude of transitions (Karaevli & Hall, 2006; Nicholson & West, 1989), phases of self-employment, sabbaticals, and parttime work (e.g. Feldman, 2000; Tomlinson, 2004) increased. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H2c: More recent career contexts lead to higher perceived changeability.*

### **3.3. Interaction effects between career stages and career contexts**

In a traditional career context, career development largely depends on the previous track record (see, e.g., the tournament models developed by Rosenbaum, 1979, 1984). For these traditional and structured career paths, career stage is an important antecedent of career outcomes. In recent career contexts individuals are more responsible for their own career management, and face constant changes and the need to demonstrate their abilities, regardless of their accomplishments in previous career stages (Sennett, 1998). These considerations lead to

*H3: In more recent career contexts the effect of career stage on perceptions of the three core dimensions of the career field decreases.*

## **4. Sample, measures, and methods**

The following analyses are based on a sample of business school graduates from one of the largest Universities in Austria, split into three cohorts. It contains 111 graduates from around 1970 (87% male, mean age 62 years  $\pm$ 3.8), 250 graduates from around 1990 (62% male, mean

age 42 years  $\pm 3.3$ ), and 246 graduates from around 2000 (56% male, mean age 33 years  $\pm 2.4$ ). Concerning age and gender proportion, the cohorts are representative of the respective graduation year for the whole university.

The data for the study were collected during questionnaire-based interviews, where the participants rated their career situation for each year on the five items measuring coupling and configuration (see next section).

Despite the three-cohort design, the periods between the cohorts' career beginnings are different (20 years between 1970 and 1990; 10 years between 1990 and 2000), making it hard to match career stages and survey years.

The design employed here attempts to respond to these difficulties by taking all consecutive career years of all three cohorts and assigning them to three career stages and three context periods (see measures section). Table 1 presents the number of career years in all contexts and stages for the 1970, 1990, and 2000 cohort, respectively.

*Table 1: Number of career years for career contexts and stages (total and by cohorts)*

<i>Career stage</i>	<i>Career context</i>									$\Sigma$
	Stable			Transitory			New			
Entry	521	1	0	4	1039	0	0	210	771	2546
Main	1114	0	0	540	153	0	9	1611	0	3427
Late	0	0	0	566	0	0	518	0	0	1084
$\Sigma$	1636			2302			3119			7057

*Career context* refers to the observation period. We distinguished between the following three contexts: Stable (1970-1985), Transitory (1986-1995), and New (1996-2005). Regarding *career stage*, we also distinguished between three stages: Entry (job years 1-5), Main (job years 6-20), and Late (job years 21-30).

*Coupling* and *configuration*, as described above in the theoretical framework, were operationalised with the following five items. All variables were measured with 11-point Likert scales.

Coupling was measured by the following three items:

- Security and calculability of career-related prospects (scale range from "very secure" to "very precarious")
- Subjection of career-related prospects to specific external actors and/or constraints ("very dependent" to "completely independent")

- How easily another adequate job could be found should the need arise ("very easily" to "not at all")

Configuration was measured by the following two items that directly refer to the two aspects of configuration mentioned above:

- Changeability of work content ("very stable" to "ever-changing")
- Changeability of professional relations ("very stable" to "ever-changing")

A principal component analysis of these five items with a slightly different sample suggested a three-factor solution (Meyer et al., 2006), with coupling split into two components (career despondency, uniting career (in)security and perceived difficulty of finding an alternative job, and independence as a remaining single item) and the two configuration items representing the third factor (changeability). For the present paper, career reliance is measured by the mean of the reversed items for (in)security and difficulty of finding an alternative job; independence is represented by the respective item, and changeability is the mean of the two configuration items. We present the detailed results of the PCA with the sample utilised here in Appendix 1.

Apart from the PCA we used linear models to explore the influence of career context and career stage on the perceptions of our three core dimensions. As our data are correlated (job years per participant), using an ANOVA-based or GLM design would probably lead to spurious significances and biased effect estimates. Regression analysis would have been a possibility, but given the aim of the analysis (examine the influence of two three-level categorical predictors), we chose mixed linear models, which like GLM procedures are able to examine the effect of categorical factors and covariates, while at the same time accounting for correlation in the data (McCulloch & Searle, 2000; Verbeke & Molenberghs, 2000). The models presented here examine career stage and context (and their possible interaction) as categorical predictors, including an autoregressive term with lag 1 (AR1) for the job years per subject.

## **5. Results**

H1a proposed that perceived career reliance is highest in the main career stage, lower in the entry and lowest in the late career stage. In a mixed model with career stage and the AR(1) term as predictors, the mean estimates for career reliance were 7.89 for the entry stage, 7.93 for the main stage, and 7.64 for the late stage, with the effect of career stage being significant

at the .01 level<sup>1</sup>, which provides support for H1a, despite modest differences. Pairwise comparisons show that the late stage is significantly different from the two others, but there is no significant difference between entry and main stage.

H2a proposed that career reliance is lower in transitory career context than in a stable or new context. Estimated means are 8.08 (stable), 7.83 (transitory), and 7.79 (new). The effect of career context is significant at the .01 level, pairwise comparisons show *stable* to be different from *transitory* and *new*, between which there is no significant difference. H2a is therefore not supported: career reliance declined in the transitory period, but did not rise again in the new context.

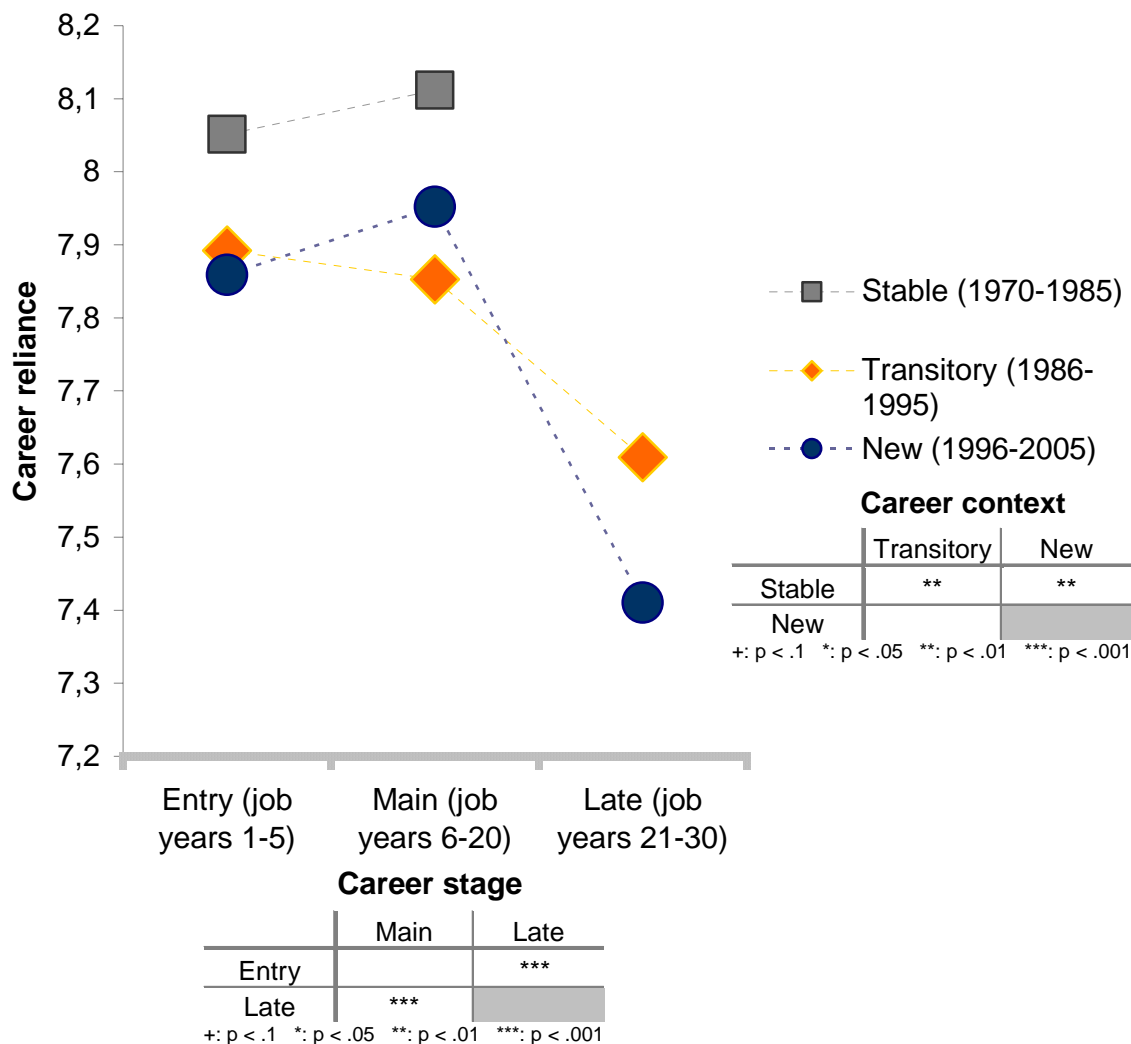
However, in a "complete" model including career stage, career context, their interaction, and the AR(1) term, the effect of career context is not statistically significant any more ( $p=.13$ ). The interaction effect is only significant at the .1 level.

Figure 1 on the following page displays the results for career reliance in different career stages and career contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, the autoregressive term was significant at the .001 level in all models.

Figure 1: Career stage and context means for career reliance

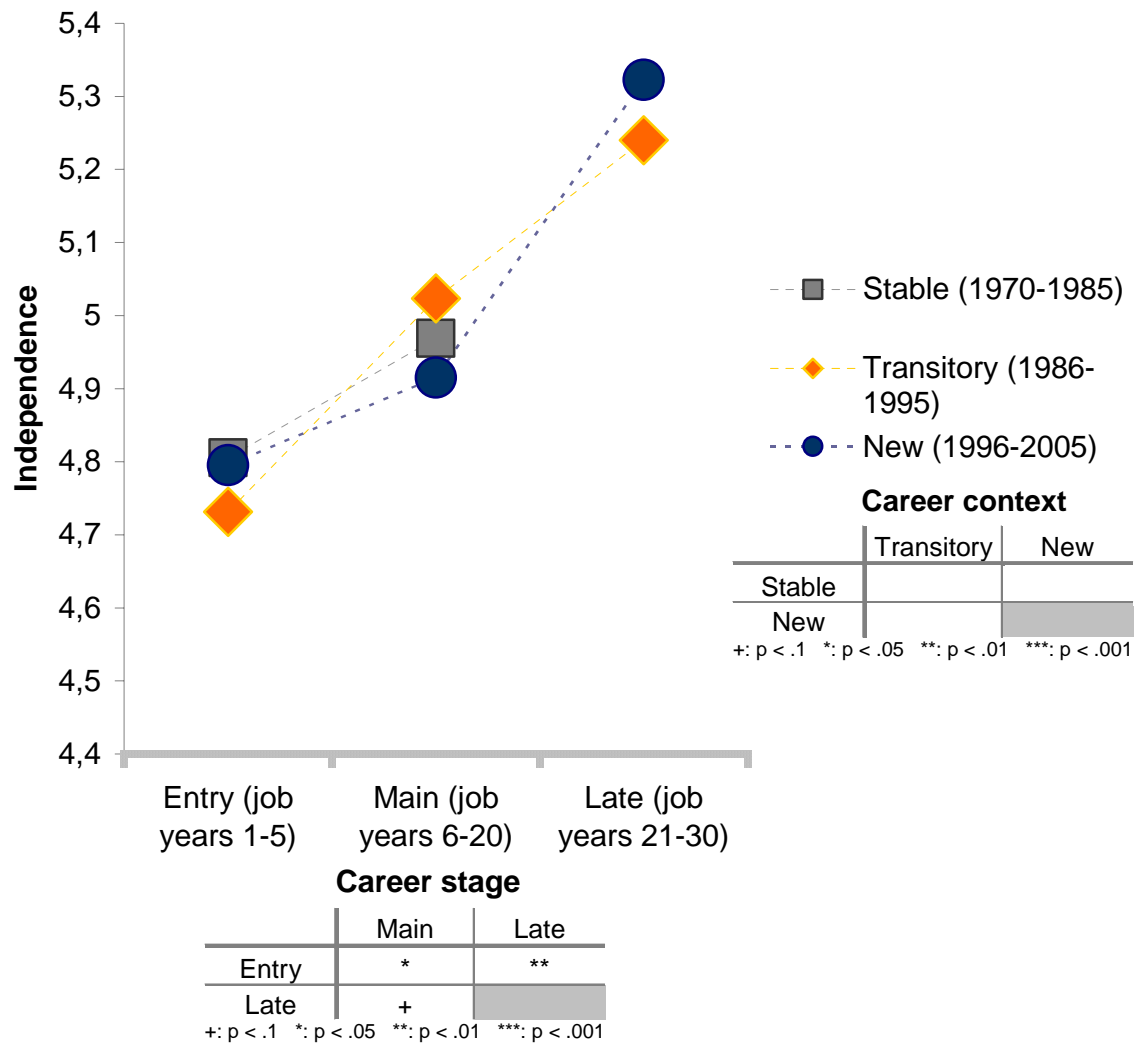


H1b proposes that progressing career stages lead to higher perceived independence. The mean estimates for a model including career stage and the AR(1) term support this prediction, with perceived independence rising from 4.78 (entry) over 4.97 (main) to 5.21 (late). The stage effect is significant at the .01 level, with entry being significantly different from main and late, while the main/late difference is only marginally significant.

According to H2b, more recent career contexts lead to higher perceived independence. Although the estimated means show a tendency in the predicted direction (4.85/4.90/4.95), the effect of career context on independence is far from being significant ( $p = 0.73$ ). H2b is therefore not supported.

Figure 2 shows the results for the effects of career stage and context on career independence. A model including career stage, career context, their interaction, and the AR(1) term shows the same pattern; the interaction term is not significant.

Figure 2: Career stage and context means for career independence



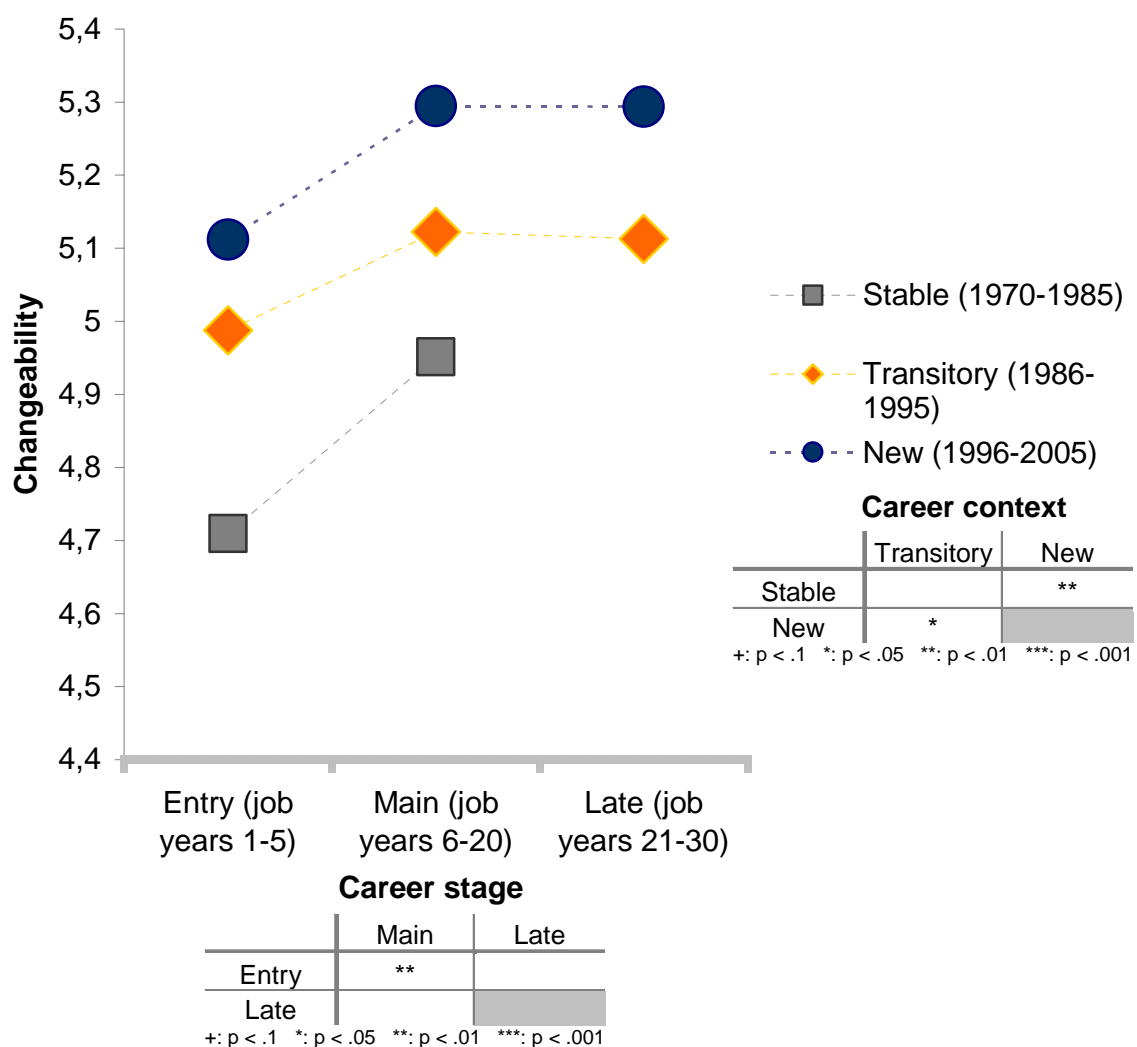
H1c claims that perceived changeability is lower in the entry than in the main or late stage. This assumption is largely supported by the results, with an estimated mean of 5.01 for the entry stage and 5.21 for the main and late stage and career stage having a significant effect at the .01 level. Surprisingly, the pairwise comparisons only show a significant difference between early and main stage.



H2c proposes that more recent career contexts lead to higher perceived changeability. The mean estimations (4.85/5.03/5.21) and significance level for the context effect ( $p < .01$ ) provide support for this hypothesis as well. In the pairwise comparisons, however, the difference between stable and transitory context is not statistically significant, while the remaining two pairwise differences are.

Figure 3 displays the results. The complete model again produces almost identical results. Both career stage and career context are significant predictors. There is no interaction effect.

Figure 3: Career stage and context means for career changeability



The interaction hypothesis proposed that in more recent career contexts the effect of career stage on the three dimensions decreases. We found no support for this assumption, quite the reverse. Apart from the fact that the stage  $\times$  context interaction was only (marginally) signifi-

cant for career reliance, the effect of career stage did not decrease in more recent contexts.<sup>2</sup> Rather, there was a slight increase; for career reliance and independence, the effect of career stage even increased considerably in the *new* context.

Although our considerations do not include gender as a relevant antecedent of the three dimensions, we exploratively checked gender effects by examining mixed models with gender and the AR(1) term. For career reliance and changeability, gender was far from being a significant predictor ( $p = 0.88$  and  $0.13$ ). For independence, gender was almost significant at the .05 level with men having a higher estimated mean (5.04 vs. 4.66), suggesting that gender might play a role for this dimension. However, in a model including gender, career stage, career context, career stage  $\times$  career context and the AR(1) term, gender was not a significant predictor any more. The remaining results corresponded to the mixed model for independence: only career stage was a significant predictor. When considering the effects of stage and context, it should be kept in mind that the graphs only show a fraction of the total scale range, which already suggests that the effect size of even statistically significant differences is rather small.

## 6. Discussion

Despite the size of the effects of career stage and general career context on career reliance, independence, and changeability being not too pronounced (which is not very surprising given the quite homogeneous sample), the results shed some light on the interplay of career stage and general career context regarding actors' perceived positions on core dimensions of the career field.

Although in the total model for career reliance career stage was the more important predictor, the results for career context are even more interesting. The career stage effect is mainly due to the drop in the late stage, but in this stage, job alternatives and career security arguably lose importance compared to the entry and main stage. Concerning career context, however, contrary to our assumptions career reliance dropped in the transitory context without recovering in the new context. In the late career stage, perceived career reliance was even lower in the new than in the transitory context. One possible explanation for this is that adaptability (Hall,

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<sup>2</sup> We examined this by calculating separate mixed models with career stage and the AR(1) term for all career contexts and entering the degrees of freedom and F values of these models into a formula for calculating *eta* (Bortz & Döring, 2002: 634).

1988), a “key-learning metacompetency” when facing turbulent change (Hall, 2002: 161) decreases in the late career stage. In any case, the results suggest that the “turbulent change” has not yet waned in the new context as far as career reliance is concerned. These results also raise two further issues.

First, it raises the issue whether we are already in a ‘new context’, i.e. whether the phase of transition from the former more stable context to the new one actually is already finished or still underway. At first sight, there are substantial arguments in favour of the view that the transitory phase has come to an end. The ‘new careers’ are already part of management folklore and some of their core assumptions such as the need for life-long learning, the requirement of regional and profession related flexibility or the importance of subjective careers have, by and large, entered everyday communications as reflected, for example, in career-related articles in the popular press.

On the other hand, ‘zooming out’ a little bit and in line with the empirical findings it seems questionable whether the partly fundamental changes linked with new careers have already been internalised by individuals. Given the long and, overall, successful history of the ‘traditional’ view on work careers, it is hardly surprising that long-established interpretation and evaluation patterns for work careers have not been completely thrown over board. Rather, individuals as well as some societies still grapple with the perceived and actual demands of the new career context. Austria in this respect is most likely a good example for a country historically firmly aligned to traditional views of careers. Being one of the most highly regulated countries in the world and having a historical background which emphasised societal and professional stratification as expressed, for example, in the importance of nobility or guilds in the past or the relatively strict limitation for various handicrafts in terms of their legitimate scope of work, e.g. Austrian plumbers officially not being allowed to also do substantial bricklaying work, it is not very surprising that current career reliance corresponds much more to the transitory than the stable career context.

Second, the findings on career reliance raise the issue whether comparable estimations to the past more stable general career context can be expected even after the complete ‘sinking-in’ of the new context. Of course, even in such a context events and potential problems are not completely random but can be linked to some rules of thumb. Still, it seems plausible that the generic characteristics of such a field lead to less career reliance than a stable context, even if individuals are well aware of how this context functions. The “good old times” may be gone for good, even if they are being replaced by a ‘new order’.

For independence, general context had virtually no effect at all, while independence increased with career stage which is in line with our hypothesis. This result supports the assumption of individuals gaining professional freedom and independence during their personal career development. This is somewhat surprising in two ways.

First, the results in a way are slightly deviating from research on the locus of control indicating that with increasing biological age the perceptions of internal locus of control decreases. In the case of this study, one has to take into account the specific sample, though. As business school graduates, most of the sample are on a moderately or even highly successful career track. This is true especially for individuals in later career stages. Being successful in the career field that members of our sample are in also is quite frequently linked with becoming more independent of external forces. Unlike in some other professions, e.g. construction workers, where uncertainties increase once you belong to the group of older employees, this effect is less noticeable for our sample. Work in consultancy or as a free-lance professional is often positively linked with age as a source of experience.

Second, our findings somewhat contradict the idea of a ‘liberating’ aspect of new career contexts. Of course, only very few members of our sample are pure representatives of new careers. However, even though many of them seem to pursue rather traditional career paths, many of them are fully affected by the new context. In addition, compared to many other members of the labour force, individuals of our sample are less affected by the negative consequences of new developments. Still, they do not report a higher degree of independence.

Regarding changeability, both hypotheses were supported by our data. More recent career contexts are linked to increased changeability, so even though ‘new’ careers do not offer more independence, they offer more variability, according to our results. As to career stage, perceived changeability was lower in the entry stage. This may be a result of individuals simply dealing with rather narrow and well-defined tasks in the beginning of their careers. This changes when individuals progress in their occupational life because they deal with more responsibility and decisions and therefore deal with more variety in terms of tasks and social contacts. On the other hand, it could hint at a different point of reference in the entry stage compared to later career stages: they might perceive less changeability just because they expect a higher rate of changeability early in their careers.

Finally, the interaction hypothesis was not supported. The effect of career stage did not decrease in more recent career contexts. How far one has progressed in one's career therefore is

as important a factor in new contexts as it has been in traditional contexts, at least regarding career reliance, independence, and changeability. This supports the view that the differentiation in three broad career stages indicating basic phases of work biographies still makes sense in new career contexts.

Wiggling, i.e. (according to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary) *moving to and fro with quick jerky or shaking motions and proceeding with or as if with twisting and turning movements* is universal in the sense that it provides an adequate image of careers across the board. However, where exactly one wiggles through the career field and how it feels in terms of reliance, independence, and changeability partly depends on both career stage and career context as expression of the time dimension in careers.

## 7. References

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### Appendix 1

Compared to Meyer et al., 2006, the PCA results regarding the five items on coupling and configuration remain virtually the same when taking the whole available job years (listwise  $n = 6938$ ; in the first analysis reported in Meyer et al., 2006, it was restricted to the first ten career years for the 1970 and 1990 cohort, with  $n = 3461$ ).

Again, the eigenvalue  $> 1$  criterion results in a two-factor solution (52% of variance explained), with (in)stability of work content and professional relations loading high on one factor, insecurity of job prospects and difficulty of finding job alternatives on the second factor, while career independence has moderate to low loadings on both factors (0.32 and -0.17). Extraction of a third factor (with an eigenvalue of almost 1: 0.99) results in the following solution (72% of variance explained), almost identical to the one presented in Meyer et al., 2006:

*Table A1: PCA results for the coupling and configuration items (varimax rotation)*

	<i>factor 1</i>	<i>factor 2</i>	<i>factor 3</i>
Changefulness of tasks & job content	<b>0.82</b>	-0.14	< 0.01
Changefulness of professional relations	<b>0.79</b>	0.20	0.08
Difficulty to find adequate alternative job	-0.14	<b>0.79</b>	0.14
Insecurity of career-related perspectives	0.20	<b>0.74</b>	-0.18
Career independence of external actors/constraints	0.07	-0.02	<b>0.98</b>