

INVITED ARTICLE

Career proactivity: Conceptual and theoretical reflections

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Abstract

This article adds several conceptual and theoretical reflections to the article “Career proactivity: A bibliometric literature review and a future research agenda” by Jiang et al. The authors conducted a timely and relevant study by analyzing and integrating literature on career proactivity from the domains of organizational and vocational behavior. Prior research has clearly demonstrated that these areas are still largely operating as separate “islands,” both conceptually and methodologically. As such, systematically analyzing the literature and synthesizing the many existing proactivity-related constructs are important steps forward in taking research on career proactivity to the next level. Though their bibliometric analysis confirms the gap between vocational psychology and OB research, there is also a hopeful message in the article, as several clusters showed considerable connections. Thus, it seems that scholars are starting to build bridges between the islands. Building on their analysis and future research suggestions, in this article, we further explore three specific considerations related to (1) conceptual issues, (2) theoretical issues, and (3) additions to their future research agenda.

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KEYWORDS

career proactivity, career self-management, grading coefficient, proactive behavior, proactive career behavior

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The authors define career proactivity as “an individual’s self-initiated and future-oriented actions aiming to influence, change, and improve career circumstances including the situation and the self.” This definition positions career proactivity as a behavioral construct, which we think is appropriate. Considering this definition, it is noteworthy that several critical concepts the authors identify in the career proactivity research field are not behavioral. This seems especially true for constructs studied within the cluster of “Career Adaptation and Construction,” which include studies focusing on proactive personality (which also plays a vital role in research in the “Employee Proactivity in Organizations” cluster), optimism, learning goal orientation, and career adaptability. Similarly, research in the “Employability and Career Self-Management in Protean and Boundaryless Contexts” cluster includes many studies focusing on protean career orientation and individual employability, while studies in the “Career Choice and Decision-Making” often focus on self-efficacy beliefs and career decidedness. Other examples include studies focused on constructs such as calling, job attitudes, or job search self-efficacy. Hence, it seems necessary to critically reflect that many studies in the context of career proactivity focused on individual characteristics, attitudes, competencies, and resources.

Such constructs are meaningfully related to career proactivity. As several studies cited in the review indicate, individual characteristics, attitudes, competencies, and resources, as well as environmental resources, can be significant predictors of career proactivity behaviors. Moreover, career proactivity behaviors can impact the development, maintenance, and utilization of career competencies and resources. As such, there is a close interplay between career proactivity and characteristics, attitudes, competencies, and resources, which merits further research attention.

However, our impression is that this research field has not focused enough on the behavioral aspect of career proactivity. We agree with the authors that such a focus would go beyond examining individual differences in summative or specific career behaviors and, instead, focus more on the dynamic process of proactive career management. As the authors noted, this implies a closer focus on specific cognitive, motivational, or behavioral aspects of career proactivity and their linkages over time in a goal-regulation process, for example, self-exploration, planning, environmental exploration, implementation, feedback processing, and adjustment (cf. Lord et al., 2010). This could be linked to developing new theories that outline such dynamic, self-regulatory processes over time. Such research could also better clarify the dynamics linking career competencies, career resources, and career proactivity, where competencies and resources are needed for career proactivity but are also shaped by career proactivity.

A related issue when focusing on the behavioral nature of career proactivity is to be more precise about when career behaviors are, in fact, proactive. This point also seems critical to distinguish career proactivity from the more general notion of career self-management (Hirschi & Koen, 2021). In our view, career proactivity should be seen as a subfacet of career self-management which focuses explicitly on proactive career behaviors. Here, it is important to note that while many studies claim to investigate career proactivity, the extent to which the

examined career self-management behaviors are, in fact, proactive remains unexplored and unclear. As the authors note, career proactivity should be self-initiated, future-oriented, and intended to change the situation and the self.

It is important to note that career self-management behaviors (e.g., career exploration, job search, career decision-making, career planning) do not necessarily fulfill these criteria. Indeed, they could be reactive (vs. self-initiated) and aim to maintain the status quo (vs. intended to change the situation and the self). For example, a student might pursue career exploration after graduating and be spurred on by parents. Likewise, a job search could occur as a reaction to a job loss, and an employee might engage in career planning because the employer requires them to present a career plan in the next performance review meeting. As this illustrates, engaging in career self-management does not automatically mean that a person shows proactive career behaviors. However, such proactivity is often presumed in studies on career behaviors that might frame their research as addressing career proactivity. Thus, future research should focus more clearly on when career self-management behaviors are genuinely proactive. This line of research could uncover essential insights into the predictors and consequences of different motivations to engage in career behaviors. It would also provide insight into the true nature of career proactivity versus other types of career behaviors.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Another impression we get from this review is that studies have focused primarily on career proactivity predictors. Understanding why and when individuals engage in career proactivity is essential for deriving evidence-based career interventions to assist individuals in becoming more proactive in managing their work and careers. Indeed, there appears to be a considerable consensus that career proactivity is needed in today's career environment and that it will produce favorable outcomes for individuals and possibly organizations. However, although this is the dominant narrative in career proactivity literature, the bibliometric analysis and discussion of future research barely mention any outcomes of career proactivity. For example, we would expect a systematic analysis of literature in this area to uncover research focusing on the effects of career proactivity on critical career outcomes such as career success, employability, and career sustainability. The absence of such findings points to a lack of research investigating under which circumstances and how career proactivity will produce positive effects. This line of research could focus more on the individual and contextual factors that amplify the beneficial effects of career proactivity (Parker et al., 2019). Such research would be essential to understand better how and when career proactivity is most helpful and when it might be less critical.

One specific direction for research would be to investigate how career proactivity may contribute to career outcomes. In virtually all studies focused on career proactivity, there seems to be an assumption that proactive behaviors directly benefit career outcomes. In other words, if someone takes the initiative to, for example, set new career goals or expand their professional network, this will automatically translate into career success or employability. Although there have been valuable attempts to update theorizing on career proactivity, these models typically focus on factors that trigger or hinder proactivity. Furthermore, empirical studies about career proactivity and related constructs (e.g., career crafting, career self-management) tend to model a direct effect of proactivity on outcomes. We believe there is a need for a more fine-grained understanding of the career proactivity–career outcomes relation. Some inspiration for this can

be found in recent work on proactive behavior at work, specifically job crafting. Zhang and Parker (2019) mention several mechanisms that may “translate” proactive behaviors into favorable outcomes, such as enhanced person-job fit, engagement at work, and need satisfaction. Similar reasoning could apply to career proactivity and career outcomes: proactively taking charge of one’s career could trigger the satisfaction of basic human needs or increases their person-career fit.

Another relatively unexplored option is whether career proactivity *directly* or *indirectly* enhances career outcomes. Although scholars often assume a direct effect of career proactivity on outcomes, perhaps its main benefits lie in creating favorable circumstances for individuals to achieve those outcomes. For example, taking the initiative to explore new job opportunities or develop relevant competencies may create a “safety net” that people can use when circumstances require them. Hence, instead of (or: in addition to) directly benefiting career outcomes, career proactivity might make people more resilient and adaptable, which could, in turn, allow them to maintain or increase their employability and career success. This reasoning is in line with ideas about sustainable career development which argues that there is a constant interplay between adaptability and proactivity in how individuals interact with their circumstances, thereby setting the stage for generating desired career outcomes (De Vos et al., 2020).

We also see an opportunity to conceptualize and study career proactivity from a whole-life perspective (Hall et al., 2013; Hirschi et al., 2020). This perspective implies that the effects of career behaviors need to be examined under consideration of other life domains (e.g., family, leisure, and community). Due to the close connection of different life domains, career proactivity likely affects not only career development but also outcomes in personal life. For example, suppose an employee engages in more networking to increase social connections that might help with career development. In that case, such efforts might increase positive affect, enriching nonwork role behaviors. However, it might also reduce time spent in home and leisure roles (Baumeler et al., 2018). These relations are likely complex. For example, Akkermans and Tims (2017) showed that career competencies triggered people to engage in proactive behaviors at work (i.e., job crafting). Subsequently, those behaviors allowed more work-home enrichment and also created work-home interference. Recent developments in the crafting literature focus on leisure crafting (Petrou & Bakker, 2016) and home crafting (Demerouti et al., 2020), further emphasizing the close connections between proactivity, work, and nonwork.

This points to another avenue for future research: to focus more on the potential dark sides of career proactivity. Being proactive requires investing resources such as energy, time, and attention. The expenditure of such resources might come at a cost in terms of exhaustion or the failure to adequately engage in other work tasks or life domains. Indeed, Bolino et al. (2016) concluded that proactivity can lead to negative outcomes for employees (e.g., it may be stressful, they can be penalized for it, and it can hinder their career progress), teams (e.g., it may lead to conflict and undermine cohesion), and organizations (e.g., everyone being proactive may cause chaos). We expect this will translate to career proactivity and career outcomes as well. For example, is there a point where people can be *too* proactive, leading to a depletion of resources? And could proactivity also harm people’s career success, for example, when colleagues or managers do not appreciate their initiatives? Though there is little explicit attention to this dark side of career proactivity in the lead article, we believe it should become a more central part of this research area.

FUTURE RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

We want to add two final considerations to the research agenda that Jiang et al. (2022) offer in their lead article. First, we suggest that future research should focus more on how career proactivity triggers actual movement in people's career paths across the lifespan. As we noted earlier, most career proactivity research assumes a direct effect of such behaviors on career outcomes. However, we argue that at least part of those effects may operate through career mobility and transitions (see Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). That is, proactively taking charge of one's career through, for example, goal setting and exploration may lead individuals to enact career transitions. Such transitions could feature promotions or salary increases, typical hallmarks of objective career success (Spurk et al., 2019). Similarly, being mobile in one's career might lead to new opportunities for finding meaningful work and making an impact, both indicators of subjective career success. Overall, we encourage career proactivity scholars to examine how such proactive behaviors may lead to career transitions and how career moves may subsequently impact career proactivity in someone's new role. Such research may help us understand the dynamics of career proactivity and its effects on people's career paths over time.

We also urge scholars to study how unpredictable and disruptive events in people's lives may relate to their career proactivity. As Jiang et al. rightfully indicate, career research has primarily adopted an agentic lens, assuming that career proactivity and success are entirely under a person's control. However, research on disruptive events in careers convincingly shows that careers are far from wholly planned. Specifically, recent research on career shocks (Akkermans et al., 2018)—disruptive events that trigger deliberate career reflection—argues that disruptive events are a significant factor in career development. Indeed, recent conceptual and empirical studies confirm that career shocks have a profound impact on, for example, career decisions, transitions, and outcomes (for an overview, see: Akkermans et al., 2021). Hence, in line with Jiang et al.'s future research suggestions regarding theorizing and contextualizing career proactivity, we argue that scholars need to consider the role of career shocks in such studies. For example, highly proactive people may be better able to capitalize on positive career shocks (e.g., an unexpected job opportunity) and cope with negative ones (e.g., a sudden layoff). Similarly, major shocks could undermine people's proactive career efforts, such as when someone stops seeking new job opportunities after experiencing a traumatic event. We would argue that career proactivity and career shocks likely interact with each other to produce career outcomes, and we encourage scholars to examine such processes in more detail.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to report.

ETHICS STATEMENT

As this is a conceptual article without empirical data, we did not require formal ethical approval for this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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