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Stable anchors and dynamic evolution: A paradox theory of career identity maintenance and change

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ABSTRACT

People routinely conceive of themselves in their career in both stable and dynamic ways. Individuals may draw common threads across their various career experiences and aspirations to form a stable anchor for their career identity, yet at the same time, dynamically adapt their self-concept in the context of their career. In this paper, we call attention to the anchoring and evolving forces that people experience as a paradox for their career identity and theorize *career identifying* as an ongoing process of career identity maintenance and change. As individuals contend with career identity tensions, they make adjustments to maintain a balance of anchoring and evolving forces on their career identity or to make shifts that accumulate into career identity change. The career identifying process accounts for both career identity maintenance and change in a single theoretical model that explains how career identity can change over time while being stable enough to make coherent career choices.

Keywords: Career identity, paradox, tensions, careers

Answering the question of "Who am I in my career?" is not as simple as responding with a singular idea of one's occupation. Indeed, even those who are objectively well-established in a particular profession may answer this question in inconsistent ways within themselves and to others. For example, a journalist could look across their various work experiences that include being a part-time screenwriter and a novelist, and see themselves as a storyteller – and they could be with colleagues at their newspaper and see themselves as a committed journalist. A manager could look at their successes and promotions and see themselves as a corporate executive – and they could think about new product areas they have developed and launched for their corporation and see themselves as an entrepreneur. These practical examples may seem unsurprising and ordinary; however, we lack theory that explains how it is that people can think of their career identity in ways that are both stable enough to progress in a career path and dynamic enough to accommodate or even spur change, at the same time.

While it may be expected that people are able to clearly express their career identity, i.e., who they are in their career, in a 30 second elevator speech or in a brief summary on a resume, the lived reality of career identity can be simultaneously stable and changing. When people think about their career identity, they can synthesize their career experiences into a common thread as well as flexibly adapt their self-definition to incorporate past, present, and anticipated future career experiences across different social situations (Hall, 1996; LaPointe, 2010). Yet, prior research about career identity tends to primarily emphasize career identity as an *anchor* that that steadies the self-concept through relatively consistent preferences for one's career (e.g., Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2013) or as something that *evolves* through a reflexive practice in response to various social contexts people experience in their career (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; LaPointe, 2010). Juxtaposing notions of career identity as anchoring

and evolving brings to light an underexamined question in the careers literature—how is it that career identity can be both anchoring and evolving at the same time, i.e., how can career identity be stable enough to guide action while preserving flexibility for change? By addressing this question, we not only theorize that career identity is both stable and changing, but also explain why career identity is necessarily both at once.

In this paper, we argue that people experience anchoring and evolving forces as a paradox for their career identity. As a paradox, these forces are competing yet mutually constitutive as individuals simultaneously attend to both forces (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). We introduce the *career identifying* [1] process, which we define as an ongoing process of career identity maintenance and change that is driven by anchoring and evolving forces, in which individuals manage tensions that arise as different choices, disruptions, and experiences call their career identity into question. We theorize that rather than reaching some ultimate end state to one's career identity, the ongoing nature of career identifying allows individuals to adapt and accommodate a wide variety of career-related thoughts and actions while also holding a stable enough self-definition to serve as a reference point. This "workable certainty" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008: 230), or dynamic equilibrium of career identity, is maintained by actively managing tensions through small shifts made to balance forces in one's career identity, and we posit that these shifts can also accumulate and eventually lead to career identity change and a new dynamic equilibrium. In the career identifying process, a career identity in dynamic equilibrium is not one that is unmoored; rather, ongoing dynamism is a necessary and functional part of the process in response to anchoring and evolving forces of the paradox.

[1] Note that we use the gerund form to denote action or doing, i.e., *career identifying* as an ongoing process of defining career identity, rather than referring to the process of identification with another social entity, such as an organization or occupation.

The objective of this paper is to build new theory that can account for both maintenance that sustains an existing dynamic equilibrium and/or change that result in a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. The career identifying process model offers three new insights to previous research. First, it explicitly decouples career identity from career path, allowing career identity to change independent of or even preceding changes in career trajectory. Though career identity change is usually assumed to follow actual employment changes (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), we propose an alternative, additional way that career identity can change. In this conception, the career identifying process involves the accumulation of micro shifts to identity over time, which can precede or even generate an actual career path change. We argue that for career identity, micro shifts are constantly occurring as a stream of triggers—choices, disruptions, and experiences that can occur in small daily moments as well as in bigger life events—set anchoring and evolving forces in motion and raise career identity tensions that call into question one's sense of self. Managing these tensions through identity work can eventually lead to a revised career identity, which may then influence subsequent concrete career changes. The career identifying process also helps to explain how it is that intense or seemingly traumatic career path changes, such as a layoff or demise of one's profession, may actually be of limited impact to one's career identity if identity work has already been accumulating preceding this event. In this way, our model shows that though tensions arising from the anchoring-evolving paradox can be experienced as a career identity challenge, managing the tensions can result in outcomes that are beneficial or desirable for an individual.

Second, we account for both career identity maintenance and change in a single theoretical model that can explain how career identity can be stable enough to make coherent choices as well as change over time. With this theory, we can apply the career identifying

process onto a wide variety of career patterns captured in concepts such as life stages (Levinson, 1978), protean (Hall, 1996), boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), and kaleidoscope (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). For example, while the life stages model assumes predictable changes in one's career with progression through adulthood (Levinson, 1978), career identifying would suggest that changes in career identity do not necessarily occur in the same progression. Our theory helps explain that what may seem to others an abrupt change that disrupts or even reverses the expected progression through adulthood can be accounted for in ongoing smaller shifts that occurred underneath the surface in an individual's career identifying process. In career patterns that capture less predictable or nontraditional career progressions such as protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope careers, the career identifying process can help to explain how individuals form a stable yet adaptable enough career identity to face potentially disjointed or distressing career experiences to pursue self-directed career interests. Thus, our theory may provide a useful framework for expanding on various patterns that are captured in careers research but that do not fully explain the ongoing underlying tensions and accumulation of identity work that facilitate different career patterns and actions.

Finally, we expand beyond the dichotomy of career action or inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020) by explaining the constant underlying activity involved with maintaining an existing career identity. Individuals may feel stuck in their experience of the anchoring and evolving paradox (Smith & Berg, 1987) as they are unable to choose between the stability of an anchored career identity and the lure of change. Paradox theorizing helps to explain how balancing is done through smaller constant adjustments, or micro-shifts, like a tightrope walker whose balance on the rope is the result of ongoing slight adaptations (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Our theory provides a processual view of how these micro-shifts can occur, and how accumulation

may be occurring in periods of apparent inaction, eventually altering the course of the tightrope itself.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we show how anchoring and evolving forces underlie existing conceptualizations of career identity, and how these forces can be conceived of as a paradox that is taken for granted in prior research. We then introduce a theoretical model that specifies the career identifying process. We illustrate how triggers set these forces in motion, which calls career identity into question and gives rise to career identity tensions. We theorize how these tensions are managed toward an existing or new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. Lastly, we articulate insights gained and discuss how future research can leverage these insights to better understand the identity dynamics that influence career identity change.

ANCHORING AND EVOLVING FORCES IN CAREER IDENTITY

Career identity is related to but distinct from other work-related identities, such as professional identity tied to a specific occupation and social identity that incorporates an employer (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) or workgroup (Kane, Argote, & Levine, 2005), because it follows the entire course of an individual's career including various career moves and changes (Ashforth et al., 2008). Definitions of career identity in prior research describe a person's self-conception in reference to their career. Though these published conceptions of career identity may acknowledge both anchoring and evolving forces, the definitions tend to primarily emphasize the anchored nature of career identity or the way that career identity evolves over time. Table 1 below provides a sample of published definitions of career identity. We organize these definitions to highlight portions (in bold) that foreground the anchoring force or the evolving force. Highlighting these contrasts shows the potential benefit of a paradox perspective

in explaining how and why both anchoring and evolving forces can co-exist, even while being experienced as contradictory.

Anchoring refers to the stabilizing nature of the self-concept that informs individual preferences around what individuals value and what is most meaningful in their career relative to their social context (Rodrigues et al., 2013; Schein, 1978). An anchored career identity stems from an individual's work history and serves as a cognitive compass when making career choices (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Meijers, 1998). Evolving refers to the more dynamic nature of career identity as something that is actively created and transformed, which is both fueled by, and in turn, influences cognitive processes of understanding one's career experiences (Ashforth et al., 2008; Vough & Caza, 2017). Anchoring is about how individuals integrate motives, values, and abilities from prior career experiences into a coherent career self-concept (Schein, 1978), while evolving is about the more ongoing processual nature of the career self-concept, which at times, leads to larger transformational change (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Insert Table 1 about here

Prior research operationalizes the anchoring force—or career anchors as first conceptualized by Schein (1978, 1996) and expanded by Feldman and Bolino (1996)—as static career types, testing for a variety of outcomes, such as managerial career trajectories (Gubler, Biemann, Tschopp, & Grote, 2015), entrepreneurial intentions (Lee & Wong, 2004), and core self-evaluation (Costigan, Gurbuz, & Sigri, 2018), as well as considering the influence of other identities on career types, such as GLB (gay, lesbian, bisexual) identity (Kaplan, 2014) or an internationalism identity (Lazarova, Cerdin, & Liao, 2014). This stream of research captures static career types as a proxy for career identity, primarily emphasizing stability over

understanding of how people actually engage with their career identity over time. While Schein's (1978) original conception is aligned to this more static treatment of career identity, he also recognizes—but does not fully theorize—that people may change their career types over time and that stability may in fact enable change. Studies that emphasize the evolving force have used the idea of dynamic construction of career identity. Dynamic construction can involve performative expressions of oneself across various career experiences and social situations, accomplishing evolution through connections that are drawn between various expressions into a more composite notion of one's self (LaPointe, 2010). Other studies have characterized career identity as responsive to career events, like setbacks. For example, people construct resilience in their present career identity by referring to their past self that overcame prior setbacks and using aspects of past identity to evolve a current career identity (Vough & Caza, 2017). Thus, anchoring and evolving forces necessarily coexist, as stability can enable change and vice-versa.

Anchoring and evolving forces are an application of the endemic forces of stability and change from the paradox literature to individual-level career identity. Like other fundamental paradoxes, such as the belonging-distinctiveness paradox (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Shore et al., 2011; Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019), the old-new learning paradox (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011), and the exploitation-exploration paradox (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), stability and change are fundamentally paradoxical, such that the essential need for stability is opposite yet mutually constitutive of the essential need for change or evolution.

In the broader identity literature, prior conceptions establish stability and change in how individuals understand who they are in relation to their social context. For example, the self-concept is understood to "feel stable yet…malleable" to accommodate an enduring essence of oneself that can be presented to others as well as dynamically constructed from moment to

moment (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012: 88). At the organizational level, stability and change can manifest as an "adaptive instability" that prevents stagnation of organizational identity and accommodate necessary change through ongoing interactions with external feedback and adjustments made to address environmental demands (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000: 64). Organizational identity is also understood to involve internal negotiations among organizational members in ongoing gradual changes through maintaining a "stable state of instability" (Kozica, Gebhardt, Muller-Seitz, & Kaiser, 2015: 187). While stability and change are negotiated through various organizational members in organizational level identity, anchoring and evolving forces are constantly pushing and pulling within an individual, bringing attention to the importance of the subjective process involved in career identifying. We expand on the process for how individuals address these forces in defining their selves in their careers below.

THE CAREER IDENTIFYING PROCESS

In Figure 1 below, anchoring and evolving forces are illustrated as a yin yang symbol, which is often used to denote paradox. The yin-yang shows opposition in stark contrast between black and white, yet also interrelatedness, represented by the dots of the opposite color in either side of the circle. The internal boundary creates distinction between the two sides and highlights opposition, and the external boundary constructs a unified whole and highlights synergy and mutual constitutions (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the career identifying process, anchoring and evolving forces co-exist in competing yet mutually constitutive ways. Forces are experienced as pushes and pulls, yet paradoxically, the anchoring force enables action by providing enough certainty in one's existing career identity to evaluate career choices or changes, and the evolving force enables stability by allowing experimentation that can eventually coalesce into a more stable self-definition.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Applying paradox theorizing to the career identifying process helps us to illustrate this interplay between the forces as triggers, tensions, and shifts that occur in ongoing, iterative ways. Working through paradox allows people to reach a dynamic equilibrium that enables a "workable certainty" to deal with intricate and fluid issues (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), such as those involving the messy reality of careers. In a dynamic equilibrium, constant micro-shifts enable balance by adapting to the continuous push and pull of opposing forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This balance does not necessarily mean an equal weighting or a permanent resolution between these forces. Rather balance is about iterative adjustments taken by individuals to attend to forces that push and pull with different weights at different times, as exemplified in the metaphor of the tightrope walker that constantly moves to balance on the rope (Schad et al., 2016). The *dynamic equilibrium of career identity* in Figure 1 reflects that people move through tensions to balance forces for enough of a workable certainty in their career identity to make choices or deal with disruptions and still have room to accommodate a wide variety of career-related thoughts and actions.

Consider the example of Julie[2]. Julie's career identity as a corporate finance analyst seems stable. She is successfully advancing through the well-established structure of progression in her firm that provides stability and direction in her career identity (anchoring); at the same time, she also feels tension when comparing herself to her mother who started her own property investment firm (evolving). Julie embodies a contradiction. She is deeply embedded in her current position, working long hours to get to the next promotion, which is in line with

[2] Julie is loosely based on one of the authors' career conversations with a former student.

expectations about what junior corporate finance analysts do. Yet, Julie is also constantly reevaluating herself in her own mind against a path that no one in her current field would anticipate her taking. In what follows, we continue to unfold Julie's story as we illustrate our theory.

Our process model shows how an ongoing stream of triggers set the anchoring and evolving forces in motion. Tensions arise from self-defining in relation to collectives, social referents, and personal career meaning. Tensions can co-occur or influence each other, sustaining the cyclical churning. People manage tensions by separating conflicting aspects across objective (i.e., clock time) or subjective (i.e., thoughts about past, present and future) time (Shipp & Jansen, 2021), and social space (e.g., audiences across different domains in the social world). In the sections that follow, we expand on each part of the model starting with triggers.

Triggers

Triggers are the choices, disruptions, and experiences that set the forces for anchoring and evolving career identity in motion. When forces are set in motion, the existing dynamic equilibrium in an individual's career identity becomes unbalanced in response. Revisiting the example of Julie, her career identity is in a dynamic equilibrium as she works toward her next promotion as a corporate finance professional. Triggers, such as conversations with co-workers on their latest work success, a performance feedback meeting with her supervisor, or even a Facebook post of a close friend who is an entrepreneur, activate the push and pull of the forces and lead her to question her career identity. Seeing the entrepreneur's excitement over his autonomy pulls her career identity toward a self-definition as an entrepreneur, yet, talking with her co-workers about their latest successes or her boss about her own career prospects pushes her career identity back toward corporate finance.

As the prior example suggests, even routine events and interactions can act as triggers in our model. Our conception of triggers is inclusive of both smaller ongoing events and larger episodic events that brings an individual's attention to their career identity and makes salient the forces that anchor career identity and the opposing forces that pull it toward evolution. While Julie's example shows how consequential small social interactions can be, such a trigger may also serve as a seed that gets planted and builds over time (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Because of their highly varied nature, triggers can constantly spark the career identifying process, as a person encounters the myriad of choices, disruptions, and experiences that occur over the course of a career, like the routine examples provided in Julie's story or a much larger event like the displacement of an occupation by technological change (Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2020).

The magnitude of the trigger, however, does not necessarily determine the extent of the activation of the forces in the career identifying process, but may rather depend on both the salience and timing of the trigger. Triggers may be more or less salient depending on the strength of the push and pull of the anchoring and evolving forces relative to an individual's preferences and aspirations. For instance, in a study of young professionals, unpredictable workplace experiences served to trigger feelings of validation and reinforced an existing career identity for some participants, while leaving others feeling invalidated and forcing a change in their existing career identity (Modestino, Sugiyama, & Ladge, 2019). Indeed, the concept of lingering identities suggests that a trigger such as a role change, which is typically assumed to be accompanied by psychological transition to a new identity, may instead be met with coping efforts to retain previous identities when faced with uncertainty (Wittman, 2019). Thus, the same trigger will be more or less salient to different people.

Timing can also affect how important triggers are in the career identifying process. Small triggers that occur at times when a person is vulnerable to influence or in a period of questioning about their careers (e.g., Jansen & Shipp, 2019) can have disproportionately large effects on the forces. For example, bumping into a former classmate with a completely different and highly desired career path at a vulnerable or uncertain time can trigger intense reflection and a pull toward the evolving force, leading to strong tensions, even though the trigger is not large or unusual. When a trigger occurs in the path of a career also matters to its importance to career identifying, i.e., the same trigger occurring early or late in a career can affect the forces differently. Large events like career changes can trigger the career identifying process, yet the result may not be a highly active and tension-filled process if the timing of the career change is congruent with an expected stage of the career path as reflected in traditional conceptions of life stages (Levinson, 1978). For example, in a study of retirees, those who followed the expected timing of retirement—as understood through a pre-existing plan of action from culturally-determined scripts—described their retirement as "on time" and largely without the experience of tensions (Vough, Bataille, Noh, & Lee, 2015: 425). In this case, the pull of the evolving force can be strong and not answered by a strong push of the anchoring force, because the timing of the retirement matches an expected evolution of career identity. Similarly, a layoff is a large career event that could have different effects depending on career stage. People in earlier career stages might be more inclined to react less strongly to layoffs in terms of career identity if their intention is to stay on a path that is consistent with the existing career identity, just with a different employer, while people in mid-career stages could use a layoff as an opportunity to question and confront existing career identity and experience the forces and resulting tensions that arise from this questioning (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). This is not to say that a layoff would

not have a large effect on a person's life, but its effect on career identity may not be large, especially if they get back on their expected career path.

In sum, triggers vary widely in their type and magnitude, but the strength of the anchoring and evolving forces they activate will depend on the salience and the timing of the trigger. Given the range of choices, events, and disruptions that can serve as triggers, triggers can arise in succession, activating new forces and tensions before previously triggered tensions have found a balance, keeping the process in motion. However, as career identity tensions that arise from the push and pull of anchoring and evolving forces, they are alleviated through identity work, which in turn maintains career identity in dynamic equilibrium or accumulates to change it. We expand on these other elements of the process model below.

Career Identity Tensions

Tensions are cognitively and socially constructed polarities experienced by individuals as dilemmas that feel like either/or choices (Lewis, 2000) that can be met with feelings of stress, anxiety, or even paralysis (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). Prior research examines tensions of identity that reside in understanding one's self in relation to others and collectives (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987) as people orient themselves to different sources of self-definition (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). As stated earlier, tensions arise from anchoring and evolving forces when they are instigated by triggers. When the push and pull of anchoring and evolving forces activate the career identifying process, career identity is questioned through tensions that arise in considering social norms of collectives, social referents in relational interactions, and one's own self-determinations and interests. Next, we describe tensions that arise as career identity is appraised against collective, relational, and personal concerns. We also note and describe how tensions for different sources

of self-definition can give rise to additional tensions, such as when personal tensions and collective tensions conflict. We illustrate career identity tensions using an example of an academic who takes on a role as Dean. We use this example to illustrate an objective role change that can trigger an imbalance in the existing dynamic equilibrium of career identity and more transparently demonstrate various tensions that can arise as a faculty member reconsiders their career identity in light of collective, relational, and personal interests that shift with their new Dean role. Regardless of how much one enjoys or dislikes the responsibilities of a new position, a shift in occupation is often accompanied by reflection on career identity. We also describe how tensions give rise to other tensions, potentially creating an ongoing stream of triggers.

Collective. Collective tensions are felt when individuals question their career identity that has been validated through and anchored in collectives (e.g., organizations and occupations). These questions can arise due to changes in the collective itself or due to individuals self-initiating adjustments to a collective. For example, changes in work collectives could include operating within occupations that are subject to more than one set of institutional logics (Dunn & Jones, 2010; Lounsbury, 2007) or hybrid professions that inject multiple collective inputs into identity (Caza & Creary, 2016), as well as the emergence of new occupations (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2017; Nigam & Dokko, 2019).

Figure 2 below provides an example of an academic who takes on a new role as Dean, experiencing tension between wanting to continue to anchor their career identity as a scholar and to evolve their career identity toward a new collective of administration.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Relational. Relational tensions are felt when individuals question their career identity that has been validated through and anchored in relationships with social referents. These questions can arise as individuals identify with multiple social referents who communicate contradictory expectations. Social referents are people that serve as benchmarks or that represent aspirations, e.g., peers, mentors or role models (Shah, 1998). Social referents provide a model or template for behaviors that are required of a given role (Ibarra, 1999; Reilly, 2017). Prior research suggests individuals often observe a range of role models with respect to their demeanor, interactions, and physical appearance of those who have assumed similar roles and choose from a repertoire of styles they can use in adapting to the new role (Ibarra, 1999). A diversity of referents can make comparison and feedback less clear, yet, having a set of referents who are similar to each other may also reduce clarity, as a narrow range of referents can place limitations on the exploration of possible self-definitions (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005).

In the example of a faculty member transitioning to the role of Dean, relational tension is likely to arise when the new Dean makes comparisons with existing (faculty) and new (administrator) social referents. In this case, the faculty member turned Dean may make an effort to distance themselves from their prior role as a faculty member by adopting behaviors of other university deans and administrators, like dressing more formally or having staff act as gatekeepers to meetings. They may also experience relational tension when comparing themselves with former colleagues, as they feel like they are not producing as much research as a faculty member should.

Personal. Personal tensions arise when individuals question their career identity that is validated through and anchored in personal interests and priorities. Personal interests can include the fulfillment of personal values and the notion of success built on a feeling that a personal best

has been achieved (Hall & Mirvis, 1996), or by self-directed career values and attitudes (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Questions arise when individuals consider how their interests are best served. For example, in the case of the faculty member becoming Dean, one place where tensions may arise is between their preferred personalized balance of research, teaching, and service and the demands of their new role that leads them to question who they are in their career.

Tensions between tensions. As individuals engage with one tension, new questions could form and give rise to another tension. Identities can be nested across multiple levels of analysis and reciprocally linked (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011). In our model, cross-level relationships between tensions are a collective-relational tension, a relational-personal tension, and a personal-collective tension. A *collective-relational tension* can arise when collective tensions lead to relational tensions, or vice versa. For example, as the new Dean works to develop their new leadership identity, they may experience tension when interacting with their former department colleagues as their focus moves beyond their department to the college as a whole. The relational tension can also lead to the personal tension, or vice versa. In this *relational-personal* tension, looking to other Deans as social referents may call career identity into question for the new Dean if the other Deans provide contradictory information about how much they re-prioritized service over research. The new Dean may feel tension in personally prioritizing research when they are unsure of the extent to which other Deans prioritize service. Lastly, personal tensions can lead to collective tensions, or vice versa. In this *personal-collective* tension, the new Dean may call into question their scholarly identity that was validated and anchored in publishing, as they feel challenged to meet administrative demands and to make time for research.

In sum, when an imbalance of anchoring and evolving forces raises questions about one's career identity, individuals engage with tensions that arise from considering various sources of defining one's self in relation to the social context of one's career, including collective, relational, and personal interests. We used the Dean example to illustrate the different tensions, but a single trigger may give rise to multiple tensions, or one tension may lead to another. For example, the trigger of Julie seeing her entrepreneur friend's Facebook post raises relational tensions as she compares herself to her friend. As she thinks about an entrepreneurial identity, she has to engage with the validation and success she finds as a corporate finance professional, as a relational tension raises a collective tension. Further reflection leads her to remember how corporate finance was supposed to be a stepping stone, leading her to feel a personal tension. Even absent new triggers, tensions giving rise to other tensions can also keep the career identifying process in motion.

Identity Work to Manage Tensions

In order to address tensions raised in the career identifying process, individuals separate anchoring and evolving forces by performing the identity work of holding different versions of themselves across time and social space. Identity work is defined as an individual's efforts to create, manage and present identities that reflect their coherent and distinctive self-concept (Snow & Anderson, 1987: 1348; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1165). Identity work includes "*cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral* activities that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, and revising, or rejecting *collective, role, and personal self-meanings* within the boundaries of their social context," (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018: 895).

Paradoxical tensions can lead to vicious cycles in which people become trapped in defensiveness, or to virtuous cycles that create new opportunities when tensions are managed (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Vicious cycles occur when individuals suppress either force, which intensifies pressure from the other force and produces an intellectually and emotionally disturbing cycle of tensions in which individuals can become subjectively stuck (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987). To exit or avoid this unsettling cycle, identity work helps individuals manage tensions by subjectively separating the forces into different versions of themselves. In the broader identity literature, individuals are understood to hold multiple versions of themselves across subjective time periods, such as in future versions of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), in current provisional and alternative selves (Ibarra, 1999; Obodaru, 2012), and even grappling with past versions of oneself in lingering identities (Wittman, 2019) and identity paralysis (Toubiana, 2020). Individuals hold past, present, and future selves for a variety of career related actions—e.g., to anticipate a desired future, to test new identities or to retain meaningful alternate possibilities for the present, and to sustain continuity from the past. Similarly, individuals may also communicate different versions of themselves to different audiences across social spaces—e.g., to present a professional image at work (Ladge & Little, 2019; Roberts, 2005), to navigate different cultural expectations across social contexts at work and at home (Bell, 1990), and to meet the moral obligations of one's occupation while also meeting one's own personal material aims (Reid & Ramarajan, 2021).

We draw from Poole and Van de Ven (1989) to theorize that separating anchoring and evolving forces in the career identifying process takes place through temporal and spatial separation. Temporal separation is about locating opposing forces in different time periods, whereas spatial separation is about situating opposing forces in different locations in the social

world (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). To manage tensions, people accept that contradictory forces coexist in the short term and work to separate and iterate between the forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). By managing tensions, people can learn to tolerate ambiguity, become more adaptable to change, and develop resiliency (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Similarly, in career identifying, individuals can perform identity work to manage the tensions and become more adaptable and resilient to career-related uncertainty in order to live with both anchoring and evolving forces in their career identity.

Separating forces across time. An individual's work history is understood to progress through objective time, i.e., the literal passage of clock or calendar time that moves from past to present to future; yet, subjective interpretations of career identity can also include engaging with subjective time, where thoughts move between past, present and future in any order and direction (Shipp & Cole, 2015; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). When triggers disturb the dynamic equilibrium of career identity, people may make connections by drawing upon past, present, and future selves to balance anchoring and evolving forces across different subjective time periods. For example, Julie lives with tensions by separating forces across the present and future. As she actively takes steps toward her next promotion in corporate finance in the present, she tucks away her entrepreneurial intentions in provisional versions of her future self that she tries out in different imagined scenarios. She may play out entrepreneurial activities in her mind and vicariously experience her entrepreneurial intentions through referents, such as her entrepreneur friend or her mother. Playing out possibilities and alternatives in her mind could increase Julie's self-knowledge for the time being (Obodaru, 2012). As she increases this self-knowledge and gains a better understanding of what she wants in her career, new connections may be formed between

present and future, which can in turn, begin to unravel the existing balance between anchoring and evolving forces toward a new dynamic equilibrium.

Separating forces across social space. Different versions of one's self-concept can also be expressed across different social spaces (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012) and among different audiences depending on the reactions they hope to elicit (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In our theorizing, we suggest that individuals can manage tensions by spatially separating anchoring and evolving forces across social milieus, such as highlighting different attributes to potential employers than to peers (Modestino et al., 2019). While expressing one's self through different narratives to different audiences may appear as inauthentic or a form of compartmentalizing, trying out these different versions of one's self through different narratives can serve as a mechanism to experiment with possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Returning to our example of Julie, she may tell different narratives to different audiences that allow her to manage the tensions arising from anchoring and evolving forces. For example, when her peers at work share their work successes, she too may share her own work successes to retain the stability of the anchoring force. She may also seek out her Facebook friend, asking to meet for coffee to talk about ways she can get involved in entrepreneurial activities and other people she can meet to build her network in real estate, allowing her to expand toward the evolving force. As she continues to use these different narratives for different audiences, she may begin to form connections between audiences, such as articulating transferrable skills that corporate finance has given her for real estate. Thus, the identity work she does to manage tensions across audiences allows Julie to make adjustments to maintain her current dynamic

equilibrium, while also allowing her to make gradual shifts that can accumulate toward change and forming a new dynamic equilibrium.

Identity Work Leads to Existing or New Dynamic Equilibrium through Career Identity Maintenance and/or Change

In Figure 1, we illustrate two main routes from the dynamic equilibrium of career identity. In the first route, accumulating identity work serves to maintain the dynamic equilibrium, while the second route represents larger transformational changes to a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. While maintaining and changing are core types of identity work (Caza et al., 2018), they are usually conceived of as separate types: maintaining is about retaining and securing a sense of meaning and self-worth (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1987), whereas changing involves addressing issues related to authenticity and fitting one's self into a new social context, such as in workplace entries or exits and shifts in occupations (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Our model considers career identity maintenance and career identity change as involving the same activities of separating across time and social space. In our model, however, the identity work to manage tensions accumulates to maintain a dynamic equilibrium, and/or change toward a new dynamic equilibrium.

Accumulating identity work. Accumulating identity work is particularly relevant to the career identifying process, as paradoxes are understood to persist over time, and smaller shifts to manage the paradox can accumulate to respond to dilemmas in the short term, while managing both forces of the paradox in the long term (Smith, 2014). Thus, accumulation is important to the long-term sustainability of anchoring and evolving forces. Using the metaphor of the tightrope walker, we conceive that accumulating identity work shifts career identity in both routes of maintenance and change; however, in maintenance, the tightrope walker continues to move along

the tightrope in the same general direction toward the existing dynamic equilibrium whereas in change, the endpoint of the tightrope moves such that a new dynamic equilibrium emerges.

Accumulating identity work occurs within a "container" that is psychologically cultivated as well as created through connections to physical places, other people, and routine practices—i.e., an identity work space (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces are understood to reduce emotional disturbances and facilitate sensemaking that allows people to figure out who they are or to craft portable versions of themselves across various identity-related aims they may have at different times in their career (Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood, 2018). An identity work space could include real-life interstitial spaces, such as hobbyist clubs or coffee shops, that provide informal gathering places outside of one's regular workplace (Furnari, 2014) or psychological spaces in which individuals can begin to store and to practice activities tied to different identities (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces are where accumulating identity work can be played out through various movements—psychological, physical, behavioral, and relational that accompany identity transitions (George, Wittman, & Rockmann, 2022)—and may result in preserving one's existing sense of self or in helping a new sense self to take shape.

Career identity maintenance and/or career identity change. Accumulating identity work in the career identity maintenance route may be experienced as routine or effortful depending on the strength of the push and pull of the forces. Identity work is more routine when people follow well-established scripts for their identity, such as an organization's structure for managerial advancement, and may be able to maintain self-continuity with limited uncertainty; however, people begin to question this continuity if they perceive they have limited input into the routine and feel constrained in self-defining who they are (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In the

maintenance route, the tightrope walker may make micro-shifts back and forth and in many different directions to balance the forces. In this way, accumulating identity work occurs even in career identity maintenance, yet the tight rope continues toward the existing dynamic equilibrium. Thus, career identity maintenance does not sustain career identity in a static sense but in a more dynamic self-continuity that preserves an existing dynamic equilibrium.

The second route toward career identity change involves accumulating identity work that builds up to a threshold that becomes a turning point (Obodaru, 2012). People may reach a threshold from living with the tensions or feeling stuck, as well as through a more conscious build up, such as when people nurture their future career identity through their activities in an identity work space or gain experience before making a career change. When tensions influence a career identity change, people make micro-shifts to attempt to alleviate tensions, yet, paradox theory suggests that alleviating one tension provides only a temporary respite as new tensions emerge (Smith & Berg, 1987). As identity work accumulates, micro-shifts that move toward a new end point compile into a turning point—i.e., a shift in the subjective meaning for one's life that is derived from one's career identity (Obodaru, 2012). The turning point acts as trigger, such that it activates the anchoring and evolving forces, tensions, and accumulating identity work, leading to a new dynamic equilibrium. When people engage in a more conscious accumulation, they make sense of their current work activities relative to their desired future. For example, medical residents accumulate identity work by customizing their identities to their present work at hand, despite an incongruence with their future image of a being a doctor (Pratt et al., 2006). In this case, the turning point may occur when an individual perceives they are ready for a change in the meaning of their identity, e.g., when they have accumulated enough activities or practices to create a new dynamic equilibrium of their career identity.

Returning to the example of Julie, she may feel stuck in her career identity if she starts to think about where her current career path is leading her. Perhaps a rise of tensions is triggered by getting an accelerated promotion or by spending time with more senior people in corporate finance, which makes her envision a future she realizes she might not want. At the same time, she's stuck in a career identity that she's following very successfully that gives her status and security. The identity work of separating across time and audiences to manage the tensions may increase in frequency or specificity, as she continues to think more about an entrepreneurial identity and shares these aspirations with others. In doing so, her identity work accumulates through micro-shifts that continuously pull her toward a new direction. She reaches a turning point in which she reflects on who she really is in her career and begins to fully re-envision herself as an entrepreneur, even if it might not be time to make an actual job change yet. In this scenario, while Julie is promoted and appears to her peers and supervisor to have further solidified and anchored her career identity, the notion of accumulation in our model helps to explain how her career identity was also evolving under the surface. This accumulation leads to subjective career identity change, which later materializes as a career path change to quit her corporate finance job and undertake starting her own real estate firm.

Returning to the example of the Dean, there are triggers, such as seeing announcements of their colleagues' new publications, that pull on their scholarly identity. While the Dean experiences micro-shifts back towards scholarship, such as telling themselves they will make time for research in the summer or finding other referents in indirect research activities like grant administration, they experience salient triggers toward maintaining their current administrative identity. Over time, the Dean's micro-shifts push more toward an administrative identity, maintaining the existing dynamic equilibrium. Additionally, as the Dean experiences other

triggers, such as successfully delivering on organizational goals related to diversity or fundraising activities, the maintenance of their existing dynamic equilibrium may be reinforced. The existing dynamic equilibrium could then drive future choices to advance up the ranks of administration to provost or president.

As demonstrated in Julie's and the Dean's examples, our theory accommodates a variety of ways in which career identity is maintained and changes. By decoupling career identity change from career path change, we are able to account for when micro-shifts maintain and change dynamic equilibrium. Theorizing career identity maintenance and career identity change in a single theory provides an understanding that both are needed, and that neither the continuity of maintenance nor the dynamism of change are inherently bad for one's career identity, despite what might seem like on the surface as appearing stuck or making an irrational choice. Challenges that individuals experience for their career identity are instead a useful and developmental part of working through the career identifying process. In what follows, we further expand on new insights that are gained from our theory as well as future implications for research.

DISCUSSION

With this theory, we seek to reconcile orderly conceptions of career identity with the messy reality of how people think of themselves in relation to their careers. While past research has primarily emphasized the anchoring aspect of career identity (Rodrigues et al., 2013; Schein, 1996) or the evolving aspect of career identity (Ashforth et al., 2008; LaPointe, 2010), we start with the idea that career identity is subject to both anchoring and evolving forces at the same time. Tensions arising from these paradoxical forces keep the career identifying process in motion, and people manage tensions by performing identity work that accumulates to maintain career identity in an existing dynamic equilibrium and/or change to a new dynamic equilibrium

of career identity.

In Figures 3a and 3b, we compare stylized representations of stepwise career identity change that accompanies career change and a more continuous career identifying process. If Julie's example were explained through the stepwise change depicted in Figure 3a, her career identity would be anchored in corporate finance, then a career change would occur, and then identity work would happen to transition and re-anchor her career identity as an entrepreneur in her real estate business. She would go from one anchored career identity to another in tandem with her career change.

Insert Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c about here

In contrast, Figure 3b shows Julie's career identity as only quasi-anchored in corporate finance, and that her interest in entrepreneurship feeds into an evolving force that leads her to make continual adjustments to her career identity, as she encounters an ongoing stream of triggers. Since many of these adjustments pull in the same new direction, the identity work accumulates to a turning point for Julie, eventually leading to a revised career identity quasi-anchored in entrepreneurship that encourages her to make a subsequent move to start her own real estate business. The move may seem sudden, but Julie has been doing identity work over a period of years to support the career change. The idea of accumulation accounts for continuity while also changing direction toward a revised dynamic equilibrium as a different quasi-anchored identity takes shape. In the career identifying process, while Julie ends her employment with her corporate finance firm, her past experience is incorporated into her career identity such that she can use her transferrable skills from finance in her new entrepreneurial ventures.

Note that our model supports gradually accumulative and back-and-forth changes to career identity, but it also allows for periods of heightened activity and change (see Figure 3c). Triggers that disrupt a career can also lead to reactive changes to career identity, consistent with existing reactive models of identity transition (Ibarra, 1999; Ladge et al., 2012; Louis, 1980; Nicholson, 1984). If Julie was laid off in an economic downturn, or if an old classmate approached her with a concrete proposal for a new venture, she might make a fast career move to start her own business that requires additional identity work after the move to transition to her new quasi-anchored career identity of entrepreneur.

Career identifying also complements existing theory by offering additional interpretations for existing empirical accounts of careers. For example, in a study exploring how individuals' career resourcing moves led to the emergence of the profession of health services research (HSR) (Nigam & Dokko, 2019), Bob Brook, a physician turned health services researcher, notes the change in legitimacy of the new profession over time:

> I remember my exit interview with the dean of the medical school … when I left medical school, I said, "I'm going to be a generalist and probably go into public health or health services." The conversation ended when I said that. He had no advice, just said goodbye…. And we would worry…"Would anyone ever hire [researchers] with this kind of weird mixed training?..." Well, we have now established ourselves as a legitimate part of the medical research establishment, and [we] are now chiefs of medicine and deans (Nigam & Dokko, 2019:1062).

Reinterpreting this example through a career identifying lens calls attention to the subjective underpinnings of career resourcing. Our theory foregrounds the struggle that Brook had in figuring out his career identity as an impetus to his career actions. Brook's exit interview with the dean served as a trigger invoking both collective and personal tensions. The identity work he did to manage these tensions accumulated to enable career moves that advanced the formation of the HSR profession. The establishment and institutionalization of HSR likely reduced ongoing collective tensions for Brook, allowing him to make sense of his past work experiences and the

future directions he could take. Thus, career identifying enriches this empirical account by suggesting how career identifying is precedent to career actions that can later have broad, field-level effects.

In another example, empirical examination of person-environment fit over time suggests that individuals recount their experiences using identity as an underlying theme across various experiences. As described by one study subject:

> My [fit] story is like a series of vignettes—maybe a novella. Like Voltaire's Candide, 30 chapters that are different but there is an underlying progression. I am the constant—I am still the same person at the core … The scenery changes, environments change, even I change somewhat, but I am the underlying theme. (Jansen & Shipp, 2019: 1173)

In examining stability and change in terms of these fit narratives, consistent temporal comparisons stabilized existing work situations, whereas triggering events altered comparisons across past and present selves to change career trajectory (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Our theory would suggest that fit narratives may have stayed the same or changed over time as part of how people manage tensions. Having consistent fit narratives could be understood as an activity of identity work in the career identity maintenance route, whereas altered temporal comparisons could be indicative of a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity that preceded career trajectory changes. Thus, expanding on the career identifying process can help to further explain how fit narratives over time relate to career identity maintenance and/or change.

In addition to complementing existing empirical accounts, the process of career identifying can also be applied across many different career patterns as well as employment types. While we have primarily drawn from professional examples, we anticipate that the core concepts of our theory would hold across a variety of workers. The frequency and nature of triggers might be different and there could be implications for which tensions may be felt more strongly. For example, in more discontinuous employment types, such as gig workers, there

would be more frequent disruptive triggers, such as working for multiple organizations and limited purview of long-term employment prospects (Petriglieri et al., 2019). In these circumstances, the anchoring and evolving forces may be constantly in flux making maintenance more difficult to sustain. It is also possible that collective tensions may be attenuated as gig workers expect less affiliation with occupations or organizations, and instead, relational tensions may be felt more strongly as gig workers look to social referents to provide leads to the next gig. Similarly, career identifying may be more active early in a career than later as potential career paths extend further into the future. Thus, there may be a variety of nuances for how individuals experience the concepts we depict in our model.

Theoretical Insights and Future Research

By shedding light on the dynamic nature of career identity and elaborating the career identifying process, we offer several implications and directions for future research.

Decoupling career identity change from career change. In our theorizing, we decouple career identity change from career change, allowing us to complement prior research and illustrate different ways in which career identity may change before an observable career change occurs or even without a career change. In career and roles transitions literatures, the subjective self-concept is often understood to change simultaneously with or following objective observable career changes (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2000; Louis, 1980). Our theory elaborates ongoing ways in which individuals may subjectively engage with their identities with or without objective career changes. Further, much of the literature on role-to-role identity transitions assumes a sequence that involves letting go of a former role-related identity to prepare for a new role-related identity. Our theorizing suggests that career identity transitions could occur in a less structured sequence, particularly as we consider how one's career identity may be in transition long before an eventual career change. Future research might consider how

navigating career identity change before objective career change may alter the course of the actual transition. Indeed, prior research suggests that envisioning one's self in a role prior to an actual transition can ease some of the uncertainties of taking on the role (e.g., Ladge et al., 2012). Further research could also explore situations in which envisioning a wide variety of potential versions of one's self could increase uncertainties or conflict among possible future selves, leaving individuals feeling stuck in perpetual career identity maintenance rather than change.

Additionally, applying the career identifying process to a variety of career patterns that capture objective change may bring new insights to the subjective career experiences of individuals. For example, while earlier conceptions considered the self-directed career development in protean careers as the formation of new aspects of the self (Hall & Mirvis, 1996), more recent clarifications suggest that protean career is instead an orientation or attitude that individuals can have to varying degrees, allowing relatively static career profiles or types to be articulated (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Similarly, the boundaryless career concept has been conceived of as psychological or physical mobility that individuals possess to varying degrees (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). This static treatment of individually held stable career traits foregrounds the anchoring force, which can be useful in specifying patterns and trends that can be drawn across individual careers; however, as the evolving force falls to the background, what these relatively static types may not capture is the dynamism that occurs within an individual. Taken together, our model extends prevalent frameworks in the careers literature by explaining how underlying tensions and accumulation of identity work facilitate different career patterns and actions. By applying the career identifying process to existing career concepts, future research could further elaborate on the subjective mechanisms that influence objective observations of individual careers.

Stability and change within the individual. The anchoring and evolving forces in career identifying reflect a fundamental paradox that is often examined at the organizational level—stability and change. This paradox captures the notion that organizations are at once enduring and stable features of the workplace from which existing efficiencies can be leveraged for short-term effectiveness and are also continuously changing to produce innovation and long-term sustainability (Farjoun, 2010; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Our theorizing applies the paradox of stability and change within the individual. More specifically, the anchoring and evolving forces of career identity represent stability and change that is subjectively experienced. Within an individual, stability could be considered a special form of change that is bound within a specific time period (Roe, 2014), or in our theorizing, the existing dynamic equilibrium of the current moment. Conceived of in this way, ongoing dynamism is a necessary and functional part of managing tensions, despite the challenges that questioning one's career identity can present. While prior research highlights the emotional and intellectual disturbances that come with identity challenges (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Smith & Berg, 1987), theorizing anchoring and evolving forces as a paradox brings to light the importance of balancing rather than suppressing one force over the other, and this balancing act might be the glue that holds career identity together over time.[3] Our theory accounts for the undercurrent of activity that supports the balance of these forces and provides further insight to the interrelatedness of stability and change in career identity.

Focusing within the individual also provides opportunity to elaborate an individual's use of subjective time in terms of their identity. While prior research considers past in the present, such as in forgone professional identities (Obodaru, 2017) or lingering identities (Wittman,

[3] We thank the Editor and an anonymous reviewer for their ideas sharpening this aspect of our theorizing

2019), we examine the simultaneity of past, present, and future to separate and balance the anchoring and evolving forces. A careers perspective necessarily invokes time; a widely used definition of careers is "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989: 8), and time is fundamental to the understanding of a career, yet time has not been at the foreground of contemporary careers research (Mayrhofer & Gunz, 2019). Our model brings both subjective and objective conceptions of time back into theorizing about careers. Explicitly acknowledging that individual career identities interact with subjective time in identity work to manage tensions and objective time in responding to or driving career changes enables us to think about the temporal ordering of career identity and career moves. Other aspects of our model invite additional exploration around time. Career identity can change over time as individuals accrue past work experiences as well as new expectations and aspirations for the future. In this way, individuals think fluidly about past, present, and future in their career identity; however, they may vary in how much they focus on each of these eras (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009), or they may lose fluidity as their careers progress. In addition, tensions in our model often arise from evaluation of whether one's own career is progressing faster, slower, or in line with social referents or occupational norms. Thus, time in our model can also be a force for stability or a medium and impetus for change (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Finally, accumulation of micro-shifts to career identity occurs over time. Yet, our model is unspecific about how long accumulation takes, and the conditions under which accumulation may occur faster or slower (George & Jones, 2000). Future research can expand on the time dimensions of accumulation or individual differences in how people think about time in their careers.

Getting stuck and unstuck through career identifying. While separating forces to manage tensions provides a balance in the moment, we also take into consideration how tensions re-surface from new triggers, and re-circulate and continue to churn, at times leading people to feel stuck. To get unstuck, people need to experience movement, which occurs when people feel they are covering new ground (Smith & Berg, 1987). Thus, our theory accounts for accumulation in which identity work bubbles up to a turning point and career identity change that allows individuals to feel they are covering new ground in their self-conception in their career. Theorizing stuckness and unstuckness for career identity provides new insight to theory on career inaction. Career inaction suggests that people delay desired change in their careers due to inertia-enhancing mechanisms, such as the degree of difficulty in the decision to change and the uncertainty of the future outcome of the change (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). The career identifying process adds the explanation that individuals may perceive difficulty and uncertainty in career change because their career identity needs to change first. Periods of stuckness can be anxiety provoking and emotionally taxing (Smith & Berg, 1987), thus, becoming unstuck in one's career identity may be an important precursor and functional part of overcoming career inaction.

We also acknowledge that feelings of stuckness can be influenced by other identities that present increased potential for individuals to experience contradiction between different options for their career identity. For example, life events such as pregnancy can create identity challenges as gestational parents face potential contradictions between their work and motherhood identities (Ladge et al., 2012). Black professionals may experience dissonance as they compartmentalize professional and racial identities between their workplace and their neighborhood community (Bell, 1990) or constant code-switching to shift their behavior,

language, and even appearance when faced with social interactions across racial identities (McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, & Durkee, 2019). Future research may further examine how multiple identities further tax or perhaps enhance the various ways in which individuals manage career tensions.

Practical Implications

Our model is useful for helping people understand that having a career identity that shifts day-to-day or seems inconsistent across time and audiences is not schizophrenic, but is a normal and even functional response to the push and pull of universal—and paradoxical—anchoring and evolving forces. Rather than pushing people to resolution when career identity seems unstable, managers and career counselors can recognize that people will balance anchoring and evolving forces throughout their career, and help them to understand that even when career identity seems stable, it is in a dynamic equilibrium. Individuals who understand that managing tensions is not necessarily destabilizing but is normal and maybe even necessary to maintain a career identity, can be better equipped to live with tensions or even embrace them as opportunities to re-think who they are in their careers. Acknowledging tensions can help individuals to be more agile in making sense of their work-related experiences, or make them more resilient to triggering events, or they could even leverage job crafting techniques that integrate employees' deeply embedded personal life interests with their current work roles and career prospects (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Butler & Waldroop, 1999; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Additionally, our model could be beneficial to educational institutions or professional associations that prepare early career individuals to develop their career identity. Rather than assume that individuals will pursue traditional paths, these institutions may be better positioned to support career development by showing people that setting an anchoring career identity for decision-making now doesn't preclude envisioning themselves in other career paths that could unfold over time.

CONCLUSION

Careers are messy with many detours that forge a new path or end up back on track. Our theory shows that career identity is at least as messy. People are constantly bombarded with a range of triggers, large and small, that keep the career identifying process in motion. Our theory provides insight into how people manage tensions that arise from paradoxical anchoring and evolving forces to keep career identity steady enough to guide action while keeping open possibilities for change.

TABLE 1

Prevalent Definitions of Career Identity

Primarily emphasizes anchoring force	**Primarily emphasizes evolving force**
• A "total self-concept" (Schein, 1978: 126) that consists of self-perceived abilities, motives, and values across work and life experiences that "functions as a **stabilizing force, an anchor**…." (Schein, 1996:80) • A "structure or network of meanings in which the individual consciously links his own motivation, interests, and competencies with acceptable career roles…not the sum of those experiences but the **assimilation of the experiences into meaningful or useful structures**." (Meijers, 1998: 200) • "One's self-definition in the career context, describing 'who I am' or 'who I want to be'…that acts as a **cognitive compass** that motivates one to actively adapt in order to realize (or create) opportunities that match one's aspirations." (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004: 17)	• A "practice of **articulating and performing** identity positions in narrating career experiences" that is "**co-constructed, socially-situated, and performed in interaction**." (LaPointe, 2010: 2) • "How one conceived oneself over the course of one's work history and how that conception **forms and evolves and perhaps radically changes**." Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008: 351 • The "person's image of her- or himself in relation to the environment" developed through the "**creation of new aspects of the self** in relation to the career." (Hall & Mirvis, 1996: 25)

Note: The bolded text highlights anchoring and evolving forces in these definitions.

FIGURE 1

Process Model of Career Identifying

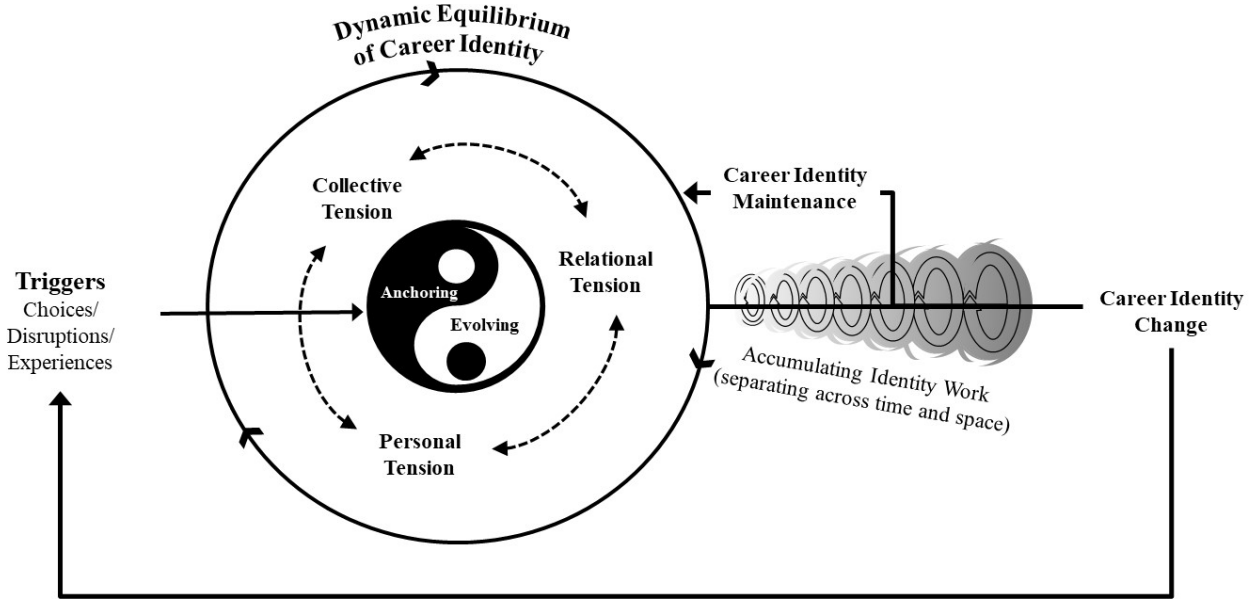


FIGURE 2

Illustration of tensions arising from a career change trigger

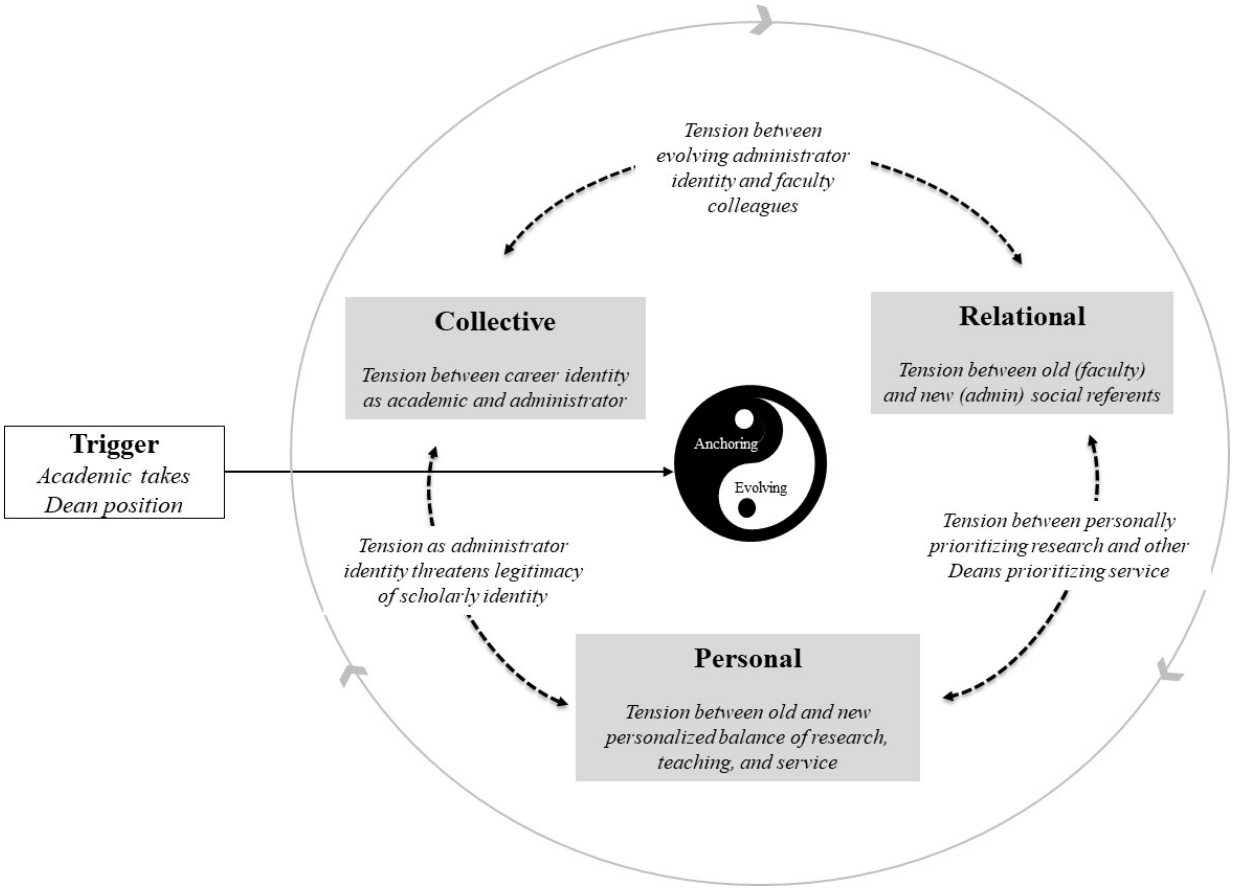


FIGURE 3A: Stepwise model underlying existing notions of identity change

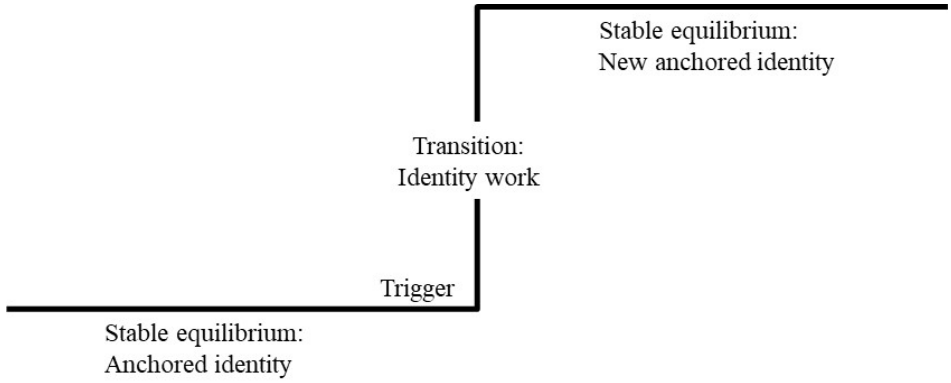


FIGURE 3B: Ongoing identity work and change with gradual, accumulated change

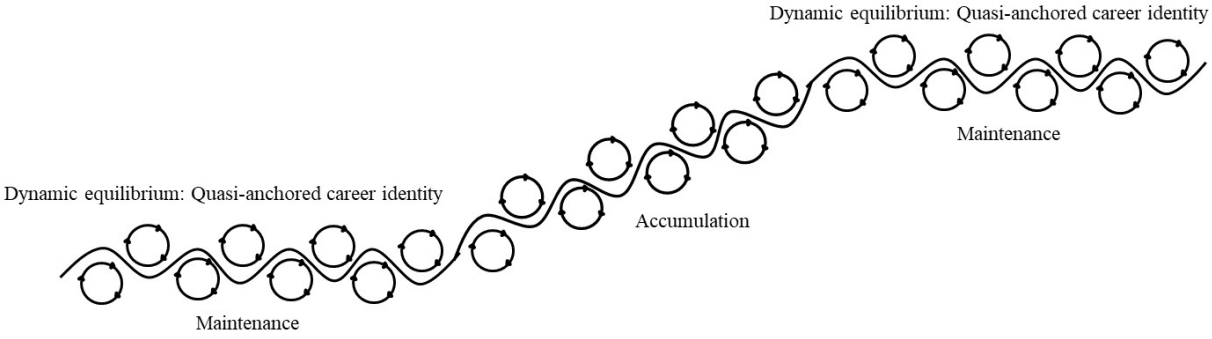
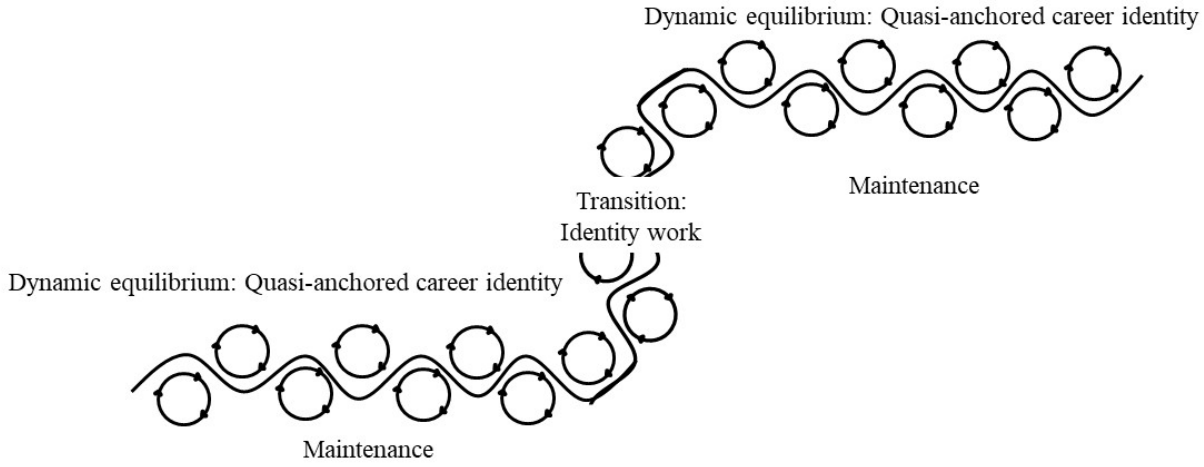


FIGURE 3C: Ongoing identity work and change with reactive, rapid change



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Stable anchors and dynamic evolution: A paradox theory of career identity maintenance and change

ABSTRACT

People routinely conceive of themselves in their career in both stable and dynamic ways. Individuals may draw common threads across their various career experiences and aspirations to form a stable anchor for their career identity, yet at the same time, dynamically adapt their self-concept in the context of their career. In this paper, we call attention to the anchoring and evolving forces that people experience as a paradox for their career identity and theorize *career identifying* as an ongoing process of career identity maintenance and change. As individuals contend with career identity tensions, they make adjustments to maintain a balance of anchoring and evolving forces on their career identity or to make shifts that accumulate into career identity change. The career identifying process accounts for both career identity maintenance and change in a single theoretical model that explains how career identity can change over time while being stable enough to make coherent career choices.

Keywords: Career identity, paradox, tensions, careers

Answering the question of "Who am I in my career?" is not as simple as responding with a singular idea of one's occupation. Indeed, even those who are objectively well-established in a particular profession may answer this question in inconsistent ways within themselves and to others. For example, a journalist could look across their various work experiences that include being a part-time screenwriter and a novelist, and see themselves as a storyteller – and they could be with colleagues at their newspaper and see themselves as a committed journalist. A manager could look at their successes and promotions and see themselves as a corporate executive – and they could think about new product areas they have developed and launched for their corporation and see themselves as an entrepreneur. These practical examples may seem unsurprising and ordinary; however, we lack theory that explains how it is that people can think of their career identity in ways that are both stable enough to progress in a career path and dynamic enough to accommodate or even spur change, at the same time.

While it may be expected that people are able to clearly express their career identity, i.e., who they are in their career, in a 30 second elevator speech or in a brief summary on a resume, the lived reality of career identity can be simultaneously stable and changing. When people think about their career identity, they can synthesize their career experiences into a common thread as well as flexibly adapt their self-definition to incorporate past, present, and anticipated future career experiences across different social situations (Hall, 1996; LaPointe, 2010). Yet, prior research about career identity tends to primarily emphasize career identity as an *anchor* that that steadies the self-concept through relatively consistent preferences for one's career (e.g., Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2013) or as something that *evolves* through a reflexive practice in response to various social contexts people experience in their career (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; LaPointe, 2010). Juxtaposing notions of career identity as anchoring

and evolving brings to light an underexamined question in the careers literature—how is it that career identity can be both anchoring and evolving at the same time, i.e., how can career identity be stable enough to guide action while preserving flexibility for change? By addressing this question, we not only theorize that career identity is both stable and changing, but also explain why career identity is necessarily both at once.

In this paper, we argue that people experience anchoring and evolving forces as a paradox for their career identity. As a paradox, these forces are competing yet mutually constitutive as individuals simultaneously attend to both forces (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). We introduce the *career identifying* [4] process, which we define as an ongoing process of career identity maintenance and change that is driven by anchoring and evolving forces, in which individuals manage tensions that arise as different choices, disruptions, and experiences call their career identity into question. We theorize that rather than reaching some ultimate end state to one's career identity, the ongoing nature of career identifying allows individuals to adapt and accommodate a wide variety of career-related thoughts and actions while also holding a stable enough self-definition to serve as a reference point. This "workable certainty" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008: 230), or dynamic equilibrium of career identity, is maintained by actively managing tensions through small shifts made to balance forces in one's career identity, and we posit that these shifts can also accumulate and eventually lead to career identity change and a new dynamic equilibrium. In the career identifying process, a career identity in dynamic equilibrium is not one that is unmoored; rather, ongoing dynamism is a necessary and functional part of the process in response to anchoring and evolving forces of the paradox.

[4] Note that we use the gerund form to denote action or doing, i.e., *career identifying* as an ongoing process of defining career identity, rather than referring to the process of identification with another social entity, such as an organization or occupation.

The objective of this paper is to build new theory that can account for both maintenance that sustains an existing dynamic equilibrium and/or change that result in a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. The career identifying process model offers three new insights to previous research. First, it explicitly decouples career identity from career path, allowing career identity to change independent of or even preceding changes in career trajectory. Though career identity change is usually assumed to follow actual employment changes (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), we propose an alternative, additional way that career identity can change. In this conception, the career identifying process involves the accumulation of micro shifts to identity over time, which can precede or even generate an actual career path change. We argue that for career identity, micro shifts are constantly occurring as a stream of triggers—choices, disruptions, and experiences that can occur in small daily moments as well as in bigger life events—set anchoring and evolving forces in motion and raise career identity tensions that call into question one's sense of self. Managing these tensions through identity work can eventually lead to a revised career identity, which may then influence subsequent concrete career changes. The career identifying process also helps to explain how it is that intense or seemingly traumatic career path changes, such as a layoff or demise of one's profession, may actually be of limited impact to one's career identity if identity work has already been accumulating preceding this event. In this way, our model shows that though tensions arising from the anchoring-evolving paradox can be experienced as a career identity challenge, managing the tensions can result in outcomes that are beneficial or desirable for an individual.

Second, we account for both career identity maintenance and change in a single theoretical model that can explain how career identity can be stable enough to make coherent choices as well as change over time. With this theory, we can apply the career identifying

process onto a wide variety of career patterns captured in concepts such as life stages (Levinson, 1978), protean (Hall, 1996), boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), and kaleidoscope (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). For example, while the life stages model assumes predictable changes in one's career with progression through adulthood (Levinson, 1978), career identifying would suggest that changes in career identity do not necessarily occur in the same progression. Our theory helps explain that what may seem to others an abrupt change that disrupts or even reverses the expected progression through adulthood can be accounted for in ongoing smaller shifts that occurred underneath the surface in an individual's career identifying process. In career patterns that capture less predictable or nontraditional career progressions such as protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope careers, the career identifying process can help to explain how individuals form a stable yet adaptable enough career identity to face potentially disjointed or distressing career experiences to pursue self-directed career interests. Thus, our theory may provide a useful framework for expanding on various patterns that are captured in careers research but that do not fully explain the ongoing underlying tensions and accumulation of identity work that facilitate different career patterns and actions.

Finally, we expand beyond the dichotomy of career action or inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020) by explaining the constant underlying activity involved with maintaining an existing career identity. Individuals may feel stuck in their experience of the anchoring and evolving paradox (Smith & Berg, 1987) as they are unable to choose between the stability of an anchored career identity and the lure of change. Paradox theorizing helps to explain how balancing is done through smaller constant adjustments, or micro-shifts, like a tightrope walker whose balance on the rope is the result of ongoing slight adaptations (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Our theory provides a processual view of how these micro-shifts can occur, and how accumulation

may be occurring in periods of apparent inaction, eventually altering the course of the tightrope itself.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we show how anchoring and evolving forces underlie existing conceptualizations of career identity, and how these forces can be conceived of as a paradox that is taken for granted in prior research. We then introduce a theoretical model that specifies the career identifying process. We illustrate how triggers set these forces in motion, which calls career identity into question and gives rise to career identity tensions. We theorize how these tensions are managed toward an existing or new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. Lastly, we articulate insights gained and discuss how future research can leverage these insights to better understand the identity dynamics that influence career identity change.

ANCHORING AND EVOLVING FORCES IN CAREER IDENTITY

Career identity is related to but distinct from other work-related identities, such as professional identity tied to a specific occupation and social identity that incorporates an employer (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) or workgroup (Kane, Argote, & Levine, 2005), because it follows the entire course of an individual's career including various career moves and changes (Ashforth et al., 2008). Definitions of career identity in prior research describe a person's self-conception in reference to their career. Though these published conceptions of career identity may acknowledge both anchoring and evolving forces, the definitions tend to primarily emphasize the anchored nature of career identity or the way that career identity evolves over time. Table 1 below provides a sample of published definitions of career identity. We organize these definitions to highlight portions (in bold) that foreground the anchoring force or the evolving force. Highlighting these contrasts shows the potential benefit of a paradox perspective

in explaining how and why both anchoring and evolving forces can co-exist, even while being experienced as contradictory.

Anchoring refers to the stabilizing nature of the self-concept that informs individual preferences around what individuals value and what is most meaningful in their career relative to their social context (Rodrigues et al., 2013; Schein, 1978). An anchored career identity stems from an individual's work history and serves as a cognitive compass when making career choices (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Meijers, 1998). Evolving refers to the more dynamic nature of career identity as something that is actively created and transformed, which is both fueled by, and in turn, influences cognitive processes of understanding one's career experiences (Ashforth et al., 2008; Vough & Caza, 2017). Anchoring is about how individuals integrate motives, values, and abilities from prior career experiences into a coherent career self-concept (Schein, 1978), while evolving is about the more ongoing processual nature of the career self-concept, which at times, leads to larger transformational change (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Insert Table 1 about here

Prior research operationalizes the anchoring force—or career anchors as first conceptualized by Schein (1978, 1996) and expanded by Feldman and Bolino (1996)—as static career types, testing for a variety of outcomes, such as managerial career trajectories (Gubler, Biemann, Tschopp, & Grote, 2015), entrepreneurial intentions (Lee & Wong, 2004), and core self-evaluation (Costigan, Gurbuz, & Sigri, 2018), as well as considering the influence of other identities on career types, such as GLB (gay, lesbian, bisexual) identity (Kaplan, 2014) or an internationalism identity (Lazarova, Cerdin, & Liao, 2014). This stream of research captures static career types as a proxy for career identity, primarily emphasizing stability over

understanding of how people actually engage with their career identity over time. While Schein's (1978) original conception is aligned to this more static treatment of career identity, he also recognizes—but does not fully theorize—that people may change their career types over time and that stability may in fact enable change. Studies that emphasize the evolving force have used the idea of dynamic construction of career identity. Dynamic construction can involve performative expressions of oneself across various career experiences and social situations, accomplishing evolution through connections that are drawn between various expressions into a more composite notion of one's self (LaPointe, 2010). Other studies have characterized career identity as responsive to career events, like setbacks. For example, people construct resilience in their present career identity by referring to their past self that overcame prior setbacks and using aspects of past identity to evolve a current career identity (Vough & Caza, 2017). Thus, anchoring and evolving forces necessarily coexist, as stability can enable change and vice-versa.

Anchoring and evolving forces are an application of the endemic forces of stability and change from the paradox literature to individual-level career identity. Like other fundamental paradoxes, such as the belonging-distinctiveness paradox (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Shore et al., 2011; Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019), the old-new learning paradox (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011), and the exploitation-exploration paradox (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), stability and change are fundamentally paradoxical, such that the essential need for stability is opposite yet mutually constitutive of the essential need for change or evolution.

In the broader identity literature, prior conceptions establish stability and change in how individuals understand who they are in relation to their social context. For example, the self-concept is understood to "feel stable yet…malleable" to accommodate an enduring essence of oneself that can be presented to others as well as dynamically constructed from moment to

moment (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012: 88). At the organizational level, stability and change can manifest as an "adaptive instability" that prevents stagnation of organizational identity and accommodate necessary change through ongoing interactions with external feedback and adjustments made to address environmental demands (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000: 64). Organizational identity is also understood to involve internal negotiations among organizational members in ongoing gradual changes through maintaining a "stable state of instability" (Kozica, Gebhardt, Muller-Seitz, & Kaiser, 2015: 187). While stability and change are negotiated through various organizational members in organizational level identity, anchoring and evolving forces are constantly pushing and pulling within an individual, bringing attention to the importance of the subjective process involved in career identifying. We expand on the process for how individuals address these forces in defining their selves in their careers below.

THE CAREER IDENTIFYING PROCESS

In Figure 1 below, anchoring and evolving forces are illustrated as a yin yang symbol, which is often used to denote paradox. The yin-yang shows opposition in stark contrast between black and white, yet also interrelatedness, represented by the dots of the opposite color in either side of the circle. The internal boundary creates distinction between the two sides and highlights opposition, and the external boundary constructs a unified whole and highlights synergy and mutual constitutions (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the career identifying process, anchoring and evolving forces co-exist in competing yet mutually constitutive ways. Forces are experienced as pushes and pulls, yet paradoxically, the anchoring force enables action by providing enough certainty in one's existing career identity to evaluate career choices or changes, and the evolving force enables stability by allowing experimentation that can eventually coalesce into a more stable self-definition.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Applying paradox theorizing to the career identifying process helps us to illustrate this interplay between the forces as triggers, tensions, and shifts that occur in ongoing, iterative ways. Working through paradox allows people to reach a dynamic equilibrium that enables a "workable certainty" to deal with intricate and fluid issues (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), such as those involving the messy reality of careers. In a dynamic equilibrium, constant micro-shifts enable balance by adapting to the continuous push and pull of opposing forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This balance does not necessarily mean an equal weighting or a permanent resolution between these forces. Rather balance is about iterative adjustments taken by individuals to attend to forces that push and pull with different weights at different times, as exemplified in the metaphor of the tightrope walker that constantly moves to balance on the rope (Schad et al., 2016). The *dynamic equilibrium of career identity* in Figure 1 reflects that people move through tensions to balance forces for enough of a workable certainty in their career identity to make choices or deal with disruptions and still have room to accommodate a wide variety of career-related thoughts and actions.

Consider the example of Julie[5]. Julie's career identity as a corporate finance analyst seems stable. She is successfully advancing through the well-established structure of progression in her firm that provides stability and direction in her career identity (anchoring); at the same time, she also feels tension when comparing herself to her mother who started her own property investment firm (evolving). Julie embodies a contradiction. She is deeply embedded in her current position, working long hours to get to the next promotion, which is in line with

[5] Julie is loosely based on one of the authors' career conversations with a former student.

expectations about what junior corporate finance analysts do. Yet, Julie is also constantly reevaluating herself in her own mind against a path that no one in her current field would anticipate her taking. In what follows, we continue to unfold Julie's story as we illustrate our theory.

Our process model shows how an ongoing stream of triggers set the anchoring and evolving forces in motion. Tensions arise from self-defining in relation to collectives, social referents, and personal career meaning. Tensions can co-occur or influence each other, sustaining the cyclical churning. People manage tensions by separating conflicting aspects across objective (i.e., clock time) or subjective (i.e., thoughts about past, present and future) time (Shipp & Jansen, 2021), and social space (e.g., audiences across different domains in the social world). In the sections that follow, we expand on each part of the model starting with triggers.

Triggers

Triggers are the choices, disruptions, and experiences that set the forces for anchoring and evolving career identity in motion. When forces are set in motion, the existing dynamic equilibrium in an individual's career identity becomes unbalanced in response. Revisiting the example of Julie, her career identity is in a dynamic equilibrium as she works toward her next promotion as a corporate finance professional. Triggers, such as conversations with co-workers on their latest work success, a performance feedback meeting with her supervisor, or even a Facebook post of a close friend who is an entrepreneur, activate the push and pull of the forces and lead her to question her career identity. Seeing the entrepreneur's excitement over his autonomy pulls her career identity toward a self-definition as an entrepreneur, yet, talking with her co-workers about their latest successes or her boss about her own career prospects pushes her career identity back toward corporate finance.

As the prior example suggests, even routine events and interactions can act as triggers in our model. Our conception of triggers is inclusive of both smaller ongoing events and larger episodic events that brings an individual's attention to their career identity and makes salient the forces that anchor career identity and the opposing forces that pull it toward evolution. While Julie's example shows how consequential small social interactions can be, such a trigger may also serve as a seed that gets planted and builds over time (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Because of their highly varied nature, triggers can constantly spark the career identifying process, as a person encounters the myriad of choices, disruptions, and experiences that occur over the course of a career, like the routine examples provided in Julie's story or a much larger event like the displacement of an occupation by technological change (Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2020).

The magnitude of the trigger, however, does not necessarily determine the extent of the activation of the forces in the career identifying process, but may rather depend on both the salience and timing of the trigger. Triggers may be more or less salient depending on the strength of the push and pull of the anchoring and evolving forces relative to an individual's preferences and aspirations. For instance, in a study of young professionals, unpredictable workplace experiences served to trigger feelings of validation and reinforced an existing career identity for some participants, while leaving others feeling invalidated and forcing a change in their existing career identity (Modestino, Sugiyama, & Ladge, 2019). Indeed, the concept of lingering identities suggests that a trigger such as a role change, which is typically assumed to be accompanied by psychological transition to a new identity, may instead be met with coping efforts to retain previous identities when faced with uncertainty (Wittman, 2019). Thus, the same trigger will be more or less salient to different people.

Timing can also affect how important triggers are in the career identifying process. Small triggers that occur at times when a person is vulnerable to influence or in a period of questioning about their careers (e.g., Jansen & Shipp, 2019) can have disproportionately large effects on the forces. For example, bumping into a former classmate with a completely different and highly desired career path at a vulnerable or uncertain time can trigger intense reflection and a pull toward the evolving force, leading to strong tensions, even though the trigger is not large or unusual. When a trigger occurs in the path of a career also matters to its importance to career identifying, i.e., the same trigger occurring early or late in a career can affect the forces differently. Large events like career changes can trigger the career identifying process, yet the result may not be a highly active and tension-filled process if the timing of the career change is congruent with an expected stage of the career path as reflected in traditional conceptions of life stages (Levinson, 1978). For example, in a study of retirees, those who followed the expected timing of retirement—as understood through a pre-existing plan of action from culturally-determined scripts—described their retirement as "on time" and largely without the experience of tensions (Vough, Bataille, Noh, & Lee, 2015: 425). In this case, the pull of the evolving force can be strong and not answered by a strong push of the anchoring force, because the timing of the retirement matches an expected evolution of career identity. Similarly, a layoff is a large career event that could have different effects depending on career stage. People in earlier career stages might be more inclined to react less strongly to layoffs in terms of career identity if their intention is to stay on a path that is consistent with the existing career identity, just with a different employer, while people in mid-career stages could use a layoff as an opportunity to question and confront existing career identity and experience the forces and resulting tensions that arise from this questioning (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). This is not to say that a layoff would

not have a large effect on a person's life, but its effect on career identity may not be large, especially if they get back on their expected career path.

In sum, triggers vary widely in their type and magnitude, but the strength of the anchoring and evolving forces they activate will depend on the salience and the timing of the trigger. Given the range of choices, events, and disruptions that can serve as triggers, triggers can arise in succession, activating new forces and tensions before previously triggered tensions have found a balance, keeping the process in motion. However, as career identity tensions that arise from the push and pull of anchoring and evolving forces, they are alleviated through identity work, which in turn maintains career identity in dynamic equilibrium or accumulates to change it. We expand on these other elements of the process model below.

Career Identity Tensions

Tensions are cognitively and socially constructed polarities experienced by individuals as dilemmas that feel like either/or choices (Lewis, 2000) that can be met with feelings of stress, anxiety, or even paralysis (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). Prior research examines tensions of identity that reside in understanding one's self in relation to others and collectives (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987) as people orient themselves to different sources of self-definition (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). As stated earlier, tensions arise from anchoring and evolving forces when they are instigated by triggers. When the push and pull of anchoring and evolving forces activate the career identifying process, career identity is questioned through tensions that arise in considering social norms of collectives, social referents in relational interactions, and one's own self-determinations and interests. Next, we describe tensions that arise as career identity is appraised against collective, relational, and personal concerns. We also note and describe how tensions for different sources

of self-definition can give rise to additional tensions, such as when personal tensions and collective tensions conflict. We illustrate career identity tensions using an example of an academic who takes on a role as Dean. We use this example to illustrate an objective role change that can trigger an imbalance in the existing dynamic equilibrium of career identity and more transparently demonstrate various tensions that can arise as a faculty member reconsiders their career identity in light of collective, relational, and personal interests that shift with their new Dean role. Regardless of how much one enjoys or dislikes the responsibilities of a new position, a shift in occupation is often accompanied by reflection on career identity. We also describe how tensions give rise to other tensions, potentially creating an ongoing stream of triggers.

Collective. Collective tensions are felt when individuals question their career identity that has been validated through and anchored in collectives (e.g., organizations and occupations). These questions can arise due to changes in the collective itself or due to individuals self-initiating adjustments to a collective. For example, changes in work collectives could include operating within occupations that are subject to more than one set of institutional logics (Dunn & Jones, 2010; Lounsbury, 2007) or hybrid professions that inject multiple collective inputs into identity (Caza & Creary, 2016), as well as the emergence of new occupations (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2017; Nigam & Dokko, 2019).

Figure 2 below provides an example of an academic who takes on a new role as Dean, experiencing tension between wanting to continue to anchor their career identity as a scholar and to evolve their career identity toward a new collective of administration.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Relational. Relational tensions are felt when individuals question their career identity that has been validated through and anchored in relationships with social referents. These questions can arise as individuals identify with multiple social referents who communicate contradictory expectations. Social referents are people that serve as benchmarks or that represent aspirations, e.g., peers, mentors or role models (Shah, 1998). Social referents provide a model or template for behaviors that are required of a given role (Ibarra, 1999; Reilly, 2017). Prior research suggests individuals often observe a range of role models with respect to their demeanor, interactions, and physical appearance of those who have assumed similar roles and choose from a repertoire of styles they can use in adapting to the new role (Ibarra, 1999). A diversity of referents can make comparison and feedback less clear, yet, having a set of referents who are similar to each other may also reduce clarity, as a narrow range of referents can place limitations on the exploration of possible self-definitions (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005).

In the example of a faculty member transitioning to the role of Dean, relational tension is likely to arise when the new Dean makes comparisons with existing (faculty) and new (administrator) social referents. In this case, the faculty member turned Dean may make an effort to distance themselves from their prior role as a faculty member by adopting behaviors of other university deans and administrators, like dressing more formally or having staff act as gatekeepers to meetings. They may also experience relational tension when comparing themselves with former colleagues, as they feel like they are not producing as much research as a faculty member should.

Personal. Personal tensions arise when individuals question their career identity that is validated through and anchored in personal interests and priorities. Personal interests can include the fulfillment of personal values and the notion of success built on a feeling that a personal best

has been achieved (Hall & Mirvis, 1996), or by self-directed career values and attitudes (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Questions arise when individuals consider how their interests are best served. For example, in the case of the faculty member becoming Dean, one place where tensions may arise is between their preferred personalized balance of research, teaching, and service and the demands of their new role that leads them to question who they are in their career.

Tensions between tensions. As individuals engage with one tension, new questions could form and give rise to another tension. Identities can be nested across multiple levels of analysis and reciprocally linked (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011). In our model, cross-level relationships between tensions are a collective-relational tension, a relational-personal tension, and a personal-collective tension. A *collective-relational tension* can arise when collective tensions lead to relational tensions, or vice versa. For example, as the new Dean works to develop their new leadership identity, they may experience tension when interacting with their former department colleagues as their focus moves beyond their department to the college as a whole. The relational tension can also lead to the personal tension, or vice versa. In this *relational-personal* tension, looking to other Deans as social referents may call career identity into question for the new Dean if the other Deans provide contradictory information about how much they re-prioritized service over research. The new Dean may feel tension in personally prioritizing research when they are unsure of the extent to which other Deans prioritize service. Lastly, personal tensions can lead to collective tensions, or vice versa. In this *personal-collective* tension, the new Dean may call into question their scholarly identity that was validated and anchored in publishing, as they feel challenged to meet administrative demands and to make time for research.

In sum, when an imbalance of anchoring and evolving forces raises questions about one's career identity, individuals engage with tensions that arise from considering various sources of defining one's self in relation to the social context of one's career, including collective, relational, and personal interests. We used the Dean example to illustrate the different tensions, but a single trigger may give rise to multiple tensions, or one tension may lead to another. For example, the trigger of Julie seeing her entrepreneur friend's Facebook post raises relational tensions as she compares herself to her friend. As she thinks about an entrepreneurial identity, she has to engage with the validation and success she finds as a corporate finance professional, as a relational tension raises a collective tension. Further reflection leads her to remember how corporate finance was supposed to be a stepping stone, leading her to feel a personal tension. Even absent new triggers, tensions giving rise to other tensions can also keep the career identifying process in motion.

Identity Work to Manage Tensions

In order to address tensions raised in the career identifying process, individuals separate anchoring and evolving forces by performing the identity work of holding different versions of themselves across time and social space. Identity work is defined as an individual's efforts to create, manage and present identities that reflect their coherent and distinctive self-concept (Snow & Anderson, 1987: 1348; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1165). Identity work includes "*cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral* activities that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, and revising, or rejecting *collective, role, and personal self-meanings* within the boundaries of their social context," (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018: 895).

Paradoxical tensions can lead to vicious cycles in which people become trapped in defensiveness, or to virtuous cycles that create new opportunities when tensions are managed (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Vicious cycles occur when individuals suppress either force, which intensifies pressure from the other force and produces an intellectually and emotionally disturbing cycle of tensions in which individuals can become subjectively stuck (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987). To exit or avoid this unsettling cycle, identity work helps individuals manage tensions by subjectively separating the forces into different versions of themselves. In the broader identity literature, individuals are understood to hold multiple versions of themselves across subjective time periods, such as in future versions of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), in current provisional and alternative selves (Ibarra, 1999; Obodaru, 2012), and even grappling with past versions of oneself in lingering identities (Wittman, 2019) and identity paralysis (Toubiana, 2020). Individuals hold past, present, and future selves for a variety of career related actions—e.g., to anticipate a desired future, to test new identities or to retain meaningful alternate possibilities for the present, and to sustain continuity from the past. Similarly, individuals may also communicate different versions of themselves to different audiences across social spaces—e.g., to present a professional image at work (Ladge & Little, 2019; Roberts, 2005), to navigate different cultural expectations across social contexts at work and at home (Bell, 1990), and to meet the moral obligations of one's occupation while also meeting one's own personal material aims (Reid & Ramarajan, 2021).

We draw from Poole and Van de Ven (1989) to theorize that separating anchoring and evolving forces in the career identifying process takes place through temporal and spatial separation. Temporal separation is about locating opposing forces in different time periods, whereas spatial separation is about situating opposing forces in different locations in the social

world (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). To manage tensions, people accept that contradictory forces coexist in the short term and work to separate and iterate between the forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). By managing tensions, people can learn to tolerate ambiguity, become more adaptable to change, and develop resiliency (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Similarly, in career identifying, individuals can perform identity work to manage the tensions and become more adaptable and resilient to career-related uncertainty in order to live with both anchoring and evolving forces in their career identity.

Separating forces across time. An individual's work history is understood to progress through objective time, i.e., the literal passage of clock or calendar time that moves from past to present to future; yet, subjective interpretations of career identity can also include engaging with subjective time, where thoughts move between past, present and future in any order and direction (Shipp & Cole, 2015; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). When triggers disturb the dynamic equilibrium of career identity, people may make connections by drawing upon past, present, and future selves to balance anchoring and evolving forces across different subjective time periods. For example, Julie lives with tensions by separating forces across the present and future. As she actively takes steps toward her next promotion in corporate finance in the present, she tucks away her entrepreneurial intentions in provisional versions of her future self that she tries out in different imagined scenarios. She may play out entrepreneurial activities in her mind and vicariously experience her entrepreneurial intentions through referents, such as her entrepreneur friend or her mother. Playing out possibilities and alternatives in her mind could increase Julie's self-knowledge for the time being (Obodaru, 2012). As she increases this self-knowledge and gains a better understanding of what she wants in her career, new connections may be formed between

present and future, which can in turn, begin to unravel the existing balance between anchoring and evolving forces toward a new dynamic equilibrium.

Separating forces across social space. Different versions of one's self-concept can also be expressed across different social spaces (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012) and among different audiences depending on the reactions they hope to elicit (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In our theorizing, we suggest that individuals can manage tensions by spatially separating anchoring and evolving forces across social milieus, such as highlighting different attributes to potential employers than to peers (Modestino et al., 2019). While expressing one's self through different narratives to different audiences may appear as inauthentic or a form of compartmentalizing, trying out these different versions of one's self through different narratives can serve as a mechanism to experiment with possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Returning to our example of Julie, she may tell different narratives to different audiences that allow her to manage the tensions arising from anchoring and evolving forces. For example, when her peers at work share their work successes, she too may share her own work successes to retain the stability of the anchoring force. She may also seek out her Facebook friend, asking to meet for coffee to talk about ways she can get involved in entrepreneurial activities and other people she can meet to build her network in real estate, allowing her to expand toward the evolving force. As she continues to use these different narratives for different audiences, she may begin to form connections between audiences, such as articulating transferrable skills that corporate finance has given her for real estate. Thus, the identity work she does to manage tensions across audiences allows Julie to make adjustments to maintain her current dynamic

equilibrium, while also allowing her to make gradual shifts that can accumulate toward change and forming a new dynamic equilibrium.

Identity Work Leads to Existing or New Dynamic Equilibrium through Career Identity Maintenance and/or Change

In Figure 1, we illustrate two main routes from the dynamic equilibrium of career identity. In the first route, accumulating identity work serves to maintain the dynamic equilibrium, while the second route represents larger transformational changes to a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. While maintaining and changing are core types of identity work (Caza et al., 2018), they are usually conceived of as separate types: maintaining is about retaining and securing a sense of meaning and self-worth (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1987), whereas changing involves addressing issues related to authenticity and fitting one's self into a new social context, such as in workplace entries or exits and shifts in occupations (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Our model considers career identity maintenance and career identity change as involving the same activities of separating across time and social space. In our model, however, the identity work to manage tensions accumulates to maintain a dynamic equilibrium, and/or change toward a new dynamic equilibrium.

Accumulating identity work. Accumulating identity work is particularly relevant to the career identifying process, as paradoxes are understood to persist over time, and smaller shifts to manage the paradox can accumulate to respond to dilemmas in the short term, while managing both forces of the paradox in the long term (Smith, 2014). Thus, accumulation is important to the long-term sustainability of anchoring and evolving forces. Using the metaphor of the tightrope walker, we conceive that accumulating identity work shifts career identity in both routes of maintenance and change; however, in maintenance, the tightrope walker continues to move along

the tightrope in the same general direction toward the existing dynamic equilibrium whereas in change, the endpoint of the tightrope moves such that a new dynamic equilibrium emerges.

Accumulating identity work occurs within a "container" that is psychologically cultivated as well as created through connections to physical places, other people, and routine practices—i.e., an identity work space (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces are understood to reduce emotional disturbances and facilitate sensemaking that allows people to figure out who they are or to craft portable versions of themselves across various identity-related aims they may have at different times in their career (Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood, 2018). An identity work space could include real-life interstitial spaces, such as hobbyist clubs or coffee shops, that provide informal gathering places outside of one's regular workplace (Furnari, 2014) or psychological spaces in which individuals can begin to store and to practice activities tied to different identities (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces are where accumulating identity work can be played out through various movements—psychological, physical, behavioral, and relational that accompany identity transitions (George, Wittman, & Rockmann, 2022)—and may result in preserving one's existing sense of self or in helping a new sense self to take shape.

Career identity maintenance and/or career identity change. Accumulating identity work in the career identity maintenance route may be experienced as routine or effortful depending on the strength of the push and pull of the forces. Identity work is more routine when people follow well-established scripts for their identity, such as an organization's structure for managerial advancement, and may be able to maintain self-continuity with limited uncertainty; however, people begin to question this continuity if they perceive they have limited input into the routine and feel constrained in self-defining who they are (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In the

maintenance route, the tightrope walker may make micro-shifts back and forth and in many different directions to balance the forces. In this way, accumulating identity work occurs even in career identity maintenance, yet the tight rope continues toward the existing dynamic equilibrium. Thus, career identity maintenance does not sustain career identity in a static sense but in a more dynamic self-continuity that preserves an existing dynamic equilibrium.

The second route toward career identity change involves accumulating identity work that builds up to a threshold that becomes a turning point (Obodaru, 2012). People may reach a threshold from living with the tensions or feeling stuck, as well as through a more conscious build up, such as when people nurture their future career identity through their activities in an identity work space or gain experience before making a career change. When tensions influence a career identity change, people make micro-shifts to attempt to alleviate tensions, yet, paradox theory suggests that alleviating one tension provides only a temporary respite as new tensions emerge (Smith & Berg, 1987). As identity work accumulates, micro-shifts that move toward a new end point compile into a turning point—i.e., a shift in the subjective meaning for one's life that is derived from one's career identity (Obodaru, 2012). The turning point acts as trigger, such that it activates the anchoring and evolving forces, tensions, and accumulating identity work, leading to a new dynamic equilibrium. When people engage in a more conscious accumulation, they make sense of their current work activities relative to their desired future. For example, medical residents accumulate identity work by customizing their identities to their present work at hand, despite an incongruence with their future image of a being a doctor (Pratt et al., 2006). In this case, the turning point may occur when an individual perceives they are ready for a change in the meaning of their identity, e.g., when they have accumulated enough activities or practices to create a new dynamic equilibrium of their career identity.

Returning to the example of Julie, she may feel stuck in her career identity if she starts to think about where her current career path is leading her. Perhaps a rise of tensions is triggered by getting an accelerated promotion or by spending time with more senior people in corporate finance, which makes her envision a future she realizes she might not want. At the same time, she's stuck in a career identity that she's following very successfully that gives her status and security. The identity work of separating across time and audiences to manage the tensions may increase in frequency or specificity, as she continues to think more about an entrepreneurial identity and shares these aspirations with others. In doing so, her identity work accumulates through micro-shifts that continuously pull her toward a new direction. She reaches a turning point in which she reflects on who she really is in her career and begins to fully re-envision herself as an entrepreneur, even if it might not be time to make an actual job change yet. In this scenario, while Julie is promoted and appears to her peers and supervisor to have further solidified and anchored her career identity, the notion of accumulation in our model helps to explain how her career identity was also evolving under the surface. This accumulation leads to subjective career identity change, which later materializes as a career path change to quit her corporate finance job and undertake starting her own real estate firm.

Returning to the example of the Dean, there are triggers, such as seeing announcements of their colleagues' new publications, that pull on their scholarly identity. While the Dean experiences micro-shifts back towards scholarship, such as telling themselves they will make time for research in the summer or finding other referents in indirect research activities like grant administration, they experience salient triggers toward maintaining their current administrative identity. Over time, the Dean's micro-shifts push more toward an administrative identity, maintaining the existing dynamic equilibrium. Additionally, as the Dean experiences other

triggers, such as successfully delivering on organizational goals related to diversity or fundraising activities, the maintenance of their existing dynamic equilibrium may be reinforced. The existing dynamic equilibrium could then drive future choices to advance up the ranks of administration to provost or president.

As demonstrated in Julie's and the Dean's examples, our theory accommodates a variety of ways in which career identity is maintained and changes. By decoupling career identity change from career path change, we are able to account for when micro-shifts maintain and change dynamic equilibrium. Theorizing career identity maintenance and career identity change in a single theory provides an understanding that both are needed, and that neither the continuity of maintenance nor the dynamism of change are inherently bad for one's career identity, despite what might seem like on the surface as appearing stuck or making an irrational choice. Challenges that individuals experience for their career identity are instead a useful and developmental part of working through the career identifying process. In what follows, we further expand on new insights that are gained from our theory as well as future implications for research.

DISCUSSION

With this theory, we seek to reconcile orderly conceptions of career identity with the messy reality of how people think of themselves in relation to their careers. While past research has primarily emphasized the anchoring aspect of career identity (Rodrigues et al., 2013; Schein, 1996) or the evolving aspect of career identity (Ashforth et al., 2008; LaPointe, 2010), we start with the idea that career identity is subject to both anchoring and evolving forces at the same time. Tensions arising from these paradoxical forces keep the career identifying process in motion, and people manage tensions by performing identity work that accumulates to maintain career identity in an existing dynamic equilibrium and/or change to a new dynamic equilibrium

of career identity.

In Figures 3a and 3b, we compare stylized representations of stepwise career identity change that accompanies career change and a more continuous career identifying process. If Julie's example were explained through the stepwise change depicted in Figure 3a, her career identity would be anchored in corporate finance, then a career change would occur, and then identity work would happen to transition and re-anchor her career identity as an entrepreneur in her real estate business. She would go from one anchored career identity to another in tandem with her career change.

Insert Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c about here

In contrast, Figure 3b shows Julie's career identity as only quasi-anchored in corporate finance, and that her interest in entrepreneurship feeds into an evolving force that leads her to make continual adjustments to her career identity, as she encounters an ongoing stream of triggers. Since many of these adjustments pull in the same new direction, the identity work accumulates to a turning point for Julie, eventually leading to a revised career identity quasi-anchored in entrepreneurship that encourages her to make a subsequent move to start her own real estate business. The move may seem sudden, but Julie has been doing identity work over a period of years to support the career change. The idea of accumulation accounts for continuity while also changing direction toward a revised dynamic equilibrium as a different quasi-anchored identity takes shape. In the career identifying process, while Julie ends her employment with her corporate finance firm, her past experience is incorporated into her career identity such that she can use her transferrable skills from finance in her new entrepreneurial ventures.

Note that our model supports gradually accumulative and back-and-forth changes to career identity, but it also allows for periods of heightened activity and change (see Figure 3c). Triggers that disrupt a career can also lead to reactive changes to career identity, consistent with existing reactive models of identity transition (Ibarra, 1999; Ladge et al., 2012; Louis, 1980; Nicholson, 1984). If Julie was laid off in an economic downturn, or if an old classmate approached her with a concrete proposal for a new venture, she might make a fast career move to start her own business that requires additional identity work after the move to transition to her new quasi-anchored career identity of entrepreneur.

Career identifying also complements existing theory by offering additional interpretations for existing empirical accounts of careers. For example, in a study exploring how individuals' career resourcing moves led to the emergence of the profession of health services research (HSR) (Nigam & Dokko, 2019), Bob Brook, a physician turned health services researcher, notes the change in legitimacy of the new profession over time:

> I remember my exit interview with the dean of the medical school … when I left medical school, I said, "I'm going to be a generalist and probably go into public health or health services." The conversation ended when I said that. He had no advice, just said goodbye…. And we would worry…"Would anyone ever hire [researchers] with this kind of weird mixed training?..." Well, we have now established ourselves as a legitimate part of the medical research establishment, and [we] are now chiefs of medicine and deans (Nigam & Dokko, 2019:1062).

Reinterpreting this example through a career identifying lens calls attention to the subjective underpinnings of career resourcing. Our theory foregrounds the struggle that Brook had in figuring out his career identity as an impetus to his career actions. Brook's exit interview with the dean served as a trigger invoking both collective and personal tensions. The identity work he did to manage these tensions accumulated to enable career moves that advanced the formation of the HSR profession. The establishment and institutionalization of HSR likely reduced ongoing collective tensions for Brook, allowing him to make sense of his past work experiences and the

future directions he could take. Thus, career identifying enriches this empirical account by suggesting how career identifying is precedent to career actions that can later have broad, field-level effects.

In another example, empirical examination of person-environment fit over time suggests that individuals recount their experiences using identity as an underlying theme across various experiences. As described by one study subject:

> My [fit] story is like a series of vignettes—maybe a novella. Like Voltaire's Candide, 30 chapters that are different but there is an underlying progression. I am the constant—I am still the same person at the core … The scenery changes, environments change, even I change somewhat, but I am the underlying theme. (Jansen & Shipp, 2019: 1173)

In examining stability and change in terms of these fit narratives, consistent temporal comparisons stabilized existing work situations, whereas triggering events altered comparisons across past and present selves to change career trajectory (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Our theory would suggest that fit narratives may have stayed the same or changed over time as part of how people manage tensions. Having consistent fit narratives could be understood as an activity of identity work in the career identity maintenance route, whereas altered temporal comparisons could be indicative of a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity that preceded career trajectory changes. Thus, expanding on the career identifying process can help to further explain how fit narratives over time relate to career identity maintenance and/or change.

In addition to complementing existing empirical accounts, the process of career identifying can also be applied across many different career patterns as well as employment types. While we have primarily drawn from professional examples, we anticipate that the core concepts of our theory would hold across a variety of workers. The frequency and nature of triggers might be different and there could be implications for which tensions may be felt more strongly. For example, in more discontinuous employment types, such as gig workers, there

would be more frequent disruptive triggers, such as working for multiple organizations and limited purview of long-term employment prospects (Petriglieri et al., 2019). In these circumstances, the anchoring and evolving forces may be constantly in flux making maintenance more difficult to sustain. It is also possible that collective tensions may be attenuated as gig workers expect less affiliation with occupations or organizations, and instead, relational tensions may be felt more strongly as gig workers look to social referents to provide leads to the next gig. Similarly, career identifying may be more active early in a career than later as potential career paths extend further into the future. Thus, there may be a variety of nuances for how individuals experience the concepts we depict in our model.

Theoretical Insights and Future Research

By shedding light on the dynamic nature of career identity and elaborating the career identifying process, we offer several implications and directions for future research.

Decoupling career identity change from career change. In our theorizing, we decouple career identity change from career change, allowing us to complement prior research and illustrate different ways in which career identity may change before an observable career change occurs or even without a career change. In career and roles transitions literatures, the subjective self-concept is often understood to change simultaneously with or following objective observable career changes (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2000; Louis, 1980). Our theory elaborates ongoing ways in which individuals may subjectively engage with their identities with or without objective career changes. Further, much of the literature on role-to-role identity transitions assumes a sequence that involves letting go of a former role-related identity to prepare for a new role-related identity. Our theorizing suggests that career identity transitions could occur in a less structured sequence, particularly as we consider how one's career identity may be in transition long before an eventual career change. Future research might consider how

navigating career identity change before objective career change may alter the course of the actual transition. Indeed, prior research suggests that envisioning one's self in a role prior to an actual transition can ease some of the uncertainties of taking on the role (e.g., Ladge et al., 2012). Further research could also explore situations in which envisioning a wide variety of potential versions of one's self could increase uncertainties or conflict among possible future selves, leaving individuals feeling stuck in perpetual career identity maintenance rather than change.

Additionally, applying the career identifying process to a variety of career patterns that capture objective change may bring new insights to the subjective career experiences of individuals. For example, while earlier conceptions considered the self-directed career development in protean careers as the formation of new aspects of the self (Hall & Mirvis, 1996), more recent clarifications suggest that protean career is instead an orientation or attitude that individuals can have to varying degrees, allowing relatively static career profiles or types to be articulated (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Similarly, the boundaryless career concept has been conceived of as psychological or physical mobility that individuals possess to varying degrees (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). This static treatment of individually held stable career traits foregrounds the anchoring force, which can be useful in specifying patterns and trends that can be drawn across individual careers; however, as the evolving force falls to the background, what these relatively static types may not capture is the dynamism that occurs within an individual. Taken together, our model extends prevalent frameworks in the careers literature by explaining how underlying tensions and accumulation of identity work facilitate different career patterns and actions. By applying the career identifying process to existing career concepts, future research could further elaborate on the subjective mechanisms that influence objective observations of individual careers.

Stability and change within the individual. The anchoring and evolving forces in career identifying reflect a fundamental paradox that is often examined at the organizational level—stability and change. This paradox captures the notion that organizations are at once enduring and stable features of the workplace from which existing efficiencies can be leveraged for short-term effectiveness and are also continuously changing to produce innovation and long-term sustainability (Farjoun, 2010; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Our theorizing applies the paradox of stability and change within the individual. More specifically, the anchoring and evolving forces of career identity represent stability and change that is subjectively experienced. Within an individual, stability could be considered a special form of change that is bound within a specific time period (Roe, 2014), or in our theorizing, the existing dynamic equilibrium of the current moment. Conceived of in this way, ongoing dynamism is a necessary and functional part of managing tensions, despite the challenges that questioning one's career identity can present. While prior research highlights the emotional and intellectual disturbances that come with identity challenges (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Smith & Berg, 1987), theorizing anchoring and evolving forces as a paradox brings to light the importance of balancing rather than suppressing one force over the other, and this balancing act might be the glue that holds career identity together over time.[6] Our theory accounts for the undercurrent of activity that supports the balance of these forces and provides further insight to the interrelatedness of stability and change in career identity.

Focusing within the individual also provides opportunity to elaborate an individual's use of subjective time in terms of their identity. While prior research considers past in the present, such as in forgone professional identities (Obodaru, 2017) or lingering identities (Wittman,

[6] We thank the Editor and an anonymous reviewer for their ideas sharpening this aspect of our theorizing

2019), we examine the simultaneity of past, present, and future to separate and balance the anchoring and evolving forces. A careers perspective necessarily invokes time; a widely used definition of careers is "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989: 8), and time is fundamental to the understanding of a career, yet time has not been at the foreground of contemporary careers research (Mayrhofer & Gunz, 2019). Our model brings both subjective and objective conceptions of time back into theorizing about careers. Explicitly acknowledging that individual career identities interact with subjective time in identity work to manage tensions and objective time in responding to or driving career changes enables us to think about the temporal ordering of career identity and career moves. Other aspects of our model invite additional exploration around time. Career identity can change over time as individuals accrue past work experiences as well as new expectations and aspirations for the future. In this way, individuals think fluidly about past, present, and future in their career identity; however, they may vary in how much they focus on each of these eras (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009), or they may lose fluidity as their careers progress. In addition, tensions in our model often arise from evaluation of whether one's own career is progressing faster, slower, or in line with social referents or occupational norms. Thus, time in our model can also be a force for stability or a medium and impetus for change (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Finally, accumulation of micro-shifts to career identity occurs over time. Yet, our model is unspecific about how long accumulation takes, and the conditions under which accumulation may occur faster or slower (George & Jones, 2000). Future research can expand on the time dimensions of accumulation or individual differences in how people think about time in their careers.

Getting stuck and unstuck through career identifying. While separating forces to manage tensions provides a balance in the moment, we also take into consideration how tensions re-surface from new triggers, and re-circulate and continue to churn, at times leading people to feel stuck. To get unstuck, people need to experience movement, which occurs when people feel they are covering new ground (Smith & Berg, 1987). Thus, our theory accounts for accumulation in which identity work bubbles up to a turning point and career identity change that allows individuals to feel they are covering new ground in their self-conception in their career. Theorizing stuckness and unstuckness for career identity provides new insight to theory on career inaction. Career inaction suggests that people delay desired change in their careers due to inertia-enhancing mechanisms, such as the degree of difficulty in the decision to change and the uncertainty of the future outcome of the change (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). The career identifying process adds the explanation that individuals may perceive difficulty and uncertainty in career change because their career identity needs to change first. Periods of stuckness can be anxiety provoking and emotionally taxing (Smith & Berg, 1987), thus, becoming unstuck in one's career identity may be an important precursor and functional part of overcoming career inaction.

We also acknowledge that feelings of stuckness can be influenced by other identities that present increased potential for individuals to experience contradiction between different options for their career identity. For example, life events such as pregnancy can create identity challenges as gestational parents face potential contradictions between their work and motherhood identities (Ladge et al., 2012). Black professionals may experience dissonance as they compartmentalize professional and racial identities between their workplace and their neighborhood community (Bell, 1990) or constant code-switching to shift their behavior,

language, and even appearance when faced with social interactions across racial identities (McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, & Durkee, 2019). Future research may further examine how multiple identities further tax or perhaps enhance the various ways in which individuals manage career tensions.

Practical Implications

Our model is useful for helping people understand that having a career identity that shifts day-to-day or seems inconsistent across time and audiences is not schizophrenic, but is a normal and even functional response to the push and pull of universal—and paradoxical—anchoring and evolving forces. Rather than pushing people to resolution when career identity seems unstable, managers and career counselors can recognize that people will balance anchoring and evolving forces throughout their career, and help them to understand that even when career identity seems stable, it is in a dynamic equilibrium. Individuals who understand that managing tensions is not necessarily destabilizing but is normal and maybe even necessary to maintain a career identity, can be better equipped to live with tensions or even embrace them as opportunities to re-think who they are in their careers. Acknowledging tensions can help individuals to be more agile in making sense of their work-related experiences, or make them more resilient to triggering events, or they could even leverage job crafting techniques that integrate employees' deeply embedded personal life interests with their current work roles and career prospects (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Butler & Waldroop, 1999; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Additionally, our model could be beneficial to educational institutions or professional associations that prepare early career individuals to develop their career identity. Rather than assume that individuals will pursue traditional paths, these institutions may be better positioned to support career development by showing people that setting an anchoring career identity for decision-making now doesn't preclude envisioning themselves in other career paths that could unfold over time.

CONCLUSION

Careers are messy with many detours that forge a new path or end up back on track. Our theory shows that career identity is at least as messy. People are constantly bombarded with a range of triggers, large and small, that keep the career identifying process in motion. Our theory provides insight into how people manage tensions that arise from paradoxical anchoring and evolving forces to keep career identity steady enough to guide action while keeping open possibilities for change.

TABLE 1

Prevalent Definitions of Career Identity

Primarily emphasizes anchoring force	**Primarily emphasizes evolving force**
• A "total self-concept" (Schein, 1978: 126) that consists of self-perceived abilities, motives, and values across work and life experiences that "functions as a **stabilizing force, an anchor**…." (Schein, 1996:80) • A "structure or network of meanings in which the individual consciously links his own motivation, interests, and competencies with acceptable career roles…not the sum of those experiences but the **assimilation of the experiences into meaningful or useful structures**." (Meijers, 1998: 200) • "One's self-definition in the career context, describing 'who I am' or 'who I want to be'…that acts as a **cognitive compass** that motivates one to actively adapt in order to realize (or create) opportunities that match one's aspirations." (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004: 17)	• A "practice of **articulating and performing** identity positions in narrating career experiences" that is "**co-constructed, socially-situated, and performed in interaction**." (LaPointe, 2010: 2) • "How one conceived oneself over the course of one's work history and how that conception **forms and evolves and perhaps radically changes**." Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008: 351 • The "person's image of her- or himself in relation to the environment" developed through the "**creation of new aspects of the self** in relation to the career." (Hall & Mirvis, 1996: 25)

Note: The bolded text highlights anchoring and evolving forces in these definitions.

FIGURE 1

Process Model of Career Identifying

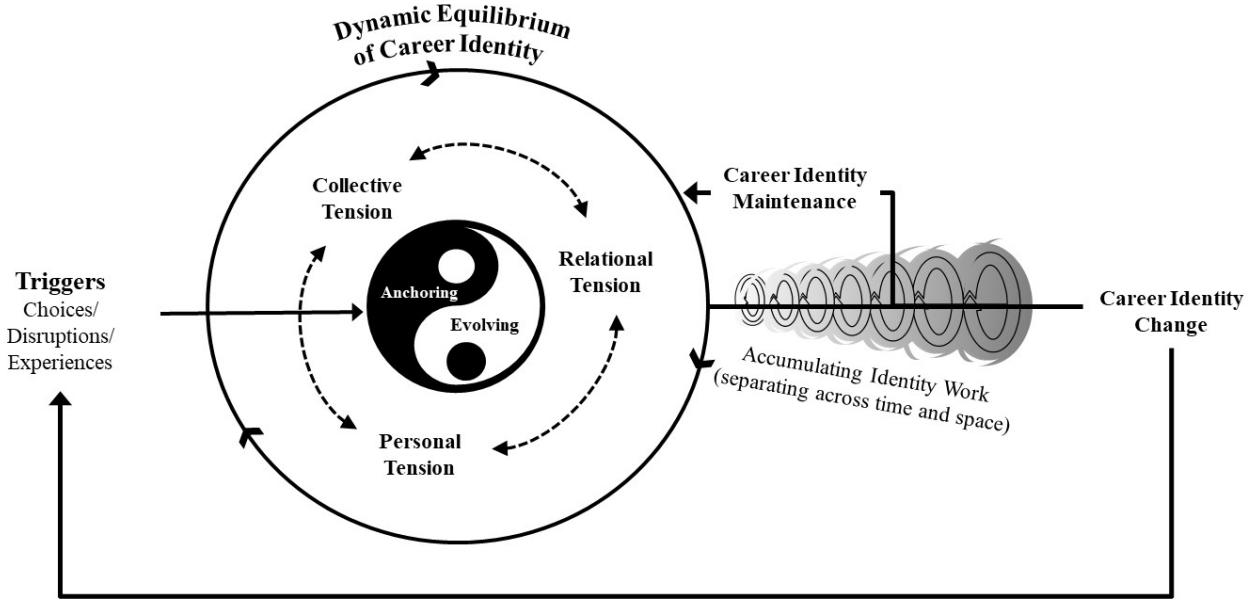


FIGURE 2

Illustration of tensions arising from a career change trigger

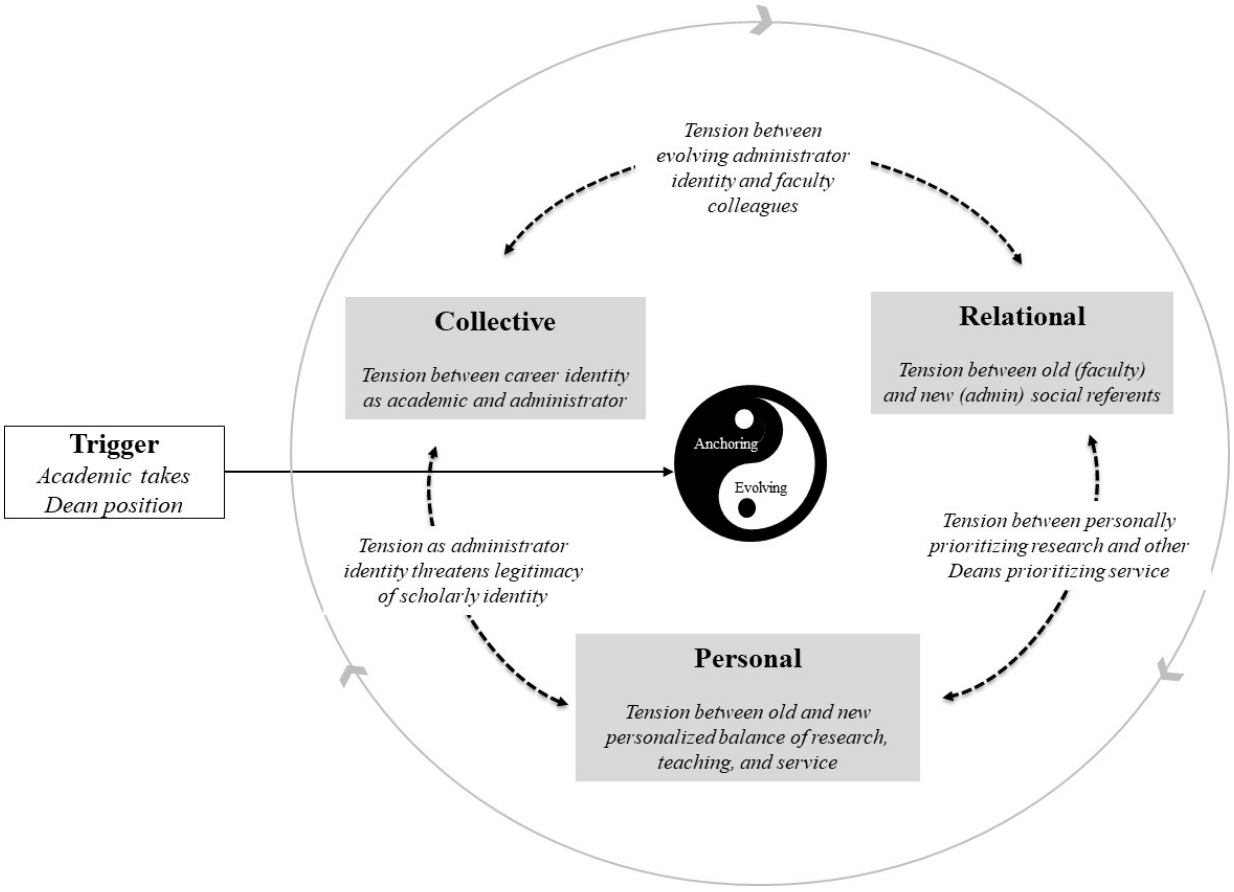


FIGURE 3A: Stepwise model underlying existing notions of identity change

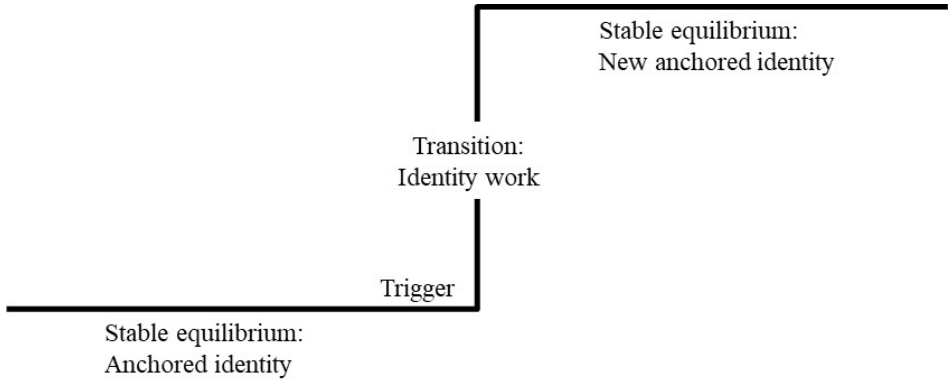


FIGURE 3B: Ongoing identity work and change with gradual, accumulated change

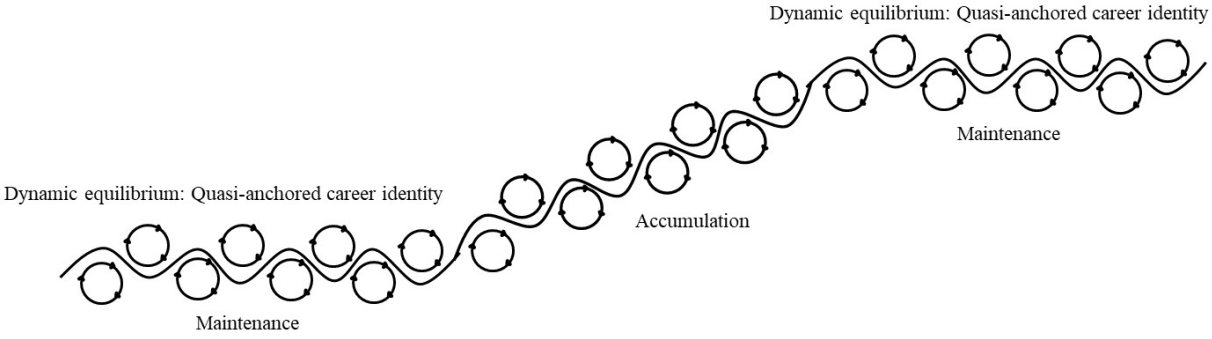
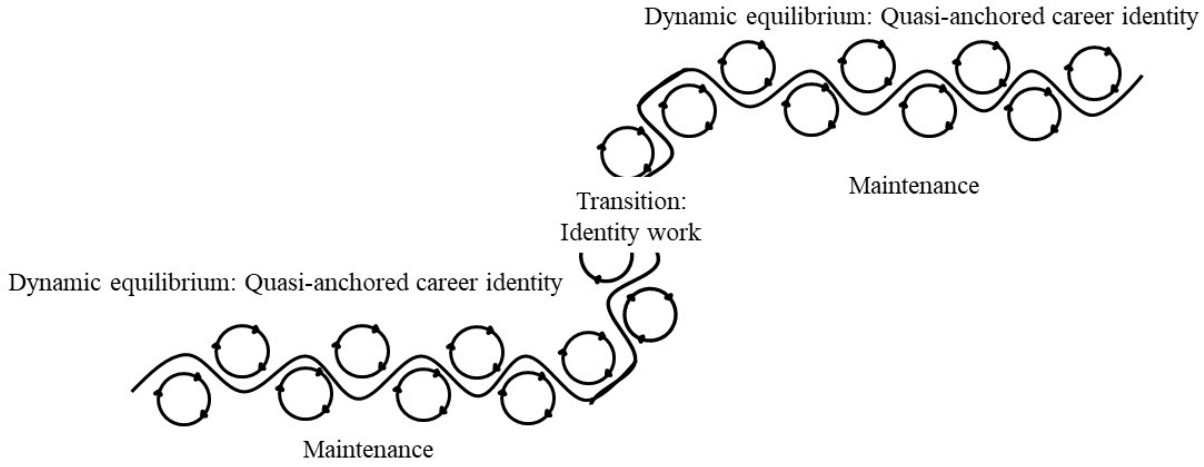


FIGURE 3C: Ongoing identity work and change with reactive, rapid change



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Stable anchors and dynamic evolution: A paradox theory of career identity maintenance and change

ABSTRACT

People routinely conceive of themselves in their career in both stable and dynamic ways. Individuals may draw common threads across their various career experiences and aspirations to form a stable anchor for their career identity, yet at the same time, dynamically adapt their self-concept in the context of their career. In this paper, we call attention to the anchoring and evolving forces that people experience as a paradox for their career identity and theorize *career identifying* as an ongoing process of career identity maintenance and change. As individuals contend with career identity tensions, they make adjustments to maintain a balance of anchoring and evolving forces on their career identity or to make shifts that accumulate into career identity change. The career identifying process accounts for both career identity maintenance and change in a single theoretical model that explains how career identity can change over time while being stable enough to make coherent career choices.

Keywords: Career identity, paradox, tensions, careers

Answering the question of "Who am I in my career?" is not as simple as responding with a singular idea of one's occupation. Indeed, even those who are objectively well-established in a particular profession may answer this question in inconsistent ways within themselves and to

others. For example, a journalist could look across their various work experiences that include being a part-time screenwriter and a novelist, and see themselves as a storyteller – and they could be with colleagues at their newspaper and see themselves as a committed journalist. A manager could look at their successes and promotions and see themselves as a corporate executive – and they could think about new product areas they have developed and launched for their corporation and see themselves as an entrepreneur. These practical examples may seem unsurprising and ordinary; however, we lack theory that explains how it is that people can think of their career identity in ways that are both stable enough to progress in a career path and dynamic enough to accommodate or even spur change, at the same time.

While it may be expected that people are able to clearly express their career identity, i.e., who they are in their career, in a 30 second elevator speech or in a brief summary on a resume, the lived reality of career identity can be simultaneously stable and changing. When people think about their career identity, they can synthesize their career experiences into a common thread as well as flexibly adapt their self-definition to incorporate past, present, and anticipated future career experiences across different social situations (Hall, 1996; LaPointe, 2010). Yet, prior research about career identity tends to primarily emphasize career identity as an *anchor* that that steadies the self-concept through relatively consistent preferences for one's career (e.g., Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2013) or as something that *evolves* through a reflexive practice in response to various social contexts people experience in their career (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; LaPointe, 2010). Juxtaposing notions of career identity as anchoring and evolving brings to light an underexamined question in the careers literature—how is it that career identity can be both anchoring and evolving at the same time, i.e., how can career identity be stable enough to guide action while preserving flexibility for change? By addressing this

question, we not only theorize that career identity is both stable and changing, but also explain why career identity is necessarily both at once.

In this paper, we argue that people experience anchoring and evolving forces as a paradox for their career identity. As a paradox, these forces are competing yet mutually constitutive as individuals simultaneously attend to both forces (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). We introduce the *career identifying* [7] process, which we define as an ongoing process of career identity maintenance and change that is driven by anchoring and evolving forces, in which individuals manage tensions that arise as different choices, disruptions, and experiences call their career identity into question. We theorize that rather than reaching some ultimate end state to one's career identity, the ongoing nature of career identifying allows individuals to adapt and accommodate a wide variety of career-related thoughts and actions while also holding a stable enough self-definition to serve as a reference point. This "workable certainty" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008: 230), or dynamic equilibrium of career identity, is maintained by actively managing tensions through small shifts made to balance forces in one's career identity, and we posit that these shifts can also accumulate and eventually lead to career identity change and a new dynamic equilibrium. In the career identifying process, a career identity in dynamic equilibrium is not one that is unmoored; rather, ongoing dynamism is a necessary and functional part of the process in response to anchoring and evolving forces of the paradox.

The objective of this paper is to build new theory that can account for both maintenance that sustains an existing dynamic equilibrium and/or change that result in a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. The career identifying process model offers three new insights to

[7] Note that we use the gerund form to denote action or doing, i.e., *career identifying* as an ongoing process of defining career identity, rather than referring to the process of identification with another social entity, such as an organization or occupation.

previous research. First, it explicitly decouples career identity from career path, allowing career identity to change independent of or even preceding changes in career trajectory. Though career identity change is usually assumed to follow actual employment changes (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), we propose an alternative, additional way that career identity can change. In this conception, the career identifying process involves the accumulation of micro shifts to identity over time, which can precede or even generate an actual career path change. We argue that for career identity, micro shifts are constantly occurring as a stream of triggers—choices, disruptions, and experiences that can occur in small daily moments as well as in bigger life events—set anchoring and evolving forces in motion and raise career identity tensions that call into question one's sense of self. Managing these tensions through identity work can eventually lead to a revised career identity, which may then influence subsequent concrete career changes. The career identifying process also helps to explain how it is that intense or seemingly traumatic career path changes, such as a layoff or demise of one's profession, may actually be of limited impact to one's career identity if identity work has already been accumulating preceding this event. In this way, our model shows that though tensions arising from the anchoring-evolving paradox can be experienced as a career identity challenge, managing the tensions can result in outcomes that are beneficial or desirable for an individual.

Second, we account for both career identity maintenance and change in a single theoretical model that can explain how career identity can be stable enough to make coherent choices as well as change over time. With this theory, we can apply the career identifying process onto a wide variety of career patterns captured in concepts such as life stages (Levinson, 1978), protean (Hall, 1996), boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), and kaleidoscope (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). For example, while the life stages model assumes predictable

changes in one's career with progression through adulthood (Levinson, 1978), career identifying would suggest that changes in career identity do not necessarily occur in the same progression. Our theory helps explain that what may seem to others an abrupt change that disrupts or even reverses the expected progression through adulthood can be accounted for in ongoing smaller shifts that occurred underneath the surface in an individual's career identifying process. In career patterns that capture less predictable or nontraditional career progressions such as protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope careers, the career identifying process can help to explain how individuals form a stable yet adaptable enough career identity to face potentially disjointed or distressing career experiences to pursue self-directed career interests. Thus, our theory may provide a useful framework for expanding on various patterns that are captured in careers research but that do not fully explain the ongoing underlying tensions and accumulation of identity work that facilitate different career patterns and actions.

Finally, we expand beyond the dichotomy of career action or inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020) by explaining the constant underlying activity involved with maintaining an existing career identity. Individuals may feel stuck in their experience of the anchoring and evolving paradox (Smith & Berg, 1987) as they are unable to choose between the stability of an anchored career identity and the lure of change. Paradox theorizing helps to explain how balancing is done through smaller constant adjustments, or micro-shifts, like a tightrope walker whose balance on the rope is the result of ongoing slight adaptations (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Our theory provides a processual view of how these micro-shifts can occur, and how accumulation may be occurring in periods of apparent inaction, eventually altering the course of the tightrope itself.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we show how anchoring and evolving forces

underlie existing conceptualizations of career identity, and how these forces can be conceived of as a paradox that is taken for granted in prior research. We then introduce a theoretical model that specifies the career identifying process. We illustrate how triggers set these forces in motion, which calls career identity into question and gives rise to career identity tensions. We theorize how these tensions are managed toward an existing or new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. Lastly, we articulate insights gained and discuss how future research can leverage these insights to better understand the identity dynamics that influence career identity change.

ANCHORING AND EVOLVING FORCES IN CAREER IDENTITY

Career identity is related to but distinct from other work-related identities, such as professional identity tied to a specific occupation and social identity that incorporates an employer (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) or workgroup (Kane, Argote, & Levine, 2005), because it follows the entire course of an individual's career including various career moves and changes (Ashforth et al., 2008). Definitions of career identity in prior research describe a person's self-conception in reference to their career. Though these published conceptions of career identity may acknowledge both anchoring and evolving forces, the definitions tend to primarily emphasize the anchored nature of career identity or the way that career identity evolves over time. Table 1 below provides a sample of published definitions of career identity. We organize these definitions to highlight portions (in bold) that foreground the anchoring force or the evolving force. Highlighting these contrasts shows the potential benefit of a paradox perspective in explaining how and why both anchoring and evolving forces can co-exist, even while being experienced as contradictory.

Anchoring refers to the stabilizing nature of the self-concept that informs individual preferences around what individuals value and what is most meaningful in their career relative to

their social context (Rodrigues et al., 2013; Schein, 1978). An anchored career identity stems from an individual's work history and serves as a cognitive compass when making career choices (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Meijers, 1998). Evolving refers to the more dynamic nature of career identity as something that is actively created and transformed, which is both fueled by, and in turn, influences cognitive processes of understanding one's career experiences (Ashforth et al., 2008; Vough & Caza, 2017). Anchoring is about how individuals integrate motives, values, and abilities from prior career experiences into a coherent career self-concept (Schein, 1978), while evolving is about the more ongoing processual nature of the career self-concept, which at times, leads to larger transformational change (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Insert Table 1 about here

Prior research operationalizes the anchoring force—or career anchors as first conceptualized by Schein (1978, 1996) and expanded by Feldman and Bolino (1996)—as static career types, testing for a variety of outcomes, such as managerial career trajectories (Gubler, Biemann, Tschopp, & Grote, 2015), entrepreneurial intentions (Lee & Wong, 2004), and core self-evaluation (Costigan, Gurbuz, & Sigri, 2018), as well as considering the influence of other identities on career types, such as GLB (gay, lesbian, bisexual) identity (Kaplan, 2014) or an internationalism identity (Lazarova, Cerdin, & Liao, 2014). This stream of research captures static career types as a proxy for career identity, primarily emphasizing stability over understanding of how people actually engage with their career identity over time. While Schein's (1978) original conception is aligned to this more static treatment of career identity, he also recognizes—but does not fully theorize—that people may change their career types over time and that stability may in fact enable change. Studies that emphasize the evolving force have used

the idea of dynamic construction of career identity. Dynamic construction can involve performative expressions of oneself across various career experiences and social situations, accomplishing evolution through connections that are drawn between various expressions into a more composite notion of one's self (LaPointe, 2010). Other studies have characterized career identity as responsive to career events, like setbacks. For example, people construct resilience in their present career identity by referring to their past self that overcame prior setbacks and using aspects of past identity to evolve a current career identity (Vough & Caza, 2017). Thus, anchoring and evolving forces necessarily coexist, as stability can enable change and vice-versa.

Anchoring and evolving forces are an application of the endemic forces of stability and change from the paradox literature to individual-level career identity. Like other fundamental paradoxes, such as the belonging-distinctiveness paradox (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Shore et al., 2011; Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019), the old-new learning paradox (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011), and the exploitation-exploration paradox (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), stability and change are fundamentally paradoxical, such that the essential need for stability is opposite yet mutually constitutive of the essential need for change or evolution.

In the broader identity literature, prior conceptions establish stability and change in how individuals understand who they are in relation to their social context. For example, the self-concept is understood to "feel stable yet…malleable" to accommodate an enduring essence of oneself that can be presented to others as well as dynamically constructed from moment to moment (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012: 88). At the organizational level, stability and change can manifest as an "adaptive instability" that prevents stagnation of organizational identity and accommodate necessary change through ongoing interactions with external feedback and adjustments made to address environmental demands (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000: 64).

Organizational identity is also understood to involve internal negotiations among organizational members in ongoing gradual changes through maintaining a "stable state of instability" (Kozica, Gebhardt, Muller-Seitz, & Kaiser, 2015: 187). While stability and change are negotiated through various organizational members in organizational level identity, anchoring and evolving forces are constantly pushing and pulling within an individual, bringing attention to the importance of the subjective process involved in career identifying. We expand on the process for how individuals address these forces in defining their selves in their careers below.

THE CAREER IDENTIFYING PROCESS

In Figure 1 below, anchoring and evolving forces are illustrated as a yin yang symbol, which is often used to denote paradox. The yin-yang shows opposition in stark contrast between black and white, yet also interrelatedness, represented by the dots of the opposite color in either side of the circle. The internal boundary creates distinction between the two sides and highlights opposition, and the external boundary constructs a unified whole and highlights synergy and mutual constitutions (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the career identifying process, anchoring and evolving forces co-exist in competing yet mutually constitutive ways. Forces are experienced as pushes and pulls, yet paradoxically, the anchoring force enables action by providing enough certainty in one's existing career identity to evaluate career choices or changes, and the evolving force enables stability by allowing experimentation that can eventually coalesce into a more stable self-definition.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Applying paradox theorizing to the career identifying process helps us to illustrate this interplay between the forces as triggers, tensions, and shifts that occur in ongoing, iterative ways.

Working through paradox allows people to reach a dynamic equilibrium that enables a "workable certainty" to deal with intricate and fluid issues (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), such as those involving the messy reality of careers. In a dynamic equilibrium, constant micro-shifts enable balance by adapting to the continuous push and pull of opposing forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This balance does not necessarily mean an equal weighting or a permanent resolution between these forces. Rather balance is about iterative adjustments taken by individuals to attend to forces that push and pull with different weights at different times, as exemplified in the metaphor of the tightrope walker that constantly moves to balance on the rope (Schad et al., 2016). The *dynamic equilibrium of career identity* in Figure 1 reflects that people move through tensions to balance forces for enough of a workable certainty in their career identity to make choices or deal with disruptions and still have room to accommodate a wide variety of career-related thoughts and actions.

Consider the example of Julie[8]. Julie's career identity as a corporate finance analyst seems stable. She is successfully advancing through the well-established structure of progression in her firm that provides stability and direction in her career identity (anchoring); at the same time, she also feels tension when comparing herself to her mother who started her own property investment firm (evolving). Julie embodies a contradiction. She is deeply embedded in her current position, working long hours to get to the next promotion, which is in line with expectations about what junior corporate finance analysts do. Yet, Julie is also constantly reevaluating herself in her own mind against a path that no one in her current field would anticipate her taking. In what follows, we continue to unfold Julie's story as we illustrate our theory.

[8] Julie is loosely based on one of the authors' career conversations with a former student.

Our process model shows how an ongoing stream of triggers set the anchoring and evolving forces in motion. Tensions arise from self-defining in relation to collectives, social referents, and personal career meaning. Tensions can co-occur or influence each other, sustaining the cyclical churning. People manage tensions by separating conflicting aspects across objective (i.e., clock time) or subjective (i.e., thoughts about past, present and future) time (Shipp & Jansen, 2021), and social space (e.g., audiences across different domains in the social world). In the sections that follow, we expand on each part of the model starting with triggers.

Triggers

Triggers are the choices, disruptions, and experiences that set the forces for anchoring and evolving career identity in motion. When forces are set in motion, the existing dynamic equilibrium in an individual's career identity becomes unbalanced in response. Revisiting the example of Julie, her career identity is in a dynamic equilibrium as she works toward her next promotion as a corporate finance professional. Triggers, such as conversations with co-workers on their latest work success, a performance feedback meeting with her supervisor, or even a Facebook post of a close friend who is an entrepreneur, activate the push and pull of the forces and lead her to question her career identity. Seeing the entrepreneur's excitement over his autonomy pulls her career identity toward a self-definition as an entrepreneur, yet, talking with her co-workers about their latest successes or her boss about her own career prospects pushes her career identity back toward corporate finance.

As the prior example suggests, even routine events and interactions can act as triggers in our model. Our conception of triggers is inclusive of both smaller ongoing events and larger episodic events that brings an individual's attention to their career identity and makes salient the forces that anchor career identity and the opposing forces that pull it toward evolution. While

Julie's example shows how consequential small social interactions can be, such a trigger may also serve as a seed that gets planted and builds over time (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Because of their highly varied nature, triggers can constantly spark the career identifying process, as a person encounters the myriad of choices, disruptions, and experiences that occur over the course of a career, like the routine examples provided in Julie's story or a much larger event like the displacement of an occupation by technological change (Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2020).

The magnitude of the trigger, however, does not necessarily determine the extent of the activation of the forces in the career identifying process, but may rather depend on both the salience and timing of the trigger. Triggers may be more or less salient depending on the strength of the push and pull of the anchoring and evolving forces relative to an individual's preferences and aspirations. For instance, in a study of young professionals, unpredictable workplace experiences served to trigger feelings of validation and reinforced an existing career identity for some participants, while leaving others feeling invalidated and forcing a change in their existing career identity (Modestino, Sugiyama, & Ladge, 2019). Indeed, the concept of lingering identities suggests that a trigger such as a role change, which is typically assumed to be accompanied by psychological transition to a new identity, may instead be met with coping efforts to retain previous identities when faced with uncertainty (Wittman, 2019). Thus, the same trigger will be more or less salient to different people.

Timing can also affect how important triggers are in the career identifying process. Small triggers that occur at times when a person is vulnerable to influence or in a period of questioning about their careers (e.g., Jansen & Shipp, 2019) can have disproportionately large effects on the forces. For example, bumping into a former classmate with a completely different and highly desired career path at a vulnerable or uncertain time can trigger intense reflection and a pull

toward the evolving force, leading to strong tensions, even though the trigger is not large or unusual. When a trigger occurs in the path of a career also matters to its importance to career identifying, i.e., the same trigger occurring early or late in a career can affect the forces differently. Large events like career changes can trigger the career identifying process, yet the result may not be a highly active and tension-filled process if the timing of the career change is congruent with an expected stage of the career path as reflected in traditional conceptions of life stages (Levinson, 1978). For example, in a study of retirees, those who followed the expected timing of retirement—as understood through a pre-existing plan of action from culturally-determined scripts—described their retirement as "on time" and largely without the experience of tensions (Vough, Bataille, Noh, & Lee, 2015: 425). In this case, the pull of the evolving force can be strong and not answered by a strong push of the anchoring force, because the timing of the retirement matches an expected evolution of career identity. Similarly, a layoff is a large career event that could have different effects depending on career stage. People in earlier career stages might be more inclined to react less strongly to layoffs in terms of career identity if their intention is to stay on a path that is consistent with the existing career identity, just with a different employer, while people in mid-career stages could use a layoff as an opportunity to question and confront existing career identity and experience the forces and resulting tensions that arise from this questioning (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). This is not to say that a layoff would not have a large effect on a person's life, but its effect on career identity may not be large, especially if they get back on their expected career path.

In sum, triggers vary widely in their type and magnitude, but the strength of the anchoring and evolving forces they activate will depend on the salience and the timing of the trigger. Given the range of choices, events, and disruptions that can serve as triggers, triggers can

arise in succession, activating new forces and tensions before previously triggered tensions have found a balance, keeping the process in motion. However, as career identity tensions that arise from the push and pull of anchoring and evolving forces, they are alleviated through identity work, which in turn maintains career identity in dynamic equilibrium or accumulates to change it. We expand on these other elements of the process model below.

Career Identity Tensions

Tensions are cognitively and socially constructed polarities experienced by individuals as dilemmas that feel like either/or choices (Lewis, 2000) that can be met with feelings of stress, anxiety, or even paralysis (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). Prior research examines tensions of identity that reside in understanding one's self in relation to others and collectives (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987) as people orient themselves to different sources of self-definition (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). As stated earlier, tensions arise from anchoring and evolving forces when they are instigated by triggers. When the push and pull of anchoring and evolving forces activate the career identifying process, career identity is questioned through tensions that arise in considering social norms of collectives, social referents in relational interactions, and one's own self-determinations and interests. Next, we describe tensions that arise as career identity is appraised against collective, relational, and personal concerns. We also note and describe how tensions for different sources of self-definition can give rise to additional tensions, such as when personal tensions and collective tensions conflict. We illustrate career identity tensions using an example of an academic who takes on a role as Dean. We use this example to illustrate an objective role change that can trigger an imbalance in the existing dynamic equilibrium of career identity and more transparently demonstrate various tensions that can arise as a faculty member reconsiders their

career identity in light of collective, relational, and personal interests that shift with their new Dean role. Regardless of how much one enjoys or dislikes the responsibilities of a new position, a shift in occupation is often accompanied by reflection on career identity. We also describe how tensions give rise to other tensions, potentially creating an ongoing stream of triggers.

Collective. Collective tensions are felt when individuals question their career identity that has been validated through and anchored in collectives (e.g., organizations and occupations). These questions can arise due to changes in the collective itself or due to individuals self-initiating adjustments to a collective. For example, changes in work collectives could include operating within occupations that are subject to more than one set of institutional logics (Dunn & Jones, 2010; Lounsbury, 2007) or hybrid professions that inject multiple collective inputs into identity (Caza & Creary, 2016), as well as the emergence of new occupations (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2017; Nigam & Dokko, 2019).

Figure 2 below provides an example of an academic who takes on a new role as Dean, experiencing tension between wanting to continue to anchor their career identity as a scholar and to evolve their career identity toward a new collective of administration.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Relational. Relational tensions are felt when individuals question their career identity that has been validated through and anchored in relationships with social referents. These questions can arise as individuals identify with multiple social referents who communicate contradictory expectations. Social referents are people that serve as benchmarks or that represent aspirations, e.g., peers, mentors or role models (Shah, 1998). Social referents provide a model or

template for behaviors that are required of a given role (Ibarra, 1999; Reilly, 2017). Prior research suggests individuals often observe a range of role models with respect to their demeanor, interactions, and physical appearance of those who have assumed similar roles and choose from a repertoire of styles they can use in adapting to the new role (Ibarra, 1999). A diversity of referents can make comparison and feedback less clear, yet, having a set of referents who are similar to each other may also reduce clarity, as a narrow range of referents can place limitations on the exploration of possible self-definitions (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005).

In the example of a faculty member transitioning to the role of Dean, relational tension is likely to arise when the new Dean makes comparisons with existing (faculty) and new (administrator) social referents. In this case, the faculty member turned Dean may make an effort to distance themselves from their prior role as a faculty member by adopting behaviors of other university deans and administrators, like dressing more formally or having staff act as gatekeepers to meetings. They may also experience relational tension when comparing themselves with former colleagues, as they feel like they are not producing as much research as a faculty member should.

Personal. Personal tensions arise when individuals question their career identity that is validated through and anchored in personal interests and priorities. Personal interests can include the fulfillment of personal values and the notion of success built on a feeling that a personal best has been achieved (Hall & Mirvis, 1996), or by self-directed career values and attitudes (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Questions arise when individuals consider how their interests are best served. For example, in the case of the faculty member becoming Dean, one place where tensions may arise is between their preferred personalized balance of research, teaching, and service and the demands of their new role that leads them to question who they are in their career.

Tensions between tensions. As individuals engage with one tension, new questions could form and give rise to another tension. Identities can be nested across multiple levels of analysis and reciprocally linked (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011). In our model, cross-level relationships between tensions are a collective-relational tension, a relational-personal tension, and a personal-collective tension. A *collective-relational tension* can arise when collective tensions lead to relational tensions, or vice versa. For example, as the new Dean works to develop their new leadership identity, they may experience tension when interacting with their former department colleagues as their focus moves beyond their department to the college as a whole. The relational tension can also lead to the personal tension, or vice versa. In this *relational-personal* tension, looking to other Deans as social referents may call career identity into question for the new Dean if the other Deans provide contradictory information about how much they re-prioritized service over research. The new Dean may feel tension in personally prioritizing research when they are unsure of the extent to which other Deans prioritize service. Lastly, personal tensions can lead to collective tensions, or vice versa. In this *personal-collective* tension, the new Dean may call into question their scholarly identity that was validated and anchored in publishing, as they feel challenged to meet administrative demands and to make time for research.

In sum, when an imbalance of anchoring and evolving forces raises questions about one's career identity, individuals engage with tensions that arise from considering various sources of defining one's self in relation to the social context of one's career, including collective, relational, and personal interests. We used the Dean example to illustrate the different tensions, but a single trigger may give rise to multiple tensions, or one tension may lead to another. For example, the trigger of Julie seeing her entrepreneur friend's Facebook post raises relational

tensions as she compares herself to her friend. As she thinks about an entrepreneurial identity, she has to engage with the validation and success she finds as a corporate finance professional, as a relational tension raises a collective tension. Further reflection leads her to remember how corporate finance was supposed to be a stepping stone, leading her to feel a personal tension. Even absent new triggers, tensions giving rise to other tensions can also keep the career identifying process in motion.

Identity Work to Manage Tensions

In order to address tensions raised in the career identifying process, individuals separate anchoring and evolving forces by performing the identity work of holding different versions of themselves across time and social space. Identity work is defined as an individual's efforts to create, manage and present identities that reflect their coherent and distinctive self-concept (Snow & Anderson, 1987: 1348; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1165). Identity work includes "*cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral* activities that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, and revising, or rejecting *collective, role, and personal self-meanings* within the boundaries of their social context," (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018: 895).

Paradoxical tensions can lead to vicious cycles in which people become trapped in defensiveness, or to virtuous cycles that create new opportunities when tensions are managed (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Vicious cycles occur when individuals suppress either force, which intensifies pressure from the other force and produces an intellectually and emotionally disturbing cycle of tensions in which individuals can become subjectively stuck (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987). To exit or avoid this unsettling cycle, identity work helps individuals manage tensions by subjectively separating the forces into different versions of

themselves. In the broader identity literature, individuals are understood to hold multiple versions of themselves across subjective time periods, such as in future versions of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), in current provisional and alternative selves (Ibarra, 1999; Obodaru, 2012), and even grappling with past versions of oneself in lingering identities (Wittman, 2019) and identity paralysis (Toubiana, 2020). Individuals hold past, present, and future selves for a variety of career related actions—e.g., to anticipate a desired future, to test new identities or to retain meaningful alternate possibilities for the present, and to sustain continuity from the past. Similarly, individuals may also communicate different versions of themselves to different audiences across social spaces—e.g., to present a professional image at work (Ladge & Little, 2019; Roberts, 2005), to navigate different cultural expectations across social contexts at work and at home (Bell, 1990), and to meet the moral obligations of one's occupation while also meeting one's own personal material aims (Reid & Ramarajan, 2021).

We draw from Poole and Van de Ven (1989) to theorize that separating anchoring and evolving forces in the career identifying process takes place through temporal and spatial separation. Temporal separation is about locating opposing forces in different time periods, whereas spatial separation is about situating opposing forces in different locations in the social world (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). To manage tensions, people accept that contradictory forces coexist in the short term and work to separate and iterate between the forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). By managing tensions, people can learn to tolerate ambiguity, become more adaptable to change, and develop resiliency (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Similarly, in career identifying, individuals can perform identity work to manage the tensions and become more adaptable and resilient to career-related uncertainty in order to live with both anchoring and evolving forces in their career identity.

Separating forces across time. An individual's work history is understood to progress through objective time, i.e., the literal passage of clock or calendar time that moves from past to present to future; yet, subjective interpretations of career identity can also include engaging with subjective time, where thoughts move between past, present and future in any order and direction (Shipp & Cole, 2015; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). When triggers disturb the dynamic equilibrium of career identity, people may make connections by drawing upon past, present, and future selves to balance anchoring and evolving forces across different subjective time periods. For example, Julie lives with tensions by separating forces across the present and future. As she actively takes steps toward her next promotion in corporate finance in the present, she tucks away her entrepreneurial intentions in provisional versions of her future self that she tries out in different imagined scenarios. She may play out entrepreneurial activities in her mind and vicariously experience her entrepreneurial intentions through referents, such as her entrepreneur friend or her mother. Playing out possibilities and alternatives in her mind could increase Julie's self-knowledge for the time being (Obodaru, 2012). As she increases this self-knowledge and gains a better understanding of what she wants in her career, new connections may be formed between present and future, which can in turn, begin to unravel the existing balance between anchoring and evolving forces toward a new dynamic equilibrium.

Separating forces across social space. Different versions of one's self-concept can also be expressed across different social spaces (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012) and among different audiences depending on the reactions they hope to elicit (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In our theorizing, we suggest that individuals can manage tensions by spatially separating anchoring and evolving forces across social milieus, such as highlighting different attributes to potential employers than to peers (Modestino et al., 2019). While

expressing one's self through different narratives to different audiences may appear as inauthentic or a form of compartmentalizing, trying out these different versions of one's self through different narratives can serve as a mechanism to experiment with possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Returning to our example of Julie, she may tell different narratives to different audiences that allow her to manage the tensions arising from anchoring and evolving forces. For example, when her peers at work share their work successes, she too may share her own work successes to retain the stability of the anchoring force. She may also seek out her Facebook friend, asking to meet for coffee to talk about ways she can get involved in entrepreneurial activities and other people she can meet to build her network in real estate, allowing her to expand toward the evolving force. As she continues to use these different narratives for different audiences, she may begin to form connections between audiences, such as articulating transferrable skills that corporate finance has given her for real estate. Thus, the identity work she does to manage tensions across audiences allows Julie to make adjustments to maintain her current dynamic equilibrium, while also allowing her to make gradual shifts that can accumulate toward change and forming a new dynamic equilibrium.

Identity Work Leads to Existing or New Dynamic Equilibrium through Career Identity Maintenance and/or Change

In Figure 1, we illustrate two main routes from the dynamic equilibrium of career identity. In the first route, accumulating identity work serves to maintain the dynamic equilibrium, while the second route represents larger transformational changes to a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. While maintaining and changing are core types of identity work (Caza et al., 2018), they are usually conceived of as separate types: maintaining is about

retaining and securing a sense of meaning and self-worth (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1987), whereas changing involves addressing issues related to authenticity and fitting one's self into a new social context, such as in workplace entries or exits and shifts in occupations (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Our model considers career identity maintenance and career identity change as involving the same activities of separating across time and social space. In our model, however, the identity work to manage tensions accumulates to maintain a dynamic equilibrium, and/or change toward a new dynamic equilibrium.

Accumulating identity work. Accumulating identity work is particularly relevant to the career identifying process, as paradoxes are understood to persist over time, and smaller shifts to manage the paradox can accumulate to respond to dilemmas in the short term, while managing both forces of the paradox in the long term (Smith, 2014). Thus, accumulation is important to the long-term sustainability of anchoring and evolving forces. Using the metaphor of the tightrope walker, we conceive that accumulating identity work shifts career identity in both routes of maintenance and change; however, in maintenance, the tightrope walker continues to move along the tightrope in the same general direction toward the existing dynamic equilibrium whereas in change, the endpoint of the tightrope moves such that a new dynamic equilibrium emerges.

Accumulating identity work occurs within a "container" that is psychologically cultivated as well as created through connections to physical places, other people, and routine practices—i.e., an identity work space (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces are understood to reduce emotional disturbances and facilitate sensemaking that allows people to figure out who they are or to craft portable versions of themselves across various identity-related aims they may have at different times in their career (Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood, 2018). An identity work space could include real-life interstitial

spaces, such as hobbyist clubs or coffee shops, that provide informal gathering places outside of one's regular workplace (Furnari, 2014) or psychological spaces in which individuals can begin to store and to practice activities tied to different identities (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces are where accumulating identity work can be played out through various movements—psychological, physical, behavioral, and relational that accompany identity transitions (George, Wittman, & Rockmann, 2022)—and may result in preserving one's existing sense of self or in helping a new sense self to take shape.

Career identity maintenance and/or career identity change. Accumulating identity work in the career identity maintenance route may be experienced as routine or effortful depending on the strength of the push and pull of the forces. Identity work is more routine when people follow well-established scripts for their identity, such as an organization's structure for managerial advancement, and may be able to maintain self-continuity with limited uncertainty; however, people begin to question this continuity if they perceive they have limited input into the routine and feel constrained in self-defining who they are (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In the maintenance route, the tightrope walker may make micro-shifts back and forth and in many different directions to balance the forces. In this way, accumulating identity work occurs even in career identity maintenance, yet the tight rope continues toward the existing dynamic equilibrium. Thus, career identity maintenance does not sustain career identity in a static sense but in a more dynamic self-continuity that preserves an existing dynamic equilibrium.

The second route toward career identity change involves accumulating identity work that builds up to a threshold that becomes a turning point (Obodaru, 2012). People may reach a threshold from living with the tensions or feeling stuck, as well as through a more conscious build up, such as when people nurture their future career identity through their activities in an

identity work space or gain experience before making a career change. When tensions influence a career identity change, people make micro-shifts to attempt to alleviate tensions, yet, paradox theory suggests that alleviating one tension provides only a temporary respite as new tensions emerge (Smith & Berg, 1987). As identity work accumulates, micro-shifts that move toward a new end point compile into a turning point—i.e., a shift in the subjective meaning for one's life that is derived from one's career identity (Obodaru, 2012). The turning point acts as trigger, such that it activates the anchoring and evolving forces, tensions, and accumulating identity work, leading to a new dynamic equilibrium. When people engage in a more conscious accumulation, they make sense of their current work activities relative to their desired future. For example, medical residents accumulate identity work by customizing their identities to their present work at hand, despite an incongruence with their future image of a being a doctor (Pratt et al., 2006). In this case, the turning point may occur when an individual perceives they are ready for a change in the meaning of their identity, e.g., when they have accumulated enough activities or practices to create a new dynamic equilibrium of their career identity.

Returning to the example of Julie, she may feel stuck in her career identity if she starts to think about where her current career path is leading her. Perhaps a rise of tensions is triggered by getting an accelerated promotion or by spending time with more senior people in corporate finance, which makes her envision a future she realizes she might not want. At the same time, she's stuck in a career identity that she's following very successfully that gives her status and security. The identity work of separating across time and audiences to manage the tensions may increase in frequency or specificity, as she continues to think more about an entrepreneurial identity and shares these aspirations with others. In doing so, her identity work accumulates through micro-shifts that continuously pull her toward a new direction. She reaches a turning

point in which she reflects on who she really is in her career and begins to fully re-envision herself as an entrepreneur, even if it might not be time to make an actual job change yet. In this scenario, while Julie is promoted and appears to her peers and supervisor to have further solidified and anchored her career identity, the notion of accumulation in our model helps to explain how her career identity was also evolving under the surface. This accumulation leads to subjective career identity change, which later materializes as a career path change to quit her corporate finance job and undertake starting her own real estate firm.

Returning to the example of the Dean, there are triggers, such as seeing announcements of their colleagues' new publications, that pull on their scholarly identity. While the Dean experiences micro-shifts back towards scholarship, such as telling themselves they will make time for research in the summer or finding other referents in indirect research activities like grant administration, they experience salient triggers toward maintaining their current administrative identity. Over time, the Dean's micro-shifts push more toward an administrative identity, maintaining the existing dynamic equilibrium. Additionally, as the Dean experiences other triggers, such as successfully delivering on organizational goals related to diversity or fundraising activities, the maintenance of their existing dynamic equilibrium may be reinforced. The existing dynamic equilibrium could then drive future choices to advance up the ranks of administration to provost or president.

As demonstrated in Julie's and the Dean's examples, our theory accommodates a variety of ways in which career identity is maintained and changes. By decoupling career identity change from career path change, we are able to account for when micro-shifts maintain and change dynamic equilibrium. Theorizing career identity maintenance and career identity change in a single theory provides an understanding that both are needed, and that neither the continuity

of maintenance nor the dynamism of change are inherently bad for one's career identity, despite what might seem like on the surface as appearing stuck or making an irrational choice. Challenges that individuals experience for their career identity are instead a useful and developmental part of working through the career identifying process. In what follows, we further expand on new insights that are gained from our theory as well as future implications for research.

DISCUSSION

With this theory, we seek to reconcile orderly conceptions of career identity with the messy reality of how people think of themselves in relation to their careers. While past research has primarily emphasized the anchoring aspect of career identity (Rodrigues et al., 2013; Schein, 1996) or the evolving aspect of career identity (Ashforth et al., 2008; LaPointe, 2010), we start with the idea that career identity is subject to both anchoring and evolving forces at the same time. Tensions arising from these paradoxical forces keep the career identifying process in motion, and people manage tensions by performing identity work that accumulates to maintain career identity in an existing dynamic equilibrium and/or change to a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity.

In Figures 3a and 3b, we compare stylized representations of stepwise career identity change that accompanies career change and a more continuous career identifying process. If Julie's example were explained through the stepwise change depicted in Figure 3a, her career identity would be anchored in corporate finance, then a career change would occur, and then identity work would happen to transition and re-anchor her career identity as an entrepreneur in her real estate business. She would go from one anchored career identity to another in tandem with her career change.

Insert Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c about here

In contrast, Figure 3b shows Julie's career identity as only quasi-anchored in corporate finance, and that her interest in entrepreneurship feeds into an evolving force that leads her to make continual adjustments to her career identity, as she encounters an ongoing stream of triggers. Since many of these adjustments pull in the same new direction, the identity work accumulates to a turning point for Julie, eventually leading to a revised career identity quasi-anchored in entrepreneurship that encourages her to make a subsequent move to start her own real estate business. The move may seem sudden, but Julie has been doing identity work over a period of years to support the career change. The idea of accumulation accounts for continuity while also changing direction toward a revised dynamic equilibrium as a different quasi-anchored identity takes shape. In the career identifying process, while Julie ends her employment with her corporate finance firm, her past experience is incorporated into her career identity such that she can use her transferrable skills from finance in her new entrepreneurial ventures.

Note that our model supports gradually accumulative and back-and-forth changes to career identity, but it also allows for periods of heightened activity and change (see Figure 3c). Triggers that disrupt a career can also lead to reactive changes to career identity, consistent with existing reactive models of identity transition (Ibarra, 1999; Ladge et al., 2012; Louis, 1980; Nicholson, 1984). If Julie was laid off in an economic downturn, or if an old classmate approached her with a concrete proposal for a new venture, she might make a fast career move to start her own business that requires additional identity work after the move to transition to her new quasi-anchored career identity of entrepreneur.

Career identifying also complements existing theory by offering additional interpretations

for existing empirical accounts of careers. For example, in a study exploring how individuals' career resourcing moves led to the emergence of the profession of health services research (HSR) (Nigam & Dokko, 2019), Bob Brook, a physician turned health services researcher, notes the change in legitimacy of the new profession over time:

> I remember my exit interview with the dean of the medical school … when I left medical school, I said, "I'm going to be a generalist and probably go into public health or health services." The conversation ended when I said that. He had no advice, just said goodbye…. And we would worry…"Would anyone ever hire [researchers] with this kind of weird mixed training?..." Well, we have now established ourselves as a legitimate part of the medical research establishment, and [we] are now chiefs of medicine and deans (Nigam & Dokko, 2019:1062).

Reinterpreting this example through a career identifying lens calls attention to the subjective underpinnings of career resourcing. Our theory foregrounds the struggle that Brook had in figuring out his career identity as an impetus to his career actions. Brook's exit interview with the dean served as a trigger invoking both collective and personal tensions. The identity work he did to manage these tensions accumulated to enable career moves that advanced the formation of the HSR profession. The establishment and institutionalization of HSR likely reduced ongoing collective tensions for Brook, allowing him to make sense of his past work experiences and the future directions he could take. Thus, career identifying enriches this empirical account by suggesting how career identifying is precedent to career actions that can later have broad, field-level effects.

In another example, empirical examination of person-environment fit over time suggests that individuals recount their experiences using identity as an underlying theme across various experiences. As described by one study subject:

> My [fit] story is like a series of vignettes—maybe a novella. Like Voltaire's Candide, 30 chapters that are different but there is an underlying progression. I am the constant—I am still the same person at the core … The scenery changes, environments change, even I change somewhat, but I am the underlying theme. (Jansen & Shipp, 2019: 1173)

In examining stability and change in terms of these fit narratives, consistent temporal comparisons stabilized existing work situations, whereas triggering events altered comparisons across past and present selves to change career trajectory (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Our theory would suggest that fit narratives may have stayed the same or changed over time as part of how people manage tensions. Having consistent fit narratives could be understood as an activity of identity work in the career identity maintenance route, whereas altered temporal comparisons could be indicative of a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity that preceded career trajectory changes. Thus, expanding on the career identifying process can help to further explain how fit narratives over time relate to career identity maintenance and/or change.

In addition to complementing existing empirical accounts, the process of career identifying can also be applied across many different career patterns as well as employment types. While we have primarily drawn from professional examples, we anticipate that the core concepts of our theory would hold across a variety of workers. The frequency and nature of triggers might be different and there could be implications for which tensions may be felt more strongly. For example, in more discontinuous employment types, such as gig workers, there would be more frequent disruptive triggers, such as working for multiple organizations and limited purview of long-term employment prospects (Petriglieri et al., 2019). In these circumstances, the anchoring and evolving forces may be constantly in flux making maintenance more difficult to sustain. It is also possible that collective tensions may be attenuated as gig workers expect less affiliation with occupations or organizations, and instead, relational tensions may be felt more strongly as gig workers look to social referents to provide leads to the next gig. Similarly, career identifying may be more active early in a career than later as potential career

paths extend further into the future. Thus, there may be a variety of nuances for how individuals experience the concepts we depict in our model.

Theoretical Insights and Future Research

By shedding light on the dynamic nature of career identity and elaborating the career identifying process, we offer several implications and directions for future research.

Decoupling career identity change from career change. In our theorizing, we decouple career identity change from career change, allowing us to complement prior research and illustrate different ways in which career identity may change before an observable career change occurs or even without a career change. In career and roles transitions literatures, the subjective self-concept is often understood to change simultaneously with or following objective observable career changes (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2000; Louis, 1980). Our theory elaborates ongoing ways in which individuals may subjectively engage with their identities with or without objective career changes. Further, much of the literature on role-to-role identity transitions assumes a sequence that involves letting go of a former role-related identity to prepare for a new role-related identity. Our theorizing suggests that career identity transitions could occur in a less structured sequence, particularly as we consider how one's career identity may be in transition long before an eventual career change. Future research might consider how navigating career identity change before objective career change may alter the course of the actual transition. Indeed, prior research suggests that envisioning one's self in a role prior to an actual transition can ease some of the uncertainties of taking on the role (e.g., Ladge et al., 2012). Further research could also explore situations in which envisioning a wide variety of potential versions of one's self could increase uncertainties or conflict among possible future selves, leaving individuals feeling stuck in perpetual career identity maintenance rather than change.

Additionally, applying the career identifying process to a variety of career patterns that capture objective change may bring new insights to the subjective career experiences of individuals. For example, while earlier conceptions considered the self-directed career development in protean careers as the formation of new aspects of the self (Hall & Mirvis, 1996), more recent clarifications suggest that protean career is instead an orientation or attitude that individuals can have to varying degrees, allowing relatively static career profiles or types to be articulated (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Similarly, the boundaryless career concept has been conceived of as psychological or physical mobility that individuals possess to varying degrees (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). This static treatment of individually held stable career traits foregrounds the anchoring force, which can be useful in specifying patterns and trends that can be drawn across individual careers; however, as the evolving force falls to the background, what these relatively static types may not capture is the dynamism that occurs within an individual. Taken together, our model extends prevalent frameworks in the careers literature by explaining how underlying tensions and accumulation of identity work facilitate different career patterns and actions. By applying the career identifying process to existing career concepts, future research could further elaborate on the subjective mechanisms that influence objective observations of individual careers.

Stability and change within the individual. The anchoring and evolving forces in career identifying reflect a fundamental paradox that is often examined at the organizational level—stability and change. This paradox captures the notion that organizations are at once enduring and stable features of the workplace from which existing efficiencies can be leveraged for short-term effectiveness and are also continuously changing to produce innovation and long-term sustainability (Farjoun, 2010; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Our theorizing applies the paradox of

stability and change within the individual. More specifically, the anchoring and evolving forces of career identity represent stability and change that is subjectively experienced. Within an individual, stability could be considered a special form of change that is bound within a specific time period (Roe, 2014), or in our theorizing, the existing dynamic equilibrium of the current moment. Conceived of in this way, ongoing dynamism is a necessary and functional part of managing tensions, despite the challenges that questioning one's career identity can present. While prior research highlights the emotional and intellectual disturbances that come with identity challenges (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Smith & Berg, 1987), theorizing anchoring and evolving forces as a paradox brings to light the importance of balancing rather than suppressing one force over the other, and this balancing act might be the glue that holds career identity together over time.[9] Our theory accounts for the undercurrent of activity that supports the balance of these forces and provides further insight to the interrelatedness of stability and change in career identity.

Focusing within the individual also provides opportunity to elaborate an individual's use of subjective time in terms of their identity. While prior research considers past in the present, such as in forgone professional identities (Obodaru, 2017) or lingering identities (Wittman, 2019), we examine the simultaneity of past, present, and future to separate and balance the anchoring and evolving forces. A careers perspective necessarily invokes time; a widely used definition of careers is "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989: 8), and time is fundamental to the understanding of a career, yet time has not been at the foreground of contemporary careers research (Mayrhofer & Gunz, 2019). Our model brings both subjective and objective conceptions of time back into theorizing

[9] We thank the Editor and an anonymous reviewer for their ideas sharpening this aspect of our theorizing

about careers. Explicitly acknowledging that individual career identities interact with subjective time in identity work to manage tensions and objective time in responding to or driving career changes enables us to think about the temporal ordering of career identity and career moves. Other aspects of our model invite additional exploration around time. Career identity can change over time as individuals accrue past work experiences as well as new expectations and aspirations for the future. In this way, individuals think fluidly about past, present, and future in their career identity; however, they may vary in how much they focus on each of these eras (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009), or they may lose fluidity as their careers progress. In addition, tensions in our model often arise from evaluation of whether one's own career is progressing faster, slower, or in line with social referents or occupational norms. Thus, time in our model can also be a force for stability or a medium and impetus for change (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Finally, accumulation of micro-shifts to career identity occurs over time. Yet, our model is unspecific about how long accumulation takes, and the conditions under which accumulation may occur faster or slower (George & Jones, 2000). Future research can expand on the time dimensions of accumulation or individual differences in how people think about time in their careers.

Getting stuck and unstuck through career identifying. While separating forces to manage tensions provides a balance in the moment, we also take into consideration how tensions re-surface from new triggers, and re-circulate and continue to churn, at times leading people to feel stuck. To get unstuck, people need to experience movement, which occurs when people feel they are covering new ground (Smith & Berg, 1987). Thus, our theory accounts for accumulation in which identity work bubbles up to a turning point and career identity change that allows individuals to feel they are covering new ground in their self-conception in their career.

Theorizing stuckness and unstuckness for career identity provides new insight to theory on career inaction. Career inaction suggests that people delay desired change in their careers due to inertia-enhancing mechanisms, such as the degree of difficulty in the decision to change and the uncertainty of the future outcome of the change (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). The career identifying process adds the explanation that individuals may perceive difficulty and uncertainty in career change because their career identity needs to change first. Periods of stuckness can be anxiety provoking and emotionally taxing (Smith & Berg, 1987), thus, becoming unstuck in one's career identity may be an important precursor and functional part of overcoming career inaction.

We also acknowledge that feelings of stuckness can be influenced by other identities that present increased potential for individuals to experience contradiction between different options for their career identity. For example, life events such as pregnancy can create identity challenges as gestational parents face potential contradictions between their work and motherhood identities (Ladge et al., 2012). Black professionals may experience dissonance as they compartmentalize professional and racial identities between their workplace and their neighborhood community (Bell, 1990) or constant code-switching to shift their behavior, language, and even appearance when faced with social interactions across racial identities (McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, & Durkee, 2019). Future research may further examine how multiple identities further tax or perhaps enhance the various ways in which individuals manage career tensions.

Practical Implications

Our model is useful for helping people understand that having a career identity that shifts day-to-day or seems inconsistent across time and audiences is not schizophrenic, but is a normal and even functional response to the push and pull of universal—and paradoxical—anchoring and

evolving forces. Rather than pushing people to resolution when career identity seems unstable, managers and career counselors can recognize that people will balance anchoring and evolving forces throughout their career, and help them to understand that even when career identity seems stable, it is in a dynamic equilibrium. Individuals who understand that managing tensions is not necessarily destabilizing but is normal and maybe even necessary to maintain a career identity, can be better equipped to live with tensions or even embrace them as opportunities to re-think who they are in their careers. Acknowledging tensions can help individuals to be more agile in making sense of their work-related experiences, or make them more resilient to triggering events, or they could even leverage job crafting techniques that integrate employees' deeply embedded personal life interests with their current work roles and career prospects (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Butler & Waldroop, 1999; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Additionally, our model could be beneficial to educational institutions or professional associations that prepare early career individuals to develop their career identity. Rather than assume that individuals will pursue traditional paths, these institutions may be better positioned to support career development by showing people that setting an anchoring career identity for decision-making now doesn't preclude envisioning themselves in other career paths that could unfold over time.

CONCLUSION

Careers are messy with many detours that forge a new path or end up back on track. Our theory shows that career identity is at least as messy. People are constantly bombarded with a range of triggers, large and small, that keep the career identifying process in motion. Our theory provides insight into how people manage tensions that arise from paradoxical anchoring and evolving forces to keep career identity steady enough to guide action while keeping open possibilities for change.

TABLE 1

Prevalent Definitions of Career Identity

Primarily emphasizes anchoring force	**Primarily emphasizes evolving force**
• A "total self-concept" (Schein, 1978: 126) that consists of self-perceived abilities, motives, and values across work and life experiences that "functions as a **stabilizing force, an anchor**…." (Schein, 1996:80) • A "structure or network of meanings in which the individual consciously links his own motivation, interests, and competencies with acceptable career roles…not the sum of those experiences but the **assimilation of the experiences into meaningful or useful structures**." (Meijers, 1998: 200) • "One's self-definition in the career context, describing 'who I am' or 'who I want to be'…that acts as a **cognitive compass** that motivates one to actively adapt in order to realize (or create) opportunities that match one's aspirations." (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004: 17)	• A "practice of **articulating and performing** identity positions in narrating career experiences" that is "**co-constructed, socially-situated, and performed in interaction**." (LaPointe, 2010: 2) • "How one conceived oneself over the course of one's work history and how that conception **forms and evolves and perhaps radically changes**." Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008: 351 • The "person's image of her- or himself in relation to the environment" developed through the "**creation of new aspects of the self** in relation to the career." (Hall & Mirvis, 1996: 25)

Note: The bolded text highlights anchoring and evolving forces in these definitions.

FIGURE 1

Process Model of Career Identifying

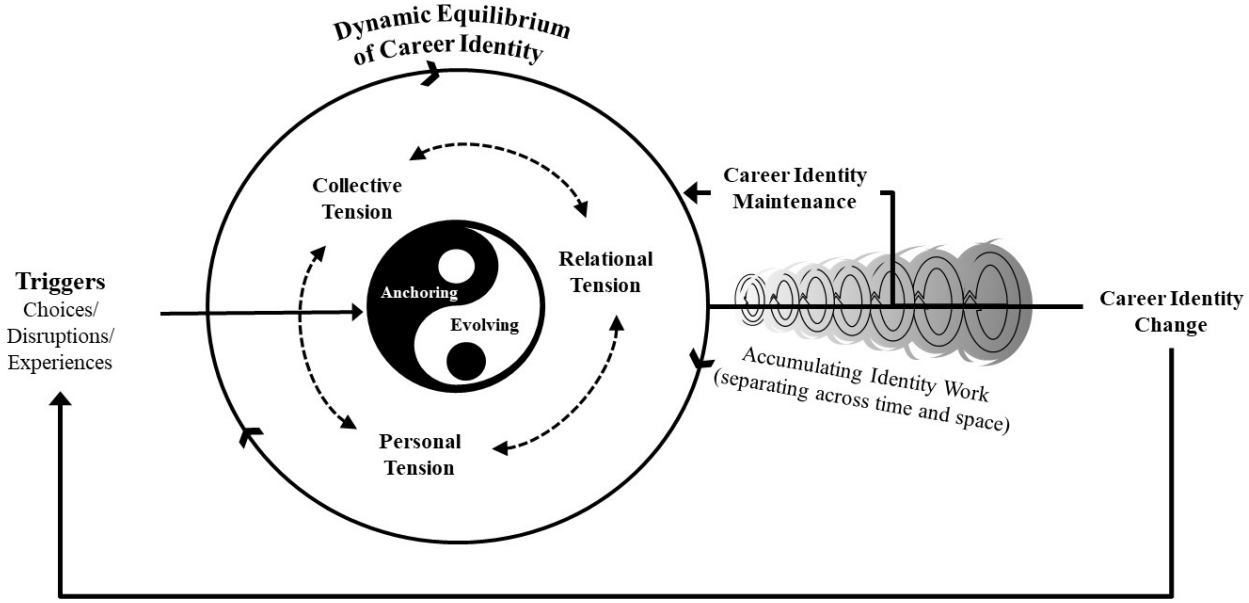


FIGURE 2

Illustration of tensions arising from a career change trigger

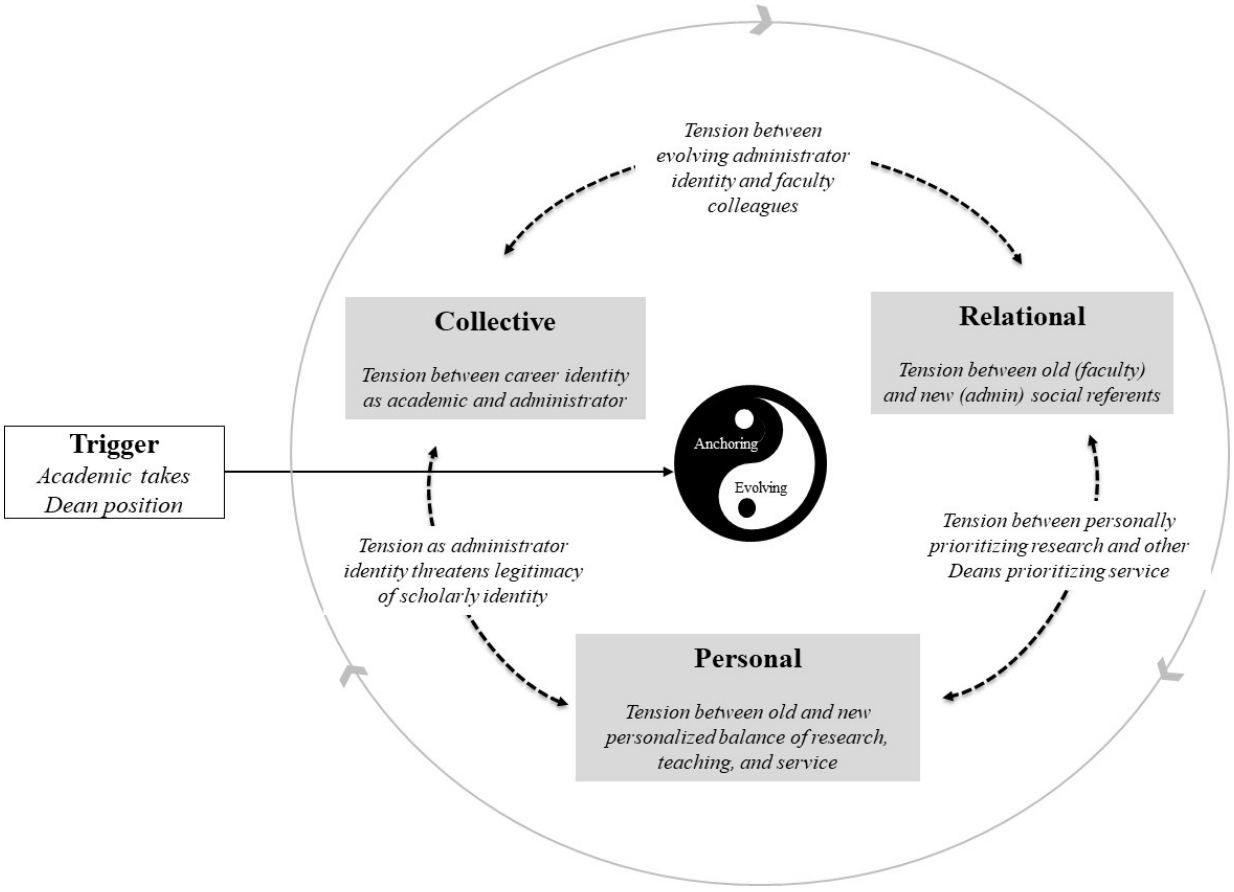


FIGURE 3A: Stepwise model underlying existing notions of identity change

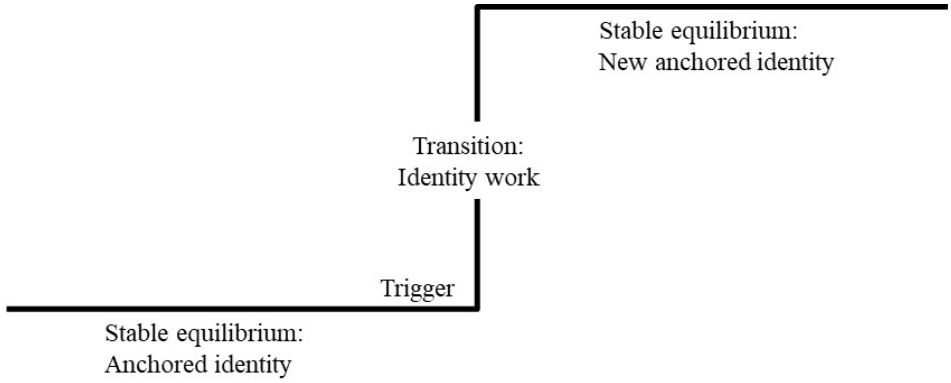


FIGURE 3B: Ongoing identity work and change with gradual, accumulated change

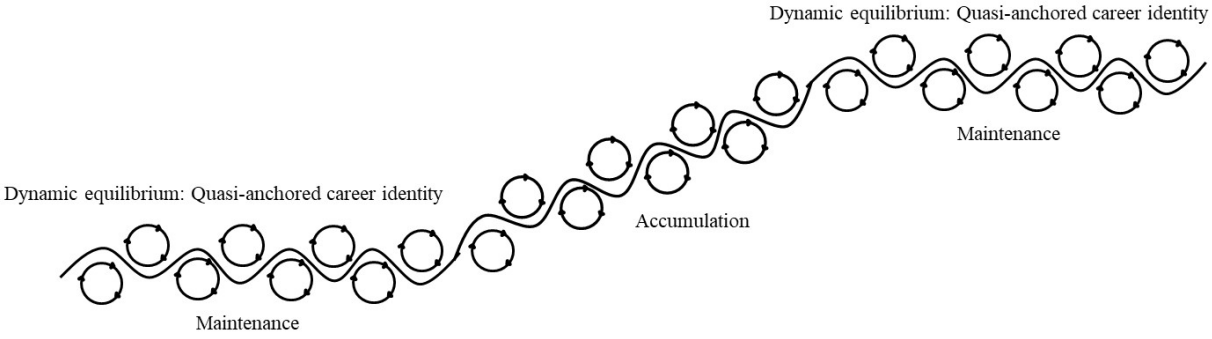
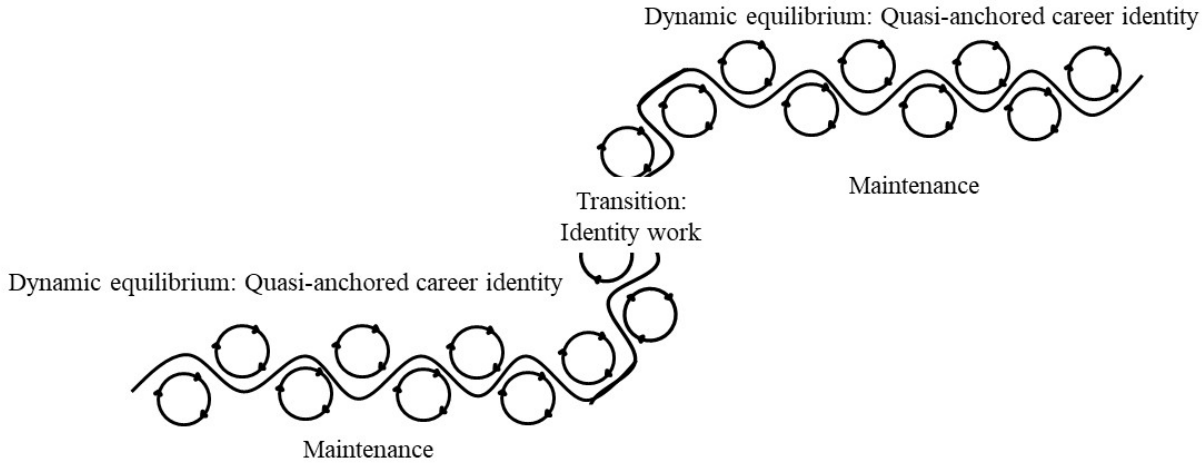


FIGURE 3C: Ongoing identity work and change with reactive, rapid change



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Stable anchors and dynamic evolution: A paradox theory of career identity maintenance and change

ABSTRACT

People routinely conceive of themselves in their career in both stable and dynamic ways. Individuals may draw common threads across their various career experiences and aspirations to form a stable anchor for their career identity, yet at the same time, dynamically adapt their self-concept in the context of their career. In this paper, we call attention to the anchoring and evolving forces that people experience as a paradox for their career identity and theorize *career identifying* as an ongoing process of career identity maintenance and change. As individuals contend with career identity tensions, they make adjustments to maintain a balance of anchoring and evolving forces on their career identity or to make shifts that accumulate into career identity change. The career identifying process accounts for both career identity maintenance and change in a single theoretical model that explains how career identity can change over time while being stable enough to make coherent career choices.

Keywords: Career identity, paradox, tensions, careers

Answering the question of "Who am I in my career?" is not as simple as responding with a singular idea of one's occupation. Indeed, even those who are objectively well-established in a

particular profession may answer this question in inconsistent ways within themselves and to others. For example, a journalist could look across their various work experiences that include being a part-time screenwriter and a novelist, and see themselves as a storyteller – and they could be with colleagues at their newspaper and see themselves as a committed journalist. A manager could look at their successes and promotions and see themselves as a corporate executive – and they could think about new product areas they have developed and launched for their corporation and see themselves as an entrepreneur. These practical examples may seem unsurprising and ordinary; however, we lack theory that explains how it is that people can think of their career identity in ways that are both stable enough to progress in a career path and dynamic enough to accommodate or even spur change, at the same time.

While it may be expected that people are able to clearly express their career identity, i.e., who they are in their career, in a 30 second elevator speech or in a brief summary on a resume, the lived reality of career identity can be simultaneously stable and changing. When people think about their career identity, they can synthesize their career experiences into a common thread as well as flexibly adapt their self-definition to incorporate past, present, and anticipated future career experiences across different social situations (Hall, 1996; LaPointe, 2010). Yet, prior research about career identity tends to primarily emphasize career identity as an *anchor* that that steadies the self-concept through relatively consistent preferences for one's career (e.g., Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2013) or as something that *evolves* through a reflexive practice in response to various social contexts people experience in their career (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; LaPointe, 2010). Juxtaposing notions of career identity as anchoring and evolving brings to light an underexamined question in the careers literature—how is it that career identity can be both anchoring and evolving at the same time, i.e., how can career identity

be stable enough to guide action while preserving flexibility for change? By addressing this question, we not only theorize that career identity is both stable and changing, but also explain why career identity is necessarily both at once.

In this paper, we argue that people experience anchoring and evolving forces as a paradox for their career identity. As a paradox, these forces are competing yet mutually constitutive as individuals simultaneously attend to both forces (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). We introduce the *career identifying* [10] process, which we define as an ongoing process of career identity maintenance and change that is driven by anchoring and evolving forces, in which individuals manage tensions that arise as different choices, disruptions, and experiences call their career identity into question. We theorize that rather than reaching some ultimate end state to one's career identity, the ongoing nature of career identifying allows individuals to adapt and accommodate a wide variety of career-related thoughts and actions while also holding a stable enough self-definition to serve as a reference point. This "workable certainty" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008: 230), or dynamic equilibrium of career identity, is maintained by actively managing tensions through small shifts made to balance forces in one's career identity, and we posit that these shifts can also accumulate and eventually lead to career identity change and a new dynamic equilibrium. In the career identifying process, a career identity in dynamic equilibrium is not one that is unmoored; rather, ongoing dynamism is a necessary and functional part of the process in response to anchoring and evolving forces of the paradox.

The objective of this paper is to build new theory that can account for both maintenance that sustains an existing dynamic equilibrium and/or change that result in a new dynamic

[10] Note that we use the gerund form to denote action or doing, i.e., *career identifying* as an ongoing process of defining career identity, rather than referring to the process of identification with another social entity, such as an organization or occupation.

equilibrium of career identity. The career identifying process model offers three new insights to previous research. First, it explicitly decouples career identity from career path, allowing career identity to change independent of or even preceding changes in career trajectory. Though career identity change is usually assumed to follow actual employment changes (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), we propose an alternative, additional way that career identity can change. In this conception, the career identifying process involves the accumulation of micro shifts to identity over time, which can precede or even generate an actual career path change. We argue that for career identity, micro shifts are constantly occurring as a stream of triggers—choices, disruptions, and experiences that can occur in small daily moments as well as in bigger life events—set anchoring and evolving forces in motion and raise career identity tensions that call into question one's sense of self. Managing these tensions through identity work can eventually lead to a revised career identity, which may then influence subsequent concrete career changes. The career identifying process also helps to explain how it is that intense or seemingly traumatic career path changes, such as a layoff or demise of one's profession, may actually be of limited impact to one's career identity if identity work has already been accumulating preceding this event. In this way, our model shows that though tensions arising from the anchoring-evolving paradox can be experienced as a career identity challenge, managing the tensions can result in outcomes that are beneficial or desirable for an individual.

Second, we account for both career identity maintenance and change in a single theoretical model that can explain how career identity can be stable enough to make coherent choices as well as change over time. With this theory, we can apply the career identifying process onto a wide variety of career patterns captured in concepts such as life stages (Levinson, 1978), protean (Hall, 1996), boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), and kaleidoscope

(Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). For example, while the life stages model assumes predictable changes in one's career with progression through adulthood (Levinson, 1978), career identifying would suggest that changes in career identity do not necessarily occur in the same progression. Our theory helps explain that what may seem to others an abrupt change that disrupts or even reverses the expected progression through adulthood can be accounted for in ongoing smaller shifts that occurred underneath the surface in an individual's career identifying process. In career patterns that capture less predictable or nontraditional career progressions such as protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope careers, the career identifying process can help to explain how individuals form a stable yet adaptable enough career identity to face potentially disjointed or distressing career experiences to pursue self-directed career interests. Thus, our theory may provide a useful framework for expanding on various patterns that are captured in careers research but that do not fully explain the ongoing underlying tensions and accumulation of identity work that facilitate different career patterns and actions.

Finally, we expand beyond the dichotomy of career action or inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020) by explaining the constant underlying activity involved with maintaining an existing career identity. Individuals may feel stuck in their experience of the anchoring and evolving paradox (Smith & Berg, 1987) as they are unable to choose between the stability of an anchored career identity and the lure of change. Paradox theorizing helps to explain how balancing is done through smaller constant adjustments, or micro-shifts, like a tightrope walker whose balance on the rope is the result of ongoing slight adaptations (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Our theory provides a processual view of how these micro-shifts can occur, and how accumulation may be occurring in periods of apparent inaction, eventually altering the course of the tightrope itself.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we show how anchoring and evolving forces underlie existing conceptualizations of career identity, and how these forces can be conceived of as a paradox that is taken for granted in prior research. We then introduce a theoretical model that specifies the career identifying process. We illustrate how triggers set these forces in motion, which calls career identity into question and gives rise to career identity tensions. We theorize how these tensions are managed toward an existing or new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. Lastly, we articulate insights gained and discuss how future research can leverage these insights to better understand the identity dynamics that influence career identity change.

ANCHORING AND EVOLVING FORCES IN CAREER IDENTITY

Career identity is related to but distinct from other work-related identities, such as professional identity tied to a specific occupation and social identity that incorporates an employer (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) or workgroup (Kane, Argote, & Levine, 2005), because it follows the entire course of an individual's career including various career moves and changes (Ashforth et al., 2008). Definitions of career identity in prior research describe a person's self-conception in reference to their career. Though these published conceptions of career identity may acknowledge both anchoring and evolving forces, the definitions tend to primarily emphasize the anchored nature of career identity or the way that career identity evolves over time. Table 1 below provides a sample of published definitions of career identity. We organize these definitions to highlight portions (in bold) that foreground the anchoring force or the evolving force. Highlighting these contrasts shows the potential benefit of a paradox perspective in explaining how and why both anchoring and evolving forces can co-exist, even while being experienced as contradictory.

Anchoring refers to the stabilizing nature of the self-concept that informs individual preferences around what individuals value and what is most meaningful in their career relative to their social context (Rodrigues et al., 2013; Schein, 1978). An anchored career identity stems from an individual's work history and serves as a cognitive compass when making career choices (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Meijers, 1998). Evolving refers to the more dynamic nature of career identity as something that is actively created and transformed, which is both fueled by, and in turn, influences cognitive processes of understanding one's career experiences (Ashforth et al., 2008; Vough & Caza, 2017). Anchoring is about how individuals integrate motives, values, and abilities from prior career experiences into a coherent career self-concept (Schein, 1978), while evolving is about the more ongoing processual nature of the career self-concept, which at times, leads to larger transformational change (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Insert Table 1 about here

Prior research operationalizes the anchoring force—or career anchors as first conceptualized by Schein (1978, 1996) and expanded by Feldman and Bolino (1996)—as static career types, testing for a variety of outcomes, such as managerial career trajectories (Gubler, Biemann, Tschopp, & Grote, 2015), entrepreneurial intentions (Lee & Wong, 2004), and core self-evaluation (Costigan, Gurbuz, & Sigri, 2018), as well as considering the influence of other identities on career types, such as GLB (gay, lesbian, bisexual) identity (Kaplan, 2014) or an internationalism identity (Lazarova, Cerdin, & Liao, 2014). This stream of research captures static career types as a proxy for career identity, primarily emphasizing stability over understanding of how people actually engage with their career identity over time. While Schein's (1978) original conception is aligned to this more static treatment of career identity, he also

recognizes—but does not fully theorize—that people may change their career types over time and that stability may in fact enable change. Studies that emphasize the evolving force have used the idea of dynamic construction of career identity. Dynamic construction can involve performative expressions of oneself across various career experiences and social situations, accomplishing evolution through connections that are drawn between various expressions into a more composite notion of one's self (LaPointe, 2010). Other studies have characterized career identity as responsive to career events, like setbacks. For example, people construct resilience in their present career identity by referring to their past self that overcame prior setbacks and using aspects of past identity to evolve a current career identity (Vough & Caza, 2017). Thus, anchoring and evolving forces necessarily coexist, as stability can enable change and vice-versa.

Anchoring and evolving forces are an application of the endemic forces of stability and change from the paradox literature to individual-level career identity. Like other fundamental paradoxes, such as the belonging-distinctiveness paradox (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Shore et al., 2011; Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019), the old-new learning paradox (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011), and the exploitation-exploration paradox (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), stability and change are fundamentally paradoxical, such that the essential need for stability is opposite yet mutually constitutive of the essential need for change or evolution.

In the broader identity literature, prior conceptions establish stability and change in how individuals understand who they are in relation to their social context. For example, the self-concept is understood to "feel stable yet…malleable" to accommodate an enduring essence of oneself that can be presented to others as well as dynamically constructed from moment to moment (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012: 88). At the organizational level, stability and change can manifest as an "adaptive instability" that prevents stagnation of organizational

identity and accommodate necessary change through ongoing interactions with external feedback and adjustments made to address environmental demands (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000: 64). Organizational identity is also understood to involve internal negotiations among organizational members in ongoing gradual changes through maintaining a "stable state of instability" (Kozica, Gebhardt, Muller-Seitz, & Kaiser, 2015: 187). While stability and change are negotiated through various organizational members in organizational level identity, anchoring and evolving forces are constantly pushing and pulling within an individual, bringing attention to the importance of the subjective process involved in career identifying. We expand on the process for how individuals address these forces in defining their selves in their careers below.

THE CAREER IDENTIFYING PROCESS

In Figure 1 below, anchoring and evolving forces are illustrated as a yin yang symbol, which is often used to denote paradox. The yin-yang shows opposition in stark contrast between black and white, yet also interrelatedness, represented by the dots of the opposite color in either side of the circle. The internal boundary creates distinction between the two sides and highlights opposition, and the external boundary constructs a unified whole and highlights synergy and mutual constitutions (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the career identifying process, anchoring and evolving forces co-exist in competing yet mutually constitutive ways. Forces are experienced as pushes and pulls, yet paradoxically, the anchoring force enables action by providing enough certainty in one's existing career identity to evaluate career choices or changes, and the evolving force enables stability by allowing experimentation that can eventually coalesce into a more stable self-definition.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Applying paradox theorizing to the career identifying process helps us to illustrate this interplay between the forces as triggers, tensions, and shifts that occur in ongoing, iterative ways. Working through paradox allows people to reach a dynamic equilibrium that enables a "workable certainty" to deal with intricate and fluid issues (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), such as those involving the messy reality of careers. In a dynamic equilibrium, constant micro-shifts enable balance by adapting to the continuous push and pull of opposing forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This balance does not necessarily mean an equal weighting or a permanent resolution between these forces. Rather balance is about iterative adjustments taken by individuals to attend to forces that push and pull with different weights at different times, as exemplified in the metaphor of the tightrope walker that constantly moves to balance on the rope (Schad et al., 2016). The *dynamic equilibrium of career identity* in Figure 1 reflects that people move through tensions to balance forces for enough of a workable certainty in their career identity to make choices or deal with disruptions and still have room to accommodate a wide variety of career-related thoughts and actions.

Consider the example of Julie[11]. Julie's career identity as a corporate finance analyst seems stable. She is successfully advancing through the well-established structure of progression in her firm that provides stability and direction in her career identity (anchoring); at the same time, she also feels tension when comparing herself to her mother who started her own property investment firm (evolving). Julie embodies a contradiction. She is deeply embedded in her current position, working long hours to get to the next promotion, which is in line with expectations about what junior corporate finance analysts do. Yet, Julie is also constantly reevaluating herself in her own mind against a path that no one in her current field would

[11] Julie is loosely based on one of the authors' career conversations with a former student.

anticipate her taking. In what follows, we continue to unfold Julie's story as we illustrate our theory.

Our process model shows how an ongoing stream of triggers set the anchoring and evolving forces in motion. Tensions arise from self-defining in relation to collectives, social referents, and personal career meaning. Tensions can co-occur or influence each other, sustaining the cyclical churning. People manage tensions by separating conflicting aspects across objective (i.e., clock time) or subjective (i.e., thoughts about past, present and future) time (Shipp & Jansen, 2021), and social space (e.g., audiences across different domains in the social world). In the sections that follow, we expand on each part of the model starting with triggers.

Triggers

Triggers are the choices, disruptions, and experiences that set the forces for anchoring and evolving career identity in motion. When forces are set in motion, the existing dynamic equilibrium in an individual's career identity becomes unbalanced in response. Revisiting the example of Julie, her career identity is in a dynamic equilibrium as she works toward her next promotion as a corporate finance professional. Triggers, such as conversations with co-workers on their latest work success, a performance feedback meeting with her supervisor, or even a Facebook post of a close friend who is an entrepreneur, activate the push and pull of the forces and lead her to question her career identity. Seeing the entrepreneur's excitement over his autonomy pulls her career identity toward a self-definition as an entrepreneur, yet, talking with her co-workers about their latest successes or her boss about her own career prospects pushes her career identity back toward corporate finance.

As the prior example suggests, even routine events and interactions can act as triggers in our model. Our conception of triggers is inclusive of both smaller ongoing events and larger

episodic events that brings an individual's attention to their career identity and makes salient the forces that anchor career identity and the opposing forces that pull it toward evolution. While Julie's example shows how consequential small social interactions can be, such a trigger may also serve as a seed that gets planted and builds over time (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Because of their highly varied nature, triggers can constantly spark the career identifying process, as a person encounters the myriad of choices, disruptions, and experiences that occur over the course of a career, like the routine examples provided in Julie's story or a much larger event like the displacement of an occupation by technological change (Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2020).

The magnitude of the trigger, however, does not necessarily determine the extent of the activation of the forces in the career identifying process, but may rather depend on both the salience and timing of the trigger. Triggers may be more or less salient depending on the strength of the push and pull of the anchoring and evolving forces relative to an individual's preferences and aspirations. For instance, in a study of young professionals, unpredictable workplace experiences served to trigger feelings of validation and reinforced an existing career identity for some participants, while leaving others feeling invalidated and forcing a change in their existing career identity (Modestino, Sugiyama, & Ladge, 2019). Indeed, the concept of lingering identities suggests that a trigger such as a role change, which is typically assumed to be accompanied by psychological transition to a new identity, may instead be met with coping efforts to retain previous identities when faced with uncertainty (Wittman, 2019). Thus, the same trigger will be more or less salient to different people.

Timing can also affect how important triggers are in the career identifying process. Small triggers that occur at times when a person is vulnerable to influence or in a period of questioning about their careers (e.g., Jansen & Shipp, 2019) can have disproportionately large effects on the

forces. For example, bumping into a former classmate with a completely different and highly desired career path at a vulnerable or uncertain time can trigger intense reflection and a pull toward the evolving force, leading to strong tensions, even though the trigger is not large or unusual. When a trigger occurs in the path of a career also matters to its importance to career identifying, i.e., the same trigger occurring early or late in a career can affect the forces differently. Large events like career changes can trigger the career identifying process, yet the result may not be a highly active and tension-filled process if the timing of the career change is congruent with an expected stage of the career path as reflected in traditional conceptions of life stages (Levinson, 1978). For example, in a study of retirees, those who followed the expected timing of retirement—as understood through a pre-existing plan of action from culturally-determined scripts—described their retirement as "on time" and largely without the experience of tensions (Vough, Bataille, Noh, & Lee, 2015: 425). In this case, the pull of the evolving force can be strong and not answered by a strong push of the anchoring force, because the timing of the retirement matches an expected evolution of career identity. Similarly, a layoff is a large career event that could have different effects depending on career stage. People in earlier career stages might be more inclined to react less strongly to layoffs in terms of career identity if their intention is to stay on a path that is consistent with the existing career identity, just with a different employer, while people in mid-career stages could use a layoff as an opportunity to question and confront existing career identity and experience the forces and resulting tensions that arise from this questioning (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). This is not to say that a layoff would not have a large effect on a person's life, but its effect on career identity may not be large, especially if they get back on their expected career path.

In sum, triggers vary widely in their type and magnitude, but the strength of the anchoring and evolving forces they activate will depend on the salience and the timing of the trigger. Given the range of choices, events, and disruptions that can serve as triggers, triggers can arise in succession, activating new forces and tensions before previously triggered tensions have found a balance, keeping the process in motion. However, as career identity tensions that arise from the push and pull of anchoring and evolving forces, they are alleviated through identity work, which in turn maintains career identity in dynamic equilibrium or accumulates to change it. We expand on these other elements of the process model below.

Career Identity Tensions

Tensions are cognitively and socially constructed polarities experienced by individuals as dilemmas that feel like either/or choices (Lewis, 2000) that can be met with feelings of stress, anxiety, or even paralysis (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). Prior research examines tensions of identity that reside in understanding one's self in relation to others and collectives (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987) as people orient themselves to different sources of self-definition (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). As stated earlier, tensions arise from anchoring and evolving forces when they are instigated by triggers. When the push and pull of anchoring and evolving forces activate the career identifying process, career identity is questioned through tensions that arise in considering social norms of collectives, social referents in relational interactions, and one's own self-determinations and interests. Next, we describe tensions that arise as career identity is appraised against collective, relational, and personal concerns. We also note and describe how tensions for different sources of self-definition can give rise to additional tensions, such as when personal tensions and collective tensions conflict. We illustrate career identity tensions using an example of an

academic who takes on a role as Dean. We use this example to illustrate an objective role change that can trigger an imbalance in the existing dynamic equilibrium of career identity and more transparently demonstrate various tensions that can arise as a faculty member reconsiders their career identity in light of collective, relational, and personal interests that shift with their new Dean role. Regardless of how much one enjoys or dislikes the responsibilities of a new position, a shift in occupation is often accompanied by reflection on career identity. We also describe how tensions give rise to other tensions, potentially creating an ongoing stream of triggers.

Collective. Collective tensions are felt when individuals question their career identity that has been validated through and anchored in collectives (e.g., organizations and occupations). These questions can arise due to changes in the collective itself or due to individuals self-initiating adjustments to a collective. For example, changes in work collectives could include operating within occupations that are subject to more than one set of institutional logics (Dunn & Jones, 2010; Lounsbury, 2007) or hybrid professions that inject multiple collective inputs into identity (Caza & Creary, 2016), as well as the emergence of new occupations (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2017; Nigam & Dokko, 2019).

Figure 2 below provides an example of an academic who takes on a new role as Dean, experiencing tension between wanting to continue to anchor their career identity as a scholar and to evolve their career identity toward a new collective of administration.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Relational. Relational tensions are felt when individuals question their career identity that has been validated through and anchored in relationships with social referents. These

questions can arise as individuals identify with multiple social referents who communicate contradictory expectations. Social referents are people that serve as benchmarks or that represent aspirations, e.g., peers, mentors or role models (Shah, 1998). Social referents provide a model or template for behaviors that are required of a given role (Ibarra, 1999; Reilly, 2017). Prior research suggests individuals often observe a range of role models with respect to their demeanor, interactions, and physical appearance of those who have assumed similar roles and choose from a repertoire of styles they can use in adapting to the new role (Ibarra, 1999). A diversity of referents can make comparison and feedback less clear, yet, having a set of referents who are similar to each other may also reduce clarity, as a narrow range of referents can place limitations on the exploration of possible self-definitions (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005).

In the example of a faculty member transitioning to the role of Dean, relational tension is likely to arise when the new Dean makes comparisons with existing (faculty) and new (administrator) social referents. In this case, the faculty member turned Dean may make an effort to distance themselves from their prior role as a faculty member by adopting behaviors of other university deans and administrators, like dressing more formally or having staff act as gatekeepers to meetings. They may also experience relational tension when comparing themselves with former colleagues, as they feel like they are not producing as much research as a faculty member should.

Personal. Personal tensions arise when individuals question their career identity that is validated through and anchored in personal interests and priorities. Personal interests can include the fulfillment of personal values and the notion of success built on a feeling that a personal best has been achieved (Hall & Mirvis, 1996), or by self-directed career values and attitudes (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Questions arise when individuals consider how their interests are best served. For

example, in the case of the faculty member becoming Dean, one place where tensions may arise is between their preferred personalized balance of research, teaching, and service and the demands of their new role that leads them to question who they are in their career.

Tensions between tensions. As individuals engage with one tension, new questions could form and give rise to another tension. Identities can be nested across multiple levels of analysis and reciprocally linked (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011). In our model, cross-level relationships between tensions are a collective-relational tension, a relational-personal tension, and a personal-collective tension. A *collective-relational tension* can arise when collective tensions lead to relational tensions, or vice versa. For example, as the new Dean works to develop their new leadership identity, they may experience tension when interacting with their former department colleagues as their focus moves beyond their department to the college as a whole. The relational tension can also lead to the personal tension, or vice versa. In this *relational-personal* tension, looking to other Deans as social referents may call career identity into question for the new Dean if the other Deans provide contradictory information about how much they re-prioritized service over research. The new Dean may feel tension in personally prioritizing research when they are unsure of the extent to which other Deans prioritize service. Lastly, personal tensions can lead to collective tensions, or vice versa. In this *personal-collective* tension, the new Dean may call into question their scholarly identity that was validated and anchored in publishing, as they feel challenged to meet administrative demands and to make time for research.

In sum, when an imbalance of anchoring and evolving forces raises questions about one's career identity, individuals engage with tensions that arise from considering various sources of defining one's self in relation to the social context of one's career, including collective,

relational, and personal interests. We used the Dean example to illustrate the different tensions, but a single trigger may give rise to multiple tensions, or one tension may lead to another. For example, the trigger of Julie seeing her entrepreneur friend's Facebook post raises relational tensions as she compares herself to her friend. As she thinks about an entrepreneurial identity, she has to engage with the validation and success she finds as a corporate finance professional, as a relational tension raises a collective tension. Further reflection leads her to remember how corporate finance was supposed to be a stepping stone, leading her to feel a personal tension. Even absent new triggers, tensions giving rise to other tensions can also keep the career identifying process in motion.

Identity Work to Manage Tensions

In order to address tensions raised in the career identifying process, individuals separate anchoring and evolving forces by performing the identity work of holding different versions of themselves across time and social space. Identity work is defined as an individual's efforts to create, manage and present identities that reflect their coherent and distinctive self-concept (Snow & Anderson, 1987: 1348; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1165). Identity work includes "*cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral* activities that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, and revising, or rejecting *collective, role, and personal self-meanings* within the boundaries of their social context," (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018: 895).

Paradoxical tensions can lead to vicious cycles in which people become trapped in defensiveness, or to virtuous cycles that create new opportunities when tensions are managed (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Vicious cycles occur when individuals suppress either force, which intensifies pressure from the other force and produces an intellectually and

emotionally disturbing cycle of tensions in which individuals can become subjectively stuck (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987). To exit or avoid this unsettling cycle, identity work helps individuals manage tensions by subjectively separating the forces into different versions of themselves. In the broader identity literature, individuals are understood to hold multiple versions of themselves across subjective time periods, such as in future versions of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), in current provisional and alternative selves (Ibarra, 1999; Obodaru, 2012), and even grappling with past versions of oneself in lingering identities (Wittman, 2019) and identity paralysis (Toubiana, 2020). Individuals hold past, present, and future selves for a variety of career related actions—e.g., to anticipate a desired future, to test new identities or to retain meaningful alternate possibilities for the present, and to sustain continuity from the past. Similarly, individuals may also communicate different versions of themselves to different audiences across social spaces—e.g., to present a professional image at work (Ladge & Little, 2019; Roberts, 2005), to navigate different cultural expectations across social contexts at work and at home (Bell, 1990), and to meet the moral obligations of one's occupation while also meeting one's own personal material aims (Reid & Ramarajan, 2021).

We draw from Poole and Van de Ven (1989) to theorize that separating anchoring and evolving forces in the career identifying process takes place through temporal and spatial separation. Temporal separation is about locating opposing forces in different time periods, whereas spatial separation is about situating opposing forces in different locations in the social world (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). To manage tensions, people accept that contradictory forces coexist in the short term and work to separate and iterate between the forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). By managing tensions, people can learn to tolerate ambiguity, become more adaptable to change, and develop resiliency (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Similarly, in career identifying,

individuals can perform identity work to manage the tensions and become more adaptable and resilient to career-related uncertainty in order to live with both anchoring and evolving forces in their career identity.

Separating forces across time. An individual's work history is understood to progress through objective time, i.e., the literal passage of clock or calendar time that moves from past to present to future; yet, subjective interpretations of career identity can also include engaging with subjective time, where thoughts move between past, present and future in any order and direction (Shipp & Cole, 2015; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). When triggers disturb the dynamic equilibrium of career identity, people may make connections by drawing upon past, present, and future selves to balance anchoring and evolving forces across different subjective time periods. For example, Julie lives with tensions by separating forces across the present and future. As she actively takes steps toward her next promotion in corporate finance in the present, she tucks away her entrepreneurial intentions in provisional versions of her future self that she tries out in different imagined scenarios. She may play out entrepreneurial activities in her mind and vicariously experience her entrepreneurial intentions through referents, such as her entrepreneur friend or her mother. Playing out possibilities and alternatives in her mind could increase Julie's self-knowledge for the time being (Obodaru, 2012). As she increases this self-knowledge and gains a better understanding of what she wants in her career, new connections may be formed between present and future, which can in turn, begin to unravel the existing balance between anchoring and evolving forces toward a new dynamic equilibrium.

Separating forces across social space. Different versions of one's self-concept can also be expressed across different social spaces (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012) and among different audiences depending on the reactions they hope to elicit

(Markus & Wurf, 1987). In our theorizing, we suggest that individuals can manage tensions by spatially separating anchoring and evolving forces across social milieus, such as highlighting different attributes to potential employers than to peers (Modestino et al., 2019). While expressing one's self through different narratives to different audiences may appear as inauthentic or a form of compartmentalizing, trying out these different versions of one's self through different narratives can serve as a mechanism to experiment with possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Returning to our example of Julie, she may tell different narratives to different audiences that allow her to manage the tensions arising from anchoring and evolving forces. For example, when her peers at work share their work successes, she too may share her own work successes to retain the stability of the anchoring force. She may also seek out her Facebook friend, asking to meet for coffee to talk about ways she can get involved in entrepreneurial activities and other people she can meet to build her network in real estate, allowing her to expand toward the evolving force. As she continues to use these different narratives for different audiences, she may begin to form connections between audiences, such as articulating transferrable skills that corporate finance has given her for real estate. Thus, the identity work she does to manage tensions across audiences allows Julie to make adjustments to maintain her current dynamic equilibrium, while also allowing her to make gradual shifts that can accumulate toward change and forming a new dynamic equilibrium.

Identity Work Leads to Existing or New Dynamic Equilibrium through Career Identity Maintenance and/or Change

In Figure 1, we illustrate two main routes from the dynamic equilibrium of career identity. In the first route, accumulating identity work serves to maintain the dynamic

equilibrium, while the second route represents larger transformational changes to a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity. While maintaining and changing are core types of identity work (Caza et al., 2018), they are usually conceived of as separate types: maintaining is about retaining and securing a sense of meaning and self-worth (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1987), whereas changing involves addressing issues related to authenticity and fitting one's self into a new social context, such as in workplace entries or exits and shifts in occupations (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Our model considers career identity maintenance and career identity change as involving the same activities of separating across time and social space. In our model, however, the identity work to manage tensions accumulates to maintain a dynamic equilibrium, and/or change toward a new dynamic equilibrium.

Accumulating identity work. Accumulating identity work is particularly relevant to the career identifying process, as paradoxes are understood to persist over time, and smaller shifts to manage the paradox can accumulate to respond to dilemmas in the short term, while managing both forces of the paradox in the long term (Smith, 2014). Thus, accumulation is important to the long-term sustainability of anchoring and evolving forces. Using the metaphor of the tightrope walker, we conceive that accumulating identity work shifts career identity in both routes of maintenance and change; however, in maintenance, the tightrope walker continues to move along the tightrope in the same general direction toward the existing dynamic equilibrium whereas in change, the endpoint of the tightrope moves such that a new dynamic equilibrium emerges.

Accumulating identity work occurs within a "container" that is psychologically cultivated as well as created through connections to physical places, other people, and routine practices—i.e., an identity work space (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces are understood to reduce emotional disturbances and facilitate

sensemaking that allows people to figure out who they are or to craft portable versions of themselves across various identity-related aims they may have at different times in their career (Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood, 2018). An identity work space could include real-life interstitial spaces, such as hobbyist clubs or coffee shops, that provide informal gathering places outside of one's regular workplace (Furnari, 2014) or psychological spaces in which individuals can begin to store and to practice activities tied to different identities (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces are where accumulating identity work can be played out through various movements—psychological, physical, behavioral, and relational that accompany identity transitions (George, Wittman, & Rockmann, 2022)—and may result in preserving one's existing sense of self or in helping a new sense self to take shape.

Career identity maintenance and/or career identity change. Accumulating identity work in the career identity maintenance route may be experienced as routine or effortful depending on the strength of the push and pull of the forces. Identity work is more routine when people follow well-established scripts for their identity, such as an organization's structure for managerial advancement, and may be able to maintain self-continuity with limited uncertainty; however, people begin to question this continuity if they perceive they have limited input into the routine and feel constrained in self-defining who they are (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In the maintenance route, the tightrope walker may make micro-shifts back and forth and in many different directions to balance the forces. In this way, accumulating identity work occurs even in career identity maintenance, yet the tight rope continues toward the existing dynamic equilibrium. Thus, career identity maintenance does not sustain career identity in a static sense but in a more dynamic self-continuity that preserves an existing dynamic equilibrium.

The second route toward career identity change involves accumulating identity work that builds up to a threshold that becomes a turning point (Obodaru, 2012). People may reach a threshold from living with the tensions or feeling stuck, as well as through a more conscious build up, such as when people nurture their future career identity through their activities in an identity work space or gain experience before making a career change. When tensions influence a career identity change, people make micro-shifts to attempt to alleviate tensions, yet, paradox theory suggests that alleviating one tension provides only a temporary respite as new tensions emerge (Smith & Berg, 1987). As identity work accumulates, micro-shifts that move toward a new end point compile into a turning point—i.e., a shift in the subjective meaning for one's life that is derived from one's career identity (Obodaru, 2012). The turning point acts as trigger, such that it activates the anchoring and evolving forces, tensions, and accumulating identity work, leading to a new dynamic equilibrium. When people engage in a more conscious accumulation, they make sense of their current work activities relative to their desired future. For example, medical residents accumulate identity work by customizing their identities to their present work at hand, despite an incongruence with their future image of a being a doctor (Pratt et al., 2006). In this case, the turning point may occur when an individual perceives they are ready for a change in the meaning of their identity, e.g., when they have accumulated enough activities or practices to create a new dynamic equilibrium of their career identity.

Returning to the example of Julie, she may feel stuck in her career identity if she starts to think about where her current career path is leading her. Perhaps a rise of tensions is triggered by getting an accelerated promotion or by spending time with more senior people in corporate finance, which makes her envision a future she realizes she might not want. At the same time, she's stuck in a career identity that she's following very successfully that gives her status and

security. The identity work of separating across time and audiences to manage the tensions may increase in frequency or specificity, as she continues to think more about an entrepreneurial identity and shares these aspirations with others. In doing so, her identity work accumulates through micro-shifts that continuously pull her toward a new direction. She reaches a turning point in which she reflects on who she really is in her career and begins to fully re-envision herself as an entrepreneur, even if it might not be time to make an actual job change yet. In this scenario, while Julie is promoted and appears to her peers and supervisor to have further solidified and anchored her career identity, the notion of accumulation in our model helps to explain how her career identity was also evolving under the surface. This accumulation leads to subjective career identity change, which later materializes as a career path change to quit her corporate finance job and undertake starting her own real estate firm.

Returning to the example of the Dean, there are triggers, such as seeing announcements of their colleagues' new publications, that pull on their scholarly identity. While the Dean experiences micro-shifts back towards scholarship, such as telling themselves they will make time for research in the summer or finding other referents in indirect research activities like grant administration, they experience salient triggers toward maintaining their current administrative identity. Over time, the Dean's micro-shifts push more toward an administrative identity, maintaining the existing dynamic equilibrium. Additionally, as the Dean experiences other triggers, such as successfully delivering on organizational goals related to diversity or fundraising activities, the maintenance of their existing dynamic equilibrium may be reinforced. The existing dynamic equilibrium could then drive future choices to advance up the ranks of administration to provost or president.

As demonstrated in Julie's and the Dean's examples, our theory accommodates a variety of ways in which career identity is maintained and changes. By decoupling career identity change from career path change, we are able to account for when micro-shifts maintain and change dynamic equilibrium. Theorizing career identity maintenance and career identity change in a single theory provides an understanding that both are needed, and that neither the continuity of maintenance nor the dynamism of change are inherently bad for one's career identity, despite what might seem like on the surface as appearing stuck or making an irrational choice. Challenges that individuals experience for their career identity are instead a useful and developmental part of working through the career identifying process. In what follows, we further expand on new insights that are gained from our theory as well as future implications for research.

DISCUSSION

With this theory, we seek to reconcile orderly conceptions of career identity with the messy reality of how people think of themselves in relation to their careers. While past research has primarily emphasized the anchoring aspect of career identity (Rodrigues et al., 2013; Schein, 1996) or the evolving aspect of career identity (Ashforth et al., 2008; LaPointe, 2010), we start with the idea that career identity is subject to both anchoring and evolving forces at the same time. Tensions arising from these paradoxical forces keep the career identifying process in motion, and people manage tensions by performing identity work that accumulates to maintain career identity in an existing dynamic equilibrium and/or change to a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity.

In Figures 3a and 3b, we compare stylized representations of stepwise career identity change that accompanies career change and a more continuous career identifying process. If Julie's example were explained through the stepwise change depicted in Figure 3a, her career

identity would be anchored in corporate finance, then a career change would occur, and then identity work would happen to transition and re-anchor her career identity as an entrepreneur in her real estate business. She would go from one anchored career identity to another in tandem with her career change.

Insert Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c about here

In contrast, Figure 3b shows Julie's career identity as only quasi-anchored in corporate finance, and that her interest in entrepreneurship feeds into an evolving force that leads her to make continual adjustments to her career identity, as she encounters an ongoing stream of triggers. Since many of these adjustments pull in the same new direction, the identity work accumulates to a turning point for Julie, eventually leading to a revised career identity quasi-anchored in entrepreneurship that encourages her to make a subsequent move to start her own real estate business. The move may seem sudden, but Julie has been doing identity work over a period of years to support the career change. The idea of accumulation accounts for continuity while also changing direction toward a revised dynamic equilibrium as a different quasi-anchored identity takes shape. In the career identifying process, while Julie ends her employment with her corporate finance firm, her past experience is incorporated into her career identity such that she can use her transferrable skills from finance in her new entrepreneurial ventures.

Note that our model supports gradually accumulative and back-and-forth changes to career identity, but it also allows for periods of heightened activity and change (see Figure 3c). Triggers that disrupt a career can also lead to reactive changes to career identity, consistent with existing reactive models of identity transition (Ibarra, 1999; Ladge et al., 2012; Louis, 1980;

Nicholson, 1984). If Julie was laid off in an economic downturn, or if an old classmate approached her with a concrete proposal for a new venture, she might make a fast career move to start her own business that requires additional identity work after the move to transition to her new quasi-anchored career identity of entrepreneur.

Career identifying also complements existing theory by offering additional interpretations for existing empirical accounts of careers. For example, in a study exploring how individuals' career resourcing moves led to the emergence of the profession of health services research (HSR) (Nigam & Dokko, 2019), Bob Brook, a physician turned health services researcher, notes the change in legitimacy of the new profession over time:

> I remember my exit interview with the dean of the medical school … when I left medical school, I said, "I'm going to be a generalist and probably go into public health or health services." The conversation ended when I said that. He had no advice, just said goodbye…. And we would worry…"Would anyone ever hire [researchers] with this kind of weird mixed training?..." Well, we have now established ourselves as a legitimate part of the medical research establishment, and [we] are now chiefs of medicine and deans (Nigam & Dokko, 2019:1062).

Reinterpreting this example through a career identifying lens calls attention to the subjective underpinnings of career resourcing. Our theory foregrounds the struggle that Brook had in figuring out his career identity as an impetus to his career actions. Brook's exit interview with the dean served as a trigger invoking both collective and personal tensions. The identity work he did to manage these tensions accumulated to enable career moves that advanced the formation of the HSR profession. The establishment and institutionalization of HSR likely reduced ongoing collective tensions for Brook, allowing him to make sense of his past work experiences and the future directions he could take. Thus, career identifying enriches this empirical account by suggesting how career identifying is precedent to career actions that can later have broad, field-level effects.

In another example, empirical examination of person-environment fit over time suggests

that individuals recount their experiences using identity as an underlying theme across various experiences. As described by one study subject:

> My [fit] story is like a series of vignettes—maybe a novella. Like Voltaire's Candide, 30 chapters that are different but there is an underlying progression. I am the constant—I am still the same person at the core … The scenery changes, environments change, even I change somewhat, but I am the underlying theme. (Jansen & Shipp, 2019: 1173)

In examining stability and change in terms of these fit narratives, consistent temporal comparisons stabilized existing work situations, whereas triggering events altered comparisons across past and present selves to change career trajectory (Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Our theory would suggest that fit narratives may have stayed the same or changed over time as part of how people manage tensions. Having consistent fit narratives could be understood as an activity of identity work in the career identity maintenance route, whereas altered temporal comparisons could be indicative of a new dynamic equilibrium of career identity that preceded career trajectory changes. Thus, expanding on the career identifying process can help to further explain how fit narratives over time relate to career identity maintenance and/or change.

In addition to complementing existing empirical accounts, the process of career identifying can also be applied across many different career patterns as well as employment types. While we have primarily drawn from professional examples, we anticipate that the core concepts of our theory would hold across a variety of workers. The frequency and nature of triggers might be different and there could be implications for which tensions may be felt more strongly. For example, in more discontinuous employment types, such as gig workers, there would be more frequent disruptive triggers, such as working for multiple organizations and limited purview of long-term employment prospects (Petriglieri et al., 2019). In these circumstances, the anchoring and evolving forces may be constantly in flux making maintenance more difficult to sustain. It is also possible that collective tensions may be attenuated as gig

workers expect less affiliation with occupations or organizations, and instead, relational tensions may be felt more strongly as gig workers look to social referents to provide leads to the next gig. Similarly, career identifying may be more active early in a career than later as potential career paths extend further into the future. Thus, there may be a variety of nuances for how individuals experience the concepts we depict in our model.

Theoretical Insights and Future Research

By shedding light on the dynamic nature of career identity and elaborating the career identifying process, we offer several implications and directions for future research.

Decoupling career identity change from career change. In our theorizing, we decouple career identity change from career change, allowing us to complement prior research and illustrate different ways in which career identity may change before an observable career change occurs or even without a career change. In career and roles transitions literatures, the subjective self-concept is often understood to change simultaneously with or following objective observable career changes (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2000; Louis, 1980). Our theory elaborates ongoing ways in which individuals may subjectively engage with their identities with or without objective career changes. Further, much of the literature on role-to-role identity transitions assumes a sequence that involves letting go of a former role-related identity to prepare for a new role-related identity. Our theorizing suggests that career identity transitions could occur in a less structured sequence, particularly as we consider how one's career identity may be in transition long before an eventual career change. Future research might consider how navigating career identity change before objective career change may alter the course of the actual transition. Indeed, prior research suggests that envisioning one's self in a role prior to an actual transition can ease some of the uncertainties of taking on the role (e.g., Ladge et al., 2012). Further research could also explore situations in which envisioning a wide variety of potential

versions of one's self could increase uncertainties or conflict among possible future selves, leaving individuals feeling stuck in perpetual career identity maintenance rather than change.

Additionally, applying the career identifying process to a variety of career patterns that capture objective change may bring new insights to the subjective career experiences of individuals. For example, while earlier conceptions considered the self-directed career development in protean careers as the formation of new aspects of the self (Hall & Mirvis, 1996), more recent clarifications suggest that protean career is instead an orientation or attitude that individuals can have to varying degrees, allowing relatively static career profiles or types to be articulated (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Similarly, the boundaryless career concept has been conceived of as psychological or physical mobility that individuals possess to varying degrees (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). This static treatment of individually held stable career traits foregrounds the anchoring force, which can be useful in specifying patterns and trends that can be drawn across individual careers; however, as the evolving force falls to the background, what these relatively static types may not capture is the dynamism that occurs within an individual. Taken together, our model extends prevalent frameworks in the careers literature by explaining how underlying tensions and accumulation of identity work facilitate different career patterns and actions. By applying the career identifying process to existing career concepts, future research could further elaborate on the subjective mechanisms that influence objective observations of individual careers.

Stability and change within the individual. The anchoring and evolving forces in career identifying reflect a fundamental paradox that is often examined at the organizational level—stability and change. This paradox captures the notion that organizations are at once enduring and stable features of the workplace from which existing efficiencies can be leveraged for short-

term effectiveness and are also continuously changing to produce innovation and long-term sustainability (Farjoun, 2010; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Our theorizing applies the paradox of stability and change within the individual. More specifically, the anchoring and evolving forces of career identity represent stability and change that is subjectively experienced. Within an individual, stability could be considered a special form of change that is bound within a specific time period (Roe, 2014), or in our theorizing, the existing dynamic equilibrium of the current moment. Conceived of in this way, ongoing dynamism is a necessary and functional part of managing tensions, despite the challenges that questioning one's career identity can present. While prior research highlights the emotional and intellectual disturbances that come with identity challenges (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Smith & Berg, 1987), theorizing anchoring and evolving forces as a paradox brings to light the importance of balancing rather than suppressing one force over the other, and this balancing act might be the glue that holds career identity together over time.[12] Our theory accounts for the undercurrent of activity that supports the balance of these forces and provides further insight to the interrelatedness of stability and change in career identity.

Focusing within the individual also provides opportunity to elaborate an individual's use of subjective time in terms of their identity. While prior research considers past in the present, such as in forgone professional identities (Obodaru, 2017) or lingering identities (Wittman, 2019), we examine the simultaneity of past, present, and future to separate and balance the anchoring and evolving forces. A careers perspective necessarily invokes time; a widely used definition of careers is "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989: 8), and time is fundamental to the understanding of a career,

[12] We thank the Editor and an anonymous reviewer for their ideas sharpening this aspect of our theorizing

yet time has not been at the foreground of contemporary careers research (Mayrhofer & Gunz, 2019). Our model brings both subjective and objective conceptions of time back into theorizing about careers. Explicitly acknowledging that individual career identities interact with subjective time in identity work to manage tensions and objective time in responding to or driving career changes enables us to think about the temporal ordering of career identity and career moves. Other aspects of our model invite additional exploration around time. Career identity can change over time as individuals accrue past work experiences as well as new expectations and aspirations for the future. In this way, individuals think fluidly about past, present, and future in their career identity; however, they may vary in how much they focus on each of these eras (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009), or they may lose fluidity as their careers progress. In addition, tensions in our model often arise from evaluation of whether one's own career is progressing faster, slower, or in line with social referents or occupational norms. Thus, time in our model can also be a force for stability or a medium and impetus for change (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Finally, accumulation of micro-shifts to career identity occurs over time. Yet, our model is unspecific about how long accumulation takes, and the conditions under which accumulation may occur faster or slower (George & Jones, 2000). Future research can expand on the time dimensions of accumulation or individual differences in how people think about time in their careers.

Getting stuck and unstuck through career identifying. While separating forces to manage tensions provides a balance in the moment, we also take into consideration how tensions re-surface from new triggers, and re-circulate and continue to churn, at times leading people to feel stuck. To get unstuck, people need to experience movement, which occurs when people feel they are covering new ground (Smith & Berg, 1987). Thus, our theory accounts for accumulation

in which identity work bubbles up to a turning point and career identity change that allows individuals to feel they are covering new ground in their self-conception in their career. Theorizing stuckness and unstuckness for career identity provides new insight to theory on career inaction. Career inaction suggests that people delay desired change in their careers due to inertia-enhancing mechanisms, such as the degree of difficulty in the decision to change and the uncertainty of the future outcome of the change (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). The career identifying process adds the explanation that individuals may perceive difficulty and uncertainty in career change because their career identity needs to change first. Periods of stuckness can be anxiety provoking and emotionally taxing (Smith & Berg, 1987), thus, becoming unstuck in one's career identity may be an important precursor and functional part of overcoming career inaction.

We also acknowledge that feelings of stuckness can be influenced by other identities that present increased potential for individuals to experience contradiction between different options for their career identity. For example, life events such as pregnancy can create identity challenges as gestational parents face potential contradictions between their work and motherhood identities (Ladge et al., 2012). Black professionals may experience dissonance as they compartmentalize professional and racial identities between their workplace and their neighborhood community (Bell, 1990) or constant code-switching to shift their behavior, language, and even appearance when faced with social interactions across racial identities (McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, & Durkee, 2019). Future research may further examine how multiple identities further tax or perhaps enhance the various ways in which individuals manage career tensions.

Practical Implications

Our model is useful for helping people understand that having a career identity that shifts day-to-day or seems inconsistent across time and audiences is not schizophrenic, but is a normal and even functional response to the push and pull of universal—and paradoxical—anchoring and evolving forces. Rather than pushing people to resolution when career identity seems unstable, managers and career counselors can recognize that people will balance anchoring and evolving forces throughout their career, and help them to understand that even when career identity seems stable, it is in a dynamic equilibrium. Individuals who understand that managing tensions is not necessarily destabilizing but is normal and maybe even necessary to maintain a career identity, can be better equipped to live with tensions or even embrace them as opportunities to re-think who they are in their careers. Acknowledging tensions can help individuals to be more agile in making sense of their work-related experiences, or make them more resilient to triggering events, or they could even leverage job crafting techniques that integrate employees' deeply embedded personal life interests with their current work roles and career prospects (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Butler & Waldroop, 1999; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Additionally, our model could be beneficial to educational institutions or professional associations that prepare early career individuals to develop their career identity. Rather than assume that individuals will pursue traditional paths, these institutions may be better positioned to support career development by showing people that setting an anchoring career identity for decision-making now doesn't preclude envisioning themselves in other career paths that could unfold over time.

CONCLUSION

Careers are messy with many detours that forge a new path or end up back on track. Our theory shows that career identity is at least as messy. People are constantly bombarded with a range of triggers, large and small, that keep the career identifying process in motion. Our theory

provides insight into how people manage tensions that arise from paradoxical anchoring and evolving forces to keep career identity steady enough to guide action while keeping open possibilities for change.

TABLE 1

Prevalent Definitions of Career Identity

Primarily emphasizes anchoring force	**Primarily emphasizes evolving force**
• A "total self-concept" (Schein, 1978: 126) that consists of self-perceived abilities, motives, and values across work and life experiences that "functions as a **stabilizing force, an anchor**…." (Schein, 1996:80) • A "structure or network of meanings in which the individual consciously links his own motivation, interests, and competencies with acceptable career roles…not the sum of those experiences but the **assimilation of the experiences into meaningful or useful structures**." (Meijers, 1998: 200) • "One's self-definition in the career context, describing 'who I am' or 'who I want to be'…that acts as a **cognitive compass** that motivates one to actively adapt in order to realize (or create) opportunities that match one's aspirations." (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004: 17)	• A "practice of **articulating and performing** identity positions in narrating career experiences" that is "**co-constructed, socially-situated, and performed in interaction**." (LaPointe, 2010: 2) • "How one conceived oneself over the course of one's work history and how that conception **forms and evolves and perhaps radically changes**." Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008: 351 • The "person's image of her- or himself in relation to the environment" developed through the "**creation of new aspects of the self** in relation to the career." (Hall & Mirvis, 1996: 25)

Note: The bolded text highlights anchoring and evolving forces in these definitions.

FIGURE 1

Process Model of Career Identifying

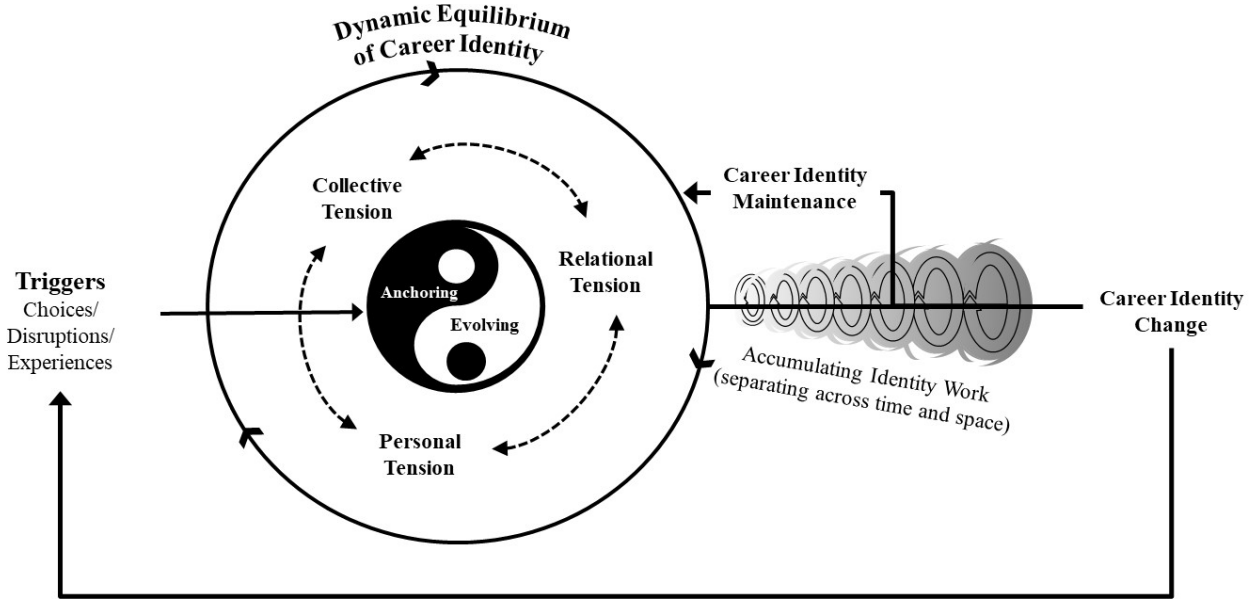


FIGURE 2

Illustration of tensions arising from a career change trigger

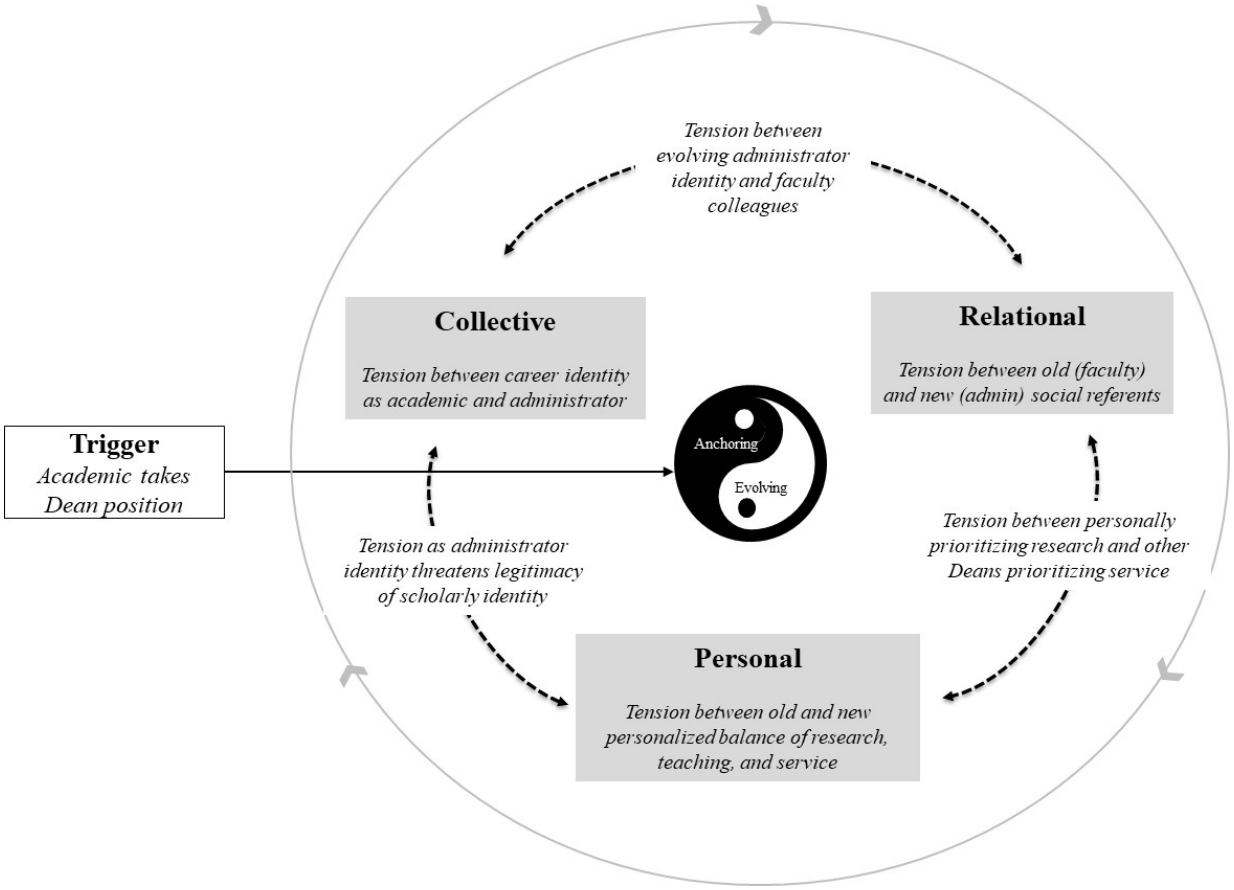


FIGURE 3A: Stepwise model underlying existing notions of identity change

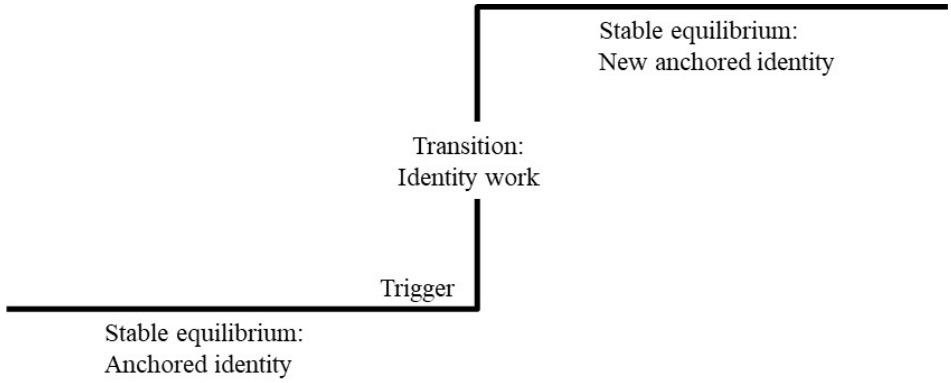


FIGURE 3B: Ongoing identity work and change with gradual, accumulated change

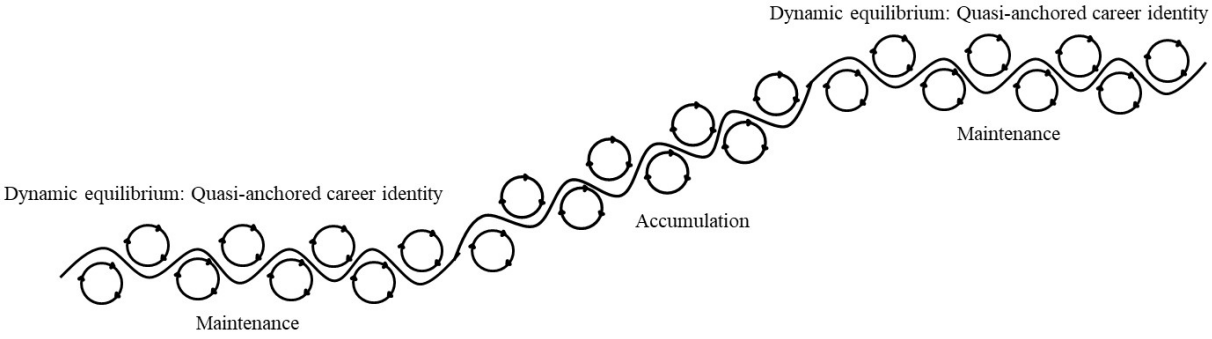
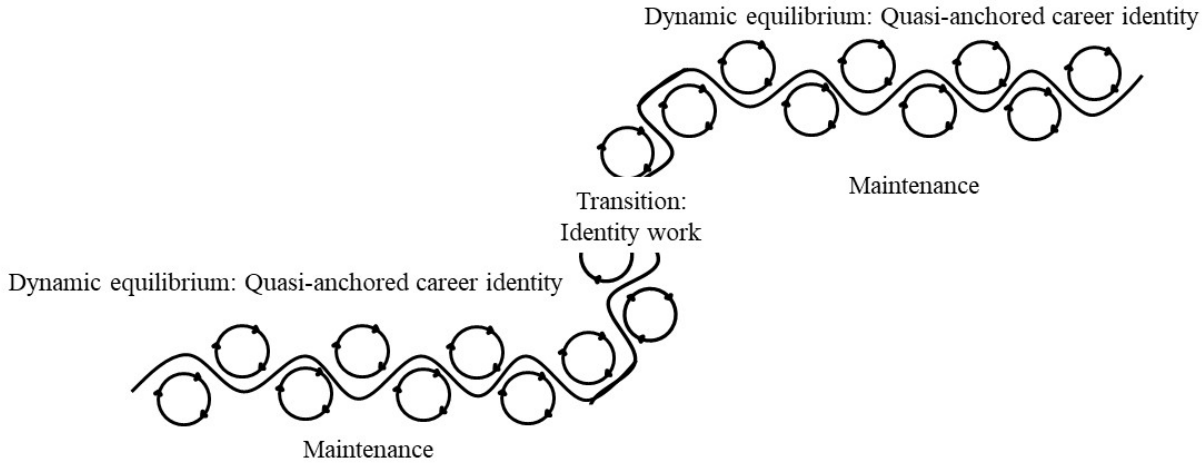


FIGURE 3C: Ongoing identity work and change with reactive, rapid change



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