Exploring Career-Related Uncertainty

IAEVG Jyväskylä 2024

Leena Itkonen

University of Jyväskylä & University of Helsinki

Leena.itkonen@helsinki.fi

Mira Kalalahti & Toni Kosonen

What are we talking about, when we talk about career-related uncertainty?

Purpose and research question

- Purpose: To explore the nature of career-related uncertainty

- **Research question:** The question guiding our analysis is how career-related uncertainty is articulated in generalist theology students' accounts.

Uncertainty in career development theories

- According to Barnett (2012) uncertainty has an ontological nature, and it is constantly present when navigating today's world

- Career planning is one of the most ambiguous aspects of undergraduate life (Kwok, 2018).

- **Career theories focus more on certainty than uncertainty (Trevor-Roberts, 2006; McCash, 2017) and the role of uncertainty is poorly understood in career theories (Trevor-Roberts et al. 2106)**

- In modern career development theories uncertainty implicitly understood as deficiencies in various domains, such as self-knowledge, options, decision-making (e.g. Holland, 1973; Sampson et al., 2004; Lent, 2013)

- Careers surrounded by complex and uncertain contexts → development of career adaptability (Savickas, 2005) or identity and narrativity (Savickas et al., 2009)

- In the planned happenstance theory, the issue of uncertainty is a central element → curiosity, optimism, and flexibility (Mitchell et al., 1999)

- Growing interest in career insecurity and its relationship to e.g. career adaptability (Spurk et al., 2016), goal engagement (Lechner et al., 2016), individual agency (Griffin et al., 2023)

- Trevor-Roberts et al. (2016), argue that understanding an individual's experience of uncertainty is crucial for providing effective support when navigating career path and making decisions. People interpret career uncertainty in various ways, resulting in distinct career behaviors.
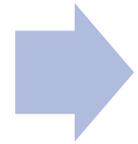
Data and analysis

Interviews in April-June 2024

18 students

in

generalist theology

Program

* Age: 23-55

* in the final stages of the bachelor program or in the master level

* Interviews semi-structured, recorded, and transcribed.

Reflexive thematic analysis

Combining inductive and deductive approaches

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Analysis becoming more theory-driven as the analysis progresses

(Koski 2011).

"Generalist track" at the faculty of theology

- Humanistic in nature, providing general training in understanding religions and society (Hirsto & Buchert, 2016).

- While the representations of theological professions are strong in the society, the existence of the generalist track is not even widely known

- Many decision points in the study path of a generalist theology student:
  - Study track and theological/religious discipline (Same for all)
  - a large proportion of other studies (1/3 of the bachelor degree): decisions regarding these must also be made simultaneously when choosing the study track. Large minors in other faculties open up even more possibilities when choosing master's program
  - The freedom to build one's own professional profile has been one of the attractions of the generalist theology degree, but many are uncertain about their future careers and the choice of additional studies . (Hirsto & Buchert, 2016).

Interview content

- Three themes in interviews:
    1. Discussion related to the choices and content of studies, what are the puzzling questions and concerns during the studies, how are study choices made
    2. Uncertainty (what is it, when is it felt, is it positive or negative)
    3. Resources and solutions

- Also, students were shown a photo montage of different chairs and invited to reflect on what kind of chair they felt they were sitting on amidst uncertainty, as well as what other kinds of chairs they had experienced during their studies and the chair reflecting their feelings about the future

Chairs shown to students:
Which chair best describes your current feelings?
Have you had other chairs during your studies? Reflect and explain.
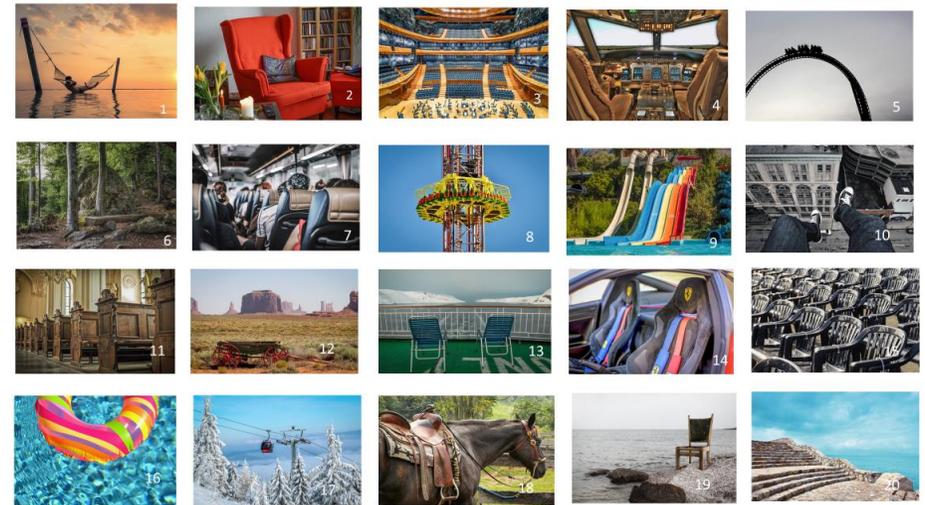
Systems theory framework as the theoretical approach

- Center of the STF is the individual, influenced by various factors such as age, values, world-of-work knowledge

- The contextual system is divided into two levels:
  - the social level, including peers, family and educational institutions, and
  - a broader level, encompassing societal-environmental influences.

- The STF also considers the temporal influences on career development, with the past influencing the present and both the past and present shaping the future.

- The framework views career development as complex and dynamic.

- Using the STF, we aim to understand how career-related uncertainty arises from the connections between different factors.
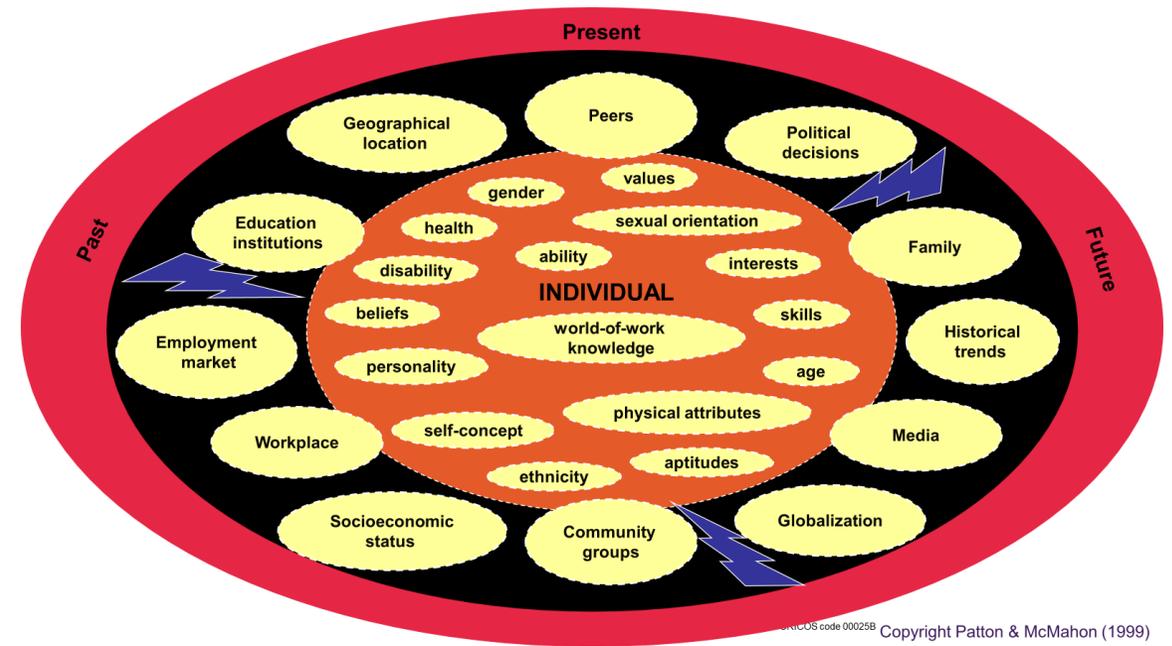
Patton & McMahon 2006, 2021,

Leena Itkonen

Preliminary results

- It seems that students articulate uncertainty in relation to concrete aspects of world-of-work.

- **However, there seems to be an interconnection,** where both individual and contextual systems, along with temporal influences, shape career-related uncertainty:

- An **interplay between individual-level factors** such as age, health, identity, emotions, and knowledge of job opportunities

- And these are connected to **contextual level:** the structure of the degree program, the endless choices it offers, and the support systems within the university and peer networks

- The sense of belonging and support from social relationships can either facilitate or hinder career-related uncertainty

- **External factors** like geographical location and financial situation complicate the process.

- Constant pondering of temporal factors: **The relationship between ideas of tomorrow and actions of today**

So what do we talk about, when we talk about career-related uncertainty?

- It seems that uncertainty is articulated in issues that are concrete (such as world-of-work knowledge) (Rational aspect of uncertainty?)

- Other aspects of uncertainty (emotional aspect of uncertainty?) coming up from the connections between different factors
  - Decision-making (what looks good in paper vs. following heart)
  - Blending in vs. standing out (being similar and special at the same time)
  - Questions of identity (who am I becoming with this education?)
  - Constant pressure from outside

- Uncertainty is fluid, when it is not on, it is difficult to remember.

- It is connected to a wide variety of personal and contextual aspects of self and social networks, even societal aspects

- Interplay of the temporal aspects; drawing ideas from the future to the actions of today

Conclusion

- We should talk about career-related uncertainty also in our practice

- And we should take it on the agenda of the career counselling session and not to overlook it without understanding how it is connected to different factors in the lives of our customers.

Thank you!
KIITOS!

Leena.itkonen@helsinki.fi

References

Barnett, R. (2012). Learning for an unknown future. *Higher education research and development*, 31(1), 65-77. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.642841

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2019.1628806

Hirsto, L. & Buchert, M. (2016). Personal worldview in constructing theological expertise? Avoidance goals and their narrative explanations in the context of career choice. *Journal of religious education*, 64, 15-32. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-016-0025-1

Holland, J. L. (1973). *Making vocational choices: A theory of careers*. Prentice Hall.

Griffin, K. A., Miller, C. & Roksa, J. (2023). Agency and career indecision among biological science graduate students. *Studies in graduate and postdoctoral education,* 14(1), 99-113. https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-02-2022-0014

Koski, L. (2011). Teksteistä teemoiksi – dialoginen tematisointi. In A. Puusa & P. Juuti (Eds.), Menetelmäviidakon raivaajat: Perusteita laadullisen tutkimuslähestymistavan valintaan (pp. 126-152). Johtamistaidon opisto

Kwok, C. Y. N. (2018), "Managing uncertainty in the career development of emerging adults: Implications for undergraduate students", *Australian Journal of Career Development*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 137-149, https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416217744216.

Lechner, C. M., Tomasik, M. J. & Silbereisen, R. K. (2016). Preparing for uncertain careers: How youth deal with growing occupational uncertainties before the education-to-work transition. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 95-96, 90-101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2016.08.002

Lent, R.W (2013). Social Cognitive Career Theory. In: Brown, S.D. and Lent, R.W. (2013). *Career development and counseling: putting theory and research to work* (pp. 115 – 146). 2nd Edition. John Wiley & Sons.

McCash, P. (2017). Employability and depth psychology. In: Tomlinson, M., Holmes, L. (Eds.), *Graduate employability in context* (pp. 41–63*)*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57168-7_7

Mitchell, K. E., Levin, A. S. & Krumboltz, J. D. (1999). Planned happenstance: Constructing unexpected career opportunities. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 77, 115–124. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1999.tb02431.x

Patton, W. & McMahon, M. (2006). The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development and Counseling: Connecting Theory and Practice. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, *28*(2), 153–166. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-005-9010-1

Patton, W. & McMahon, M. (2021). Career development and systems theory: Connecting theory and practice (4th ed.). Sense Publishers

Sampson Jr., J. P., Reardon, R. C., Peterson, G. W. & Lenz, J. G. (2004). *Career counseling and services: A cognitive information processing approach.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Savickas, M. L. (2005). The theory and practice of career construction. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (pp. 42–70). John Wiley & Sons.

Savickas, M. L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R. & Van Vianen, A. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior,* 75(3), 239–250. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.04.004

Spurk, D., Kauffeld, S., Meinecke, A. L. & Ebner, K. (2016). Why Do Adaptable People Feel Less Insecure? Indirect Effects of Career Adaptability on Job and Career Insecurity via Two Types of Perceived Marketability. *Journal of career assessment*, 24(2), 289-306. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072715580415

Trevor-Roberts, E. (2006). Are you sure? The role of uncertainty in career. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 43*(3), 98–116. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2006.tb00010.x

Trevor-Roberts, E., Parker, P, & Sandberg, J. (2019). How uncertainty affects career behaviour: A narrative approach. *Australian journal of management*, 44(1), 50-69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0312896218775801