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Career empowerment: a qualitative exploratory investigation of perceived career control

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to explore how individuals perceive control over their careers. While careers are increasingly understood to be agentic, agency and control are often assumed rather than explicitly conceptualized. Therefore, there is a need to investigate how people perceive the control they have in order to better understand the role of agency and subjective control in career-related behaviors.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 participants from diverse occupations and demographics (e.g. age and gender). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings – We identified seven unique themes, namely autonomy, impact, meaning, competence, clarity, growth and support.

Research limitations/implications – This qualitative study provides a detailed exploration of perceived career control, which we then label “career empowerment.” The findings can improve our understanding of career-related behaviors and outcomes.

Practical implications – Practical implications pertain to career counseling and organizational support for individuals in achieving their career goals.

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Originality/value – While existing career theories predominantly focus on proactive career behaviors and capabilities, the concept of perceived career control as preceding proactivity encourages future research into the full spectrum of active and passive behaviors.

Keywords Perceived career control, Career empowerment, Career proactivity, Career, Sustainable careers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Why do some people feel in control of their career, while others feel almost powerless? Why do some individuals remain stuck in an unsatisfying occupation or boring job, while others are confident that they can take charge and enact change? The goal of our study is to answer these questions by exploring perceived career control, which is an essential part of career theories but is often under-theorized explicitly (Guest and Rodrigues, 2015).

Over the last 30 years, both scholars and practitioners have portrayed careers, defined as a sequence of work experiences over time (Arthur *et al.*, 1989) and that occur inside and outside of organizations (Hall, 2002), as increasingly agentic (Hall and Heras, 2012). Therefore, current theorizing assumes that individuals act proactively to fulfill their personal career goals in terms of objective and/or subjective success (Donald *et al.*, 2024; Masood *et al.*, 2023; Spurk *et al.*, 2019; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). Inkson claims that “the career development movement has always adopted an agency approach to careers” (2007, p. 79). Contemporary research supports this idea, suggesting that individuals indeed take action to fulfill their career goals (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017; Gerritsen *et al.*, 2024; Jiang *et al.*, 2023; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). Moreover, while acknowledging the existence of objective career barriers (e.g. economic pressures, family conditions, disabilities and invalidation of foreign occupational credentials for immigrants), there is ample evidence that people can act to overcome such difficulties (Arman, 2023; Jans *et al.*, 2012; Jones-Morales and Konrad, 2018; Žikić and Richardson, 2007) and turn threats into opportunities (Le *et al.*, 2024; Maritz and Laferriere, 2016; Mishra *et al.*, 2024; Žikić and Klehe, 2006). At the same time, other individuals report feeling entrenched (Carson *et al.*, 1996), experiencing career plateaus (Yang *et al.*, 2019) and occupational regret (Budjanovcanin *et al.*, 2019) or refraining from taking action (Verbruggen and De Vos, 2020).

Such variance in career outcomes raises questions regarding people’s awareness and realization of career control. While career theories have shifted from focusing on organization-based careers to self-managed careers, giving the individuals more power to control their careers (Guest and Rodrigues, 2015; Tams and Arthur, 2010), in practice it may be that people are not fully aware of these shifts and that the objective control they might have (development opportunities, available options, etc.) is not perceived by them as such (Verbruggen and De Vos, 2020). Therefore, we argue for a clear distinction between “objective” and “subjective,” e.g. perceived career control: within the objective boundaries, individuals may or may not have an additional set of internally created, self-imposed boundaries that could have a strong impact on career-related behaviors. We suggest that the variation in career actions and outcomes may be at least partially attributed to perceived career control or career agency. Tams and Arthur define career agency “as a process of work-related social engagement, informed by past experiences and future possibilities, through which an individual invests in his or her career” (2010: 630), placing it as an essential component in the career development process as a key step towards taking action. Therefore, it is important to understand agency, or perceived career control, and its role in career-related behaviors in order to refine career theory.

It is worthy to note that the idea of agency (i.e. perceived control) is well developed in the field of organizational behavior (Guest and Rodrigues, 2015), particularly evident in motivational theories, such as self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). However, in the field of careers, agency and the notion of perceived control are most often presumed rather than explicitly measured: career theories refer to agency either by implicit assumptions (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996) or by integrating it into complex concepts (e.g. sustainable careers; Van Der Heijden and De Vos, 2015); however, a focused

investigation of the topic is still lacking and fragmented. [Guest and Rodrigues \(2015\)](#) highlight this research gap as an omission that needs to be addressed and call for researchers to explicitly examine ideas of perceived career control. We answer this call in our study, aiming to explicitly investigate how people perceive the control they have over their careers.

In this paper, we aim to make a few contributions to career theory. First, we address the need for an explicit, qualitative interpretative exploration of perceived career control, therefore answering the question – how individuals perceive control over their career. Differentiating perceived control from objective control (which may include barriers and/or opportunities) is an important contribution to understanding a full range of career-related actions – proactive behaviors, making informed decisions to stay in the current state or refraining from action. Next, while many theories refer to “agency” or “control,” it is rarely explicitly defined or specified. Our study identifies seven unique themes, which suggest that perceived career control may be a multi-dimensional construct. Finally, we define this construct that represents perceived career control, naming it *career empowerment*. We position career empowerment as the “agency” component of the sustainable careers framework ([Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015](#)) and place it in a broader nomological network, delineating its proposed relationships with other relevant constructs. Career empowerment holds promise for career practitioners who are looking for tools for counseling individuals by helping to identify areas that can be leveraged for improved career outcomes and providing insights for organizations to better support employee careers.

Literature review

Ideas of agency and control in career management go back to the seminal work of [Bell and Staw \(1989\)](#), who highlighted the individual’s role in regulating their careers and particularly the place of perceptions of personal control as mediating between individual characteristics and career outcomes. While their model discusses the importance of perceived control, it does not specify the content of such perceptions but broadly mentions “control over outcomes” and “control over behaviors” as well as “predictions,” which suggests a need for a deep investigation of what control may consist of or how people actually perceive it.

A more recent sustainable careers framework ([Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015](#)) also includes agency as one of its essential components and states that people are the owners of their careers, making choices that shape their career trajectories over time. While acknowledging contextual and structural factors, this framework places the individual in the center: as each person eventually must deal with the world of work on their own, agency is akin to responsibility to make decisions in a complex world, consider long-term goals, align individual goals with organizational ones and balance multiple domains of life. Within the sustainable careers framework, [Guest and Rodrigues \(2015\)](#) present a new model that places individual beliefs in the attainability of control in the boundary between individual-level and contextual factors and links the concept of control with career outcomes such as job satisfaction, career satisfaction and life satisfaction. While the model explains the role of control in general, the authors call for a targeted exploration of perceived control specifically.

Therefore, the role of agency, or perceived career control, is important to understanding career management, particularly self-management and proactivity. For example, [Kossek and colleagues \(1998\)](#) and [King \(2004\)](#) refer to career self-management activities that require individuals to take responsibility for their own careers and assume control. Similarly, [De Vos and Soens \(2008\)](#) mention that cognitions such as career insight allow individuals to make meaningful choices and are essential for self-management. However, as studies of self-management and proactivity focus more on the execution of control (e.g. [Abele and Wiese, 2008](#); [Akkermans and Hirschi, 2023](#); [De Vos et al., 2009](#); [Raabe et al., 2007](#)), they often do not expand on the role of perceived control but assume it is present in the process. In the current study, following [Bell and Staw’s \(1989\)](#) notion of perceived career control and sustainable careers ([Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015](#)) idea of agency, we further aim to unpack the cognitions of control that precede career actions such as proactive behaviors and self-management.

One important cognitive factor that has been identified as impacting career-related decision-making and behaviors is career self-efficacy, as people judge their ability to achieve their goals and make choices according to that judgment (Lent and Hackett, 1987). Career self-efficacy has been studied in multiple contexts: specific vocational choices, for e.g. science and technology (Sheu *et al.*, 2018), career expectations of adolescents (Ran and Cinamon, 2023), vocational choices and decision-making (Betz and Hackett, 2006; Choi *et al.*, 2012; Guan *et al.*, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2023), work self-efficacy (Barbaranelli *et al.*, 2018) and more. However, because originally self-efficacy was conceptualized as domain-specific, career self-efficacy also does not apply to a general notion of a career but to specific behaviors such as job search and to aspects such as occupational self-efficacy (Spurk and Abele, 2014). Therefore, career self-efficacy in and of itself represents a narrow notion of confidence in one's ability in a specific area, whereas career control may have more than one manifestation and be broader.

Other relevant concepts that may explore similar ideas are career adaptability and employability. Career adaptability is defined as "the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions" (Savickas, 1997: 254). Career adaptability represents four resources that help individuals form strategies that support their ability to adapt to the environment (Savickas, 1997), namely concern, control, curiosity and confidence. While mentioning control, in regard to career adaptability, the notion of control refers to processes and strategies that foster self-discipline, effort and persistence in order to help deal with career obstacles such as career indecision; while it does not represent cognitive perceptions of control, it could be its potential consequence.

Similarly, employability is conceptualized as a form of active work-specific adaptability that enables workers to identify and realize career opportunities (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008). Employability is a broad psycho-social construct that subsumes many other career- and work-related concepts, such as optimism, values and work involvement. Therefore, employability only briefly touches on perceived control, which by itself may form a complex theoretical construct.

A construct that may characterize people who have high perceived control is protean career orientation, defined as "a relatively stable career preference that values self-directedness and defines career success according to the person's personal values" (Herrmann *et al.*, 2015: 205). However, protean career orientation is conceptualized as a disposition or a trait (Baruch, 2014), whereas cognitions such as perceived career control are proposed to be a state that may fluctuate over time. It is possible that people with protean career orientation are more likely to perceive themselves in control over their career, such that it is a dispositional factor that is antecedent to perceived control.

Finally, another related construct is work volition, defined as an "individual's perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints" (Duffy *et al.*, 2012: 400). Work volition contains three sub-factors: volition itself, financial constraints and structural constraints, making constraints an integral part of the concept. While we acknowledge the possibility of constraints, we suggest that they represent "objective control" that should be distinguished and measured separately from perceived career control as potential antecedents and/or moderators, for e.g. in an ecosystem framework (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019).

Therefore, we identify a need to explicitly investigate how people perceive control over their careers, especially given newer career patterns, which require more proactive self-management: for e.g. contingent gig work, holding multiple jobs simultaneously, returning to work post-retirement, working remotely, changes caused by automation and artificial intelligence and more (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017; Baruch and Sullivan, 2022; Retkowsky *et al.*, 2023; Varma *et al.*, 2022). By specifically focusing on perceived career control, we propose that it will explain a broad range of active, reactive and passive career behaviors and outcomes.

Method

Our study aimed to understand how people perceive the control they have over their careers, which makes a qualitative exploratory research design particularly suitable (Pratt, 2009).

Moreover, as careers unfold in unique ways for each person, there is value in an inductive approach that does not aim to test theories but provides rich insights as experienced by the population of interest; as a result, exploratory studies contributed significantly to the development of career theory (Richardson *et al.*, 2022). In the current study, we were interested in investigating a subjective phenomenon and opted for a qualitative, interview-based design that captures individual perceptions of career control, allowing participants to describe their experiences and provide insights from their point of view.

Between September 2018 and January 2019, the first author conducted 31 semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to share their career narratives and to provide examples of situations where they felt in control over their career and conversely not in control. The semi-structured format allowed exploring the topic of interest while providing sufficient flexibility (Pratt *et al.*, 2022; Žikić and Richardson, 2016).

The interviews were conducted in Canada, and the participants were recruited via snowball sampling, facilitated by the first author's professional network, who shared the call for participants and the researcher's contact details. This approach was driven by practical considerations, and although a planned stratified sample would be preferable, we aimed at reaching a broad array of participants within the constraints. We made a conscientious effort to ensure variance in terms of employment status and occupations in order to increase the comprehensiveness of our theory, as much of the existing research in careers over-represents highly skilled workers (Richardson *et al.*, 2022). For example, our sample included participants from various occupational backgrounds, including retirees, the unemployed and those in production, service and management roles (see Table 1). It is noteworthy that while some participants held specific jobs at the time of the interview, some of them also referred to different lines of work in the past, which helped shed light on occupations that were not represented by the current employment situation of the interviewee (e.g. an entrepreneur with a past in engineering).

Interviews were conducted mostly in person in public spaces (e.g. university lobby and mall), with a few conducted over the phone. The average interview length was 40 min. The interviews were audiotaped with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim, totaling 194 single-spaced pages. To ensure participant privacy and confidentiality, the audio recordings and consent forms were stored on a secure platform, which were only accessible to the first author, who assigned unique codes to each participant such that their identities were not known to anyone else including the co-authors.

Interviews were conducted until no new unique insights emerged, thus reaching saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Saumure and Given, 2008; Warren, 2001). The total number of interviews ($N = 31$) is consistent with the average of sample sizes in non-ethnographic qualitative research (Mason, 2010). Of the participants, 17 were female and 14 were male, with an average age of 47. Table 1 provides further details about the participants.

The interview protocol began with a general question on how the interviewee's career unfolded after graduating from high school. This was followed by open-ended questions where the interviewees were asked to describe moments in their career when they felt in control of their career, or powerless, as well as discuss potential career enablers and/or inhibitors that may impact perceived control. The interview questions are provided in the supplemental materials.

For the analysis, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, which is a flexible method of identifying, organizing and describing patterns within a dataset. Compared to grounded theory, it does not specifically aim to generate a broad theory but allows more latitude in the analysis because it is not attached to a specific framework or perspective, which makes it particularly suitable for exploratory studies such as ours. The methodology includes the following steps: becoming familiar with the data (initial reading), generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes and, finally, defining and naming the themes.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Current occupation	Country of birth	Education
1	40	F	Business - manager	Canada	Masters
2	28	F	Unemployed	China	Undergraduate
3	23	M	Restaurant server and student	Canada	High school
4	50	F	Physician	Pakistan	MD
5	71	F	Retired (former social worker and mental health professional)	Canada	Masters
6	28	F	Biology - quality assurance	Canada	Masters
7	51	M	Entrepreneur (former engineer)	India	Masters
8	46	F	Police officer	Hungary	Associate
9	55	F	Speech therapist	Canada	Masters
10	35	F	Social worker (former Human Resources manager)	India	Undergraduate
11	35	M	Bank teller	Korea	Undergraduate
12	41	F	Financial analyst (former Senior Manager)	Canada	Masters
13	47	F	Strategic consultant and writer (former Human Resources manager)	Canada	Masters
14	62	M	Restaurant owner and real estate agent	Canada	Real estate Diploma
15	45	F	Restaurant owner	Canada	High school
16	45	M	Manager-donations	Canada	Masters
17	62	F	Career counselor	Bosnia	Masters
18	45	M	Writer, instructor (former Information Technology technician)	Canada	Masters
19	50	F	Manager – health care (former nurse)	Canada	Masters
20	38	F	Instructor and counselor	Japan	Ph.D
21	51	M	Manager – education and sports	Canada	Undergraduate
22	71	M	Life coach	Canada	Masters
23	58	F	Recently retired (former training specialist, real estate executive)	Canada	Masters
24	49	F	IT manager - banking industry	USA	Masters
25	51	M	Manager - operations	Israel	Masters
26	54	M	Manager - digital marketing	Canada	Masters
27	63	M	Volunteer - human rights activist	USA	Undergraduate
28	21	F	Undergraduate student studying health sciences	China	High school
29	43	M	Senior Manager - Information Technology industry	Canada	Undergraduate
30	35	M	Student - counseling diploma; occasionally works in retail industry	Canada	Undergraduate
31	55	M	Police officer - research analyst	Canada	Undergraduate

Source(s): Authors' own work

While the first author conducted the interviews, the initial interview protocol was developed under the guidance of two of the co-authors in order to deal with researcher subjectivity. Furthermore, the analysis was performed independently by the first author and two of the other co-authors, using general rather than designated software (MS Word and Excel). The two co-author coders were not part of the study design but joined the project during the data analysis stage, which helped mitigate subjectivity. After the initial coding, similar codes were aggregated into groups, or themes, using an inductive approach. Coders met online multiple times to share their individual findings, critique each other's work and resolve differences of opinion until consensus was reached (Saldana, 2015). The themes were reviewed for coherence, ensuring all the codes under each theme indeed formed a coherent group. The coders rearranged, merged or further subdivided themes as necessary. While initially each coder separately defined and named themes (e.g. coders assigned various names to the same theme: contribution, altruism and helping), in later stages of the analysis, names of

themes were discussed in order to determine the final name. In some instances, where a theme was only identified by one coder, it was not retained (e.g. resilience) but noted for future reference (see [supplementary materials](#) for further details on our methodological approach).

Findings

Our data analysis identified seven main themes: autonomy, impact, meaning, competence, clarity, growth and support. [Table 2](#) presents the data structure and the definitions we created for the themes based on the data.

Most interviewees described having some level of self-determination, or *autonomy*, in their career. Yet, a few participants reported difficulties in perceiving themselves as having control, allowing others to manage their careers instead.

I feel that I'm the one who drives my career and I'm the one in the driver's seat and I get to make those decisions (P25, M, 51, financial manager).

My career kind of developed based on suggestions of others. It's kind of a river, takes me where I'm going on the river, and I get on or off. I could change rivers, but yeah, there's always other forces that sway me. So it's almost like there's a fear or a level of discomfort with that control that's given to me (P1, F, 40, senior manager).

The second prominent theme was *impact*: a desire to do something important, make a difference, cause change and witness that change. The participants expressed that seeing the results of their efforts makes them feel in control:

I feel like you're making a difference, you're giving people knowledge so that they can make good life choices (P8, F, 46, police officer).

What it boils down [to] for me is that it had to be purposeful, and it had to be something that I thought was important (P5, F, 71, retired social worker).

Some participants noted that for them, being in control means that their career is congruent with their personal values and interests rather than satisfying social expectations. In addition, some referred to a calling or intuition guiding their vocational choices. We labeled this theme *meaning*, an important factor that reflects a person's authentic identity that is realized through their careers. Yet, having a career aligned with interviewees' authentic values sometimes required them to overcome obstacles and make sacrifices such that their sense of control was challenged:

I wanted to be a doctor since I was a little kid . . . I felt that this would be the best use of my life . . . I was going to leave Canada if I couldn't do my medicine. Because I am a doctor, and I didn't want to change my profession for any reason . . . there was no question or changing my mind about practicing medicine (P4, F, 50, physician).

There are very specific signals that are telling me that the thought that I have is not the right one, but sometimes I need to flesh it out. Like I remember the decision to tell my dad I don't want to be an engineer . . . And he said, "Well, I want you to become a doctor" and I remember that feeling, it was like emptiness when we were having that conversation. Because that's not what I wanted to hear (P7, M, 51, entrepreneur).

Participants indicated relying on their abilities, skills and experience for career advancement – in other words, their level of *competence*. They discussed having control as doing what they knew and what they were good at.

When I was leaving my birth city, I was carrying my degree with me as a proof that I do have education, because everything else through the war could be taken away except education level (P17, F, 62, career counsellor).

My skill set is talking, and my skill set is selling and I'm a quick study so I can learn the business pretty quick, so I've always felt like I can have the ability to do whatever I wanted to do. I always felt like I

Table 2. Coding structure

Code	1st-order theme	2nd-order theme	Theme definition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realizing/not realizing control • Active/passive 	Taking charge	Autonomy	<i>Career autonomy</i> : making one's own career-related decisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to let go of sunk costs • Responsible for career despite barriers 	Taking responsibility		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self/other people • Following/defying expectations • Self-determination • Internal locus of control 	Self-driven		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a difference • Making a change • Contribution to society • Ethos motivation • Helping people • Altruism • Improving lives 	Difference	Impact	<i>Career impact</i> : the degree to which an individual can influence external outcomes, such as situations or people, through their own career
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow one's passion • Fulfillment • Satisfaction 	Passion	Meaning	<i>Career meaning</i> : the fit between one's career and one's beliefs, values, and purpose
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment with personal values • Sense of self-value • Sense of purpose • Fit • Calling • Identity 	Values	Interest	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal education • Credentials • Training • Experience • Professional knowledge • Professional recognition • Skillset • Transferrable skills • Self-efficacy • Being good enough/successful 	Credentials	Competence	<i>Career competence</i> : an individual's belief in their capability to perform career-related activities with skill and/or mastery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience • Professional knowledge • Professional recognition • Skillset • Transferrable skills • Self-efficacy • Being good enough/successful 	Experience		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing what I want in my career • Having a vision • Keeping an eye on the prize • Thinking about the future • Living in the present without thinking • Evaluating oneself • Making plans • Setting goals • Not thinking about career • Going with the flow 	Focus	Clarity	<i>Career clarity</i> : the clarity of an individual's vision of what they want their career to be, including but not limited to understanding their goals, how to achieve those goals, and recognizing their potential
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking about the future • Living in the present without thinking • Evaluating oneself • Making plans • Setting goals • Not thinking about career • Going with the flow 	Self-reflection		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making plans • Setting goals • Not thinking about career • Going with the flow 	Goals		

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Code	1st-order theme	2nd-order theme	Theme definition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life-long learning • Growing • Curiosity • Intellectual stimulation • Accepting challenges • Risk-taking • Stepping outside the comfort zone 	Learning	Growth	<i>Career growth:</i> the cognitive component of active engagement in the process of career development, which includes seeking personal challenge, growth, accomplishment, and a variety of experiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing • Restlessness • Can't be stagnant 	Change		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility • People that will be there for you 	People	Support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social mobility • Emotional ties • Colleagues (peers) • Leaders (seniors)/mentors • Role modeling/guidance • Access to jobs 	Network		<i>Career support:</i> Meaningful connections to other human beings that include being supportive of one's career development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family situation (financial/emotional) • Family support/pressure (to pursue specific paths) 	Family		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors in decision-making • Work-life balance 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional support • Can help with finding jobs • Can distract from career goals 	Friends		

Source(s): Authors' own work

was smart enough to be able to convince somebody to let me do it or to pay me to do it (P26, M, 54, digital marketing manager).

Another important theme is *clarity*, or focus, where being in control means knowing what kind of career one wants rather than going with the flow without thinking. Having focus involved taking the time to think about a desirable career, self-reflection and goal setting. Some respondents admitted to not having focus until later in their career. Developing a sense of clarity, either purposefully or accidentally, enabled the respondents to take action towards their goal.

[Before I enrolled in the MBA program] I really didn't know what I wanted to do and I didn't care what I wanted to do, I just wanted to have a career-oriented job. [In the MBA program], I ended up getting all the [self-assessment] questionnaires back and essentially all rang true, every last recommendation inside these questionnaires about the type of things that motivated me, the type of things I found interesting, the things that really upset me. And I just read it and it resonated so true with me that I decided I was going to leave my job (P26, M, 54, digital marketing manager).

Why did I go back to that [restaurant industry]? Because it was easy. And it was fun, and I was young and not really thinking about the future. But all of a sudden, you wake up one day and you're 45. Uh, you start to think about your mortality, and your old age is right around the corner. That's why I decided

that I should maybe get somewhat serious. This business is a lot of fun and there are careers made in it, but you have to keep an eye on the prize and focus. Because otherwise days turn into weeks, weeks into months and years, and they can flip by, and you haven't proceeded upwards at all (P14, M, 62, restaurant owner/real estate agent).

Participants also expressed a desire for constant challenges, learning, growth and development, which makes them feel in control as they can act on that desire. In contrast to competence, which is achievement-based, *growth* was described as change in order to not be stagnant and seeking flexibility/variety:

So I started to think, I'm not a sit still kind of person, I don't deal with idle time really well. [It makes me feel] restless or frustrated, envious of other people who are doing exciting things (P18, M, 45, instructor/writer/investor).

"A voice inside of me said "You need something new, you can do this, but you're not challenged" and I have a thirst for learning. If I'm not constantly learning, I'm going to stagnate . . . When I realize that I hit a saturation point here, I've got to go somewhere else, I get somebody else [to fill the role] and I go (P23, F, 58, recently retired from real estate).

The final theme that emerged was relationships (professional networks, mentors, clients, family members, friends and being with people in general), which we labeled *support*. Positive social connections supported and enabled participants, and the lack of such supportive relationships limited perceived control, which is why we chose to emphasize *support* rather than relationships. Specific actions resulting from these connections were not necessarily expected and sometimes the connections alone were sufficient:

I still feel comfortable calling anyone of my former classmates. I could call them any time and expect that they'll take my call, we'll talk like friends, so that's really cool. (P18, M, 45, instructor/writer/investor).

[My wife] and I are very much partners, we are helping each other, and we are impacting each other. I'm impacting her career and she's impacting my career, absolutely and in [an] enabling way, not just impacting in a bad way, but also enabling (P25, M, 51, operations manager).

At other times, even generally positive relationships proved detrimental because they distracted the individual from their career goals:

Oh, I did have some wrong people around me back in Montreal. So peer pressure, and there I had a lot of people . . . we were just busy, not working hard, just going out too much. So that really played a big role, that's why my career started a little bit later than other people (P11, M, 35, bank teller).

These seven themes comprise the idea of perceived career control (see [supplementary materials](#) for a discussion of additional analyses we have conducted).

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore how people perceive the control they may have over their careers. While there is a need to deeply investigate career control (Guest and Rodrigues, 2015) and to differentiate objective control from subjective control, it has rarely received research attention. Our study aims to address this gap, and we suggest that as perceived control impacts further career-related behaviors and outcomes, it is important to understand how people experience it.

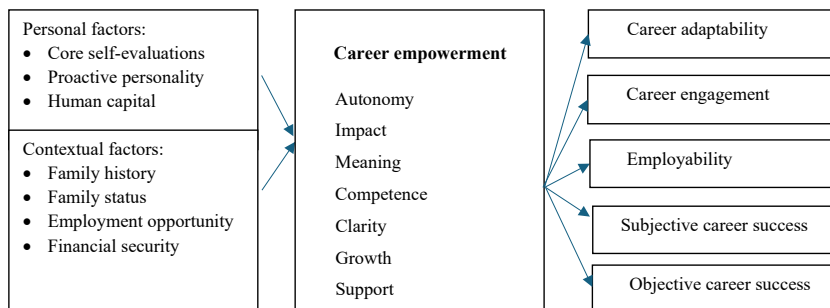
We identified seven distinct themes: autonomy, impact, meaning, competence, clarity, growth and support. Taken together, these themes represent *a set of cognitions that constitute a sense of control over one's career and underpin one's motivation to be active rather than passive in the career domain*. We name this set of cognitions "*career empowerment*," inspired by the concept of psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995) that represents a sense of control that individuals have in their workplace and that "reflects an active orientation of the

employees to their work role” (p. 1444). We suggest that career empowerment, i.e. a person’s perceived career control, contributes to variation in behavioral outcomes: people who have a high degree of career empowerment (i.e. believe they are in control of their careers) are more likely to behave proactively. This may include monitoring the job market, taking steps to pursue career goals and making informed decisions that may result in initiating change within the work context or accepting the current situation (e.g. [Junker et al., 2023](#); [Masood et al., 2021](#); [Muehlhausen et al., 2023](#)). On the other hand, individuals who have a low degree of career empowerment are less likely to take any career-related action. Again, we emphasize that career empowerment is focused on subjective control rather than objective control: while people may have many available resources and opportunities, without acknowledging their control over their career they are less likely to act.

Previous research has identified the role of cognitions such as insight ([De Vos and Soens, 2008](#)), intentionality ([Chen, 2006](#)) and self-knowledge ([Raabe et al., 2007](#)), and our study captures such cognitions to provide a comprehensive picture. Our findings suggest that career empowerment is multi-dimensional, where individuals experience a sense of control in different ways, for e.g. through feeling autonomy, clarity and more. The themes that we have identified in this study resonate with existing research. For example, competence is often equivalent to self-efficacy (e.g. [Lent and Hackett, 1987](#); [Spreitzer, 1995](#)), which was also one of the codes that were aggregated into the theme of competence in our analysis. Therefore, career self-efficacy is included as one of the components of career empowerment. Similarly, the theme of career clarity resembles [London’s \(1983\)](#) notion of “career insight” and has been discussed in the context of career exploration ([Stumpf et al., 1983](#)). Ideas of growth, challenge and learning appear in the kaleidoscope career model ([Sullivan et al., 2009](#)) as well as in the protean career theory ([Hall, 1996](#)), reflecting the dynamic nature of careers. Including them in career empowerment makes them integral to perceived control, which is another theoretical contribution we make. Finally, career support can be linked to social capital ([Seibert et al., 2001](#)). However, our findings show that not all important and even positive relationships are necessarily interpreted as supportive by the individual. We predict that social capital may be a potential antecedent of career empowerment, as individual subjective cognitions link the objective availability of support to behavioral outcomes.

Therefore, our findings contribute to the theoretical development of the careers field by providing an explicit insight into subjective, or perceived, control. While there is a prolific stream of research on career proactivity (see [Akkermans and Hirschi, 2023](#); [Jiang et al., 2023](#)), it is hard to fully understand proactivity in terms of its antecedents and subsequent career outcomes. We know that some personal capabilities, for e.g. career adaptability ([Savickas, 1997](#)) and employability ([Fugate et al., 2004](#)), are linked to career success. However, we believe that these personal capabilities are not necessarily the direct consequences of personality factors (e.g. protean career orientation), and we theorize that there is a mediating link between individual characteristics and individual capabilities and behaviors. We propose that career empowerment (perceived control) is that mediating link, as previously suggested by [Bell and Staw \(1989\)](#). [Figure 1](#) depicts an initial nomological network of career empowerment, which should be tested and refined in future studies.

Finally, we position career empowerment within the sustainable careers framework, which refers to person, context and time, as the “agency” component ([De Vos et al., 2020](#)). Within this framework, the notion of agency explains why and how people take action, whether proactively or reactively (in response to external events). For example, we predict that career empowerment explains career engagement, a broad set of career-related behaviors including job search, networking and more ([Hirschi et al., 2013](#)). However, our concept also helps explain why people are passive (i.e. not acting at all), which can lead to negative outcomes such as career entrenchment ([Carson et al., 1996](#)), career indecision ([Gati et al., 1996](#)), occupational regret ([Budjanovcanin et al., 2019](#)) and career inaction ([Verbruggen and De Vos, 2020](#)). It is important to mention, however, that proactivity is not always desirable ([Akkermans and Hirschi, 2023](#)), such that an informed decision to not take action may also stem from career



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1. Partial nomological network of career empowerment

empowerment and lead to a positive outcome. Thus, career empowerment may explain a broad range of career-related behaviors, which makes it particularly instrumental to theory development.

The idea of career empowerment fills a considerable gap between career theory and practice, as it allows a better glimpse at individual cognitions that can be changed, which makes it useful for counseling practitioners who aim to assist job seekers. A practical strength of the study is its inclusiveness: while it was conducted in a single geographical area, special effort was made to achieve a diverse group of study participants in terms of demographics (age, gender and place of birth) and occupations and industries represented. This effort to include people in different job positions makes *career empowerment* applicable across broad contexts. For example, many career studies have focused on managers and professionals (Richardson *et al.*, 2022), and it is also important to study individuals who are working in alternative arrangements (Jiang *et al.*, 2023), self-employed persons (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022) and individuals not currently employed (Žikić and Richardson, 2007). Moreover, understanding perceived career control can be essential for people who struggle and need to persist despite difficulties. This is particularly relevant in turbulent times that may be characterized by career shocks (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021) and when career sustainability, characterized by improved health, productivity and happiness (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015), require investing individual effort within a given broad context (Talluri *et al.*, 2022). As such, career empowerment can also be leveraged by organizations to support their employees by focusing on different aspects (e.g. increasing competence, providing opportunities for growth and strengthening relationships) in order to benefit from such improved outcomes.

Limitations and future directions

Despite the efforts to conduct a thorough study, it is not without limitations. First, despite interviewing participants from diverse demographics (e.g. gender and age) and occupational backgrounds, the study's geographic scope was limited to North America. Future research should examine career empowerment in non-Western countries. Additionally, many of the participants were highly educated, which we attribute to self-selection, suggesting that individuals with higher education may be more inclined to discuss their careers. Future studies need to ensure representation of diverse educational backgrounds. Next, while the study's initial results describe seven themes, a quantitative study is needed to test whether they are all essential and distinct from each other. Following validation of the model, the resulting measurement scale can be used to explicitly predict and test the proposed relationships between career empowerment and its potential outcomes (e.g. career adaptability,

employability and career success) and antecedents (e.g. personality factors, demographic factors and the job market).

In conclusion, the concept of career empowerment has the potential to advance both career theory and practice. For theory, career empowerment provides an understanding of perceived career control, differentiating it from objective control and defining its relationship with career-related behaviors and outcomes. For practice, it can be used by career counselors who are working with underrepresented groups, such as the chronically unemployed and underemployed. By leveraging the different aspects of career empowerment, career practitioners can assist individuals in constructing more fulfilling and sustainable career paths. We hope that the concept of career empowerment spurs future research into why some individuals are willing to exert effort to achieve career goals while others remain passive.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online

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