



# When people don't realize their career desire Towards a theory of career inaction

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# Career Decisions

- Among the most important decisions people make in their life
    - E.g. what to study, which organization to enter, when to switch organizations, etc.
    - Often long-term impact on financial situation, lifestyle, subsequent opportunities, social network, identity, ...
  - Accordingly, many theories on:
    - How career decisions are made (e.g. Lent et al., 1994)
    - How decisions should be made (e.g. Holland, 1973)
    - Career transition process (e.g. Nicholson, 1984)
- ⇒ Implicit assumption on career decisions which are followed through



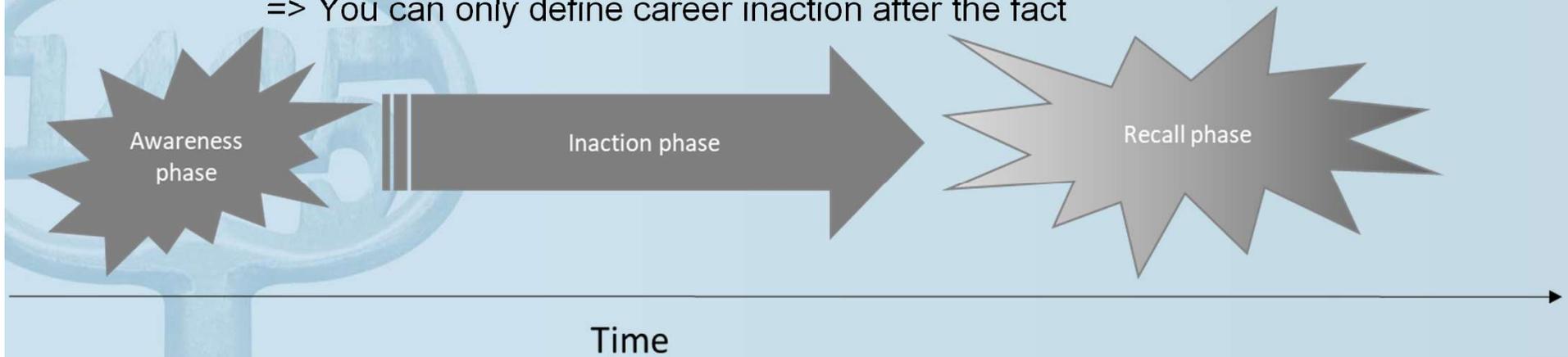
# But... do people always act on their career desires?

- There are several indications that people do not always enact their career desires:
  - We all know stories about people in whose career inaction plays a major role!
  - The biggest life regrets people have are things they did not do in their career (Roesse et al., 2005; Hattiangadi et al., 1995)
  - Most careers are characterized by stability and lack of change (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010)
- In addition, research suggest that not acting on a desired change is not without consequences (Mai et al., 2016; Verbruggen & van Emmerik, 2018)



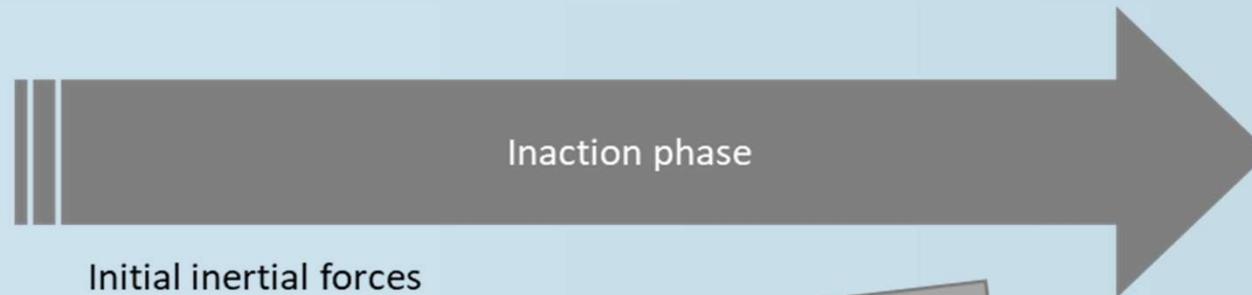
# Career inaction

- Failure to act sufficiently over some period of time on a desired change in one's career
- Three characteristics:
  - the person desires to make a change in his or her career;  
=> Counterfactual thoughts
  - the person recognizes that (s)he can take action to initiate the desired change but does not do so in a sufficient way;  
=> Feeling of personal responsibility
  - this situation persists for some period of time  
=> You can only define career inaction after the fact



# Why does career inaction occur?

- In cases of decision difficulty and outcome uncertainty, as in the case of career decisions, different inertia-enhancing forces tend to keep people in the status quo



Initial inertial forces

Not acting

Acting

Hoped-for future gains

Inertia-enhancing factors

- Fear, anxiety and dread
- Disproportionate influence of action costs and losses
- Tendency to avoid high cognitive demands

# When career inaction is more or less likely?

## Decision characteristics (P1-3)

- Vague versus crystallized
- Push versus pull
- Short versus long time frame

## Contextual characteristics (P4-5)

- Embeddedness
- Social norms



Inaction phase



# When people look back over what did not happen

- When people look back, they are likely to keep have counterfactual thoughts about (1) their lack of action and (2) the outcomes they could had had

	Process-related counterfactual thoughts	Outcome-related counterfactual thoughts
Content of the counterfactual thoughts	Alternative actions ( <i>"If only I had acted more"</i> )	Alternative outcomes ( <i>"If only I had realized the desired change"</i> )
Related career-inaction phase	Inaction phase	Awareness phase
Induced emotion	Regret	Regret, contentment or relief
Key processes triggering the counterfactual emotion	Justifiability	Comparison process

- If the overall counterfactual feeling
  - Is regret => negative outcomes which persist over time
  - Is contentment or relief => positive outcomes which fade over time

# Discussion

Our theory contributes to the literature by

- Helping to understand why careers remain so stable, even with different forces pushing towards boundarylessness
- Highlighting that people's career desires, on one hand, and their behaviors and future career states, on the other, are not always consistent
- Explaining that inaction may have both negative and positive consequences
- Challenging the rather unilaterally positive view regarding the value of self-directedness in careers
- Integrating the research on inaction and combining it with literature on careers

**Thank you for your  
attention!**

