

1                   **An Ideological Analysis of Sustainable Careers:**  
2                   **Identifying the Role of Fantasy and a Way Forward**

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16                  *Manuscript in press with Career Development International*

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3  
4                                   **Abstract**

- 5       • **Purpose:** Scholarly and general interest in sustainable careers is flourishing.  
6       Sustainable careers are focused on the long-term opportunities and experiences of  
7       workers across dynamic employment situations, and are characterized by flexibility,  
8       meaning, and individual agency. The current paper analyzes and challenges the  
9       underlying ideological assumptions of how sustainable careers are conceptualized and  
10      advocates the inclusion of the ecological meaning of sustainability and the notion of  
11      dignity into the sustainable careers concept.
- 12     • **Design/methodology/approach:** Using Slavoj Žižek's (1989, 2001)  
13      conceptualization of ideology as fantasy-construction, we explore how the use of  
14      sustainable careers is influenced by fantasies about the contemporary workplace and  
15      the role of the individual in the workplace. This is a conceptual method.
- 16     • **Findings:** We argue that the concept of sustainable careers is grounded in the  
17      neoliberal fantasy of the individual. The paper concludes by presenting an alternative  
18      concept of sustainable careers grounded in a collective dignity-perspective on  
19      sustainability, which offers an alternative theoretical understanding of sustainable  
20      careers in the contemporary workplace, sharpening its contours and usefulness in  
21      theorizing careers.
- 22     • **Originality:** This paper is the first to systematically analyze the use and  
23      conceptualization of sustainable careers in the literature and to expose the ideological  
24      underpinnings of the concept. Propositions are developed to be explored by future  
25      research.

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2 Keywords: Sustainable careers, ideology, critique, meaning, dignity

3 Running Head: Ideology and Sustainable Careers

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1 Research on sustainability at work and sustainable careers has flourished over the last years,  
2 as evidenced by a growing number of publications devoted to the topic (De Vos and Van der  
3 Heijden, 2015; Ehnert and Harry, 2012; Newman, 2011; Pfeffer, 2010; Van der Heijden *et*  
4 *al.*, 2020). This is reflective of the rapid changes in society and the workplace, which cause  
5 employees to focus on becoming more proactive and employable in order to sustain  
6 continued employment over their careers (Parker and Bindl, 2017). As employees can no  
7 longer trust in the employment model where loyalty to the organization was exchanged for  
8 lifelong job security (Rubery *et al.*, 2016; Vallas, 1999), new career models are emerging  
9 (Lawrence *et al.*, 2015).

10         The concept of sustainable careers, therefore, has been introduced to explain and to  
11 describe an ideal construction of contemporary careers, including the transfers between jobs,  
12 and changes from employment to unemployment, education, eldercare, and return to the  
13 workplace (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015; De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*,  
14 2020). Sustainable careers have been defined as “the sequence of an individual’s different  
15 career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing  
16 several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to  
17 the individual” (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p.7).

18         Research on sustainable careers is increasing in popularity, underpinned by the need  
19 for individuals to develop their own sustainable careers (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015;  
20 Valcour, 2013). It has also been claimed that “[I]t seems unlikely that any person [...] would  
21 disagree that sustainable careers are good for workers as well as organizations” (Lawrence *et*  
22 *al.* 2015, p.444). Yet, concepts that seem to be universally agreed upon are precisely those  
23 that need to be assessed critically as these are most likely to have unexplored ideological  
24 underpinnings on which there may be much less agreement among both scholars and  
25 practitioners (Žižek, 2014). Therefore, an analysis of the underlying assumptions of

1 sustainable careers is needed to improve our understanding of the implications of sustainable  
2 careers for individuals, workplaces and society.

3         In this paper we adopt an explicit problematization strategy (Alvesson and Sandberg,  
4 2011) to critique the underlying assumptions of contemporary scholarship on career  
5 sustainability. To do this we engaged in a ‘dialectical interrogation’ of the taken for granted  
6 assumptions of the sustainable careers concept and the careers literature more generally. Such  
7 interrogations require theorists to adopt a ‘counter-stance’, or an unfamiliar theoretical  
8 position from which their own assumptions will appear problematic (Alvesson and Sandberg,  
9 2013). We identify the ideological anchoring point of contemporary literature on sustainable  
10 careers in neoliberalism and offer a counter-stance anchored in the concept of dignity (Bal,  
11 2017; Kostera and Pirson, 2017). Using the lens of ideology, we focus on not just the visible,  
12 intentional attempts to create a particular image of a concept and its understanding (Alvesson  
13 and Kärreman, 2016), but also more fundamentally the lesser known, unconscious  
14 understandings of the social order itself which affects the conceptualization and use of the  
15 concept (Žižek, 1989). The specific model of ideology used is that of Žižek (1989, 2001,  
16 2014). We chose Žižek’s model due to the utility of the concept of *fantasy*, a key concept in  
17 his work, which explains how hegemonic beliefs about a concept are maintained, de-  
18 contested, and thus persist in a field of science as well as more generally in society. In so  
19 doing, the problematic ideological features of scientific concepts are often ignored.

20         Our aim is to open up the concept of sustainable careers to alternative  
21 conceptualizations and encourage pluralism within this research domain (Greenwood and  
22 Van Buren III, 2017). First, we consider what is excluded from, or underplayed within, the  
23 dominant conceptualizations of sustainable careers in order to explore new opportunities for  
24 theory development. We explore *what* and *who* are excluded from this conceptualization.  
25 Subsequently, we investigate the ideological ‘anchoring point’ of the sustainable careers

1 concept. Finally, we consider the possible consequences of the current conceptualization of  
2 sustainable careers and consider the extent to which these may be problematic. Subsequently,  
3 we develop an alternative conceptualization and propositions for further research on  
4 sustainable careers. Through this approach, we offer the following contributions to the  
5 literature. First, by analyzing the ideological underpinnings of the sustainable careers  
6 concept, we elucidate the ways through which the more implicit meanings and manifestations  
7 of concepts can be understood. While the sustainable careers literature tends to convey the  
8 inherently good nature of the concept (Lawrence *et al.*, 2015), the more contested aspects can  
9 be investigated using our critical approach. Secondly, we also elucidate the ways through  
10 which concepts, such as sustainability or careers, may have multiple meanings dependent on  
11 their anchoring point (Žižek, 1989). In the future, researchers may more explicitly discuss  
12 such anchoring points, depending on societal goals or values of researchers themselves, such  
13 as humanism or planetary survival.

#### 14 **Ideology in Sustainable Careers**

15 While a dominant perspective within research on sustainability and sustainable  
16 careers may claim to be ‘culturally neutral and politically inert’ (Banerjee, 2011, p.726), it is  
17 the unarticulated assumptions, or that which is *unsaid*, which matter in determining the more  
18 hidden and rarely discussed effects research on sustainable careers has both on academia and  
19 practice. To disentangle the ideological underpinnings underlying sustainable careers, we use  
20 the work of philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1989, 2001, 2014) to understand the problematic  
21 nature of the concept.

22 While discussion on the role of ideology has been somewhat absent from the careers  
23 literature (see for exceptions Coltrane, 2004; Roper *et al.*, 2010), it contributes to our  
24 understanding of how sustainable careers are researched. Ideology constitutes not only the  
25 explicit, intentional attempts within the social order to create an image of society and the

1 workplace as it *should* be, but also the lesser known unconscious understandings of the social  
2 order itself (Glynos, 2008; Žižek, 1989, 2001). Ideology, as a system of beliefs, is not simply  
3 externally imposed on people, but exists as people's spontaneous reaction to, and fantasies  
4 about, the social world (Žižek, 1989). Thus, ideology is about the interplay between what is  
5 explicit and implicit (Žižek, 2014). Analyzing this interplay is useful as it enables us to  
6 convey the ways in which implicit messages have an impact, even though they are absent  
7 from the public discourse.

### 8 **Ideology as Fantasy Construction**

9 Žižek's work (1989, 2001, 2011) describes ideology as a "fantasy-construction which serves  
10 as a support for our 'reality' itself: an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real, social  
11 relations" (Žižek, 1989, p.45). Hence, according to Žižek, there is no sharp distinction  
12 between fantasy and reality, as people use fantasy to construct their perceptions of reality.  
13 Moreover, Žižek (1989) argues that ideology does not offer people an escape from reality, but  
14 offers reality itself. The relationship between ideology and reality is therefore complex, as the  
15 former may be constructed to support the existence of the latter, while at the same time,  
16 reality is constructed on the basis of ideology. Fantasy is important for people as it offers a  
17 straightforward solution to make sense of the world in complex situations, such as those in  
18 the contemporary workplace (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017).

19 An important part of ideology pertains to what constitutes the dominant rhetoric in  
20 society and the workplace. Hegemonic ideologies can be promoted by governments and  
21 powerful groups in society, but can also be adopted and reinforced more widely by the media,  
22 corporations, and scientists into a publicly accepted discourse. The question is, however, why  
23 and how the commanding rhetoric gets widely accepted in society and is able to impact the  
24 structures and practices in society and the workplace.

1           The role of ideology, according to Žižek, is to present an appealing narrative about the  
2 state of affairs in society to the public, notwithstanding the impossibility of realizing certain  
3 ideas or the potential contradictions inherent within an ideology. Žižek (2010) explains that  
4 as experiences of reality can be too uncomfortable for people, ideology provides an appealing  
5 alternative. Thus, the fantasmatic portrayal of society for the public represents the ultimate  
6 description of reality rather than what is actually happening in society. These fantasies may  
7 also function as ideological underpinnings of scientific concepts. We argue that the current  
8 construction of sustainable careers constitutes such a fantasy, as it is unlikely that everyone in  
9 society is able to achieve a sustainable career.

10           Žižek (1989) uses the term anchoring point (quilting point or *le point de capiton*) to  
11 illustrate how ideology operates. More specifically, the anchoring point is the perspective  
12 through which people understand particular concepts, such as the sustainable career. In other  
13 words, ideology may cause people to have a specific interpretation of and perspective on  
14 concepts. Concepts such as freedom, democracy and justice can have very different meanings  
15 depending on context (Žižek, 1989, 2001), and ideology offers an anchoring point, or an  
16 anchor, to interpret the meaning of concepts in a specific way. For instance, freedom has very  
17 different meanings in market economies and planned socialist economies, depending on how  
18 freedom is ‘anchored’ in the dominant ideology. While in market economies, freedom  
19 denotes economic freedom and autonomy from the state, advocates of planned socialist  
20 economies maintain that this formal freedom is merely a form of slavery, and that only a  
21 socialist revolution can bring real freedom (Žižek, 1989). Hence, through ideology, concepts  
22 which in themselves are interpretable in multiple ways, obtain a specific meaning in a  
23 context. This applies to the concept of sustainable careers as well, and in the subsequent  
24 analysis we will explore the anchoring point underlying sustainable careers.

## 25 **An Ideological Analysis of Sustainable Careers**

1 The concept of sustainable careers is derived from a broader interest in sustainability at work  
2 (Haugh and Talwar, 2010; Parkin Hughes *et al.*, 2017; Pfeffer, 2010). De Lange *et al.* (2015)  
3 present four dimensions of sustainability at work: a) preservation of resources, b) fairness and  
4 equal priority for all, based on protecting the ability of all people to meet their needs, c)  
5 social and technological innovation to achieve progress, and d) the interconnectedness of  
6 multiple actors within a system. However, sustainable careers as a concept is much narrower  
7 and appears to be less concerned with exploring how careers are embedded within a system  
8 of interconnected multiple actors and how they contribute towards the fairness of that system  
9 or how well that system preserves resources for future generations.

10 Newman (2011) was one of the first to describe the concept of sustainable careers (see  
11 also Iles, 1997), as careers that have renewal opportunities, are flexible in nature, include  
12 opportunities for integration across life spheres and can provide individuals with meaning.  
13 The handbook on sustainable careers (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015) provided the most  
14 comprehensive overview, and includes the following definition: “the sequence of an  
15 individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity  
16 over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith  
17 providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p.7). Subsequent  
18 work, most notably present in a recent Special Issue on sustainable careers, reiterated this  
19 definition and emphasized the role of agency, meaning, proactivity and adaptability (De Vos  
20 *et al.* 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). These definitions share overlapping features  
21 including notions of continuity (Newman: ‘renewal opportunities’; Van der Heijden and De  
22 Vos (2015): ‘patterns of continuity over time’), and meaning (Newman: ‘integration that  
23 leads to meaning’; Van der Heijden and De Vos: ‘providing meaning to the individual’).  
24 Moreover, Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015; De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*,  
25 2020) also added the importance of individual agency in managing sustainable careers, while

1 this is somewhat less explicitly discussed by Newman (2011). Newman adds flexibility  
2 ('flexible and adaptable'), while Van der Heijden and De Vos consider 'crossing several  
3 spaces', which is a facet of flexibility. In the current analysis, we will focus on the elements  
4 of flexibility, meaning, and individual agency. While continuity is important in the context of  
5 sustainability, it should also be perceived as inherent to the concept of 'career' itself, and  
6 therefore we do not consider it to be unique to sustainable careers, but indicative of careers  
7 more generally (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997).

8         Thus, the sustainable career as defined through flexibility, meaning and individual  
9 agency carries implicit meaning, which manifests itself through projecting the universal need  
10 for workers to 'assume primary responsibility for managing their own careers' (Valcour  
11 2015, p.21). While individual agency may be a requirement for people to be able to obtain a  
12 sustainable career in the contemporary workplace, the ideological dimension within the  
13 concept manifests itself through what is and what is *not* mentioned as part of its  
14 conceptualization. As sustainability is portrayed as an inherently appealing concept, it  
15 implicitly assumes a positive connotation. However, the more contested aspects of its  
16 manifested meaning in the literature are usually not discussed. This is because sustainable  
17 careers is an empty concept in itself that needs to be anchored using an ideological  
18 interpretation. Ideology is manifested in the current conceptualization of sustainable careers  
19 in the fantasy that building a sustainable career is a matter of choice, that people are free to  
20 choose to be flexible, to find meaning in their work, and to exhibit individual agency. As it is  
21 unlikely that all people globally will be able to achieve a sustainable career, we need to ask  
22 the question *what* and *who* are excluded from developing a sustainable career.

23 *What is excluded from sustainable careers conceptualizations?*

24         The first way through which ideology manifests in the concept of the 'sustainable  
25 career' concerns the absence of an explicit integration of *what* the term 'sustainability' entails

1 in relation to contemporary careers. Research on sustainability has drawn primarily on the  
2 definition of sustainability presented in the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, i.e., meeting  
3 of needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations (WCED, 1987).  
4 The needs of the current generation and future generations will only be met by responsibly  
5 managing the stock of capital that contributes towards human welfare, which consists of five  
6 types of capital: natural, social, human, manufactured, and financial capitals (Porritt, 2007).

7 Sustainable careers has to date focused on human capital (Newman, 2011) but largely  
8 ignored the relationship between individual careers and their effects on the sustainability of  
9 the other four capitals. By better understanding the relationship between careers and the five  
10 capitals, we will be better able to unpack how some careers can contribute toward  
11 sustainability. Many careers will contribute towards the accumulation of manufactured and  
12 financial capital in one form or another, which may contribute towards the depletion of  
13 natural capital (Cairns, 2003; Langhelle, 1999) and social capital (Jackson, 2009; Speth,  
14 2008). If this is the case, these careers may not be considered to be sustainable. For example,  
15 a project manager working on a deep-sea drilling operation for an oil industry can contribute  
16 to manufactured and financial capital but their project is likely to destroy natural capital  
17 through destabilizing sea-beds that are critical to maintain marine biodiversity and producing  
18 a product that contributes to further destabilizing the climate system through global warming  
19 (Blühdorn, 2017).

20 There is a hierarchy among the five capitals that is essential to an understanding of  
21 sustainability, in which manufactured and financial careers are embedded within social and  
22 human capital, and social and human capital are embedded within natural capital (Porritt,  
23 2007). Given that social, human, manufactured and financial capital are embedded within  
24 natural capital, a rigorous understanding of natural capital is essential to the concept of  
25 sustainable careers. The 'Planetary Boundaries' framework (Rockström *et al.*, 2009), adopted

1 by the World Council for Sustainable Business Development (WCSBD) in 2012, establishes  
2 the environmental conditions within which humanity can exist sustainably. It details nine  
3 natural boundaries which constitute a 'safe operating space' for humanity and shows how  
4 four of these boundaries have been transgressed in the current globalized environment  
5 (Rockström *et al.*, 2009; Steffen *et al.*, 2015). Thus, for a career to be considered sufficiently  
6 sustainable, a minimal condition is that it must not contribute to the (further) transgression of  
7 these boundaries. For a career to be truly sustainable, it would strive towards a net positive  
8 contribution to natural capital. An example of a truly sustainable career would be a career in  
9 the natural capital restoration sector, such as the engineers working on drones used to plant  
10 tree seeds to restore depleted forests or the bankers directing capital into projects restoring  
11 natural capital (Bal, 2017; Faruqi *et al.*, 2018).

12 A whole range of careers are inconsistent with sustainability, defined as living within  
13 planetary boundaries. Whether humanity makes the transition toward sustainability or not, the  
14 current climate crisis will dictate that whole industries will cease to exist or need to be  
15 transformed (World Bank, 2012). In either scenario, numerous careers that we are familiar  
16 with today will need to be redefined with many becoming obsolete. For example, the fossil  
17 fuel industry and the careers it supports will no longer be viable in a world that has  
18 transitioned towards sustainability. In the worst case scenario, economic activity will be  
19 significantly more constrained by environmental limits than at present (Meadows *et al.*,  
20 2004). In such an eventuality, the wide variety of career opportunities currently available will  
21 most likely have significantly contracted as economic activity is constrained to the provision  
22 of basic human needs, such as food and health care provision (Randers, 2012; World Bank,  
23 2012).

24 Inter- and intragenerational sustainability concerns balancing the needs of multiple  
25 generations, which makes sustainability first and foremost an *ethical* concept based on the

1 principle of solidarity (Blühdorn, 2017; Shearman, 1990). Ostensibly, the concept of  
2 sustainable careers draws upon the ethical framework of sustainability. For example, Van der  
3 Heijden and De Vos (2015) refer to the ethics underpinning sustainability in the introduction  
4 to the Handbook on Sustainable Careers but the ethical relationship between the concepts of  
5 sustainability and sustainable careers needs clearer articulation.

6         There does not appear to be an explicit consideration of the contribution that  
7 sustainable careers make towards inter- and intragenerational sustainability. Indeed, the  
8 ethical dimension appears to be missing from the concept of sustainable careers with the  
9 concept shifting from the sustainability of humanity's stock of capital to the sustainability of  
10 an individual's career. The concept of sustainable careers is concerned with the individual to  
11 the extent that other people and natural capital become merely instrumental to the  
12 achievement of one's individualistic career goals. While *sustainability* originally refers to  
13 protecting resources to preserve them and ensure a sustainable future for next generations,  
14 ethical – in the relational, societal and ecological sense - perspectives are absent from the  
15 conceptualization of sustainable careers.

16         The only future that is generally considered in the literature is the future of the (career  
17 of the) individual. This omits the intergenerational considerations and the creation of  
18 replicable and sustainable career paths. Further, how careers contribute toward equitable  
19 access to capital in the present is similarly ignored. This individualist focus (Bal and Dóci,  
20 2018) means that there is a potential paradox at the heart of the concept. Individuals may be  
21 able to sustain a career throughout their working lives but may have contributed towards the  
22 depletion of the capital stock needed to meet the needs of future generations and contributed  
23 to intragenerational inequity in the present. Such careers would be considered sustainable  
24 according to the current concept of sustainable careers but unsustainable according to the  
25 broader ethical framework of sustainability (Banerjee, 2011). The recognition of this paradox

1 provides us with the opportunity to re-conceptualize sustainable careers with a more explicit  
2 focus on the contributions they make towards sustainability. Thus, the sustainable careers  
3 literature is problematic as it does not yet fully put the ethical, intergenerational dimension of  
4 sustainability at the heart of its conceptualization. Moreover, there is a second ideological  
5 implication of the current sustainable careers literature that is problematic in terms of  
6 sustainability, specifically the exclusion of particular groups of people from sustainable  
7 careers, which is inconsistent with the principle of intra-generational equity.

8 *Who is excluded from sustainable careers conceptualizations?*

9         The intragenerational dimension of sustainability postulates equity across the world to  
10 the stock of capital upon which human welfare depends. In terms of sustainable careers,  
11 intragenerational equity would mean that everybody in the world has the opportunity to have  
12 a sustainable career. However, the concept of sustainable careers appears to be based on the  
13 questionable assumption that contemporary capitalist societies are meritocracies (Bal and  
14 Dóci, 2018; Littler, 2013), which entails the belief that those who work hard, will be  
15 rewarded accordingly (Su, 2015). The meritocratic fantasy offers an appealing narrative that  
16 everyone has a fair chance to climb the corporate/societal ladder and to become successful  
17 (Su, 2015). However, there is increasing evidence that this constitutes a myth, and that the  
18 vast majority of people are unable to thrive within the current system, as indicated by  
19 increasing inequality (Putnam, 2016; Stiglitz, 2012; Wisman, 2013). Hence, in the workplace  
20 a minority of workers will actually succeed and experience objective success, while an  
21 increasing number of workers are confronted with low-quality jobs and precarious  
22 employment (Caldbeck *et al.*, 2014; Standing, 2016), high job insecurity (Bidwell *et al.*,  
23 2013), wage stagnation (Wisman, 2013), and reduced unemployment, healthcare and pension  
24 benefits (Harvey, 2005). Hence, despite the rhetoric, the ‘average’ worker may have very

1 different work experiences to what is ideologically implied (Wisman, 2013; Žižek 1989,  
2 2014).

3         While ideas of meritocracy belong to the dominant discourse underpinning  
4 interpretations of sustainable careers, the workplace itself is structured around the illusion of  
5 meritocracy (Jost *et al.*, 2003). The consequence of this is that people perceive workplaces as  
6 fair institutions where everyone ‘gets what they deserve’, contributing to people’s sense of  
7 control, optimism and belief in a just world (Jost *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, it may manifest  
8 itself through an increasing focus on individual responsibility over collective solidarity  
9 (Brown and Tannock, 2009; Burke, 2013).

10         In an era where individuals are expected to take full responsibility for their own  
11 individual careers (Akkermans and Kabusch, 2017), an increasing number of workers  
12 globally are deprived of the possibility of doing so, being locked into suboptimal working  
13 conditions without security or opportunities for intrinsically meaningful work (Bidwell *et al.*,  
14 2013; Görg and Görlich, 2015; Stiglitz, 2012). Substantial evidence suggests that many  
15 workers do not have the prospect of a sustainable career, i.e., patterns of long-term  
16 meaningful jobs characterized by individual agency (Siegmann and Schiphorst, 2016). Many  
17 people are excluded from the possibility of having a sustainable career because they are the  
18 ones doing the ‘dirty work’ (see e.g., Gregson *et al.* 2016), which is increasingly organized  
19 within the modern ‘gig-economy’ (Friedman, 2014). As these jobs become increasingly  
20 specialized and monotonous, the extent to which these jobs provide objective meaning seems  
21 to be limited. As a result, workers in low-quality jobs may have few prospects to actually  
22 obtain work that is meaningful to them.

23         Moreover, while the careers literature has drawn attention to careers in non-western  
24 contexts (Baruch and Forstenlechner, 2017; Roper *et al.*, 2010), it does not take into account  
25 that many people across the world do not have prospects of a (sustainable) career, and are

1 forced into insecure and unstable employment (Standing, 2016). Unfortunately, it is not clear  
2 from the sustainable careers literature how those without sustainable careers in both the  
3 global North and South can acquire them. More striking, it does not appear to be of  
4 significant interest, as indicated by the absence of literature on sustainable careers in non-  
5 western contexts, and the absence of non-western perspectives in the recent literature (e.g.,  
6 De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020).

7 Finally, the opportunity to craft a sustainable career of one's choosing is a form of  
8 privilege, as it implies a career trajectory that involves initial access to social and cultural  
9 capital and is characterized by the maintenance and accumulation of social and economic  
10 capital over its course. The concept of a 'career' is an exclusive concept in itself in the sense  
11 that it implies the sequence of meaningful jobs during one's lifetime that may be accessible  
12 only to a limited number of educated and skilled professionals. On the structural level,  
13 however, this trajectory can only be realized by relying on the low-paid, low-status and  
14 insecure work of less fortunate individuals and social groups (Kalleberg, 2009; Rubery *et al.*,  
15 2016), who are thereby excluded from the opportunity of building sustainable careers.  
16 Therefore, the realization of sustainable careers is only available to certain, privileged  
17 individuals and groups in global society.

18 To understand the exclusive nature of the sustainable career, a closer look at its  
19 dimensions is needed. Flexibility, meaning, and agency can be considered more advanced  
20 needs which can only be met when less advanced needs, such as physiological needs, needs  
21 for safety, need for care and reproduction are satisfied. In contemporary society, it is claimed  
22 that due to continuous economic growth and accumulated welfare, its members no longer  
23 need to fight for survival but have the freedom and possibilities to pursue their higher needs  
24 and realize self-actualization (Bal and Dóci, 2018; Harvey, 2005). However, as the Covid-19  
25 crisis has also shown, organizations and societies are organized in a manner where gender,

1 ethnicity, class and other structural factors still largely designate the place one occupies in the  
2 societal division of labor and in the social stratification system (Bahn *et al.*, 2020; Risman,  
3 2004), and thus shapes one's chances to meet higher needs such as realizing meaningful,  
4 fulfilling, sustainable careers. Presently, such sustainable careers are under pressure, with the  
5 heightened risk for increased inequalities and a greater division of labor (Fouad, 2020;  
6 Özkazanç-Pan and Pullen, 2020).

7         For example, contemporary society still largely relies on women's reproductive work  
8 in social reproduction (albeit to a varying degree in terms of their geographical location,  
9 class, ethnicity etc.; Bahn *et al.*, 2020), social reproduction here being defined as 'the social  
10 processes and human relations associated with the creation and maintenance of the  
11 communities upon which all production and exchange rest' (Bakker 2003, p.67). However,  
12 such work is associated with low status and low or no pay, and does not offer the chance to  
13 realize a sustainable career (Bahn *et al.*, 2020), and provide scarce opportunities to  
14 experience flexibility, meaning and agency through one's work over the lifespan. Moreover,  
15 precisely by providing this (often non-paid or low-paid) service, the societal group to whom  
16 reproductive work is assigned on the structural level gets deprived from the benefits of  
17 sustainable careers, such as flexible work conditions, opportunities for integration across life  
18 spheres, or self-realization. In sum, sustainable careers may be problematic in terms of the  
19 creation of the myth that they are accessible to everyone, whereas access to sustainable  
20 careers is more exclusive in reality. But why is this myth so central to the dominant  
21 conceptualization of sustainable careers? To answer this question, we analyze the anchoring  
22 point of sustainable careers, to understand the dominant perspectives and interpretations of  
23 sustainable careers.

24 *What is the Anchoring Point of Sustainable Careers?*

1           The dominant conceptualizations of sustainable careers is organized around the  
2 exclusion of the inter- and intragenerational dimensions that are central to an ethical  
3 conceptualization of sustainability. They also uncritically accept some problematic myths that  
4 justify the unsustainability of our current political economy, which is not able to give  
5 everyone the opportunity to enjoy a sustainable career, such as the myth of meritocracy. But  
6 how do dominant conceptualizations of the sustainable career become exclusive in these  
7 ways? We argue that it is because sustainable careers has its anchoring point in the neoliberal  
8 construction of the self-sufficient individual (Bal and Dóci, 2018; Harvey, 2005; Roper *et al.*,  
9 2010). Neoliberalism is defined as a political-economic ideology which postulates that to  
10 enhance human well-being, it is necessary to maximize individual economic freedom (Bal  
11 and Dóci, 2018; Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017). Sustainable careers are conceptualized primarily  
12 through the emphasis on economic freedom for the individual. As a consequence,  
13 characteristics of a sustainable career (meaningfulness, agency, flexibility) are attributed to  
14 the individual as their free choice and responsibility. This entails the belief that those  
15 employees who have developed a sustainable career have done so as the sole result of their  
16 own hard work and efforts (Littler, 2013). Such ideological underpinnings imply that people  
17 are expected to be fully self-reliant and have sole responsibility for managing their own  
18 sustainable careers (Valcour, 2013).

19           The three main elements describing sustainable careers align closely with neoliberal  
20 ideology: flexibility, meaning and individual agency. First, sustainable careers are expected  
21 to be flexible (Newman, 2011), but even more so, the ideology underpinning sustainable  
22 careers implies that *people* need to be increasingly flexible (Bal and Jansen, 2016). In other  
23 words, workplaces are not expected to become more flexible to accommodate the diverse  
24 needs and capabilities of workers. Indeed, the trend is quite the opposite, with many  
25 workplaces becoming less flexible and accommodating (Bahn *et al.* 2020). The societal

1 expectation toward stable employment has dissolved in neoliberal capitalism, and instead of  
2 organizations adapting to the changing needs of society, people must adapt to the changing  
3 needs of the market economy and become more flexible themselves, to be able to swiftly  
4 change jobs, skills, and vocations when the labor market demands such changes. This also  
5 corresponds to what has been referred to as the need to become ‘an entrepreneur of the self’  
6 (Bauman, 2000; Žižek, 2014): the individual is expected to be a capitalist, and invest in  
7 themselves through development and education. Therefore, it is not surprising to observe how  
8 flexibility has become another axiomatic feature of the contemporary worker (Bal and  
9 Jansen, 2016). Presently, the Covid-19 crisis actually deepens the neoliberal logic, whereby  
10 individuals in times of crisis have even greater responsibility for the sustainability of their  
11 own careers in the light of the deepening of the precariousness of work (Fouad, 2020).

12         In addition, the emphasis on ‘meaning’ in sustainable career implies a norm where the  
13 modern worker is expected to be engaged in employment and activities that provide meaning,  
14 and enhance one’s own development and expertise (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). A  
15 lack of meaning in a job implies one has to change and become flexible and to look for other  
16 jobs which may provide meaning. An important aspect of ‘meaning’ in the literature concerns  
17 the individualized nature of it (Greene, 2008); the employee is both self-reliant in finding  
18 meaning at work, and postulated to be solely interested in providing meaning to one’s own  
19 job. The relational nature of meaning is largely neglected within the sustainable careers  
20 literature (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). While meaning may be individually generated, it is often  
21 ignored how the meaning of work is something that is both social in how it is constructed,  
22 i.e., people may jointly find meaning in their work through dialogue (Bal, 2017), as well as  
23 how meaning is shared within communities and is a result of interactions with other people  
24 (Rosso *et al.*, 2010).

1           Finally, the contemporary individual employee is perceived and expected to be  
2 agentic (Valcour, 2015; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Careers are constructed as the  
3 result of deliberate, individual choices made by people. Aligning with a neoliberal  
4 perspective on the individual as primarily responsible for one's own career and well-being  
5 (Greene, 2008), these choices are supposed to be made in line with one's individual  
6 aspirations and needs, without much attention paid to the social circumstances that outline  
7 and constrain the choices available to an individual. The individualistic construction of  
8 agency is also normative, hence, the anchoring point does not merely imply that individuals  
9 *are* agentic, but that all individuals *should* be agentic. The result is that the societal, political  
10 and economic responsibility to ensure sustainable careers for people is de-emphasized, and  
11 reference to governmental or organizational duty to create the conditions for widely  
12 available, meaningful and sustainable careers is absent from the literature.

13           In sum, the anchoring point of sustainable careers and the constitutive elements (i.e.,  
14 flexibility, meaning, and individual agency) revolve around the individual responsibility to  
15 develop one's career. This aligns with neoliberal ideology (Greene, 2008), which constitutes  
16 the dominant ideology in contemporary Western society (Glynos, 2008; Roper *et al.*, 2010).  
17 Furthermore, it ignores the inter- and intragenerational responsibility inherent to the concept  
18 of sustainability, which implies that careers are only sustainable if they contribute to the  
19 sustainable management of humanity's stock of capital in order to ensure the welfare of  
20 current and future generations. The effect of the neoliberalization of society and scientific  
21 research is that the focus has shifted to the individual and subsequently, any reference to  
22 collective needs, collective representation or collective identity is absent or suppressed (Bal  
23 and Dóci, 2018). The impact of an individualistic anchoring point underpinning sustainable  
24 careers is that, on the one hand, vulnerable groups of people are structurally excluded from  
25 sustainable careers, while on the other hand, those who have a privileged status are more

1 likely to secure sustainable careers. For instance, even though the conceptual paper of De Vos  
2 *et al.* (2020) discusses the systemic context of sustainable careers, its primary focuses  
3 remains on the individual and how this individual can obtain a sustainable career.

4         Moreover, even if the individual employee does not directly exploit others and does  
5 not treat them as means to realize their own career needs, on the structural level, sustainable  
6 careers are realized through the instrumentalization of the work of low-power societal groups.  
7 As a consequence, members of low-power societal groups are locked into rigid work  
8 trajectories with a low chance for social mobility. The question is then: why do people who  
9 do *not* benefit from neoliberal organizing accept their disenfranchised position, and how can  
10 an unfair system remain largely unchallenged? According to Žižek (2012), the response to  
11 this is the internalization of appealing narratives. The narrative of meritocracy implies that  
12 those who are deserving (because they are agile, competent, agentic etc.) have fulfilling,  
13 sustainable careers (Bal and Dóci, 2018). Those without successful, sustainable careers do  
14 not have them because they do not deserve them, that is, they did not work hard enough for it,  
15 and/or they are not competent, flexible or agentic enough. For example, the slower  
16 advancement of women in their careers is often explained by their lack of flexibility (because  
17 of being ‘too’ involved in childrearing, home duties, caring commitments) and agency (i.e.,  
18 lower ambitions, lower risk-taking, less agile networking, less earning power; Eckel and  
19 Grossman, 2008). By internalizing this narrative, and applying it to explain one’s own career  
20 trajectory, the *status quo* – in which the sustainable career is an ideal only achievable for  
21 some - is perpetuated, and unequal power relations remain unchallenged.

22         The emphasis within the conceptualization of sustainable careers on flexibility,  
23 meaning and agency is not unique to sustainable careers. In an overview of the broad careers  
24 literature, Akkermans and Kubasch (2017, p.586) stated that “all of these topics exemplify  
25 the importance of the individual taking responsibility for their own career success”. This is

1 not merely projected as a societal desire to empower citizens to become more agentic and  
2 take greater responsibility, but it represents a withdrawal of governmental and organizational  
3 responsibility to ensure a career to people, and thus a shifting of responsibility towards self-  
4 reliance (Bal, 2017; Bal and Dóci, 2018).

5         Those not excluded by previous criteria still face challenges in constructing  
6 sustainable careers. Notwithstanding the possibilities for people to be self-reliant and their  
7 capabilities to manage a sustainable career, an increased pressure on people to do so increases  
8 inequality in the workplace through differentiating between those workers who are able to  
9 self-manage and those workers less able, or unable, to do so (Stiglitz, 2012). Without  
10 protection within a governmental and organizational framework (e.g., through law, labor  
11 regulation, or HR-policies), the latter group of people may be less able to develop a  
12 sustainable career, and in contrast, are forced into contractual employment without job  
13 security and with low wages (Friedman, 2014; Rubery *et al.*, 2016; Wisman, 2013). Hence, in  
14 reality workers may have experiences which are in direct contrast to the promise of  
15 sustainable careers and employment, including meaning and continuity (De Vos and Van der  
16 Heijden, 2015), and fairness and equality (De Lange *et al.*, 2015). It is now well-documented  
17 how an increasing number of jobs in the gig-economy are precarious, offer little or no job  
18 security, provide little (intrinsic) meaning to workers, and transfer flexibility from the job to  
19 the person (Kalleberg, 2009; Rubery *et al.*, 2016; Standing, 2016).

20         Yet, individuals may still fantasize about having a sustainable career, and may act as  
21 if their careers are sustainable, even when they are faced with the precariousness of their  
22 working lives. A Žižekian analysis would identify such a dynamic as disavowal or dis-  
23 identification (Žižek, 1989). Dis-identification in this context refers to being in denial about  
24 the possibility that one's career may not be sustainable for oneself or for others, including  
25 future generations. Through perceiving one's career and work as meaningful, people may

1 uphold positive self-identities, and avoid alienation (Villadsen, 2016). In such ways, people  
2 can avoid confronting existential questions such as what changes they would need to make in  
3 their careers and lives for those to become ‘truly’ sustainable.

4         At the same time, individuals are held solely responsible for their career-management.  
5 When individuals fully internalize the idea of self-reliance, there is the risk that they become  
6 self-blaming and prone to experience burnout, due to the fundamental attribution error to  
7 locate responsibility to an individual, ignoring structural factors (Best *et al.*, 2005). This may  
8 lead to the supposition that one belongs to the category of ‘losers’, or those workers who are  
9 unable to obtain and develop a sustainable career. Hence, people blame themselves if they do  
10 not succeed in obtaining a sustainable career, while the organization and society gets  
11 exempted from their responsibility to provide meaningful and sustainable careers to people.  
12 In other words, people may continue to believe in the system, and actively justify the system  
13 (Jost *et al.*, 2003), but their belief in the system also requires them to accept personal  
14 accountability when failing in the system. Self-blaming can therefore be regarded as a  
15 response where reality is internalized as a personal failure, structural inequalities are ignored,  
16 and therefore one needs to work harder, exert more effort, be more proactive and self-  
17 managing to be able to develop a meaningful and sustainable career.

18         In sum, when the concept of sustainable careers is exclusively conceptualized on the  
19 basis of an individualistic anchoring point, it has the potential to undermine one of the key  
20 principles of sustainability, namely preservation of the various forms of ‘capital’ (Banerjee,  
21 2011). Not only does it not safeguard the welfare of those in current pursuit of sustainable  
22 careers but it has the potential, in its current form, to undermine the welfare of future  
23 generations by not taking into account those dimensions of sustainability that are not  
24 consistent with the ideology of neoliberalism. Should the concept of sustainable careers then

1 be thrown away? We argue that the concept should be critically revised, and possibly  
2 conceptualized around an alternative ‘anchoring point’ to retain its value.

### 3 **Towards an Alternative Conceptualization of Sustainable Careers**

4 We advocate a pluralist approach toward the study and practice of sustainable careers  
5 (Greenwood and Van Buren III, 2017). Pluralism allows for the coexistence of multiple  
6 paradigms at the same time, thereby allowing scientific debates to take place about the  
7 various (implicit) assumptions that drive our research (Matthews et al., 2016). The intention  
8 of this paper, therefore, is not to advocate *against* the concept of sustainable careers, but to  
9 conceptualize its value in the contemporary workplace. To do this, we explore how careers  
10 can be more strongly aligned with the ideal of sustainability, particularly the dimensions of  
11 intra- and intergenerational responsibility. To emphasize the importance of sustainability in  
12 sustainable careers, we offer ‘collective dignity’ (Bal, 2017; Kostera and Pirson, 2017) as one  
13 alternative anchoring point for the conceptualization of sustainable careers. It should be noted  
14 before proceeding further that collective dignity is different from collectivism, which makes  
15 individuals instrumental to the needs of the collective. In contrast to collectivism, collective  
16 dignity respects the dignity of each individual.

17 The original idea of sustainability was primarily concerned with the preservation of  
18 resources; fairness, equal priority for all, the fulfillment of the needs of all people, and the  
19 interconnectedness of multiple actors (De Lange *et al.*, 2015; Porritt, 2007), therefore taking  
20 an ethical, relational perspective on society and the planet, whereby people and nature are  
21 respected for their inherent worth and their interdependent nature is recognized. From the  
22 concept of sustainable careers, however, this ethical, relational perspective is absent, and is  
23 replaced by an individualistic perspective (Blühdorn, 2017). To bring sustainability back into  
24 sustainable careers, we suggest to reintegrate it in an ethical paradigm, and one way through  
25 which this could be achieved is the dignity framework on workplace relations (Kostera and

1 Pirson, 2017). Within this paradigm, people and nature have an intrinsic worth, and therefore  
2 they ought not to be used as mere means towards the career goals of an individual. A dignity  
3 paradigm where people and the planet are postulated to have *intrinsic worth*, distinguishes  
4 itself from a neoliberal, instrumental perspective, where exploitation of people for the  
5 achievement of individualistic goals is conceptually allowed, and even promoted (Žižek,  
6 2014). A collective dignity approach entails the notion that social practices in society and  
7 workplace should strive towards respecting and promoting the intrinsic worth of *all*  
8 individuals and of the planet itself. Our focus on dignity as anchoring point for sustainable  
9 careers has the potential to lead to contributions towards each of the five stocks of capital  
10 (Porritt, 2007). This leads to our first proposition:

11 **Proposition 1:** *A career anchored in collective dignity will be more likely to*  
12 *contribute to sustainability of the five stocks of capital (especially social and natural*  
13 *capital) than a career anchored in neoliberalism.*

14 Envisaging the sustainable career through a dignity-perspective integrates the ethical  
15 and collective dimensions of sustainability into the concept. Within this paradigm, the  
16 individual's career cannot be sustained at the expense of present and future generations, or at  
17 the expense of non-human nature. If a career is realized at such costs, it cannot be considered  
18 sustainable. Hence, the individual gives way to the 'individual embedded in the global  
19 community' (as an anchoring point), whereby the needs of all people are equally protected  
20 (De Lange *et al.*, 2015). People are respected for their inherent worth (Bal, 2017), as is  
21 nature, and therefore may not be regarded – neither directly, nor indirectly - as means to  
22 realize anyone's individual career goals and higher order needs. This leads to our second  
23 proposition:

1           **Proposition 2:** *A sustainable career anchored in collective dignity is more likely to*  
2           *contribute towards a net positive contribution to both intra- and intergenerational*  
3           *welfare, than a sustainable career anchored in neoliberalism.*

4           Within this framework, the concept of sustainable careers becomes conditional: a  
5           career may only be considered sustainable if it protects and promotes the dignity of people  
6           and the planet. From this perspective, the minimal condition for a career to be considered  
7           sustainable is that one's work or sequence of job experiences do not harm or exploit people or  
8           the natural environment (*cf.* Blühdorn, 2017). Moreover, anchoring the concept of sustainable  
9           careers around the notion of collective dignity implies a linkage between the individual career  
10          and those of others. Hence, as careers are inherently relational and embedded within the  
11          constraints of a global system, a systemic approach is necessary to understand how  
12          sustainable careers may relate to collective dignity.

13          The neoliberal anchoring of the (sustainable) career conceptualization implies that a  
14          career is competitive *per se* (i.e., individuals compete with each other for the best jobs and  
15          possibilities for a sustainable career; Bal and Dóci, 2018), while also emphasizing the  
16          individualistic nature of sustainable careers. In contrast, anchoring the concept in the notion  
17          of collective dignity prioritizes collaboration as the foundation of sustainable careers. Such  
18          collaboration may unfold at both the societal and the organizational level, whereby decisions  
19          need to be made as to how careers can be facilitated collectively, taking into account the  
20          interdependent nature of careers. More specifically, governments and organizations are able  
21          to incentivize careers that promote the preservation and accumulation of the various forms of  
22          capital, whereas careers that deplete *any* form of capital (and in particular natural, human or  
23          social capital) may be discouraged. This can be done for instance by higher income taxation  
24          (on governmental level), or lower salary (on organizational or sector level) for jobs that  
25          deplete capital. The additional governmental or organizational income that is generated

1 through this approach can be reinvested in intra- and intergenerational equity, such as  
2 investment in jobs that contribute positively to human, social or natural capital. This leads to  
3 our third proposition:

4 **Proposition 3:** *Sustainable careers anchored in collective dignity are more likely to*  
5 *contribute towards the sustainable management of humanity's stock of capital*  
6 *(natural, social, human, manufactured, and financial) upon which the welfare of*  
7 *current and future generations depend, than sustainable careers anchored in*  
8 *neoliberalism.*

9 Reconceptualizing sustainable careers within the ethical perspective of collective  
10 dignity, and anchoring its components around the individual embedded in community and  
11 nature, imply that the meaning of flexibility, meaningful work, and agency will also change.  
12 Flexibility, within this paradigm would be the indicator of an open society (Popper, 1966),  
13 where flexible career trajectories and social mobility are attainable for most people,  
14 regardless of their place in the social structure or their geographical location. Flexibility, in  
15 this sense, is something that is not something that is required of individuals for organizational  
16 benefit, but in a collective dignity paradigm, organizations become more flexible towards the  
17 needs of individuals and collective groups of workers (see e.g., Bal and Izak, 2020).

18 Moreover, work may be considered meaningful – in a sustainable way – if it  
19 contributes to collective well-being. The central emphasis of meaning is on its social aspects,  
20 or in other words, how meaning is both socially constructed (in a collective way by people),  
21 and how meaning is elicited not only for individuals but more widely for communities of  
22 people. Finally, the concept of agency would also broaden within this paradigm (or reconnect  
23 with its original meaning), and would refer to people's capacity, freedom and power to make  
24 their own career choices and shape their work circumstances to meet their needs, without  
25 being limited by socio-structural factors, and without limiting others' chances for a

1 sustainable career and a life where one is treated with dignity (Bal, 2017). Agency would  
 2 furthermore refer to the individual's capacity to have an influence on work conditions and  
 3 cultures so that they meet the wider community's needs. Moreover, agency is no longer only  
 4 constructed as an individual attribute, but also conceptualized collectively. Agency represents  
 5 the possibility for communities to exercise power and to strive for greater dignity of people  
 6 and the environment (Bal, 2017). Hence, the central elements of sustainable careers may be  
 7 re-conceptualized such that they emphasize the contribution to both individual and collective  
 8 dignity. This leads to our final proposition:

9 **Proposition 4a:** *Meaning anchored in collective dignity, as central element of a*  
 10 *sustainable career, is more likely to contribute to individual and communities'*  
 11 *meaningfulness than meaning anchored in neoliberalism.*

12 **Proposition 4b:** *Flexibility anchored in collective dignity, as central element of a*  
 13 *sustainable career, is more likely to be available to individuals and to be required of*  
 14 *organizations, than flexibility anchored in neoliberalism, where flexibility is more*  
 15 *likely to be required of individuals and available to organizations.*

16 **Proposition 4c:** *Agency anchored in collective dignity, as central element of a*  
 17 *sustainable career, is more likely to be defined both individually and collectively, and*  
 18 *to contribute to individual and communities' well-being than agency anchored in*  
 19 *neoliberalism.*

## 20 **Implications for Future Research**

21 We identify two primary implications for future research on sustainable careers on the  
 22 basis of our analysis. First, a dignity framework is important in relation to the  
 23 conceptualization of meaning, flexibility and agency. While these elements of sustainable  
 24 careers are neutral in themselves, they become ideological through a specific connotation with  
 25 individual responsibility (Greene, 2008). When explicitly anchored to the notion of the

1 individual embedded in communities and nature, and thus to the aims of achieving collective  
2 welfare for present and future generations, these elements may obtain a specific meaning  
3 which differs from the individualistic conceptualizations currently present in the literature.  
4 Consequently, the question no longer pertains to how individuals are required to be flexible,  
5 find meaning and be agentic to pursue their own individual career, but how systems may  
6 support people's need for flexibility and agency to enhance collective welfare. Consequently,  
7 future research may shed more light upon this issue.

8           Moreover, the meaning of work is not just an individual experience, but something  
9 that is inherently shared and collective (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Despite the collective nature,  
10 there still is little research on the role of collectives in eliciting meaning. Hence, new  
11 questions can be formulated on the basis of how people as part of collective groups (e.g.,  
12 teams, organizations, societies) can sustain the viability of careers through flexibility, agency  
13 and meaning-related activities. When meaning is something that does not merely unfold  
14 individually, but is inherent within collective settings, how can people support and help each  
15 other in finding and realizing meaning in their work and their careers? Moreover, individual  
16 agency in a collective welfare paradigm no longer merely serves the interests of the  
17 individual to develop a sustainable career, but becomes important in relation to how agency  
18 may support the collective welfare of people (Bal, 2017).

19           Second, collectivity is important to address the unequal balance between people who  
20 are unable and who are able to have access to sustainable careers (Coltrane, 2004). What is  
21 often neglected is the notion that careers are inherently relational and social. Hence, a career  
22 of one person may develop at the expense of others. When individuals gain access to  
23 organizational resources to build sustainable careers, it may deplete the resources available to  
24 others in the organization (e.g., employees on temporary contracts), which may stifle their  
25 opportunities for obtaining sustainable careers. Future research on such careers would help us

1 to better understand the relational and social nature of careers, which in turn will help us to  
2 better evaluate the extent to which a career can be considered to be truly sustainable.

### 3 **Conclusion**

4 This paper analyzed the concept of sustainable careers from an ideological  
5 perspective. Using Žižek's (1989, 2001) model of ideology, we ascertained how the current  
6 construction of sustainable careers offers a fantasy, particularly when it is conceptualized as  
7 careers which are attainable for everyone, and views all people as being flexible, agentic and  
8 able to give meaning to their careers. This anchoring of sustainable careers in neoliberal  
9 ideology is far from unique, and can also be traced in the boundaryless career literature. This  
10 concept has also been critiqued in the literature (e.g., Budtz-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2019; Roper *et*  
11 *al.*, 2010), such as being anchored in neoliberal normativity, presuming individual agency  
12 and responsibility for individuals to manage their careers *as if* there are no boundaries to their  
13 career wishes.

14 Ideological analysis helps to understand why a concept such as the sustainable career  
15 may actually not be so beneficial to each and every worker, despite the promise that  
16 sustainable careers are inherently good to everyone (Lawrence *et al.*, 2015; Valcour, 2013,  
17 2015). To understand this, Žižek's thinking provides an insight into what or who is excluded  
18 as a result of an ideological use of the sustainable careers concept, through projection of  
19 norms on people, who may be more or less successful in actually obtaining a sustainable  
20 career.

21 Moreover, we showed how neoliberal ideology functions as the anchoring point for  
22 the conceptualization of sustainable careers. In contrast, a collective dignity-perspective on  
23 sustainable careers (Bal, 2017; Kostera and Pirson, 2017) may offer an alternative anchoring  
24 point of the individual being embedded in the community and nature, where sustainable  
25 careers obtain new meanings, and where they more directly address the need for

1 contemporary careers to contribute to collective welfare, not only of people but also of the  
2 environment. Such a dignity perspective may help to better integrate the meaning of ‘true’  
3 sustainability within the concept of sustainable careers and it is the hope of the authors that  
4 our conceptualization of sustainable careers will help future research and practice on  
5 sustainable careers to deliver important contributions to the greater sustainability of work,  
6 careers, the planet and its peoples.

7

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