

FORUM

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WHY ADOPT A SUSTAINABILITY APPROACH IN CAREER STUDIES? A THEORETICAL ESSAY ABOUT THE FOUNDATIONS AND THE RELEVANCE OF THE DISCUSSION

Por que adotar a perspectiva da sustentabilidade nos estudos de carreira? Ensaio teórico sobre os pilares e a importância da discussão

¿Por qué adoptar un enfoque de sostenibilidad en los estudios de carrera? Un ensayo teórico sobre los fundamentos y la relevancia de la discusión

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability has been adopted as a perspective for understanding contemporary careers, which enables an analytical view of the reality of work by including human and social impacts. This theoretical essay discusses the foundations of sustainability as a core dimension of the sustainable career concept. As its main contributions, the career sustainability perspective offers a lens for a theoretical analysis emphasizing in a systemic and procedural way, and among other factors: the dynamics of the influence of multiple contexts for the continuity of individual paths; career continuity through time movements and the choices made; the interconnectivity of the diverse actors that influences individual careers; the need for a process which allows adaptive capability to be fostered, and the creation of opportunities for sustainability.

Keywords: career, career sustainability, sustainable career, sustainability social sustainability.

RESUMEN

La sostenibilidad ha aparecido como una perspectiva para la comprensión de las carreras, permitiendo una mirada analítica a la realidad del trabajo y sus impactos en lo humano y social. Este ensayo teórico tiene como objetivo discutir los fundamentos de la sostenibilidad buscando su comprensión y profundizando en ella como elemento sustentador del concepto de carrera sostenible. Como aportes, se observa que la perspectiva de sostenibilidad de las carreras se presenta como una lente teórica de análisis al enfatizar de manera sistémica y procedimental: la dinámica de la influencia de múltiples contextos para la continuidad de las trayectorias individuales; la continuidad de la carrera a través de los movimientos en el tiempo y las elecciones realizadas; la interconectividad entre los diversos actores que participan en la constitución de las carreras individuales; la necesidad de procesos que permitan promover el potencial de adaptación y la creación de oportunidades necesarias para la sostenibilidad, entre otros aspectos.

Palabras clave: carrera, carreras sostenibles, sostenibilidad de las carreras, sostenibilidad, sostenibilidad social

RESUMO

Sustentabilidade tem aparecido como perspectiva para a compreensão das carreiras, permitindo um olhar analítico para a realidade do trabalho e seus impactos no humano e no social. Neste cenário, o objetivo deste ensaio teórico é discutir os pilares da noção de sustentabilidade buscando sua compreensão e a aprofundando como elemento sustentador do conceito de carreira sustentável. Como contribuições, a perspectiva da sustentabilidade das carreiras se apresenta como lente teórica de análise ao ressaltar de modo sistêmico e processual: a dinâmica da influência dos múltiplos contextos para a continuidade das trajetórias individuais; a continuidade da carreira através de movimentos no tempo e escolhas trilhadas; a interconectividade entre os diversos atores que participam da constituição de carreiras individuais; a necessidade de processos que permitam o fomento do potencial de adaptação e criação de oportunidades necessário para a sustentabilidade, entre outros aspectos.

Palavras-chave: carreira, carreira sustentável, sustentabilidade das carreiras, sustentabilidade, sustentabilidade social.

We so love our new holy words that we turn them into clichés and commonplaces, forgetting for the moment that we must maintain their spirit, as well as their meaning. (Abrahams, 1989, p. 44)

INTRODUCTION

At first sight, it may not sound fitting to use the concept of sustainability for understanding careers. The popularity of “sustainability” as a watchword that is commonly linked to activist movements aimed at environmental preservation and the social issues that are caused by organizations, and involving actions that criticize consumption (Valentin, 2015), lies at the heart of corporate responsibility policies, practices and discourses (Kramar, 2014), and makes it difficult to understand its real meaning. In the words of McDonald and Hite (2018), “[...] references to sustainability have become ubiquitous in our culture (e.g., in job positions, TED talks, and on book covers); however, its meaning often seems vague, open to interpretation [...]”. As stated in the epigraph, sustainability currently seems to have assumed the status of a “sacred” word, one that is so enthusiastically celebrated and uncritically reproduced that it sometimes loses its essence and its meaning is associated with clichés and the commonplace (Abrahams, 1989, p. 44).

In order to clarify the importance of the discussion, it would seem relevant to briefly revisit aspects that in recent years have increased the complexity of the world of work, culminating in the introduction of the sustainability dimension in career studies. Technological advances, productive restructuring processes, open markets, and rearrangements between productive forces, have resulted in new ways of living and working, the end of certain types of work and the emergence of other, newer work (McDonald & Hite, 2018). The notion of employment has been redefined considering the new work arrangements and different employment relationships that now exist (Barley *et al.*, 2017; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, this scenario in career studies has been reflected in the emergence of contemporary understandings that seek to encompass these new work configurations and demands. These perspectives – the so-called “new careers” - intersect and emphasize individual movement between and beyond organizational structures, as opposed to traditional careers, which meant vertical ascension within the same organization (Lawrence, Hall & Arthur, 2015; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Individuals are now more responsible for their own inclusion in the labor market and for remaining in it, and for managing their own careers. Employability, often used as the guiding logic of this mobility, is linked to the individual search for experiences that help increase one’s chances of working in the foreign market, considering the job market as a whole, and internally within the organizational environment (Forrier, Verbruggen & De Cuyper, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019).

In recent years, however, external and uncontrollable factors have increasingly affected the labor market, and these have put career continuity at risk (McDonald & Hite, 2018). The human consequences of the current organization of work are revealed as the precariousness

of employment, growth in economic insecurity, and uncertainty with regard to remaining in employment (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). The limitations of the potential for individual action focus perspectives exclusively on sometimes unrealistic agency, given the complexity of the relationships that permeate the construction of career trajectories (Akkermans, Seibert & Mol, 2018). In this sense, there is, in the literature on careers, a certain analytical neglect in investigating the role of institutions, contexts, and political aspects for constructing careers, and in job opportunities for the entire workforce (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates and reinforces the need to adopt new perspectives for analyzing the reality of work that emphasize strategies for creating long-term career resilience, and go beyond adjusting old theoretical models (Hite & McDonald, 2020).

Assuming the contextual complexity and the need to embrace the different actors' roles in providing opportunities for career development over time, sustainability is a theoretical alternative for analyzing careers in view of the rapid changes in the reality of work (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). As a branch of its social pillar, career-related sustainability entails protecting and promoting (rather than depleting) human and career development, by emphasizing the individual need for renewal and balancing priorities (Newman 2011). The discussion primarily proposes having a long-term vision and a responsibility that is shared between the organizations and institutions that are linked and working together on social sustainability and, consequently, on its systemic effect on careers. As Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015, p. 2) explain:

In today's New Economy, in which uncertainties and difficulties prevail around the world, the focus on career sustainability is of immediate importance. As workers move from an expectation of lifelong employment to the need to protect their employability, it is important to expand our knowledge of those elements that contribute to the sustainability of the careers of all workers, and to deepen our understanding of factors that, at different levels, affect this sustainability (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 2).

Despite proposing an innovative perspective, however, a more careful reading of the main theoretical studies on sustainability and careers (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; De Vos, Van der Heijden & Akkermans, 2020; De Lange, Kooij & Van der Heijden, 2015) reveal that the understanding of “sustainability” is often taken as a given, or is little explored in terms of its basic foundations, which makes it difficult to grasp its concept in its entirety. The lack of conceptual universality also contributes to the inconsistent theoretical and practical application of sustainability to different areas of knowledge (Valentin, 2015). In this sense, there is a lot of criticism of the actual possibility of implementing the guidelines of the classic sustainability goals, for example at the organizational level. Sustainable human resource management, which is critical to career studies, commonly faces the contradiction involved in the role of sustainability as a mediator between the profit goal of organizations and the well-being of people at work, especially considering the reality in developing countries, in which many challenges affect individuals and communities and there are different work-related issues (Mascarenhas & Barbosa, 2019). Critics also claim that sustainability emerged and grew stronger in order to promote an ideology for preventing a capitalist reality from showing its true colors (Vizeu, Meneghetti & Seifert, 2012).

Sustainability is understood here as a theoretical lens for understanding careers in a dynamic way, considering the individual's interaction in those social spaces that permeate trajectories as they develop (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). These assumptions are reflected in the sustainable career concept (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017), in the process model of the sustainable career (De Vos *et al.*, 2020), and in the career ecosystem theory (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019), which are complementary theoretical concepts that find points of convergence in "sustainability" in its dynamic and procedural sense.

This discussion has been addressed from the social perspective of sustainability, especially in regard to work, based on studies in workability (De Lange *et al.*, 2015), sustainable work systems (Docherty *et al.*, 2009), and human sustainability (Pfeffer, 2010). These perspectives emphasize the social aspect of sustainability that is understood by those processes that favor the maintenance and continuous development of careers, and the promotion of settings that are more inclusive and capable of more effectively covering the challenges of work safety in uncertain contexts (De Lange *et al.*, 2015).

Based on this issue, this theoretical essay presents and discusses some of the fundamental pillars of sustainability and how they are reflected in career studies, in order to emphasize its importance when analyzing contemporary careers. To this end we critically analyzed the conceptual foundations of the discussion of career sustainability in order to identify any conceptual elements that have not been sufficiently well explored hitherto. We considered the references to sustainability in the studies we identified in the literature review on the Web of Science database in October 2020, which were searched for under "title", "abstract" and "keywords", with the terms "*sustainable career*" (115 articles found) and "*career sustainability*" (33 articles found). After excluding articles that do not address "careers" as their main theme, 47 we identified eligible articles, which we carefully read as the authors of this essay, and analyzed their theoretical references in order to understand how "sustainability" is addressed and discussed in these studies. Over the following sections, these references will be accessed and analyzed in depth as a part of this theoretical essay.

SUSTAINABILITY: THE CONTEXT AND MAIN PILLARS OF THE DISCUSSION

The main discussions on sustainability in academic literature invariably mention the definitions of sustainable development and sustainability presented in 1987 by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development – the Brundtland Report (Valentin, 2015). Entitled "Our Common Future," the aim of the report was to present an agenda for global change and a common future for humanity (Ehnert & Harry, 2012). The emergence of these questions is strictly related to the world of work, which is shaped in response to the industrialization processes that have been experienced since the 19th century. In addition to the concern with environmental decline, the measures relate to social impact and the continuous waste of human resources due to the dominant focus of nations on economic growth and development. The

focus falls, therefore on organizations, not only as being responsible for the impacts caused, but as the agents that potentially collaborate to promote practices and actions that lead to the changes sought by the Commission (Valentin, 2015).

Sustainability is presented as an overview of the world, according to which everyone must make an effort so that current needs are met without preventing future generations from being able to meet their needs (Docherty *et al.*, 2009). Underlying this definition is the concept of sustainable development, which is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report, 1987, p. 43). Both definitions are considered to be the classic perspective of the discussion, and were adopted as a starting point for understanding the concepts here presented (Docherty *et al.*, 2009; Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Kramar, 2014).

Docherty, Kira, and Shani (2009) interpret the meanings involved in the concept, and outline the existence of three fundamental and interconnected dimensions. The (i) “principle” dimension, which emphasizes the importance of protecting the world’s resource wealth through preservation, regeneration, and development. Every generation has a responsibility to protect the resources it uses, and for the processes by which those resources are formed or regenerated. The (ii) “priority” dimension, which defines the priority of meeting people’s needs now and in the future, and places them before the desires and ambitions of privileged people in the present. This dimension involves a notion of continuity and encompasses the discussion on social justice that is outlined in the Brundtland Report. Finally, (iii) the “progress” dimension, which highlights the capacity of systems to develop constantly, which is necessary for their renewal and preservation. Inserted in the current context, this dimension is often linked to the role of technological innovation as allies in the search for ecological and social sustainability, in addition to assuming the impact of developing technology and organizations in these areas. The equal ability that innovation has, however, of destroying or harming system continuity must not be ignored, which highlights the interconnection that exists between the principles: resources must be protected by adopting short- and long-term perspectives to enable renewal, while maintaining constant efforts to develop these resources (Docherty *et al.*, 2009).

In line with these principles, the Brundtland Report recognizes the interconnectedness of the ecological, social, and economic factors that are present in the concept of sustainability (Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Kramar, 2014). In 1997, economist John Elkington (2006) coined the term “Triple Bottom Line” for translating this idea for use at the organizational level. The concept states that “corporations and other organizations create value in multiple dimensions,” and, in the case of sustainability, it refers to “economic, social or environmental value – added or destroyed value” (Elkington, 2006, p. 523). The main idea lies in assuming that in a sustainable system, human, social, environmental, and economic resources must be able to grow and develop together. It is based on the notion that the operations of a company, or any other work system (public or private organization, for-profit or non-profit), affect not only the shareholders, but also its stakeholders, such as employees, customers, suppliers, the environment, and the surrounding economic system (Docherty *et al.*, 2009; Elkington, 2006), all of whom must be taken into consideration in the business strategy.

These fundamentals have been applied in organizations and predominantly support the definitions of sustainability in the business world and in management research (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017; Kramar, 2014). According to the principles outlined by Docherty *et al.* (2009) and the Triple Bottom Line concept (Elkington, 2006), the characteristics predominantly associated with sustainability include: (i) a focus on the internal and external impacts on the organization, with sustainability being understood in terms of the short- and long-term impacts on different stakeholders; (ii) recognition of the interconnection and interaction of stakeholders with organizational systems and subsystems, with social systems and with the environment in which these systems operate (Kramar, 2014); (iii) the adoption of a short- and long-term notion by assuming the interconnectivity of these systems; and, finally, (iv) considering the interconnectedness of systems and the different effects of these relationships in the strategic decision-making of organizations (De Lange *et al.*, 2015; Docherty *et al.*, 2009).

Although sustainability involves three fundamental pillars, there is a noticeably greater emphasis on the environmental dimension by theorists and in public discourse (Pfeffer, 2010). Organizations have moved center stage due to their intense use of natural resources over 200 years of industrial development, accompanied by a western consumer lifestyle that contributes to environmental degradation (Ehnert & Harry, 2012). The trend towards Green Management strongly penetrates organizational policies and practices (Valentin, 2015), which are supported by a context in which companies are under increasing popular pressure to be “greener” (Pfeffer, 2010). Only in the first decade of the 21st century did social sustainability – or human sustainability – begin to receive special attention from researchers (De Lange *et al.*, 2015). Pfeffer’s (2010) definition is frequently adopted (De Lange *et al.*, 2015; Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Kramar, 2014; McDonald & Hite, 2018; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015) for defining the differences between the emphasis on environmental sustainability practices, which focus on the “physical” aspects of sustainability, and social practices:

In the same way that physical sustainability considers the consequences of organizational activity for material and physical resources, social sustainability must consider the way in which organizational activities affect well-being - work-related stress in the human system - and the physical and mental health, as well as the effects of business practices, such as working hours and behaviors, which produce stress in work environment groups and in group cohesion, in addition to being related to the richness of social life, exemplified by participation in civic, voluntary and community organizations (Pfeffer, 2010, p. 35).

Given this situation, sustainability at work is a development of the discussion on sustainability, and is especially relevant in career studies. In this sense, Docherty *et al.* (2009) emphasize the social dimension as a unifying pillar of sustainability, based on the following premises: (1) the opportunity to develop people, professionals and members of society through work experiences, or a person supporting themselves through work; a basic human right; (2) in the contemporary world of work, which is characterized by rapid change, intense intellectual work, global competition, and social values that emphasize equality and human dignity, the sustainability of human and

social resources is one of the foundations of economic sustainability; (3) the sustainability of human resources at work is one of the foundations for the social development and sustainability of entire societies; and (4) the sustainability of human and social resources is necessary to ensure economic sustainability, because only people and groups that operate sustainably are able to understand, prioritize and work towards ecological sustainability.

In this proposal, “sustainability means the dynamic state of becoming sustainable, a process founded on conscious efforts to create new opportunities for existence in multiple domains and at multiple levels, now and in future;” sustainable development, in turn, refers to “the active efforts of people to support this dynamic state of sustainability” (Docherty *et al.* 2009, p. 8). These definitions are based on the concept of human sustainability that was presented by Holling (2001), in which:

Sustainability is the ability to create, experience and maintain *adaptive capability*. Development is the process of creating, experimenting, and maintaining opportunities. The expression that brings the two terms together, “sustainable development,” refers to the objective of encouraging *adaptive capabilities* and creating opportunities. It is not, therefore, an oxymoron, but a term that describes a logical partnership (Holling, 2001, p. 390).

In the context of work, “[...] sustainable development is a change, a learning process that must occur at all levels of the organization: individually, collectively, between organizational levels and beyond them – among organizations, networks, coalitions, and systems (Docherty *et al.*, 2009, p.10)”; processes that enable the nurturing of the adaptive potential needed for sustainability (Docherty *et al.*, 2009; Holling, 2001). At the individual level, sustainable development involves the continuous process of acquiring new knowledge and skills, and especially “reflection on assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and values” (Docherty *et al.*, 2009, p. 11). These notions enable career conceptions that are essentially centered on the role of the agency, to be extended in order to emphasize the interaction between the individual and social spaces that permeate their trajectories, as well as the results of these relationships (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020).

The section below will explore these issues by bringing together the concepts and definitions developed by Docherty *et al.* (2009) and Holling (2001) in career ecosystem studies (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019) and workability (De Lange *et al.*, 2015), and then focus on sustainability as a concept through the perspective of sustainable careers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

THE DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABILITY IN CAREER STUDIES: THE CAREER ECOSYSTEM THEORY AND A DISCUSSION OF WORKABILITY

Like the Brundtland Commission’s assumptions with regard to the need to take into consideration the interrelationship of different stakeholders (Kramar, 2014), the sustainability dimension

brings to careers the notion of interconnectedness between the different players that participate in the constitution of individual careers. Career is defined as the sequence of work experiences throughout an individual's life that has its own complexity in accordance with the reality experienced (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). The discussion of sustainability is, therefore, included in the proposal of the concept to broaden the understanding of the construction of careers at the individual level, while also considering: (i) the influences of different actors and career contexts; (ii) the changes that occur in these contexts; and (iii) the dynamic nature of these contexts (De Vos, Dujardin, Gielens & Meyers, 2016).

Baruch (2015) presents a proposal to articulate the perspective of the systemic interaction between actors that is inherent in sustainability, based on the ecosystem notion. Applying the logic of the ecosystem to careers assumes understanding its operation in a constellation that is part of a political, social, and economic phenomenon in a global context (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). The term “ecosystem” is inherited from ecology and, based on its conceptual foundations, is adopted as a metaphor for introducing a career perspective that considers the interrelationship, influence, and interaction of actors at each level of the system:

[...] an ecosystem is a holistic and integrated ecological concept, which combines living organisms and physical resources to the system. I define career ecosystems as a metaphorical use of the concept of ecosystem adopted to the field of management and behavioral sciences, in which organisms are replaced by human beings, and the physical environment is replaced by a complex system of labor markets – organizations, from small to large, private to public, national to global companies (Baruch, 2015, p 365).

The career ecosystem perspective is mentioned in studies on sustainable careers (De Vos *et al.*, 2016; De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017) to clarify the systemic and dynamic interactivity that exists between actors and social spaces in career development. External economic and social factors can change the dynamics of the career ecosystem, and lead to actors searching for equilibrium in the system. Every change in the world of work has implications for individuals and all other actors involved in career-related policies at the organizational and societal level. While organizations must reconsider the meaning of the organizational career and how career management can accommodate both individual and organizational needs, policymakers face challenges related to employment sustainability and employability that involve the entire workforce (De Vos *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, the perspective of career ecosystems as a theoretical analytical lens enables the identification and analysis of, factors that limit or create opportunities for career development and their sustainability (*push and pull factors*), (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Guo & Baruch, 2021), allowing the actors involved to undertake actions that contribute towards a more sustainable career.

As the master of their own career, the individual is the main actor in the system, able to have a more incisive impact on sustainability through decisions that directly or indirectly affect the continuity of their career (Baruch, 2015). Sustainability, in this individual scope, resides in the capacity for adaptation and development within a system aimed at ensuring a state

of equilibrium (Docherty *et al.*, 2009; Holling, 2001), which is achieved through dynamic adjustments that (re)shape active relationships between actors and learn from these interactions (Baruch, 2015). It is a continuous lifelong learning process, in which individuals continuously affect their career potential through the choices they make with regard to their mobility, learning, and the numerous ways in which they acquire new skills (Baruch, 2015; De Vos *et al.*, 2016). Internal factors, such as behavioral aspects, especially proactivity and initiative, personal values, and experiences that are directly or indirectly related to work (McDonald & Hite, 2018) are relevant to sustainability as they guide individual development in the system (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

The need to build employability is linked to sustainability and associated with the ability to work. The individual search for experiences that encourage employability should not, however, compromise career development in the medium and long term. The notion of employability relates the role of actors in providing job opportunities and developing sustainable careers (Lawrence, Hall & Arthur, 2015) by way of organizational policies and practices that foster the development of learning and skills (Bozionelos, Lin & Lee, 2020), for example, or via public policies aimed at diversity and inclusion (Gupta & Priyadarshi, 2020; Brzykcy, Boehm & Baldrige, 2020). This discussion is often approached from the perspective of workability (De Lange *et al.*, 2015), which expresses the extent to which an individual is able to work in the present and near future, considering their physical and mental resources, and the work demands that are required at the performance level. Workability is literally the ability to work, referring to the physical, psychological, and social conditions that affect career continuity. The World Health Organization's definition of "health" is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not just the absence of disease or infirmity (Aalbers & De Lange, 2015; De Lange *et al.*, 2015; Bozionelos, Lin & Lee, 2020).

The main studies on workability emphasize the role of economic, legal, and political organizations and institutions in promoting practices aimed at sustainability at work (Aalbers & De Lange, 2015; De Lange *et al.*, 2015). Individual well-being is the ultimate purpose of these propositions, as it is an essential condition for sustaining careers in the long run. Analogous to the concept of sustainability, workability highlights the shared responsibility of different actors to preserve human resources in work settings. De Lange *et al.* (2015) analyze the ability to work on three levels: (i) the micro level, which is influenced by variables related to health in general, lifestyle, functional abilities, personal experiences, and other characteristics that are inherent in individual reality; (ii) the meso level, in which the variables predominantly belong to the scope of work, considering, for example, effects such as ergonomics, physical load, the leadership styles that influence motivation and individual well-being; and, (iii) the macro level, which refers to relationships and the social context (e.g., social support, rules and regulations/laws) as potential influencers (De Lange *et al.*, 2015).

A theoretical alternative for articulating discussions on workability in career studies was carried out via the procedural notion known as the sustainable career, which assumes career sustainability to be the result of the interactions of individuals in the different social areas that combine to make up their trajectories. This possibility will be addressed below, based on

fundamental approximations between the understanding of sustainability and the theoretical assumptions that support the concept of sustainable career.

SUSTAINABLE CAREER: SUSTAINABILITY AS A CONCEPT IN CAREER STUDIES

Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015) present the concept of sustainable career as “[...] ‘the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual’” (p.7). In line with the notion of the interconnectedness of actors and social spaces that are set out in the notion of sustainability, De Vos *et al.* (2020) suggest the concept should be understood from a systemic perspective, highlighting the influence of the multiple contexts that influence and affect them, and from a dynamic perspective, aimed at capturing the way that changes over time impact and constitute elements of career sustainability. To do so, the authors start from four fundamental dimensions that constitute contemporary conceptions of career: time, social space, agency and meaning.

In terms of a systemic perspective, the sustainable career theory assumes that the individual is the main actor, and is active in managing their career. They influence and are influenced by the social spaces or the contexts that permeate them (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, career sustainability needs the involvement of several stakeholders who work on career trajectories, which the theory points out as being influenced by the international context, the national context, the political system, the educational system, the labor market and the organizational context (De Vos *et al.*, 2016). The assumptions in Baruch’s (2015) proposal on career ecosystems and the principles of sustainability (Docherty *et al.*, 2009; Holling, 2001) are directly related to this aspect, which highlights the interconnection between these contexts. The individual, as the main person responsible for conducting his/her career, characterizes the “agency” dimension (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; Lawrence *et al.*, 2015). The agency capability, however, is limited or made possible by the contextual conditions that result from the individual’s interaction with the actors who permeate their trajectories. Behavioral aspects inherent in employability precepts are especially relevant for sustainable trajectories (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

From a dynamic perspective, the concept of the sustainable career emphasizes the cycles of events and decisions that permeate individual careers, and “clarifies how factors internal to individuals and within their context change over time” (De Vos *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). This in particular comprises the “time” dimension in relation to his/her interaction with society, as being the individual’s development over the years. This means understanding careers to be a phenomenon that is situated both in time and historically (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020), considering the different events that lead to structural changes in work and consequently affect individual careers: for example, processes for restructuring production, the globalization of the economy (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019) and, more recently, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hite & McDonald, 2020).

The essence of sustainability is the ability to continue over time (Docherty *et al.*, 2009). It is lifelong decisions that will determine career sustainability, in which there is a diversity of possible continuity patterns, involving cycles of transition between jobs and roles, such as changing companies and temporary status as a result of a particular event (unemployment, voluntary work, gap year). Each decision-making process involves the particularities of the career moment that is experienced, such as insertion and professional qualification (Blokker, Akkermans, Tims, Jansen, Khapova, 2019), the need for career ascension, preparing for retirement, and other constituent elements of professional trajectories (De Vos *et al.*, 2016; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015), in addition to limitations or opportunities in the social sphere. At this point it is important to analyze the circumstantial aspects that are inherent in the socioeconomic conditions that permeate career development, especially in countries like Brazil where there is a structural discrepancy in opportunities and access to resources.

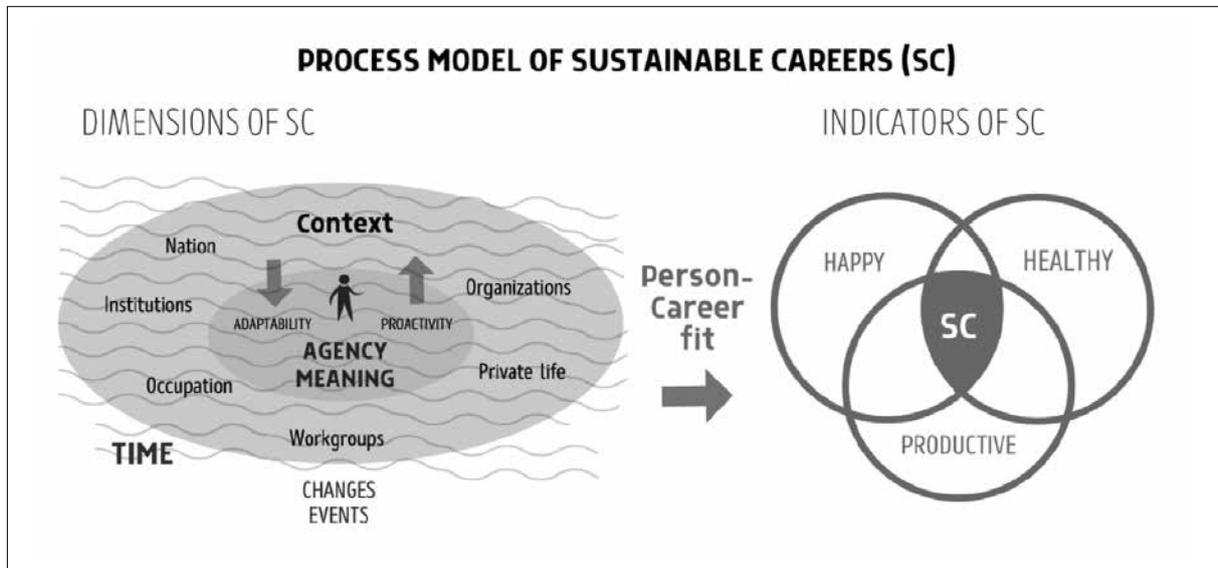
From its dynamic aspect, career sustainability can also be understood as a cyclical and self-regulated process, in which positive and negative experiences and events, and the way these events are perceived and interpreted by the individual and the different stakeholders involved, provide opportunities for what De Vos *et al.* (2020, p. 2) call “dynamic learning”. This is a process by which the individual captures opportunities from the various experiences and events they experience, and incorporates them in the personal context (by developing skills and competences) and in a number of the social spaces with which they interact. Dynamic learning thus allows individuals to influence and adapt to the contexts in which they participate, thereby improving their self-awareness and their understanding of their personal and organizational context, and more broadly, of the labor market (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

The term “cyclical” is used to express the perspective of continuity present in the general notion of sustainability (Docherty *et al.*, 2009), in which career sustainability implies protecting and promoting (rather than depleting) human and career development, by redefining the person-career fit (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). This fit is guided by what gives meaning to the person, an aspect that also changes according to the implications that social spaces have with regard to careers. The “meaning” attributed to careers is, in itself, fundamental to the concept of a sustainable career, referring to the particularities of each individual being considered with regard to the subjective criteria of success. It is inherent in the agency issue, as it guides the sense of direction towards career choices that are considered relevant to the moment. It can involve both objective aspects of career – salaries and bonuses – and subjective criteria of success, referring to intrinsic needs: self-fulfillment, flexible careers that facilitate the balance between work and life, a career with less intense demands, with greater mental and physical well-being, and a number of other possibilities (De Vos *et al.*, 2016, 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Meaning is also related to the opportunities or structural limitations of socioeconomic aspects, which emphasize the systemic character of career development.

Based on our understanding of sustainability as a dynamic state, a process based on efforts aimed at creating and maintaining an adaptative capability (Docherty *et al.*, 2009; Holling, 2001) that is applied to careers through the need to develop employability (Van der Heijde & Van

der Heijde, 2006) and workability (Aalbers & De Lange, 2015), De Vos *et al.* (2020) introduce three indicators of sustainable careers: “productive”, “healthy” and “happy”. These indicators represent aspects that are essential for individual prosperity, as well as being foundations for the individual’s well-being in the different social spaces with which they interact (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Aligned and balanced, these dimensions integrate the characteristics of sustainable careers. Figure 1 graphically represents this relationship.

Figure 1. Sustainable Career Dimensions and Indicators



Source: Adapted from De Vos *et al.* (2020).

Career sustainability is achieved from the person-career dynamic fit based on different experiences that ensure a balance between these indicators. The systemic perspective assumes the influence of the context (social space), in which the theory highlights work groups, organizations, occupation, nation (legislation, demography), various institutions, as well as aspects of private life, and the various changes in the person, and the importance of their potential for adapting through proactivity, and their initiative in regard to building a sustainable career. The person, who is central to the model (agency), is in constant interaction with the context (grey arrows), in which “proactivity” and “adaptability” stand out as fundamental behavioral aspects for sustainability. The dynamic perspective refers to changes that establish the need for the dynamic adjustment of the individual in their interaction with their life and career contexts. This process is necessary given the events that constantly permeate the trajectories and contexts of careers, and require the individual to adapt and change. Sustainability indicators are guided by the “meaning” dimension, the intrinsic and specific needs that are prioritized at a certain point in the career (time dimension).

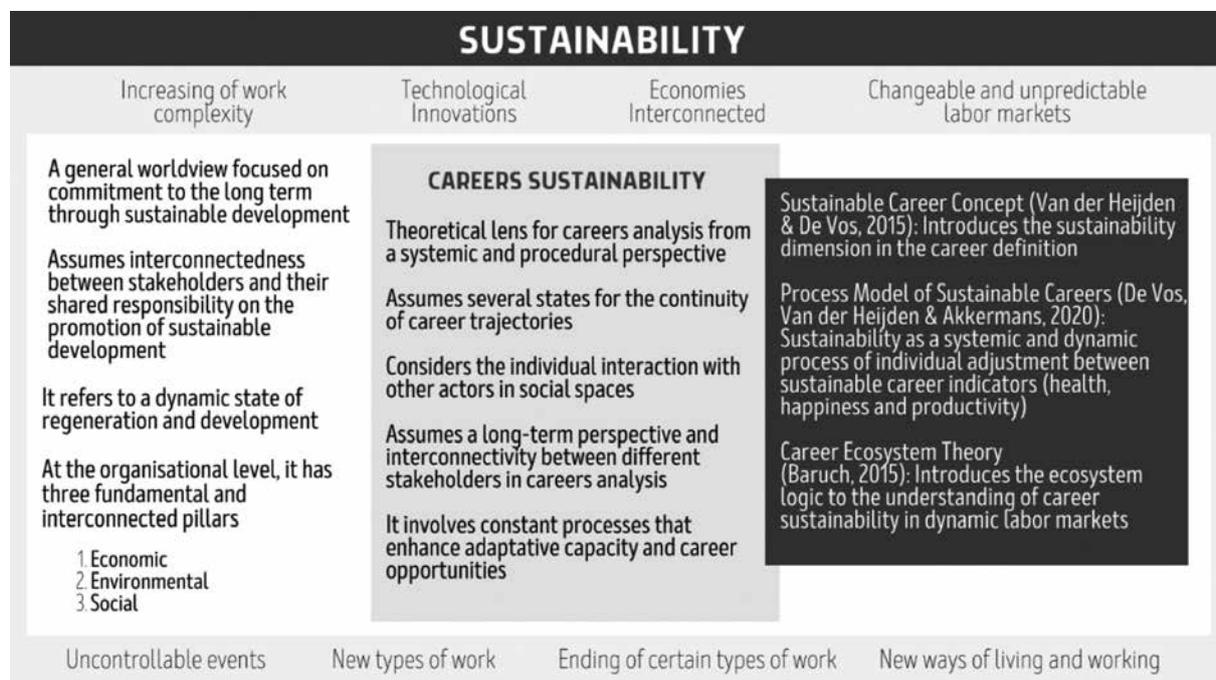
The fundamental character of employability for conquering and maintaining a space in the labor market implies the inclusion of this aspect in the dimension related to “productivity,” understood as: a good performance at work (when there is some kind of bond with the organization);

high employability or future career potential; or even the development of competences in conformity with the demands of the labor market. “healthy” means the mental and physical health of individuals, and is related to the perception of well-being and the quality of life, elements that are, in themselves, indicators of career sustainability. Finally, “happy” involves the perception of success or career satisfaction, and emphasizes the need to align career with individual values, career goals, or work-life balance and personal growth as indicators of sustainability, which are aspects that are variable due to the moment experienced (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

While “productive” is associated with the need to develop constant employability, the “healthy” and “productive” dimensions are related to the long-term work capability (workability) as a central aspect for career sustainability. The dynamic fit between the indicators refers to the understanding of sustainability as a process, and not as an ultimate state, as discussed by Holling (2001) and Docherty *et al.* (2009). The connection between the indicators reinforces the interdependence of employability with aspects related to well-being, a fundamental attribute for sustainability, which extends the understanding of employability as being centered on the development of learning to encompass the influence of structural elements that affect career continuity.

The sustainable career concept and the process model of a sustainable career are complementary theoretical perspectives, which address the dimension of sustainability in its dynamic and systemic nature. As well as the career ecosystem theory, these proposals incorporate the classic foundations of the sustainability discussion, offering theoretical lenses for analyzing career development in the current work context, which is primarily marked by mutability, complexity, and uncertainty. These relationships have been articulated throughout this theoretical essay and are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Discussion of Sustainability in Career Studies



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This essay was written to articulate and discuss elements that justify the importance and “whys” of adopting the sustainability perspective in careers. The arguments presented herein assume there is a need to clarify the conceptual bases of understanding sustainability in its social dimension for comprehending its application as a theoretical and conceptual lens for analyzing careers based on the development of individuals in multiple contexts over time.

In this sense, the notions of “career sustainability” and “sustainable careers” are distinct and complementary approaches. Career sustainability is a process. It is a dynamic state of constant transformation in response to changes in the world of work, while preserving and developing aspects that are intrinsically important to human prosperity. It is not a static, linear, and predictable process, but is subject to constant cycles and different experiences that constitute life and career trajectories, characterized as being more or less sustainable according to the results of the relationships between the actors in the short, medium, and long term. The concept of the sustainable career represents an ideal type, an analytical tool that uses the dimension of sustainability as a theoretical lens to investigate the different patterns of career continuity, the influence of the actors and structures, and by way of indicators maps out those factors that contribute to or inhibit the individual’s ability to build a career in different contexts. As [Lawrence, Hall, and Arthur \(2015, p. 444\)](#) point out in the Handbook of Research on Sustainable Careers:

It seems unlikely that any person or corporate executive would disagree that sustainable careers are good for workers as well as organizations. The definition including work-ability and employability is a win-win. However, these attributes raise several questions about how we explore the subject. Sustainable careers represent an ‘ideal type’. We may never be able to pin down what is or is not a sustainable career. Rather, we may need to identify more and less sustainable careers.

Since each career path is subjective and unique, there is no way to define what constitutes a sustainable career. The indicators, however, allow the individual and contextual factors that contribute to more or less sustainable paths to be identified and understood ([De Vos et al., 2020](#)), thus facilitating the action of important factors, such as organizations and institutions linked to work, in promoting the practices and policies that foster career sustainability at the individual level, and social sustainability as a systemic consequence of this intervention. Delving deeper into the fundamentals of sustainability clarifies the particularities of the concept of the sustainable career, which accommodates its general fundamentals under three central notions: (i) continuity, presenting a long-term perspective as a career change; (ii) constant development by way of dynamic learning processes; (iii) renewal and balance through adaptability, which is possible because of the person-career dynamic fit between the “productive”, “healthy” and “happy” indicators of career sustainability, which are considered the foundations of individual prosperity ([De Vos et al., 2020](#)).

An important contribution of the article in this regard is that it emphasizes looking at career continuity, which involves the need for attention to be paid to well-being, health, and the relevance of work and social life, which implies human and social development as a basis for economic development. The emphasis on different actors and contexts and on the dynamics of these relationships reveals the interconnection and interaction of these actors with organizational systems and subsystems, with social systems and with the environment in which these systems operate (Kramar, 2014), which are a promising reference for expanding career analysis.

Individual agency is also central to understanding adaptive movements in the career ecosystem. This look at career sustainability, however, aims to broaden this view by assuming a systemic and dynamic perspective of the relationships between individuals and contexts, and the actors operating in these contexts, with an emphasis on the contextual interaction process, and highlighting contextual conditions and aspects, such as the importance of resilience and adaptation (of both individuals and systems), and a long-term focus. In studies carried out in Brazil, the ecosystem perspective is appropriate for revealing those structural aspects that reinforce inequalities in work and career opportunities, and subsequently guide intervention opportunities by way of public or organizational policies.

In addition to technologies and other structural aspects that have had an impact on work, the current global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of adopting a systemic perspective. As the report by the International Labour Organization (2021) points out, by the end of 2021 around 200 million people will be unemployed globally, and a large part of the workforce has had their wages reduced, thereby increasing the number of poor working people by around 8.8 million. Given this scenario, as demonstrated in relevant international studies (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020), the person-context relationship interaction is an interesting analytical alternative for understanding the impacts on careers given the challenges created by the pandemic.

Although there is no explanation of the fundamental issues required for analyzing careers and their dynamics in the Brazilian context, which is marked by historically-produced social differences (related to class, race, gender), the sustainability dimension reveals inequalities through the longitudinal observation of career patterns in different analysis groups. We suggest that these aspects should be studied in future discussions of careers, and the ecosystem as a whole, when the particularities of each actor, or even broader contextual elements, such as the internationalization and digitization of work, should be emphasized.

Expanding the understanding of careers with a focus on the interaction between actors is, therefore, one of the main contributions of this study as it clarifies the inclusion of the sustainability dimension in career studies. This procedural perspective adds a unique aspect to existing career theories by allowing a systemic and dynamic understanding as careers develop, by following the contextual changes and actions of different actors. As a theoretical lens, sustainability thus contributes a new way of understanding careers, which is capable of encompassing the complexity of the relationships between a person and the different social spaces with which he/she interacts. From looking at a recent field of study that has extensive theoretical and practical

possibilities, we offer the notion of the “dynamic state” becoming sustainable because of its potential for adaptation, experimentation, and the creation of new opportunities.

As a theoretical implication, the study also examines discussions on sustainable careers and career sustainability within the context of Brazil, using approaches that were specifically developed in research centers in the Netherlands that are renowned for being avant-garde in several fields. As seen above, sustainability as a process goes beyond the concept of a sustainable career, enabling the demographic and socioeconomic contextualization of Brazilian regions that have characteristics that are different from those found in Europe, which makes the topic attractive for problematization and new avenues of investigation.

This theoretical essay promotes reflections on the role of organizations as the facilitators of sustainable careers, and suggests some conceptual foundations that can be used for guiding future practical actions that have a systematic impact on social sustainability in its broadest sense. As its ultimate goal, the study is expected to motivate organizational practices or public policies that address the concept of “sustainability” in their fundamental pillars, considering the importance of these actors for fostering sustainable careers. Going beyond the hype surrounding the term and its discursive implications, effective efforts are needed to ensure that the sustainability perspective is fully applied and developed, and thus clearly benefits all actors in the career ecosystem.

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Camila Vieira Müller and Angela Beatriz Scheffer both worked on the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, on the conduction of the theoretical review, in the discussion and analysis of the adopted theory, as well as on the writing and final revision of the manuscript.