

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

3
4 P. Matthijs Bal

5 University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom

6
7 Lee Matthews

8 University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

9
10 Edina Dóci

11 VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands

12
13 Lucy McCarthy

14 Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, United Kingdom

15
16 *Manuscript in press with Career Development International*

17
18 Correspondence should be addressed to: Matthijs Bal, University of Lincoln, Lincoln

19 International Business School, Lincoln LN6 7TS, United Kingdom. Email:

20 mbal@lincoln.ac.uk; +44-1522-835341.

21

22

23

24

25

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

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.

1

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

3 Running Head: Ideology and Sustainable Careers

4

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

1 **References**

- 2 Akkermans, J. and Kubasch, S., (2017). “#Trending topics in careers: a review and future
3 research agenda”, *Career Development International*, Vol. 6, pp. 586-627.
- 4 Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2016). “Intellectual failure and ideological success in
5 organization studies: The case of transformational leadership”, *Journal of Management
6 Inquiry*, 25(2), pp.139-152.
- 7 Alvesson, M. and Sandberg, J. (2011). Generating research questions through
8 problematization. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2), pp.247-271.
- 9 Bahn, K., Cohen, J. and van der Meulen Rodgers, Y. (2020). A Feminist Perspective on
10 COVID-19 and the Value of Care Work Globally. *Gender, Work & Organization*, Vol.
11 27, pp. 695-699.
- 12 Bakker, I. (2003). Neo-liberal governance and the reprivatization of social reproduction:
13 Social provisioning and shifting gender orders. In *Power, production and social
14 reproduction* (pp. 66-82). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- 15 Bal, M. (2017). *Dignity in the workplace: New theoretical perspectives*. Amsterdam:
16 Springer.
- 17 Bal, P.M. and de Jong, S.B. (2017). From human resource management to human dignity
18 development: A dignity perspective on HRM and the role of workplace democracy.
19 In *Dignity and the Organization* (pp. 173-195). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- 20 Bal, P.M. and Dóci, E. (2018). Neoliberal ideology in work and organizational
21 psychology. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 27(5), pp.536-
22 548.
- 23 Bal, P. M. and Izak M. (2020). Paradigms of flexibility: a systematic review of research on
24 workplace flexibility. *European Management Review*, in press.

- 1 Bal, P.M. and Jansen, P.G. (2016). Workplace flexibility across the lifespan. In *Research in*
2 *Personnel and Human Resources Management*, Vol.34, pp. 43-99. Emerald Group
3 Publishing Limited.
- 4 Banerjee, S.B. (2011). Embedding sustainability across the organization: A critical
5 perspective. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(4), pp.719-731.
- 6 Baruch, Y. and Forstenlechner, I. (2017), Global careers in the Arabian Gulf: Understanding
7 motives for self-initiated expatriation of the highly skilled, globally mobile
8 professionals", *Career Development International*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 3-22
- 9 Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- 10 Best, R.G., Stapleton, L.M. and Downey, R.G. (2005). Core self-evaluations and job burnout:
11 the test of alternative models. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 10(4), p.441.
- 12 Bidwell, M., Briscoe, F., Fernandez-Mateo, I. and Sterling, A. (2013). The employment
13 relationship and inequality: How and why changes in employment practices are
14 reshaping rewards in organizations. *Academy of Management Annals*, 7(1), pp.61-121.
- 15 Blühdorn, I. (2017). Post-capitalism, post-growth, post-consumerism? Eco-political hopes
16 beyond sustainability. *Global Discourse*, 7(1), pp.42-61.
- 17 Brown, P. and Tannock, S. (2009). Education, meritocracy and the global war for
18 talent. *Journal of Education Policy*, 24(4), pp.377-392.
- 19 Burke, P.J. (2013). The right to higher education: Neoliberalism, gender and professional
20 mis/recognitions. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 23(2), pp.107-126.
- 21 Cairns Jr, J. (2003). A preliminary declaration of sustainability ethics: making peace with the
22 ultimate bioexecutioner. *Ethics in Science and Env Politics*, pp.43-48.
- 23 Caldbick, S., Labonte, R., Mohindra, K.S. and Ruckert, A. (2014). Globalization and the rise
24 of precarious employment: the new frontier for workplace health promotion. *Global*
25 *health promotion*, 21(2), pp.23-31.

- 1 Coltrane, S. (2004). Elite careers and family commitment: It's (still) about gender. *The*
2 *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 596(1), pp.214-220.
- 3 De Lange, A.H., Kooij, D.T.A.M. and Van der Heijden, B.I.J.M. (2015). Human resource
4 management and sustainability at work across the lifespan: An integrative
5 perspective. *Facing the challenges of a multi-age workforce: A use-inspired approach*,
6 pp.50-79.
- 7 De Vos, A., and Van der Heijden, B. (Eds.) (2015). *Handbook of Research on Sustainable*
8 *Careers*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- 9 De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B.I. and Akkermans, J. (2020). Sustainable careers: Towards a
10 conceptual model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117, p.103196.
- 11 Duffy, M. (2007). Doing the dirty work: Gender, race, and reproductive labor in historical
12 perspective. *Gender & Society*, 21(3), pp.313-336.
- 13 Eckel, C.C. and Grossman, P.J. (2008). Men, women and risk aversion: Experimental
14 evidence. *Handbook of experimental economics results*, 1, pp.1061-1073.
- 15 Ehnert, I. and Harry, W. (2012). Recent developments and future prospects on sustainable
16 human resource management: Introduction to the special issue. *Management Revue*, Vol.
17 23 (No.3), pp.221-238.
- 18 Faruqi, S., Wu, A., Brolis, E., Ortega, A.A. and Batista, A. (2018). *The business of planting*
19 *trees: a growing investment opportunity* (Online). Available at:
20 <https://www.wri.org/publication/business-of-planting-trees> (Accessed: 15 December
21 2018).
- 22 Fine, B. and Saad-Filho, A. (2017). Thirteen things you need to know about neoliberalism.
23 *Critical Sociology*, 43(4-5), pp.685-706.
- 24 Fouad, N.A. (2020). Editor in chief's introduction to essays on the impact of COVID-19 on
25 work and workers. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 119.

- 1 Friedman, G. (2014). Workers without employers: shadow corporations and the rise of the
2 gig economy. *Review of Keynesian Economics*, 2(2), pp.171-188.
- 3 Glynos, J. (2008). Ideological fantasy at work. *Journal of political Ideologies*, 13(3), pp.275-
4 296.
- 5 Görg, H. and Görlich, D. (2015). Offshoring, wages and job security of temporary workers.
6 *Review of World Economics*, 151(3), pp.533-554.
- 7 Greene, T.W. (2008). Three ideologies of individualism: Toward assimilating a theory of
8 individualisms and their consequences. *Critical Sociology*, 34(1), pp.117-137.
- 9 Greenwood, M. and Van Buren, H.J. (2017). Ideology in HRM scholarship: Interrogating the
10 ideological performativity of ‘New Unitarism’. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 142(4),
11 pp.663-678.
- 12 Gregson, N., Crang, M., Botticello, J., Calestani, M. and Krzywoszynska, A. 2016. Doing the
13 ‘dirty work’ of the green economy: Resource recovery and migrant labour in the EU.
14 *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 23(4), pp.541-555.
- 15 Harvey, D. (2005). *Neoliberalism: A Brief History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 16 Haugh, H.M. and Talwar, A. (2010). How do corporations embed sustainability across the
17 organization? *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 9(3), pp.384-396.
- 18 Hooley, T. and Sultana, R.G. (2016). Career guidance for social justice. *Journal of the*
19 *National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, Vol 36, pp. 2-11.
- 20 Iles, P. (1997). Sustainable high-potential career development: a resource-based view. *Career*
21 *Development International*, Vol 2, no. 7: 347-353.
- 22 Jackson, T. (2009). *Prosperity without growth: Economics for a finite planet*. London:
23 Earthscan.
- 24 Jost, J.T., Blount, S., Pfeffer, J. and Hunyady, G. (2003). Fair market ideology: Its cognitive-
25 motivational underpinnings. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 25, pp.53-91.

- 1 Kalleberg, A.L. (2009). Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in
2 transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1), pp.1-22.
- 3 Kostera, M. and Pirson, M. eds. (2017). *Dignity and the Organization*. Palgrave Macmillan
4 UK.
- 5 Langhelle, O. (1999). Sustainable development: exploring the ethics of Our Common Future.
6 *International Political Science Review*, 20(2), pp.129-149.
- 7 Lawrence, B.S., Hall, D.T. and Arthur, M.B. (2015). Sustainable careers then and now.
8 In *Handbook of research on sustainable careers*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- 9 Littler, J. (2013). Meritocracy as plutocracy: The marketising of 'Equality' under
10 neoliberalism. *New Formations*, 80(80), pp.52-72.
- 11 Matthews, L., Power, D., Touboulis, A. and Marques, L. (2016). Building bridges: Toward
12 alternative theory of sustainable supply chain management. *Journal of Supply Chain*
13 *Management*, 52(1), 82-94.
- 14 Meadows, D., Randers, J. and Meadows, D. (2005). *Limits to growth: The 30-year update*.
15 London: Earthscan.
- 16 Newman, K.L. (2011). Sustainable careers. *Organizational Dynamics*, 40(2), pp.136-143.
- 17 Özkazanç-Pan, B. and Pullen, A. (2020). Gendered labour and work, even in pandemic
18 times. *Gender, Work, and Organization*, 27(5), p.675-676.
- 19 Parker, S.K. and Bindl, U.K. (2016). *Proactivity at work: Making things happen in*
20 *organizations*. Taylor & Francis.
- 21 Parker Hughes, C., Semeijn, J. and Caniëls, M. (2017). The sustainability skew. *Current*
22 *Opinion in environmental Sustainability*, 28, pp.58-63.
- 23 Pfeffer, J. (2010). Building sustainable organizations: The human factor. *Academy of*
24 *Management Perspectives*, 24(1), pp.34-45.
- 25 Popper, K.R. (1966). *The Open Society and Its Enemies.(Revised.)*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

- 1 Porritt, J. (2007). *Capitalism as if the World Matters*. Earthscan.
- 2 Putnam, R.D. (2016). *Our kids: The American dream in crisis*. Simon and Schuster.
- 3 Randers, J. (2012). *2052: A global forecast for the next forty years*. White River Junction,
4 VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- 5 Risman, B.J. (2004). Gender as a social structure: Theory wrestling with activism. *Gender &*
6 *society*, 18(4), pp.429-450.
- 7 Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K., Persson, Å., Chapin, F.S., Lambin, E.F., Lenton,
8 T.M., Scheffer, M., Folke, C., Schellnhuber, H.J. and Nykvist, B. (2009). A safe
9 operating space for humanity. *Nature*, 461(7263), pp.472-475.
- 10 Roper, J., Ganesh, S. and Inkson, K. (2010). Neoliberalism and knowledge interests in
11 boundaryless careers discourse. *Work, Employment and Society*, 24(4), pp.661-679.
- 12 Rosso, B.D., Dekas, K.H. and Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A
13 theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, pp.91-127.
- 14 Rubery, J., Keizer, A. and Grimshaw, D. (2016). Flexibility bites back: the multiple and
15 hidden costs of flexible employment policies. *Human Resource Management Journal*,
16 26(3), pp.235-251.
- 17 Shearman, R. (1990). The meaning and ethics of sustainability. *Environmental Management*,
18 14(1), p.1.
- 19 Siegmann, K.A. and Schiphorst, F. (2016). Understanding the globalizing precariat: From
20 informal sector to precarious work. *Progress in Development Studies*, 16(2), pp.111-123.
- 21 Speth, J. G. (2008). *The bridges at the edge of the world: Capitalism, the environment, and*
22 *the crossing from crisis to sustainability*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- 23 Standing, G. (2016). *A precariat charter: From denizens to citizens*. A&C Black.

- 1 Steffen, W., Richardson, K., Rockström, J., Cornell, S.E., Fetzer, I., Bennett, E.M., Biggs, R.,
2 Carpenter, S.R., De Vries, W., De Wit, C.A. and Folke, C. (2015). Planetary boundaries:
3 Guiding human development on a changing planet. *Science*, 347(6223).
- 4 Stiglitz, J.E. (2012). *The price of inequality: How today's divided society endangers our*
5 *future*. WW Norton & Company.
- 6 Su, J. (2015). Reality behind absurdity: The myth of American dream. *Sociology Study*,
7 5(11), pp.837-842.
- 8 Valcour, M. (2013). Craft a sustainable career. *Harvard Business Review*,
9 <https://hbr.org/2013/07/craft-a-sustainable-career>.
- 10 Valcour, M. (2015). Facilitating the crafting of sustainable careers in organizations. In
11 *Handbook of research on sustainable careers*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- 12 Vallas, S.P. (1999). Rethinking post-Fordism: The meaning of workplace flexibility.
13 *Sociological Theory*, 17(1), pp.68-101.
- 14 Van der Heijden, B.I. and De Vos, A. (2015). Sustainable careers: Introductory chapter. In
15 *Handbook of research on sustainable careers*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- 16 Van der Heijden, B., De Vos, A., Akkermans, J., Spurk, D., Semeijn, J., Van der Veldek, M.
17 and Fugate, M. (2020). Sustainable careers across the lifespan: Moving the field forward.
18 *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117.
- 19 Villadsen, K. (2017). Constantly online and the fantasy of 'work-life balance': Reinterpreting
20 work-connectivity as cynical practice and fetishism. *Culture and Organization*, 23(5),
21 pp.363-378.
- 22 WCED, S.W.S. (1987). World commission on environment and development. *Our common*
23 *future*, 17, pp.1-91.
- 24 Wisman, J.D., 2013. Wage stagnation, rising inequality and the financial crisis of 2008.
25 *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 37(4), pp.921-945.

- 1 World Bank (2012). *Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4°C Warmer World Must Be Avoided*.
2 <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/11860>. Website Accessed 16
3 September 2020.
- 4 Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P. and Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and
5 callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1),
6 pp.21-33.
- 7 Žižek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso.
- 8 Žižek, S. (2001). *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* London: Verso Books.
- 9 Žižek, S. (2011). *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso Books.
- 10 Žižek, S. (2014). *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*.
11 London: Melville house.
12