

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# More to life than promotion: Self-initiated and self-resigned career plateaus

Farveh Farivar<sup>1</sup> | Mary Anthony<sup>2</sup> | Julia Richardson<sup>1</sup>  |  
Rajiv Amarnani<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Management and Marketing,  
Faculty of Business and Law, Curtin University,  
Perth, Western Australia, Australia

<sup>2</sup>School of Law and Business, University  
of Notre Dame Australia, Perth, Western  
Australia, Australia

<sup>3</sup>Management and Organizations Department,  
UWA Business School, The University of  
Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia,  
Australia

**Correspondence**

Farveh Farivar, School of Management and  
Marketing, Faculty of Business and Law,  
Curtin University, Perth, WA, Australia.  
Email: [farveh.farivar@curtin.edu.au](mailto:farveh.farivar@curtin.edu.au)

**Abstract**

Being on a career plateau is widely regarded as an undesirable career experience characterised by a lack of individual proactivity, ability, or opportunity for promotion. In this paper, we present an alternative view arguing that some employees may choose to plateau their careers and deliberately forego opportunities for hierarchical progression. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 75 law enforcement officers in the US and Australia, we explore why they declined a promotion opportunity or elected not to apply for promotion. Drawing on social cognitive career theory, we develop a provisional taxonomy characterised by individual proactivity: self-initiated and self-resigned career plateaus. Specifically, we report how the decision to remain on either of these career plateaus is informed by either the low valence accorded to a promoted position or, paradoxically, the reduced self-efficacy in navigating what is viewed as a flawed promotion system.

**KEYWORDS**

career plateau, career progression, promotion, work-life conflict, workplace politics

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## Practitioner notes

### What is currently known?

- Career plateau is related to negative performance, attitudinal, and well-being outcomes.
- Recently, some authors have suggested that employees may prefer to forego a promotion despite their individual merit and ability.

### What this paper adds?

- It explains the drivers of why some people choose to remain on a career plateau.
- It introduces a new taxonomy of self-resigned career plateaus versus self-initiated career plateaus.
- Low valence outcomes at work are key drivers towards a self-initiated career plateau.
- Systemic barriers to promotion reduce self-efficacy and reinforce a self-resigned career plateau.

### Implications for Human Resources practitioners and organisations

- Identifying the drivers towards a self-initiated career plateau enables a more inclusive work environment to incorporate subjective measures of career success.
- Identifying and reducing the drivers towards a career plateau will result in designing more effective career management systems.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Career progression through hierarchical promotion is widely regarded as a significant indicator of objective career success (Ng et al., 2005; Spurk et al., 2019), a reward for high performers and a critical organisational strategy to retain talent (Alessandri et al., 2021). Indeed, a national benchmarking study of turnover in Australia reported that the most universally cited contributor to turnover was 'lack of career progression opportunities' (AHRI, 2018). Conversely, perceptions of being on a career plateau have been shown to predict negative performance, attitudinal, and well-being outcomes (Yang et al., 2019). Yet, an emerging body of evidence suggests that—under certain conditions—employees may prefer to forego promotions despite their having the individual merit and ability to take on higher-level roles. This paper will explore this phenomenon in more depth.

In their seminal work, Ference et al. (1977) described two types of career plateaus: organisational career plateaus and personal career plateaus, where the former refers to a paucity of promotion opportunities or lack of success in promotion applications, and the latter to a lack of desire for promotion, despite opportunities being available. Whereas most scholarly work has focused on the negative aspects of career plateaus, the popular press has shown more interest in why some people might prefer a career plateau rather than a promotion.

This preference for career plateaus over promotions has been connected to a greater focus on personal well-being and a movement away from climbing organisational ladders amid what has been referred to as 'the great resignation' (Thompson, 2019). It has also been connected to increasing demands for more authentic and individualised notions of career success (Peltokorpi, 2023). The little that we do know about why some people might prefer a career plateau over a promotion suggests a range of explanations, including prioritising personal roles and responsibilities (Godshalk & Fender, 2015; Thompson, 2019) and preferring to remain in one's area of technical expertise rather than moving into a more generalist role at a higher organisational level (Cardador, 2017).

This paper draws on an in-depth study of 75 mid-level and senior-level law enforcement officers in the US and Australia and examines their experiences and perceptions of hierarchical promotion, including why they had declined opportunities for promotion or were not looking for a promotion at all. In doing so, it contributes to current literature and practice in several ways. First, it addresses longstanding concerns about prioritising 'objective career success' as a marker of career progression (Gunz & Heslin, 2005) and ignoring or underplaying the importance of subjective career

success (Dai & Song, 2016). Indeed, as the results of this study will show, some people may prefer a career plateau to a promotion if a promotion compromises their personal well-being and/or likelihood of simply enjoying what they do. In doing so, we highlight the socially constructed nature of career opportunities and experiences where individuals will create and co-create their careers according to their values, aspirations, and life circumstances.

Second, we advance the career plateau literature by moving away from the dominant discourse of career plateaus as primarily structural in origin and inherently undesirable (Yang et al., 2019). Whereas this dominant discourse provides important insights into how career plateaus might best be managed/overcome or avoided altogether through more diverse organisational management systems/talent management, with reports of a growing number of people eschewing opportunities for promotion, a study of the positive dimensions of a career plateau and how for some people they are preferable to a promotion is timely. Therefore, this paper will investigate why someone might eschew a promotion, including their underlying motivations and assumptions. It will also challenge Yang et al. (2019) recent findings that career plateauing reflects a lack of proactivity by reporting that it can also result from deliberate and proactive career planning, that is, someone specifically and deliberately deciding *not* to be promoted. Finally, we will signal the implications for management practices and individual career self-management, thus responding to growing calls to celebrate and support individual career ownership—where individual career actors are encouraged to identify and construct their own versions of career success (Arthur et al., 2018).

## 2 | CAREER PLATEAU

Being on a 'career plateau' can be broadly understood as having limited or no opportunities for career advancement or promotion (FERENCE et al., 1977). It is subjective (Yang et al., 2019) in the sense that it is something the individual feels about their respective career situation and a result of individual choice (FERENCE et al., 1977), that is, rather than being imposed upon them by an employer. Recent research indicates that being on a hierarchical career plateau can have adverse effects on employees and employers alike (Yang et al., 2019), with related negative consequences for employee retention (Kao et al., 2022); performance (Lin et al., 2018); work motivation (Godshalk & Fender, 2015); organisational commitment (DiRenzo et al., 2022); citizenship behaviours (Song et al., 2019); and knowledge sharing (Lin et al., 2020). Furthermore, research suggests that career plateau results in stressful experiences (i.e., employees' emotional exhaustion) and counterproductive behaviours, especially if combined with abusive and discriminatory supervision (Hu et al., 2022; Jain & Chhabra, 2023).

Empirical research has focused almost exclusively on the negative experiences and outcomes of career plateaus in part because the existent measures are predicated on items whose wording assumes a negative evaluation (e.g., 'My career is blocked. I feel trapped in the present job'; Tremblay, 2021). Consequently, and not unsurprisingly, a meta-analysis of survey-based studies has concluded that there are clear negative outcomes of career plateaus for career and job attitudes as well as for work performance behaviour (Hu et al., 2022). The same meta-analysis also examined the antecedents of career plateaus and concluded that employees often end up on a career plateau because they lack agency, and/or resources, and/or support. However, we depart from this perspective by proposing that career plateaus can be self-initiated and agentically chosen.

In a more expansive narrative review of the career plateau literature, Yang et al. (2019) noted that promotions—like any other organisational reward—are not equally desirable to all employees. These scholars speculated that the desirability of promotion might, therefore, serve as an antecedent of a subjectively felt career plateau. In other words, the extent to which an employee desires a promotion may impact the extent to which they feel they are on a career plateau. Extending this line of thinking further, we explore the extent to which employees reflect on the desirability of a promotion, considering their life situation and, therefore, the extent to which they agentically choose to remain on a career plateau.

The notion that an individual may choose to remain on a career plateau rather than having it imposed upon them first appeared in the mid-1970s (FERENCE et al., 1977). Godshalk and Fender (2015) reported that individuals remain

on a plateau for 'internal reasons', that is, because they are satisfied with their respective jobs/careers and/or for 'external reasons', that is, because they lack opportunities for promotion/advancement or have been denied a promotion by an employer/manager. More recently, Ng and Yang (2023) suggest that career plateau is subjective and does not necessarily result in issues at work. Extending these findings further, in this study, we explore career plateaus within a single profession and across two national contexts, namely law enforcement in Australia and the US. Adding a further dimension to the literature, we also explore the decision to decline a promotion, thus responding to calls to examine career plateaus in specific professional contexts (Zikic & Richardson, 2016) by answering the following research question: Why do law enforcement officers decline or choose not to pursue opportunities for hierarchical promotion?

### 3 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To understand why intentional career plateauing might occur, we turn next to theories on career progression, which have traditionally focused on the individual characteristics that drive career choice and progression. However, more recent literature recognises that individual and contextual factors invariably impact careers and that the relationship between is the individual career actor and their respective career context is inherently recursive (Cohen et al., 2004). This line of thinking is codified in the most recent iteration of social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent & Brown, 2013). In essence, and with its roots in the original theorising (Lent et al., 1994), SCCT comprises five interrelated models and was originally created as 'a unifying framework that might complement', and forge linkages among, foundational theoretical approaches to career development (Lent & Brown, 2019). In a departure from what has been variously described as an overly dominant interest in individual career agency at the expense of understanding the impact of organisational structures and career management systems (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022), SCCT's key strength is its consistent focus on identifying and understanding the individual, behavioural and contextual factors that both enable and constrain human agency in career development (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Lent & Brown, 2019).

A key point of departure for this theory is that individuals craft their careers partly following their values and partly to accommodate their personal lives (Lent & Brown, 2019). For example, they may try to avoid disruptions such as relocating to another organisational/career context to minimise the disruption to their personal lives. SCCT further assumes that individuals will take family responsibilities and domestic division of labour into account in their career decision-making where, for example, women are more likely to forgo employment opportunities to fulfil child-care responsibilities—something which may leave them in a precarious situation in the event of a marital breakdown (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003).

Incorporating the idea of contextual and individual factors, we draw on the principles of SCCT to explain why employees might deliberately choose to plateau their careers. SCCT provides a framework for thinking about how personal agency (or the lack thereof) manifests and informs career progression (or, in the case of a career plateau, a lack of career progression) precisely because it explains how individuals' career decisions are subject to their sense of what they can do (self-efficacy) and whether it is worth it (outcome expectations).

Exploring this line of thinking further, self-efficacy refers to an individual's 'can-do' beliefs about the extent to which they have the requisite skills/competencies to complete a particular task in a particular context (Bandura, 1986). As we might anticipate, an individual's self-efficacy is directly impacted by their past experiences and the extent to which they can adapt to contextual factors/demands (Blaique & Pinnington, 2021; Chronister & McWhirter, 2003). It is also directly informed by vicarious learning or observation—that is, seeing colleagues being promoted may increase the respective individual's confidence that they might also be promoted. Conversely, seeing barriers to promotion may reduce their self-efficacy (Downes et al., 2021). Encouragement from others and individual emotions/emotional states can also enhance or reduce one's self-efficacy, albeit to a lesser extent.

Outcome expectations refer to whether the focal behaviour is believed to have valued consequences (Sheu et al., 2018). Thus, individuals may have the confidence (high self-efficacy) to negotiate and obtain a promotion while

at the same time believing that it will not result in a valued outcome. Put another way, while they could obtain a promotion, doing so might not provide them with the high salary or work-life balance they seek. Thus, self-efficacy and outcome expectations are mutually exclusive and crucial for understanding when and why the respective career behaviours occur/do not occur.

SCCT, then, argues that people enact behaviours when *both* self-efficacy and outcome expectations are favourable, but that neither factor precludes the respective behaviour. Hence, being on a career plateau—not pursuing promotion—may occur due to low self-efficacy or negative or weakly positive outcome expectations. However, these two possibilities have dramatically different implications for personal agency. On the one hand, an individual who lacks the self-efficacy, agency, or ambition to pursue a promotion may intentionally plateau because they are resigned to the fact that they don't have the requisite skills or desire to be promoted. On the other hand, an individual who plateaus because they ascribe a negative outcome expectation to a promotion may deliberately and, in some instances, enthusiastically choose not to pursue a promotion or to decline one if it is offered because it simply does not suit their life circumstances and/or accord with their values, for example, they don't ascribe value to being promoted and/or to an increase in pay or they are unwilling to compromise their life-balance as a result of being promoted. While extant literature has identified the impact of low levels of agency or self-efficacy on career self-management (e.g., Chronister & McWhirter, 2003), SCCT adds a further dimension by theorising that people may deliberately choose to plateau their careers/decline a promotion depending on their respective outcome expectations. Drawing specifically on SCCT, in this study, we explore why police officers in the respective countries elect to forgo a promotion, thus remaining on a career plateau.

## 4 | METHOD

Given our aim to explore individual experiences of, and explanations for, declining or not pursuing opportunities for hierarchical promotion, we adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore 'emic' experience and interpretation of the focal phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Relatedly, the study is located within a social constructivist ontology, assuming that careers are individually constructed and relational, that is, impacted by individual behaviour, motivation, social interaction, and contextual influences (Cohen et al., 2004). Law enforcement provides a particularly good example of a career structure that is impacted by both individual and contextual influences with relatively rigid, formal hierarchies and highly structured pathways for promotion. It is a highly regulated profession like medicine and education, with strict normative standards of practice or 'career scripts' for recruitment and subsequent promotion (Zikic & Richardson, 2016).

We adopted a purposeful, non-probabilistic sampling strategy to identify and recruit our participants (Patton, 2002) combined with snowball sampling to access 'hard to reach' subjects (Noy, 2008). Purposeful sampling allowed us to target participants who had experience with the topic under investigation (Patton, 2002). We followed two main selection criteria where participants were required to be: (i) employed full time, and (ii) working in a middle- to senior-rank position. First, we wrote to each institution's relevant Human resources departments, seeking volunteers for the study. The initial contact with the participants was an email inviting them to participate. Then, following each interview, we asked the participants to name any individuals working in senior or middle positions who might be interested in participating in the study. Our final sample comprised middle- to senior-rank law enforcement officers in federal and state agencies in Australia and the United States. We selected law enforcement in these two countries because they have similar institutional career paths, rules, and regulations. The final sample was sufficiently diverse to explore and understand differences in experiences and perceptions of electing not to pursue or decline promotion, comprising 75 middle and senior full-time law enforcement officers with at least 10 years of work experience. There were 56 women (36 middle managers and 20 senior managers) and 19 men (nine middle managers and 10 senior managers). We have understood middle management positions to be senior sergeants and inspectors,

whereas senior management positions are superintendents and commanders. Leadership roles are assistant commissioner, deputy commissioner, and commissioner ranks.

As shown in Table 1, 64% of participants had a tertiary qualification, of which 31% had a post-graduation qualification, suggesting an interest in both personal and professional development and learning. Sixty-seven percent had more than 20 years of professional experience, and 25% had more than 15 years of experience in the respective force. Seventy-five percent were under 50 and were thus, in theory, at least suitably qualified and at the right career/life stage for hierarchical promotion.

## 4.1 | Data collection

The semi-structured interviews covered four main themes: (i) the strategies participants used to manage their respective careers; (ii) their future career plans; (iii) their perceptions of current barriers and opportunities for hierarchical career progression; and (iv) their perceptions of anticipated barriers and opportunities for future career progression. They were conducted between 2014 and 2018 and lasted 45–60 min. All interviews were professionally transcribed and checked for accuracy by two of the research team.

## 4.2 | Data analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse each transcript, identifying dominant and subsidiary themes or first and second-order codes (see Figure 1) through the 'lens' of our overarching research question. Given the vast volume of data, we used NVivo 1.3 to manage and organise the data, uploading all transcripts and then proceeding to thematic analysis. We began with open coding, identifying excerpts from the interviews and assigning them to a particular theme or sub-theme. We then moved to more in-depth and theoretically driven coding—following Gioia

TABLE 1 Demographics.

Demographic variables	Country	
	The US (n = 30, 40%)	Australia (n = 45, 60%)
Age		
30–39 years	2 (2.7%)	19 (25.3%)
40–49 years	22 (29.4%)	13 (17.3%)
+50 years	6 (8%)	13 (17.3%)
Education level		
High school diploma	5 (6.7%)	12 (16%)
Bachelor's degree	6 (8%)	19 (25.3%)
Graduate certificate	3 (4%)	8 (10.7%)
Master's degree	16 (21.3%)	6 (8%)
Work experience in law enforcement		
10 years	2 (2.7%)	4 (5.3%)
11–20 years	4 (5.3%)	15 (20%)
+20 years	24 (32%)	26 (34.7%)
Gender		
Female	30 (40%)	26 (34.7%)
Male	0	19 (25.3%)

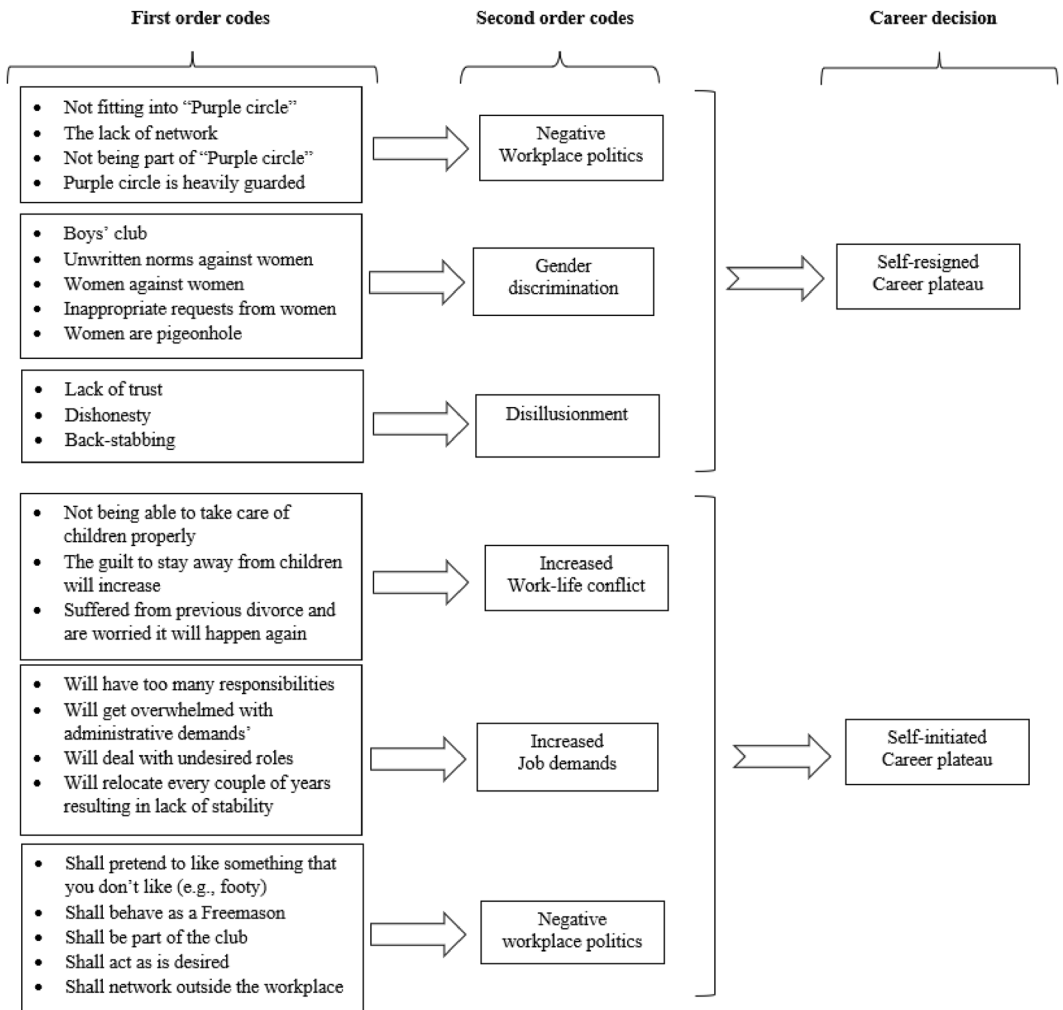


FIGURE 1 Coding process.

et al.'s (2013, p. 20) recommendation to 'adhere faithfully to informant terms'. We also used the Gioia method (2013) to organise our data, moving the themes and sub-themes to identify relationships between codes, that is, creating a 'tree' of themes and sub-themes and then overarching concepts, as shown in Figure 1 below. A key concern at this stage was to ensure rigour in analysis and to remain 'true' to the respective participant's explanation of their career experience while at the same time identifying commonalities and differences between participants. For example, some participants said they had refused a promotion primarily due to family roles and responsibilities. However, they also drew on other reasons, albeit those that they felt were less important, such as wanting to avoid the 'political' ramifications of holding a more senior hierarchical position.

To ensure the rigour of our data collection, analysis, and subsequent findings, we applied Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) conception of quality in qualitative research design and implementation to ensure trustworthiness. These authors argue that several factors influence the quality of qualitative research, including the researcher's active presence and engagement during data collection, the dynamic interaction between the researcher and participants, the use of data triangulation to enhance qualitative validity, the nuanced interpretation of participants' perspectives, and the provision of rich and detailed descriptions of the data. They also emphasise the importance of employing 'imaginative insight' during data analysis while remaining 'true' to the participants' world views and

reported experiences. This included understanding the interviews as a 'whole', that is, asking what the 'overall picture' was and then identifying themes in each interview to capture consistencies and contradictions within and between accounts.

We engaged three lenses and four methods to augment the transactional validity and credibility of the findings: the researchers' lens, the participants' lens, and the lens of a reader. In terms of the researchers' lens, interviews were conducted by an author who had worked in managerial positions in law enforcement for 14 years. Thus, providing a robust understanding of the institutional/professional context, which facilitated the interpretation of context-specific vocabulary, and helped build rapport with participants. The interviewer also took additional notes while the participants verbalised their thoughts. We also used the 'disconfirming evidence technique' to check the accuracy of the data, that is, looking for contradictory themes to increase the study's validity (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018), which enhances the trustworthiness of primary qualitative research rather than relying solely on similarities and commonalities in a body of data (Booth et al., 2013).

We first collected and analysed the data from the US cohort. Collection and analysis of the Australian data followed and confirmed the findings from the US cohort. To enhance the rigour of our findings further, we also undertook 'member checks' providing all participants with an opportunity to review their transcriptions. Finally, to enhance the transactional validity, we asked a peer researcher not involved in the initial analysis to analyse 25 manuscripts and cross-check the results.

## 5 | FINDINGS

Data analysis identified a relatively broad range of reasons why participants might decline or elect not to pursue a promotion, choosing to remain in their current position/role. A descriptive analysis of the sample showed that 68 out of 75 participants (90.6%) explicitly stated that they would not pursue a hierarchical promotion, nor would they accept a promotion if they were offered one. Of these, 49 (72%) had been offered a promotion or an opportunity to explore the possibility of promotion but said they had declined the offer without further discussions. We have understood and defined this behaviour as signalling a 'self-initiated career plateau', borrowing the concept of 'self-initiation' from the expatriate management literature, where self-initiation conveys individual motivation for a given course of behaviour whilst acknowledging the broader structural, institutional, and social context within which it occurs (Doherty, 2013). In this sense, the concept of 'self-initiation' captures the deliberate and agentic nature of this type of career plateau. The rest (28%) said they would not seek a promotion regardless of their eligibility due to the difficulty in overcoming 'barriers' or 'challenges' in the promotion system. The difference between this cohort and those on a 'self-initiated' plateau is that whereas they were not opposed to a promotion if offered one, they were not motivated to navigate the promotion system to secure a promotion themselves. We have understood and defined this cohort as being on a 'self-resigned career plateau'.

Although data analysis suggested that participants who had engaged in self-initiated career plateauing were motivated by different drivers to their counterparts who had engaged in a self-resigned career plateauing, most participants in both groups (82%) were cautious about the value or 'worth' of a promotion. Conversely, they all accorded significant value to ensuring that they derived personal and professional meaning from their respective careers, thus prioritising subjective over objective career success. Dominant themes amongst these participants were what was variously described as 'doing the right thing', ensuring their own skill development and fulfilling their professional duties and obligations versus climbing the organisational hierarchy. For example, one participant (Int11), working in an American state law enforcement agency at the senior management level, described career progression as 'doing what is right' or 'doing what makes us happy' (i.e. achieving subjective career success) rather than actively pursuing or obtaining a hierarchical promotion (i.e. achieving objective career success). Another interviewee (Int 60) accorded primary importance to enjoying their work rather than climbing 'the ladder'—again prioritising subjective over objective career success.



Having a hard trajectory in motion and doing things only for promotion...is contrary to my current thinking of progress. For me, it's more important to do what we know to be right...and if that's recognised with opportunities, that is the reward. The promotion is secondary.

[Int11, F, US, State law enforcement, *Self-initiated* career plateau]

You know everyone who is racing to the top should not be there. You know there are a lot of people with ulterior motives for financial and prestigious gain. I enjoy what I am doing... Why do we have to keep climbing the ladder? People should reach the level they would be happy.

[Int 60, M, Australia, State law enforcement, *Self-initiated* career plateau]

Expanding the idea of personal fulfilment (subjective career success) further, 81% of participants reported a strong need for self-understanding, reflexivity, and authenticity—working with colleagues as a form of mutual support to ensure career satisfaction.

It [career progress] is about self-reflection...your strengths and your weaknesses you have to understand and support.

[Int7, F, US, Federal law enforcement, *Self-initiated* career plateau]

It [career progress] is not a destination...It is a journey. And we all are on a different part of that journey. I continue to take guidance from people who I respect and admire. And that can be from whatever level...

[Int56, M, Australia, State law enforcement, *Self-initiated* career plateau]

What we observe here, therefore, is how these participants understood career progress as a continuous process through which they might experience personal and professional growth, learning, and development. Rather than fixating solely on a hierarchical promotion, that is, achieving a specific position or achieving a particular goal, they sought to embrace the ongoing evolution and developmental dimensions of their careers. They also emphasised the value of mentorship and learning from others, regardless of their hierarchical position, as a valuable source of career satisfaction and fulfilment.

## 5.1 | Anticipated outcomes of hierarchical promotion

Somewhat surprisingly, none of the participants in senior positions ( $n = 30$ ) were motivated to accept or seek a promotion. Indeed, half of these participants said they had previously been offered a promotion but had turned it down. Others indicated that while they had not been offered a promotion, they weren't looking for one because of the onerous nature of the promotion process or because they did not want to move from their current position. By comparison, 31 out of the 45 middle-level managers (69%) said they would apply for promotion in the near to mid-term but did not aspire to a senior leadership role. The remaining 14 participants (31%) in this group indicated no plans or aspirations to apply for any promotion. Several key themes emerged as participants refused or did not plan a promotion.

### 5.1.1 | Increased work-life conflict

Expectations of increased work-life conflict were a dominant theme in most interviews (87%), with widespread concerns about a promotion's detrimental impact on their non-work roles, particularly parenting/caring responsibilities

and their capacity to enjoy leisure pursuits. Interestingly, middle managers said they were already dissatisfied with their work-life balance and were particularly sensitive to the prospect of even greater demands on their personal time, as shown in the quote below. The same concern was raised by senior managers, who also indicated that they preferred a career plateau to the additional work and increased work-life conflict brought about by a promotion, as shown below.

My future plans at the moment are just to stay where I am, not seeking promotion, it's not because I don't have the desire to, it's about my family. I'm 53 years old and just had a total life change, new partner, new life, so I'm concentrating on my own life for a while.

[Int41, M, Australia, State law enforcement, Self-initiated career plateau]

And I said, well, with all due respect I've got a son with a learning disability, I want to spend time with him to get him through school, and I said 'no' several times to his promotion offer.

[Int49, M, Australia, State law enforcement, Self-initiated career plateau]

### 5.1.2 | Increased job demands

All participants indicated that a promotion would invariably mean an increase in job demands, variously understood as longer working hours, an expanded administrative workload, increased pressure to perform at a higher level, greater social and psychological demands outside of 'regular' work hours, including increased emotional labour—and particularly for promotions to a leadership position. Interestingly, 56% of participants were also more concerned about the concomitant impact on what was variously described as their capacity to be 'out on the beat', 'working with the general public' and 'dealing with real-life people'. This finding suggests as much concern with what promotion would prevent them from doing, and hence a preference to remain on a career plateau, as with what it would require them to do, for example, less opportunity for direct interaction with local communities due to increased administrative loads. A senior manager said he had turned down a promotion precisely because he did not want to take on the anticipated increase in administrative duties: *'If I get promoted, I do find that I will be very much an administrator. (In my current position) I try and get out when I can to assist (the general public) in things that may be a bit more complex...Out at the scene...I can't do that as much as I would like (if I become a leader)'*. A middle manager expressed a similar line of thinking thus: *'I like to be a leader, but that's more down the administrative route. It isn't leadership'*.

In addition to changes in role demands and responsibilities, there was a widespread belief among participants (85%) that promotion to a leadership position would involve geographical relocation—something which several participants said would have a direct and negative impact on their personal lives and relationships with family members. One senior manager working at the federal level in the US, for example, said that he had turned down a promotion to a more senior position to avoid frequent demands for geographical mobility and the concomitant impact on his personal life: *'When you get into that level of management, you get moved a lot more'*. Reflecting a similar line of thinking, a middle-level participant in Australia indicated that she would not pursue a promotion due to a perceived requirement for geographical mobility: *'... this would mean relocating every couple of years...I do not want to aspire for another rank'*. Whereas we might assume that geographical mobility may be particularly problematic for participants with young families and particularly school-age children, participants without children were equally opposed to moving, as were those whose adult children had already left home. For example, one interviewee working at the federal level in the US described how she was not interested in a promotion because it would require her to move to another city: *'I don't have kids; it [mandatory relocation] disturbs my stability'*. Similarly, a participant who was single and living alone working at the state level in Australia reported not wanting to relocate *'If I accept the [promotion] offer, I have to move to a regional area; I don't like to live in small cities'*.

### 5.1.3 | Negative workplace politics

All interviews believed promotion, particularly to a leadership position, would incur what was described as 'workplace politics' and increased demands for ongoing emotional labour with senior management, negotiations and conflict resolution. Indeed, many said avoiding workplace politics was the primary reason they were reluctant to either pursue or accept a promotion to a leadership position. For example, one participant in Australia who was already working in a senior position described how he had declined a promotion to a higher level precisely because of the institutional politics involved in leadership roles: *'It's just not a boys' club; it's like a Freemason's mentality. I never wanted to be that'*. Relatedly, participants in both countries described what they referred to as 'the purple circle', an 'elite' and exclusive group comprising senior leaders who had risen to positions of power due to their capacity to engage in organisational politics rather than as a reflection of their professional competency:

I had to talk about footy and pretend I like footy, or I couldn't be in their group [leaders]. That is what I think a lot will become and I do not want to be a part of that.

[Int70, F, Australia, State law enforcement, Self-resigned career plateau]

You know you have to say the right thing and do the right thing at all times, or you could be gone in a heartbeat. It's not who I am.

[Int21, F, the US, Federal law enforcement, Self-initiated career plateau]

A further sub-theme was not wanting to be part of existing networks of senior figures, which many saw as essential for promoted positions. Most of these participants (79%) believed that leadership requires creating and maintaining networks and engaging in 'politically' charged behaviour, which they found distasteful.

When I said 'No' to promotion, his response to that was, 'as long as my ass points to the ground, you'll never get promoted'; He was recruiting specifically for his little group, and I didn't want to be part of his group.

[Int62, M, Australia, Federal law enforcement, Self-initiated career plateau]

They would have themselves, within, personality-driven promotion. Appointed promotion. You need to be close to the people they know. I don't want to spend time with them outside work.

[Int17, F, the US, State law enforcement, Self-initiated career plateau]

Having discussed those participants whom, we have identified as being on a self-initiated career plateau, we now turn to our second grouping—those participants who had not pursued or accepted a promotion due to perceived barriers to promotion.

## 5.2 | Barriers to promotion

In addition to the perceived negative outcomes of a promotion reported above, data analysis also identified perceived barriers to promotion and the extent to which they might dissuade an individual from pursuing a promotion. We have understood these participants as being on a 'self-resigned' career plateau because they are resigned not to apply for promotion compared to their self-initiated counterparts who have declined a promotion. We identified three dominant themes among these participants: negative workplace politics, gender discrimination, and disillusionment.

### 5.2.1 | Negative workplace politics

As for those participants whom we have defined as being on a self-initiated career plateau, workplace politics were a dominant theme among individuals on a self-resigned career plateau. However, the current workplace politics, rather than anticipated workplace politics, impacted their resolve to remain in their current roles rather than seek a promotion. All seven participants in this group described current workplace politics as a barrier to promotion. One of the participants working in the Australian federal police force, for example, described what he saw as a 'closely-guarded circle', which he also believed would prevent his being promoted: *'I never could make it to the purple circle, it is closely guarded and when you look at them—they all got fast-tracked in their promotion'*. Other participants also referred to barriers to promotion and particularly the need to 'fit':

I suppose the biggest barriers to promotion are fitting into what we call 'the purple circle'. It's your face has to fit. Barriers are about face-fit, it's not all about doing a good job. It's not always about being the best, it's not about the degrees you have on the walls. It's about, 'do you fit?'

[Int59, M, Australia, State law enforcement, Self-resigned career plateau]

...for someone like me who does not know anybody, I am screwed. There is no one looking out for me. For the bulk of my career, I did not hang out with people from work...

[Int42, F, Australia, State law enforcement, Self-resigned career plateau]

### 5.2.2 | Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination was cited as a barrier to promotion among women, with all women ( $n = 5$ ) whom we have classified as being on a self-resigned career plateau reporting inherent bias against women in law enforcement in both countries. However, this theme was also discussed by men, who said that women were less likely to be promoted than men. Data analysis identified concerns about assumptions that women would not be able to meet the demands of senior roles due to their domestic responsibilities (mostly revolving around childcare). There were also concerns about law enforcement being a 'boys club', which both dissuaded and actively prevented women applying for promotion and from rising to senior positions due to male nepotism.

Nepotism is mainly the biggest issue.... jobs for the boys. Nepotism is equal to the boys' club, and I am a boy, but it is correct.

[Int45, M, Australia, State law enforcement, Self-resigned career plateau]

All the women in this group said that their managers (both men and women) neither recognised nor valued their effort and/or professional competencies and achievements and thus they would be unlikely to be promoted. One woman also reported inappropriate behaviour among senior managers, including victimisation, which further dissuaded them from seeking promotion:

Because I am a woman, every time I travelled overseas, my boss gave me a shopping list to buy expensive souvenirs. Otherwise, she would create hell for my department. Once, she asked me to buy a Gucci bag for her mother.

[Int55, F, Australia, State law enforcement, Self-resigned career plateau]

### 5.2.3 | Disillusionment

A further theme among this group was a sense of disillusionment with law enforcement as a profession and widespread reports of inequity and a lack of trust in senior management and the 'system' more broadly. This sense of disillusionment dissuaded them from applying for a promotion, primarily because they believed that the promotion process was marred by inequity and bias:

Now, I am dealing with people that were despondent...Because they're either not promoted, or not looked at, or looked over. And it really comes back to people are not truthful.

[Int26, F, the US, Federal law enforcement, Self-resigned career plateau]

I have been asked to put in for positions and then...the skulduggery that went on. It was never the truth.... You get very, very bitter. And disappointed. And then you lose the credibility of those people [leaders].

[Int66, M, Australia, Federal law enforcement, Self-resigned career plateau]

It is notable that the sense of disillusionment they felt at the time of the interview was juxtaposed with their initial expectations of what it would be like to work in law enforcement. Indeed, several of these participants described a sense of bitterness and disappointment about what they had hoped would be a fulfilling and career.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

This in-depth qualitative study sought to answer the research question: *Why do law enforcement officers decline or choose not to pursue opportunities for hierarchical promotion?* Drawing on 75 semi-structured interviews with middle- and senior-level managers in law enforcement in the United States and Australia, we identified two types of career plateau—the self-initiated and the self-resigned career plateau, as shown in Figure 1 above. Whereas career plateaus have traditionally been associated with a lack of career proactivity and, in some instances, ambition (Hu et al., 2022), leading to increased turnover and demotivation, this study indicates that some individuals may deliberately and purposefully choose to remain on a career plateau rather than applying for a promotion and/or may decline promotion opportunities if they are offered. Moreover, departing from extant literature, this study has shown that those on a self-initiated career plateau do so precisely because they enjoy their work rather than because they are demotivated or underperforming.

SCCT provides a theoretical explanation for this finding with its foundational assumptions about how individuals develop and apply personal agency to shape their careers, which are, in turn, impacted by their respective organisational/institutional/social contexts (Brown & Lent, 2019; Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Rogers & Creed, 2011). We used these two foundational assumptions to categorise the drivers behind intentional career plateaus, as shown in Figure 2 below where, for example, individuals' career decisions are understood to be influenced by both their sense of what they can do (self-efficacy) and the value they accord to the outcome of those actions (valence outcomes). The valence of outcomes refers to whether the outcome of a given action or behaviour is accorded value (Sheu et al., 2018). In this case, the valence of outcomes refers to whether participants accorded value to being promoted.

Extending beyond individual experience, this study has drawn on SCCT to explain how self-efficacy beliefs are also formed through vicarious learning, where watching others apply for promotion may increase or decrease their belief about their capacity to apply for promotion and/or be promoted. Conversely, seeing others being turned down for promotion or struggling with the application process had a negative impact on some participants' perception of the likelihood of their being promoted or being able to complete the application process successfully.

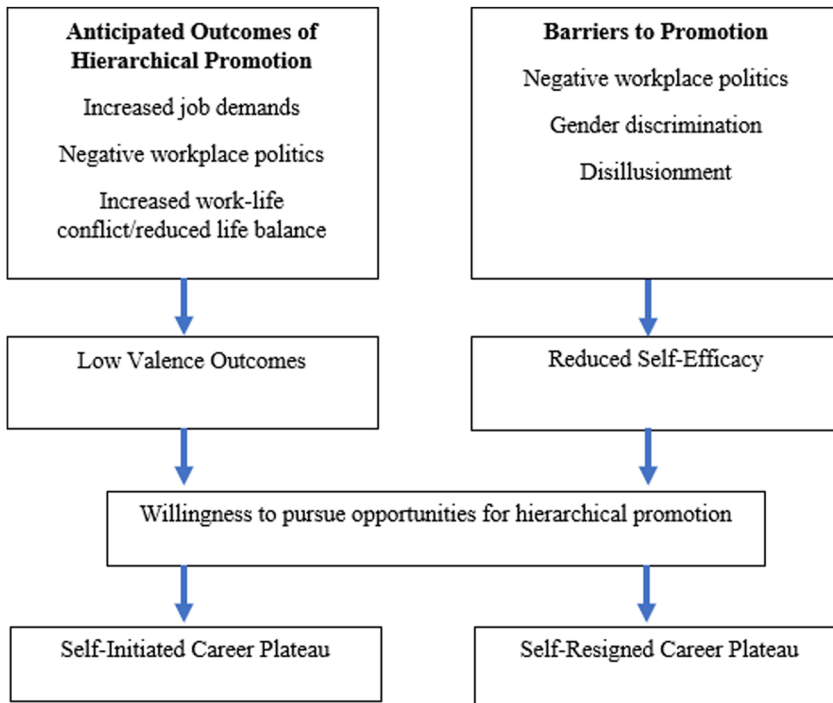


FIGURE 2 Self-initiated career plateau versus self-resigned career plateau.

## 6.1 | Self-initiated career plateau

As shown in Figure 2, participants who were on a self-initiated plateau elected to either not pursue a promotion or declined a promotion when offered because they accorded low valence to the perceived outcomes of a promotion, that is, in some instances, increased job demands, negative workplace politics and/or increased work-life conflict/reduced life balance. For these participants, even while they may have had high levels of self-efficacy or believed that they could be promoted and/or submit a successful application for promotion, they did not do so because of the low valence they accorded to the expected outcomes of a promotion. One of the main reasons associated with low valence was negative workplace politics. Negative workplace politics refers to behaviour involving the misuse of power and self-serving activities to accrue benefits for the focal individual (Crawford et al., 2019). Thus, in this instance, some participants on a self-initiated plateau refused or did not pursue promotion because they anticipated the promoted position would require them to be involved in or have to navigate this kind of workplace behaviour.

Hochwarter et al. (2020) have reported that individuals who perceive or experience negative workplace politics are also more likely to experience workplace stress, low job satisfaction and turnover. Negative workplace politics can also have a detrimental impact on opportunities for personal growth, job satisfaction and goal attainment, resulting in increased absenteeism and decreased organisational equity, trust and commitment (Bedi & Schat, 2013). Whereas previous research has suggested that men and women may view workplace politics differently—with women seeing it as more problematic than men (Makarem & Wang, 2020), we found no difference, with both genders indicating that they had declined a promotion because of anticipated workplace politics.

Again reflecting negative or low valence of anticipated outcomes, individuals on a self-initiated career plateau also reported that they had refused a promotion because of the anticipated work-life conflict and increased work demands. This finding echoes the widespread evidence that reducing work-life conflict and increasing life balance is a growing concern for many employees (Farivar & Richardson, 2020; Richardson et al., 2015) and that work-life

conflict has a negative impact on job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Kossek & Lee, 2017), productivity and performance (Farivar et al., 2016) and engagement (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). Adding to this literature, therefore, this study indicates that it can also have a negative impact on willingness to accept or apply for a hierarchical promotion. Our findings add a different angle to Huo and Jing's (2023) study that suggests work-life conflict results in career, as we argue that willingness to create work-life balance can also lead to career plateau.

Whereas increased job demands can be a source of personal challenge and growth, adding to perceptions of subjective career success (Richardson & McKenna, 2020), the participants in this study indicated that it was something they wished to avoid precisely because of the negative impact it would have on their well-being. Thus, they were taking ownership of their careers, exhibiting a strong sense of agency by choosing to remain on a plateau and adhering to their own values and aspirations.

## 6.2 | Self-resigned career plateau

SCCT also helps explain the participants we have located on a 'self-resigned career plateau.' Unlike those on a self-initiated plateau, these participants have not pursued a promotion because they perceived the promotion process to be unfair or overly complex characterised by workplace politics and gender discrimination leading to a sense of disillusionment, as shown in Figure 2. The idea of self-resignation is important here, where participants have resigned themselves to remaining on a career plateau even though they might otherwise aspire to a promotion. Their self-resignation is partly due to reduced self-efficacy (believing that they cannot navigate the respective promotion system) but also that the system itself is inherently flawed. This finding is consistent with Darling and Cunningham's (2023) results that indicate employees lacking skills often seek solutions through education and skill development to increase their chances for promotion. However, those encountering discrimination and favouritism are less likely to pursue promotions, expressing withdrawal and hesitation to adopt practices they find dishonourable. SCCT again provides a theoretical explanation for this finding where participants have elected not to pursue a promotion, paradoxically displaying a sense of agency when faced with what they perceive to be unassailable barriers.

Reflecting extant research (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Todak et al., 2022), this study has reported evidence of gender discrimination, with women being seen as less promotable to leadership positions than their male counterparts. However, whereas some studies have indicated that women are more likely than men to identify general workplace discrimination (Hentschel et al., 2021), we found that men were equally as likely to do so. Some men in this study, for example, said they would also not apply for promotion due to other forms of discrimination in their respective promotion systems, such as the presence of 'in-groups', a 'purple circle' or not being part of a particular professional network. In this respect, the findings of this study echo earlier studies about the creation of 'purple circles' in community organisations who 'intentionally or unintentionally, dominate organisations, discourage newcomers and prevent the succession of new people into key roles' (Paull & Redmond, 2011, p. 131).

For the participants on the self-resigned career plateau, increased work-life conflict and work demands did not dissuade them from applying for promotion. Instead, it was the promotion system itself that was the key barrier, believing that they did not have the 'right' personal attributes to successfully navigate the promotion system, which created a sense of disillusionment, further exacerbating their reluctance to apply for promotion.

Reflecting extant scholarship on the impact of disillusionment and reduced self-efficacy, the findings of this study also indicated widespread scepticism among this group, who reported both a lack of distributive equity (suggesting that the promotion decision outcomes were inequitable/unfair [Adams, 2005] and a lack of procedural equity, suggesting that the procedures used to make decisions about promotion outcomes were inequitable/unfair) (Newman et al., 2020). It has also indicated how a lack of organisational support caused some participants to withdraw psychologically (Low et al., 2016).

## 7 | THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study contribute to SCCT and to our understanding of career plateaus in several ways. First, we respond to Brown and Lent (2017) call for researchers to 'extend the theory to populations that remain underserved or understudied by vocational psychology', and to apply it 'across cultures, genders, communities, regions and countries' (p. 173). In this instance, by undertaking a cross-national study of law enforcement officers in Australia and the US., the study also responds to their recent calls to apply the theory to 'non-STEM domains' and specifically to examine 'the various ways in which self-efficacy and outcomes expectations may interrelate with respect to interests and goals' (Lent & Brown, 2019, p. 10).

Second, we develop a taxonomy and process model (see Figure 2) to explain why people might choose to plateau their careers. While our taxonomy identifies two types of career plateau (we acknowledge that others may also exist), there may also be some overlap between the two—suggesting a further avenue of study. However, it signals the heterogeneity of career plateaus, extending current understandings predicated on assumptions of a lack of agency. The taxonomy also distinguishes between those individuals who choose to plateau to prioritise subjective rather than objective career success, adding to the literature on career success and responding to recent calls (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022) to study 'more than upward movement' as a marker of perceived career success in contemporary careers.

Third, our study has highlighted the influence of prospection in career planning and decision-making or, in the language of SCCT, how individuals will look ahead to what they believe will be the outcomes of a particular career decision or trajectory and how what they expect to experience will impact on their career decision making. Thus as we have shown, whereas SCCT tells us that individuals will 'develop interests in, and pursue activities through which they might obtain desirable outcomes for themselves and others' (Brown & Lent, 2019, p. 8), they will also decline opportunities (in this case promotion opportunities) regardless of how 'socially desirable' those opportunities are, preferring to remain on a career plateau (despite its negative connotations) if the respective opportunities are understood to result in undesirable outcomes for themselves as individuals. In doing so, we connect the emerging scholarship on prospection in how people construe their careers (Shipp & Jansen, 2021) with SCCT by demonstrating how anticipatory forecasts, that is, what a future work role will involve, anticipated impacts on life-balance and work-life conflict impact on individual willingness to pursue hierarchical promotion.

Fourth, we have shown how SCCT helps to explain why individuals who choose to remain on a career plateau are demonstrating agency rather than a lack of agency, that is, one actively refusing promotion or being unwilling to apply for a promoted position and another resigning themselves from engaging in the promotion process, as shown in Figure 2. Therefore, whereas much of the extant literature characterises those on a career plateau as lacking proactivity, this study suggests that it can be a direct result of proactivity to remain where they are—enjoying subjective rather than objective career success and greater life balance. This finding suggests that whereas some professions like law enforcement and medicine might well be characterised by traditional 'career scripts' with inherent expectations of an upward trajectory (Valette & Culié, 2015), some individuals may well ignore those scripts, choosing instead to exhibit personal agency following what Svejenova (2005) describes as a 'path with a heart' to create a more authentic career experience.

The study has several practical implications. First, it signals the importance of ensuring equitable promotion systems and, perhaps more importantly, that all stakeholders perceive them as equitable concerning decision outcomes, that is, who is and who is not promoted and how promotion decisions are made. A key concern here is ensuring procedural justice with applications being fairly evaluated and distributive justice where promotions are based on meritocratic principles rather than exclusory decision-making, such as gender discrimination or preferential treatment being given to specific cohorts over others. This may be particularly true for organisations looking to expand their cohort of women leaders and/or other social cohorts, such as individuals from diverse cultural and/or socio-economic groups. Second, it signals the need to ensure that leadership positions provide desirable and rewarding opportunities for personal and professional growth rather than negatively impacting individual well-being,



including reduced life balance. Whereas increased responsibility invariably comes with increased work demands, organisational practices should ensure appropriate support systems for a robust pipeline of future leaders.

## 7.1 | Limitations

Despite its empirical and theoretical contributions, our study has several limitations. First, it is cross-sectional, whereas a longitudinal design would have captured whether participants' perceptions of a promoted position change over time and the concomitant impact on their willingness to accept or pursue a promotion. Indeed, in their recent paper marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of SCCT, Lent and Brown (2019) continue the longstanding call for more longitudinal studies employing SCCT. A longitudinal design might also capture whether participants' perceptions of their respective promotion systems change over time and, again, their willingness to apply for promotion.

Second, law enforcement is paramilitary-gendered with a specific remit to ensure public and professional safety. Thus, an unspoken level of loyalty creates strong bonds between law enforcement officers, similar to the sense of belonging in a family where family members establish strong ties. Within this context, in-groups have a considerable role in the workplace, and informal groups form quickly. Thus, we suggest further studies in different organisational contexts are needed to investigate whether workplace politics and in-groups could result in a self-initiated career plateau.

Third, the age cohort of participants in this study is more likely to view work-life conflict as problematic and hence more likely to use it as a factor in their respective career decision-making. Thus, we suggest that future studies investigate the impact of age on the relationship between work-life conflict and self-initiated career plateau. Finally, while exploring careers in law enforcement in two cultural contexts has allowed for empirical breadth, we did not explore the specific impact of national culture. Nor did we explore gender differences specifically. Thus, future research exploring gender differences in why men and women may elect to forgo a promotion would also respond to earlier calls to use SCCT to explore gender differences in career planning and development (Rogers & Creed, 2011). Similarly, although we have identified two typologies, we anticipate further typologies may be identified—perhaps with more nuance than those we have presented here, including the extent to which men or women, individuals from different cultural backgrounds or socio-economic groups might prefer to remain on a career plateau rather than pursuing hierarchical promotions.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

Hierarchical career progression has traditionally been seen as something to which most, if not all, individuals aspire—particularly those in the professions. Conversely, being on a career plateau has traditionally been viewed as an inherently negative career experience resulting from a lack of individual proactivity and/or ability. This study challenges these views, reporting how some individuals may deliberately and proactively choose to remain on a career plateau either because they do not aspire to a leadership position (self-initiated career plateau) or because they are unwilling to navigate what they see as an inequitable or inherently flawed promotion system (self-resigned career plateau). In doing so, we join those scholars calling for increased awareness of the heterogeneity of individual career trajectories and the growing trend of individuals prioritising subjective rather than objective career success.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no known conflict of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Julia Richardson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5238-2376>

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