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# Moving forward: Diverse conceptual and theoretical perspectives to advance career proactivity research

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## INTRODUCTION

Research interests have surged recently to unpack the different elements or forms of career proactivity, which is presumed to carry important implications for one's career (Klehe et al., 2021). However, as revealed in our bibliometric review (Jiang et al., 2022), career proactivity remains a complex domain that resides in various research themes in vocational and organizational psychology. While these insights emerging from the bibliographic analyses echo well-established perspectives in the wider career development literature, they do suggest broad directions future research may follow to move this field forward, such as clearing up the conceptualization of career proactivity, taking contextualized views, bridging historical traditions across domains, and developing new theories. That being said, since most existing career studies do not directly address "proactivity" due to constrained or ambiguous knowledge about the nature of being vocationally or occupationally proactive, the themes and clusters were largely hidden behind the literature that indirectly attends to individuals' actions or behavioral tendencies

(or indicators reflecting/fostering these actions or tendencies). What seems challenging for career proactivity research in the future is still the complexity of identifying a clearer and more precisely defined thread that can bind these themes in a coherent, meaningful manner.

We are pleased to see career development researchers engage with this line of scholarly conversations from diverse, critical perspectives to shape a way forward to advance career proactivity research. Three groups of researchers (Akkermans & Hirschi, 2022; Forrier, 2022; Sonnentag, 2022) have provided thought-provoking views around the concept, context, and theory to facilitate further unpacking of the four broad future research directions outlined in our bibliometric review and to raise new conceptual perspectives that can further enhance existing research of career proactivity. The most consistent, strong message they have communicated is centered on *context*. Despite these commentaries have each come with different angles, there appears to be a consensus that context, or contextualization, would be a promising thread that future researchers can leverage to dig deeper into the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical spectra of career proactivity. While this focus has been briefly discussed in our call for integrating context into career proactivity research (Jiang et al., 2022), these researchers have stepped further to unpack how we can do so more clearly and creatively. For example, Sonnentag (2022) articulated the need to incorporate historical and temporal contexts to understand career proactivity. Forrier (2022) took a critical view to challenge an agency or ontic perspective of career proactivity, in that career actions are not always self-determined and instead are often shaped by the context. Akkermans and Hirschi (2022) emphasized the behavioral nature of career proactivity and prompted researchers to think about proactive career behaviors as an element of career self-management in broader contexts. As advocates for contextualization, we agree with their highlights on the importance of context in advancing the scholarly inquiry of career proactivity. In the remaining of this rejoinder, our elaboration focuses on context and career proactivity from three angles embedded in these researchers' commentaries.

## MACRO CONTEXTS SHAPING THE CONCEPTUAL LANDSCAPE OF CAREER PROACTIVITY

The first angle involves the integration of context into the concept of career proactivity, with an emphasis on the effects of "big" environments, which vary over time. Concurring with Sonnentag (2022), we believe that historical and temporal contexts drive the development and change of career proactivity as a concept and how people make sense of this concept. While our bibliometric review attempted to naturally capture the evolving trends of the literature that is bibliographically linked to the proactive nature of careers (Jiang et al., 2022), it did not purposefully match the literature development to the historical events that mark societal or economic changes, which can exert significant contextual influence on people's career-oriented cognitions and behaviors (Lent et al., 2002; Meoli et al., 2020). Bibliographic analyses were used to portray the trend of the *literature* organized based on citation data and the time (i.e., year) of the publication, but this time does not necessarily reflect when the research was conducted, due to the lag between data collection (particularly for empirical research) and final publication of that research. In other words, an article published around the same time as the occurrence of a major historical event may not capture the impact of that event. The bibliographic analyses, different from the ways of conducting conventional literature reviews, do not specifically code the occurrence of such events from each individual article. To more accurately understand the impact of major historical events occurring in the macro environments (e.g., societal and economic contexts), bibliographic analyses need to be accompanied by one or several other types

of reviews (e.g., qualitative coding or meta-analyses) based on at least an appropriate subsample of the article pool. Like Sonnentag (2022), we encourage future researchers to consider this direction in exploring how critical historical contexts may have changed the conceptual landscape of career proactivity.

Despite the limitations of bibliographic techniques, the literature development trends generated from the co-word analysis may be informative in certain ways. For example, the phase of 2011–2015 may be able to reflect a change in context extended from the 2007–2009 global financial crisis when unemployment surged. The career proactivity literature during this phase presented a swift shift, featured by a particular highlight on career adaptation (with a proactive connotation), which is required for effectively coping with vocational challenges during transitional time (e.g., job loss, job search, and career change) (Jiang, 2017; Koen et al., 2012; Savickas, 1997). The latest phase (after 2015) captured in the development trend roughly started as the world entered the fourth industrial revolution (Industry 4.0), which has been rapidly changing the way people live and work. The post-2015 literature continues to emphasize adaptation and seems to more explicitly highlight the "proactive" elements of managing personal careers and career contexts. It is likely that the complexity of Industry 4.0 has raised an ongoing need to monitor the changing career environments and, accordingly, to make sense of what it may mean or constitute proactivity in the changing context. Clearly, our review has not provided an overview of another possible phase, which originates from the Great Resignation incurred by COVID-19 (Miller, 2021), due to a relative lack of citation data on this line of research when our review was conducted. However, the layers of complexity are at least doubled because of the clash between the new industrial revolution and the pandemic, both of which are unprecedented. Echoing Sonnentag (2022), we call for future research to investigate how the Great Resignation, the pandemic, and Industry 4.0 together have been shaping the conceptual and empirical direction of career proactivity research. We believe that it will remain an interesting and significant question in the coming years of this decade.

# MICRO CONTEXTS AFFECTING INDIVIDUALS' PROACTIVE CAREER BEHAVIOR

Another angle concerns the impact of one's micro contexts, which are "smaller" than societal and economic contexts, on individuals' proactive career behaviors. Supporting Forrier (2022), we agree that the individual and the context cannot be separated strictly and artificially. Humans do not live and work in void and are often influenced by their associated environments. Our commentators have shared varied but connected perspectives that future researchers can reflect on to analyze the contexts of proactive career behaviors. To some extent synthesizing these perspectives, we would like to highlight two avenues through which researchers can potentially identify more specific, new directions.

First, there is a need to rethink how the agency or ontic perspective of careers can be balanced with a contextualized view. Career proactivity, while being a construct largely embedded in the agency perspective, is manifested within individuals' relevant contexts. We believe that the agency or ontic approach is still an appropriate starting point to look at career proactivity, but individual agency and associated behaviors are always bounded in contexts (e.g., spatial and temporal). A way forward should be to unpack as well as integrate contexts that drive individuals' proactive career behaviors; this does not separate but instead connects the individuals with their contexts. The social chronology framework (SCF), which classifies contexts of the ontic (the individual) into space and time (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2015, 2018), helps develop more

nuanced and organized understandings of individuals' career contexts under which they behave proactively. However, unpacking contexts in this way does render the risk of "artificially" isolating individuals from their contexts, particularly when researchers fail to, or ineffectively, "reunite" the individual and the context in subsequent steps of the research process. To this end, we endorse Forrier's (2022) proposal of using practice theory, according to which a career is a social phenomenon sustained via continuous practice of career activities, to facilitate the individual-context (re)integration or reunification. In this case, a key question future researchers should consider is how to innovatively integrate SCF and practice theory to guide career proactivity research.

Second and relatedly, we need to develop a deeper understanding of how proactive career behavior is shaped without directly assuming that it always comes from one's deliberated, goal-directed cognition. Reflecting on Forrier's (2022) insights, we acknowledge that momentary contact with various contexts, such as unexpected circumstances or events, can affect one's actions, and such processes may not be grounded in self-determination. For some, the "context as a trigger" perspective might appear to be in conflict with the self-initiated nature of proactivity, as the actions fostered by momentary contextual experiences involve reactivity (i.e., taking actions to respond to the context). If we, like Akkermans and Hirschi (2022), concentrate on the behavioral nature of proactivity, an action promoted by contexts can be proactive in itself. An employee who is made redundant (context) may proactively seek jobs. Even though job seeking is prompted by redundancy (or a reaction to redundancy), the actions during job seeking can be proactive (e.g., proactively apply jobs rather than passively wait to be contacted by potential employers). Thus, we believe that the contextualization of career proactivity should be based on a process view, which acknowledges contexts as prompters of an action and then focuses on the proactive nature of the action itself. However, as Akkermans and Hirschi (2022) noted, a difficulty is to decide when a career-related behavior is *actually proactive*. While the key features of our definition of career proactivity (e.g., self-initiated, future-oriented, and intention to influence/change the career situation and the career-self) provide bases to evaluate the proactive nature of a career behavior, this difficulty remains a critical issue that future researchers needs to consider.

## CONTEXTUALIZED EFFECTS OF CAREER PROACTIVITY: HOW IT SHAPES AND INTERACTS WITH CONTEXTS

A further angle is focused on the effects of career proactivity through a contextualized perspective. There are at least two major areas researchers should attend to when contextualizing the consequences of proactive career behavior. The first area is closely aligned with the characteristic of *changing the situation* in our definition of career proactivity (Jiang et al., 2022). Our bibliometric review has prompted Akkermans and Hirschi (2022) to call for research to investigate outcomes of career proactivity taking into account associated processes or mechanisms. Concurring with them, we see a great potential to explore this area through the lens of proactivity creating contexts that maximize positive outcomes. These contexts are not limited to those directly linked with work and career but can be extended to nonwork domains, for career involves more of a whole-life perspective in the future world of work (Hirschi et al., 2020). Since, as noted earlier, contexts are often triggers of proactive behaviors, the new or changed contexts as a result of one's career proactivity may again trigger the individual to continue the same or initiate other proactive behaviors that enable career success. This chain of effects suggests the presence of a process loop where the order of context and proactivity are switchable;

such effects could assist in unpacking the dynamic interplay between contexts and career proactivity over time. The process loop could serve as a foundation for future research which takes a temporal perspective to explore the contextual antecedents and outcomes of career proactivity.

The second area resides in how career proactivity interacts with contexts to positively influence the individual and/or the situation. For example, when or under what contexts career proactivity would be more beneficial for a person and/or an organization needs to be understood more thoroughly. It also relates to the dark side of career proactivity (e.g., proactivity may generate negative outcomes such as resource depletion hindering career progress) researchers have recently alerted (e.g., Akkermans & Hirschi, 2022; Parker et al., 2019). The management of this dark side requires us to consider the specific context, the specific type of proactive career behavior, and the congruence and/or the complementation between the two. The success or benefit of a proactive career behavior can be jointly determined by the contextual resources (e.g., time resources) and the specific behavior itself (Sonnentag, 2022). As such, wise proactivity (Parker et al., 2019), which in essence involves one's awareness of and attention to the contexts of his or her action, plays an important role in shaping a positive outcome. Future research is also encouraged to go beyond the dark side and wisdom perspectives of proactivity to explore novel ways of identifying contexts that enable and sustain success of career proactivity.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through synthesizing the critical views shared by three groups of commentors (Akkermans & Hirschi, 2022; Forrier, 2022; Sonnentag, 2022) in response to our bibliometric review of career proactivity (Jiang et al., 2022), this rejoinder articulates *context* as a central focus to advance our knowledge in this research domain. Based on the commentaries, we delineate three areas where context can be more purposefully incorporated in future research. First, macro-level contexts such as historical, societal, and economic circumstances may influence the conceptual foundation of career proactivity. Second, micro-level contexts, which are more proximal to individuals' daily life and work (e.g., relational and temporal contexts), may either directly or indirectly shape individuals' proactive career behavior. Third, career proactivity can facilitate the creation of more positive contexts where one can continue proactive actions to sustain success, and career proactivity can also interact with the context in determining whether individuals can achieve positive outcomes. Recognizably, the perspectives laid out in our rejoinder are only just a starting point to inform future research of potential avenues to contextualize career proactivity research. We call on future researchers to build upon and extend these research avenues to advance our understanding of career proactivity, both theoretically and empirically.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

### ETHICS STATEMENT
Wiley's Guidelines on Publishing Ethics were followed.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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