

Developing a sustainable career through discourse: a qualitative study on a group of Italian project managers

Sustainable
career through
discourse

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Abstract

Purpose – The current study makes two main contributions: one theoretical and one methodological. First, it investigated the theoretical prepositions of career sustainability perspective, which appears particularly suitable for examining project managers' careers' dynamics and patterns, featured by explicit and recursive interactions between individual, temporal and contextual factors. Second, the study aimed to adopt a qualitative approach to this topic as to allow a deeper understanding of individual narratives about careers, highlighting underexplored issues and peculiarities that future research could further examine through quantitative methodologies.

Design/methodology/approach – Project managers' careers are still an under-researched topic, especially through qualitative methods. The study applied career sustainability theory to the realm of project management, moreover, adopting a socio-constructivist perspective. Participants were 50 Italian project managers who were involved through a narrative in-depth interview that focused on career and career success. Their answers were analyzed through thematic analysis of contents and diatextual analysis.

Findings – Results showed that project managers' career could be a prototypical example of sustainable career, basically described in terms of four basic constitutive dimensions as follows: time frame, social space, agency and meaning. Implications for both future theoretical expansion of career sustainability theory and project managers' career management interventions were also discussed.

Originality/value – The originality of the paper could be found in the effort to adopt a socio-constructivist perspective to investigate the topic of career sustainability taking the exemplary case of project managers' career.

Keywords Project manager, Sustainable career, Socio-constructivism, Qualitative study

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Consistent with the changes that affected human labor over the last decades, the number of organizations whose work is based on projects is increased nowadays and “[...] more than 20% of global economic activities taking place as projects” (McKevitt *et al.*, 2017, p. 1673). While project management initially spread in some sectors as aerospace and information



technology, in recent years its demand has also increased in several other sectors as health care, constructions, energy and finance (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). Project management is no more a *niche* occupational area: it has become a term of common use (Bredin and Söderlund, 2013).

Despite of these increasing spread and importance, project management as a profession is still not adequately valorized in several organizations, even in project-based ones (McKevitt *et al.*, 2017). For instance, Richardson *et al.* (2015) defined project management as an *accidental profession* because many people do not choose to become project managers, but project work becomes a necessary step to reach higher levels in the organization, especially for those who do not hold line positions too. Moreover, McKevitt *et al.* (2017) pointed out that after having managed several projects, full-time project managers may find themselves *stuck in a rut* without opportunities for development and not adequately compensated for their work. Recently, although an increasing multi-disciplinary interest in project management could be observed, Bredin and Söderlund (2013) argued that available studies are still not enough to support project managers both from the perspectives of career and project management. In particular, while a recent and significant increase in the scholarly attention about project managers' careers is acknowledged (Söderlund, 2004), some approaches, as the socio-constructivist ones, are still under-represented although career studies have long benefited from them (Jackson and Klobas, 2008).

Berger and Luckmann (1967), notably, the founders of social constructivism, claimed that reality and knowledge are socially created by language. The universal needs of meaning and order lead people to share personal meanings and to define experience; therefore, observations are not an objective reflection of the world but an interpretation of it (Andrews, 2012). Jackson and Klobas (2008) underlined that project managers need to understand those elements of organizational environment (e.g. internal communication and hierarchies) that influence the construction of knowledge, as the understanding of these basic principles remains a critical factor for successful projects. According to these assumptions, while discussing about the main gaps of contemporary career theory, several authors (e.g. Akkermans *et al.*, 2020; De Vos *et al.*, 2020) stressed that many studies took an agentic perspective – thus, emphasizing the individual focus – therefore, not adequately considering the contextual dimension, which is the situational constraints and the opportunities that affect individual attitudes and behaviors. A recent approach to career studies, namely the *career sustainability* perspective, provides a theoretical perspective where person, context and time influence each other (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). It is also argued that each individual's career is inherently interconnected and all parties are involved such as individual's family, peer, employer and society; therefore, negative and positive experiences and how they are perceived by individuals provide opportunities to adapt and to influence their environment and to develop one's own career (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

Based on the abovementioned scenario, the current study makes two main contributions as follows: one theoretical and one methodological.

First, our study responded to Akkermans *et al.* (2020) call for testing the theoretical prepositions of career sustainability perspective, which appears particularly suitable for examining project managers' careers' dynamics and patterns that are characterized by explicit and recursive interactions between individual, temporal and contextual factors. To the best of our knowledge, project managers' careers have not been examined through this theoretical lens, although their career idiosyncrasies may probably be better captured through it in light of aspects like multiple career patterns, multiple stakeholders, the competing influences between the line and the project, etc.

Second, the study adopted a socio-constructivist perspective (e.g. Jackson and Klobas, 2008), which although widely used to analyze the specificities of some groups of participants, as for instance disabled women (Mondéjar-Jiménez *et al.*, 2009) and undergraduates (Dong

et al., 2013), as far as we know, has never been adopted to explore project managers' careers. Therefore, the study aimed to fill this notable gap by adopting this qualitative approach that could allow a deeper understanding of individual narratives about careers, highlighting underexplored issues and peculiarities that future research could further examine through quantitative methodologies.

Peculiarities of project managers' careers

Project management is a growing area of employment in many sectors by virtue of notable changes in work structures and processes, which is commonly defined as "projectification" (Midler, 1995). This notion emerged following changes in the structure of human labor, now more flexible and dynamic, and the increasingly common use of the project seen as a time limited form and specific task. Project work "is perceived as a controllable way of avoiding all the classic problems of bureaucracy with which most normal organizations are struggling" (Packendroff and Lindgren, 2014, p. 7).

As the number of project organizations is constantly growing, their diversification also increased. Bredin (2008) distinguished between project-based organizations in which projects are core business and project-oriented organizations, whose functional lines are traditional but rely on projects to carry out a series of activities such as implementing a new process or providing services to new products. Project managers in organizations are sometimes self-employed or contract workers, which lead to a significant presence of those who are no longer permanent employees (Garsten, 2008). Projects by their nature are temporary activities, dynamic and flexible, which give rise to discontinuous and temporary paths and are characterized by challenges to achieve success.

Based on this premise, it seems necessary that project managers become able to embrace uncertainty (Lloyd Walker *et al.*, 2016) and also regarding their career. However, individuals often consider their actual position as a project manager only as a launching path for a prospective higher-level position in the line-career ladder, as project work may not appear very attractive (Pinto and Kharabanda, 1995; Hözle, 2010) or it can become progressively more difficult to manage bigger or more complex projects to pursue a project manager career ladder. In fact, several studies suggested that higher pressure and mobility related to project manager's profession often lead individuals choosing alternative career paths as an expert career or a line career (Bredin and Söderlund, 2013; McKeivitt *et al.*, 2017). In fact, while in traditional organizations, career progression is somewhat linked to the hierarchical position, salary and responsibilities, for those who hold project management roles, even when they are hired by the organization, their future assignments are often uncertain so as their career progression (Hözle, 2010). Moreover, unlike traditional career development, project managers' career advancement is marked not only by the title (e.g. junior project manager, project manager, senior project manager and project director), but also by the nature of the projects they successfully managed (Lloyd-Walker *et al.*, 2016).

Therefore, the pursuit of a career as a project manager appears challenging because it is characterized by a higher number of shifts from one organization to another, as well as of lateral shifts, for e.g. from one project to another within the same organization or shifts from the line to projects and *viceversa*. Moreover, available literature suggests that higher mobility, and, therefore, the ever-increasing acquisition of professional experiences, is not always accompanied by corresponding objective (e.g. remuneration) and subjective (e.g. personal satisfaction) career success (McKeivitt *et al.*, 2017). Hence, the importance of establishing integration between project management and organizational policies, as well as between line human resource management (HRM) and project HRM, to guarantee project managers adequate career development (Huemann, 2016). The organization should strive to provide continuity to project managers' professional experiences and build clear and defined career paths, clearly differentiating between line-, expert- and project-career ladders, in which

transparency and fairness are promoted (Hözle, 2010). Lo Presti and Elia (2020) underlined the importance of building well-defined career paths as they suggested that organizations should create an environment in which project managers can act and feel gratified.

Several metaphors have been applied to describe project management careers (McKevitt *et al.*, 2017), among which the protean and boundaryless ideas need to be mentioned, as they are particularly salient. While the protean idea (Hall, 1996) emphasizes autonomy, continuous learning, identity growth and subjective satisfaction as an indicator of success, the boundaryless idea (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994) stresses the initiation and pursuit of work-related relationships across organizational boundaries (not necessarily in terms of physical or employment mobility) as well as enthusiasm and comfort in establishing and nurturing active relationships beyond organizational boundaries. Lloyd-Walker *et al.* (2016, p. 24) connected these career ideas with project management careers stating that “there is a general acceptance that project based careers are boundaryless and there is evidence that those in project based roles take a ‘protean’ approach to their careers, in which they see themselves as masters of their own destiny.”

From an empirical standpoint, project managers’ careers have been often examined in relation with job satisfaction and motivation and almost exclusively through a quantitative approach. Hözle (2010) argued that project managers’ motivation depends on the organizational ability to implement a holistic career path and to integrate a reward system that provides for maximum subjective benefit; project managers will be satisfied when the total sum of the awards will be higher than the costs necessary to carry out their tasks. Hözle (2010) also listed the most important factors for the implementation and design of a career path tailored on project managers’ peculiarities: integration of a mentoring model, the need to clearly define the specific skills required for each level given that the skills required change according to the nature of the project, alignment of all career paths to ensure fairness and transparency, the need to give project managers a “home” and, therefore, to encourage the implementation of a department in support of this professional figure. Instead, Ekrot *et al.* (2016) focused on the relation between organizational support and project managers’ satisfaction. They showed that project managers need to be adequately supported to feel satisfied; even if they strive for autonomy and decision-making power, in order to decrease turnover rates, it is necessary that organizations support their work, even if this is more difficult within projects than in the normal line function (Huemann *et al.*, 2019). Thus, consistently with Hözle (2010) and Bredin and Söderlund (2013), the formalization of project managers’ career paths is still the most recommended tip.

Overall, several aspects of project managers’ careers still appear under-researched (Akkemans *et al.*, 2020). This lack of knowledge (compared to other occupational groups) could be detrimental, as future research could not capture project managers’ careers peculiarities and direct empirical efforts toward non-original results. Career sustainability can represent the interpretative key to gain insights into these peculiarities, especially through qualitative approaches that prove worthwhile particularly when research questions need initial development and consolidation (Wiggins, 2011).

Sustainable careers through a socio-constructivist lens

“A career is defined as the sequence of work experiences that evolves over the individual’s life course” (Van der Heijden and de Vos, 2015, p. 2). This definition highlights two main elements: time and (social) space. Consistently with it, a career can be meant as the progression or movement of the individual over time in search of opportunities and adaptation to his needs, values and objectives (Marion *et al.*, 2014). Space is the set of work- and non-work-related life contexts of an individual that can influence his/her choices (Van der Heijden and de Vos, 2015), thus, it is inherently social. Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015, p. 7) defined a sustainable career as a “sequence of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns

of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual.” In doing so, they identified four fundamental elements, namely time, social space, agency and meaning, also suggesting that careers consist of subjective and objective experiences. In light of the abovementioned socio-economic changes, the sustainable careers idea provides an integrative framework by focusing on the central role of the individual in managing own career (Hall, 1976; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and also on contextual influences and life prospects (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). Within this framework, career is defined as a cycle of events and decisions that implies a constant interaction between personal and external factors (Van der Heijden and de Vos, 2015). The four key elements that characterize a sustainable career are described as follows. *Time* refers to the movement of individuals through their lifetime while making career experiences (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). *Social space* refers to the work context such as labor market, organizational structures, work group contexts and the private life context (Greenhaus and Kossek, 2014). *Agency* is another key element, as individuals play a central role in shaping the sustainability of their own career through proactive behaviors and adapting to the career events and changes (Akkermans and Tims, 2017). *Meaning* refers to the awareness of individuals about what matters in their career considering personal needs and values that represent an important resource to the career decisional process. Being aware of what is important and experiencing meaning provide individuals with a clear sense of mission (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015, p. 7) argued that “career choices that are made while being mindful about these personal and contextual needs and possibilities will be more likely to contribute to a sustainable career.” Therefore, individuals need to understand what matters in their life and fit their career choices with their personal needs to be healthy, happy and productive.

Careers are often studied in terms of their effects for the individual, namely career success (Spurk *et al.*, 2019). Career success may refer either to a subjective evaluation of the degree of satisfaction towards an range of career aspects as advancement, career goals, professional development, etc. or to a more objective evaluation (e.g. individual or third-part) of the individual attainment of these indicators (e.g. monthly income). While the former is often referred to as subjective career success (frequently evaluated in terms of career satisfaction), the latter is defined as objective career success. The idea of sustainable career somewhat tries to move forward from this distinction, incorporating both concepts within the idea of sustainability, as it highlights both subjective and objective elements that are not important *per se* but for the individual and his/her perceived relationships with a broader context of social ties, life objectives, contextual constraints and opportunities and so on.

As mentioned above, sustainability of project managers' careers is a topic that has not yet received any scholarly or empirical attention. Nevertheless, the sustainable career perspective appears to be easily examinable through the social constructivism approach. This approach is particularly suitable for the sustainable career framework described above as social constructivism focuses on how individuals construct and share meaning with others (Andrews, 2012). Berger and Luckmann (1967) suggested that reality is constructed by social interactions during which individuals share their interpretations using language, thus stressing the idea that reality is defined by subjective experiences and the individual interpretations of the society. Social constructionists argue that knowledge, understanding and perception depend on circumstances and how these are interpreted by individuals (Blustein *et al.*, 2004). Andrews (2012, p. 41) claimed that “[. . .] conversation is the most important means of maintaining, modifying and reconstructing subjective reality”, the narration of a story is a self-construction and it is a way through which individuals provide meaning to their experience (Bujold, 2004). With special reference to careers, Savickas (2013) maintained that individuals shape their self and collect perspectives on their personal career story through narratives. In this vein, career is a construction in progress embracing each stage of life and engaging

individuals in alternatively behaving as actors, striving as agents and arguing as authors. These roles grant a different perspective on a career story. An objective perspective is given when the actor delineates his/her own story about the sequence of positions occupied from school through retirement. A subjective perspective is evident while the agent accounts for the strivings and adaptations pursued to gain occupational success. A projective perspective emerges when the author voices his/her own individual's reflections on life and work. All perspectives are important, as each of them contributes to pattern work experiences into a meaningful career story. Therefore, these approaches suggest that a career is a mix of subjective and objective experiences characterized by multiple decisions that involve the unique ways through which an individual can deal with circumstances, events, change and inner conflicts (Bujold, 2004; Van der Heijden and de Vos, 2015).

Looking at the sustainable career perspective's core concepts through a socio-constructivist lens, the four key elements appear clearly intertwined. *Time* is the temporal quality of reality through which different experiences and events influence individual's decisions (Chudzikowski *et al.*, 2020). *Social space* is the whole of organizational and personal contexts that influences the perceptions and the interpretations of human beings (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). *Agency* is constructed through the experience of socialization, and through it the personal identity is defined giving form of understanding actions and events (Andrews, 2012). *Meaning* is the process through which individuals give a shape to reality and make sense of their experiences (Blustein *et al.*, 2004; Bujold, 2004). In the light of this, it can be argued that the sustainable career perspective could be fruitfully applied to the study of project managers' careers, as it could be useful to address some of the several blind spots that still exist about them, moreover, making the most of the social-constructionist approach through which a deeper understanding of the ways of individuals shape their career through their narrative could be gotten.

Method

Data collection

As mentioned above, this study addressed two main aims. First, it applied this lens to the examination of project managers' career narratives, and second, it aimed to conciliate research on career sustainability with a socio-constructivist perspective.

Accordingly, project managers were chosen as a specific target of the study since they are considered a quite representative example of knowledge workers, namely a peculiar occupational group who possess a distinctive and intangible resource – i.e. knowledge – which can make the difference between and within organizations, especially in times as the contemporary ones. Indeed, project managers are generally recognized for their ability to co-create new insights, to communicate, coach and facilitate the implementation of new ideas. Their work is generally non-repetitive and results-oriented, using both “traditional” scientific methods and the need for continuous learning, intuition, new mindsets and imagination. Therefore, these workers should be able to use both a rational and analytical approach to problem solving as well as to exercise their intuition and creativity while dealing with complexity and uncertainty (see agile approaches and practices in project management; Davenport *et al.*, 2002; Brodeur and Dupont, 2006).

Data were collected through a narrative in-depth interview. The individual interaction with participants was guided by semi-structured outline dealing with their professional experience (e.g. professional role, occupational sector, employment status and organizational tenure) and more specifically with the meaning project managers attach to their career as professionals. Parallel in line with the objectives of the study, the concept of career success was explored as to investigate the objective and subjective dimensions that might concur to define career sustainability. The complete outline of the interview is showed in [Appendix](#).

Participants and procedure

A total of 50 Italian project managers were interviewed for the study. Of the managers, 90% were members of three Italian Project Management Institute Chapters, while the other 10% were recruited through the personal networks of the professionals involved adopting a snowball convenience sampling technique. Yet, the collaboration with the National Institute was precious to select project management (PM) professionals from whole Italy, who responded to a call for participation published by the chapters on some communication channels.

Among participants, 38 (76%) were men and 12 (24%) were women. Mean age was 49.04 years (standard deviation (SD) 7.06). As for individuals with a university degree ($n = 45$), 24 (48%) were graduated in engineering degrees, 13 (26%) in scientific degrees, 4 (8%) in economic and financial degrees, 2 (4%) in social degrees and 2 (4%) in liberal arts degrees. Five project managers had high school degrees.

Average professional tenure was 23.56 years ($SD 7.24$), while average organizational tenure was 14.04 years ($SD 7.8$). As for their main occupational sector, 22 (44%) worked in the information and communication technology (ICT), 14 (28%) in the industry and logistics, 1 (2%) in the public administration, education or health, 3 (6%) in the construction or facilities, 1 (2%) in the banking, financial or insurance and 9 (18%) in other sectors. As for employment status, 45 (90%) were employed, 2 (4%) were freelancers, 2 (4%) were retired and 1 (2%) was currently looking for another job.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis of contents (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was first carried out on the corpus collected to describe and organize “what” project managers thought about career. A special attention was devoted to the analysis of the aspects that they considered important to define the sustainability of their career, namely the whole of subjective and objective aspects that gave meaning to their work as professionals. Parallel, diatextual analysis (Mininni, 2005) was adopted to penetrate “how” did participants discursively constructed their experience with special reference to the focused topics of the study (Manuti *et al.*, 2012; Miminni *et al.*, 2014; Mininni and Manuti, 2017).

Diatextual analysis is a special address of textual analysis, whose main aim is to reveal the relationship that binds interlocutors, texts and contexts of talk. Accordingly, the term diatext (from the Greek “dia” that means “through”) is “the context as it is perceived by the enunciators of the text, as they imagine it and show that they take it into account” (Mininni, 1992, p. 63). According to this methodological perspective, sense does not reside permanently within a text but rather it goes through. Therefore, to penetrate within texts and to catch their meanings scholars need to focus on some discursive traces that concretely refer to the subjectivity, argumentation and modality of any discourse. More simply, by approaching to a text adopting diatextual analysis, scholars should find answers to three basic questions as follows: *Who is saying that? Why does he/she say it? How does he/she say it?* These answers are precious to analyze texts by collecting information about subjectivity, argumentation and modality (SAM model) and finally to organize the recurrence of some diatextual markers according to specific patterns of meaning as showed in Table 1.

The first question (*Who?*) aims at clarifying how the interlocutor conveys his/her identity through discourse. Accordingly, with reference to the “subjectivity” dimension, diatextual analysis allows to trace back discursive markers of agency, affect and the enunciative strategies adopted to signal his/her position toward the discursive context and toward the interlocutors (*embrayage/debrayage* strategies).

The second question (*Why?*) points out how the enunciator organizes the “meanings why,” i.e. the reasons that concretely guide stances and claims about the topic debated.

Questions of diatextual analysis	Dimensions of diatextual pregnancy	Diatextual markers
Who?	Subjectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Agency</i>: any textual unit showing if the enunciator is source or goal of action • <i>Affect</i>: any textual unit highlighting the emotional dimension of texts • <i>Embrayage/debrayage</i>: any textual unit revealing whether the enunciator is involved or not
Why?	Argumentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Stake</i>: aims and interests animating the text • <i>Story</i>: scenes, characters and models of action • <i>Network</i>: <i>logoi</i> and <i>antilogoi</i> activated within the several narrative and argumentative programs
How?	Modality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Genre</i>: any reference to the typology of text and intertextual references • <i>Opacity</i>: rhetorical figures and frame metaphorsetc. • <i>Meta-discourse</i>: any expressions of comment and reformulation

Table 1.
Diatextual markers of the SAM model

Finally, the third question (*How?*) focuses on the discursive modalities through which the meaning is shaped, namely it focuses on the stylistic and rhetorical options that make clearer the position and the subjectivity of the interlocutor.

Results

Career is a project . . .

The first questions of the interview were addressed to examine the meaning project managers attach to career. As argued earlier, these questions were meant to explore a culturally shared concept adopting the point of view of this peculiar category of professionals. Thematic analysis and diatextual analysis allowed to focus on some specific aspects related to these aims.

A most traditional view of career considers the latter as a path that every worker walks in during his/her professional life, progressing in terms of expertise and of better qualification and economic recognition. In line with this, even some of the project managers acknowledged that career, like in any other profession, is defined as a professional advancement, implying a progress in responsibilities, challenges and skills.

- (1) "Career means to manage projects that progressively become more complex to acquire greater responsibilities and to receive higher economic reward for one's own role" (Male, 38 years old, IT Sector) [1].

However, the discursive resources revealed through diatextual analysis contributed to show the peculiarity of the meaning they attach to career. Interestingly, to better specify this concept, a project manager used the metaphorical image of the project (ex. 2), namely the core goal of his profession. The interlocutor compared career to the life cycle of a project that has a beginning, a progress and a conclusion, affirming that the topic of the project is one's own professional growth. This stylistic choice contributed to strengthen his career identity, also conveying a sense of agency, inbuilt in this definition of career. Following the words of this manager, career (and consequently its success), like a project, strongly depends on the manager's motivation and abilities to take the direction, make choices, take risks and take control over challenges. By this, career could be "measured" by autonomy, leadership, responsibility and control over the resources.

- (2) "Career is a path of professional growth that every individual, with different kind of ambitions, plans in time, independently from the working context. Career is a project

that is concluded once the professional experience is finished [. . .] the object of this project is one's own professional growth which could be measured mostly by autonomy, leadership, responsibility and control over the resources that are available" (Male, 40 years old, Automotive Sector).

Another meaningful metaphorical image of career used by participants was "journey," namely a long path that allows collecting memories to make experience, develop relations, in a word the "cargo" that according to ex. 3 is the heritage and, therefore, the personal meaning of career.

- (3) "The root that originates this word (career) is the same that originate words like roadway and cart. Both refer to journey. The roadway represents the path, the cart carries the cargo. I believe that words are very important and that they might help us in thinking about the use that we should do of them. Then, if we reflect upon linguistic proximity, career is a journey during which we collect a cargo" (Male, 49 years old, Energy and Utilities sector).

A recurrent discursive feature in project managers' contributions revealed by diatextual analysis is the use of *debrayage*, namely the adoption of impersonal forms or third person pronouns in narratives that are generally used to present opinions as socially recognized truths, also conveying a sense of detachment from personal experience (ex. 4). However, in this case, these strategies, mainly addressed to underline that companies hold the responsibility to decide whether a manager's career should progress or not, are indirectly contributed to shape project managers' agency with respect to career development. In fact, although most participants agreed that the company plays a primary role in taking decisions about managers' career, they also stated that it is also up to them to gain visibility, show their abilities and convince their colleagues about their reliability and success. This personal engagement would generally result in career progress. In this vein, career management is described as "shared responsibility" between managers and companies.

- (4) "Career means that the company acknowledges that you succeed in your job and therefore gratifies you in different ways by means of career advancements and or economic promotions" (Female, 50 years old, Training and Development Sector).

To strengthen further this sense of agency, mainly shared among participants as a crucial feature of the job of project managers, some of them described their professional domain by using the image of the "craft," namely a kind of activity where personal motivations, talents and efforts are fundamental to succeed.

- (5) "We can use the same definition generally used for other kind of 'crafts': to achieve goals in the perspective of continuous improvement. This is the central role played by the project manager and these are his/her features and activities actually a driver for his/her personal and professional growth and therefore for his/her career path. Development of soft skills, work ethic, management skills are the pivots around which a Project Manager could develop his/her career." (Male, 49 years old, Training and Development Sector).

Though sharing the definition of career as a progressive professional evolution, some project managers among the interviewed chose *embrayage* strategies to directly construct their subjectivity in discourse and to concretely involve the reader in their personal professional story (ex. 6). *Embrayage* strategies are conveyed through the recurrent use of personal markers such as "I" and "my" that underlined the sense of active participation of managers to the development of their career.

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- (6) “My career has begun, has evolved and I believe will conclude in my family company. I have a quite singular experience as project manager. I am a civil engineer and today as an industrial and building engineer I think that it is crucial the experience I have had in my company for my growth.” (Male, 59 years old, Building Sector).

Another relevant feature of career according to project managers was related to the evidence according to which the meaning of “career” might change in relation with the professional status of professionals, being either dependent workers or a freelancer.

- (7) “(The meaning of career) depends from the context where the project manager is allocated, if he is allocated within a structured organization his competence and his work might open wide perspectives and horizons within the organization [...] Therefore, a competent project management might aspire to higher organizational positions, if on the other hand he is a freelancer or consultant he will aspire to get more clients” (Male, 46 years old, Services Sector).

Provocatively, some stated that career is a concept that does not exist because of the very peculiar features of this job. According to these contributions, career is the natural evolution of professional life. However, it is not simply the chronological and progressive accumulation of activities, skills and expertise. It is the subjective effort to manage the challenges that every project brings with it, above all in terms of interpersonal relationships.

- (8) “In general, a career does not exist for a project manager because as time goes by his/her job does not change at all. Certainly, there is a career line that begins with the management of a project or of multiple projects and then you can gain responsibility in program management and then in portfolio management. But for those who are fond of project management, striving for being a lifetime project manager, career could be a professional path that goes through the management of projects that become even more complex, with a growing budget, with a bigger number of resources to manage at the same time, with a wider and more diverse management of human resources, etc.” (Male, 41 years old, Automotive Sector).

Therefore, career seemed to be a concept that goes behind its objective condition, and it is strongly driven by individual motivations and efforts (Lo Presti and Elia, 2020). Yet, apart from the occupational status of the project managers interviewed, a distinctive feature of their career that emerged from the narrative contributions collected was that career for them is defined mostly by subjective factors (e.g. work meanings, personal resources, skills and motivations) rather than by objective ones (e.g. economic stability and role progression). This narrative representation echoed the concept of career as *sustainable*, which is mostly deriving from individual self-determination and from the human capacity to create, test and maintain one’s own adaptability to the context and to make sense of it in personal and professional life (Anseel, 2017; Veld *et al.*, 2016; De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

- (9) “Career for a project manager is his/her personal narrative of the evolution of the professional skills acquired through time [...] going back to all the working experience, through all the choices and decisions made [...] through the successes and fulfillments but most of all through the lessons learned from the failures [...] the men and women met, we have worked with [...] the emotional participation to the projects, the convictions we have developed [...] career for a project manager is his/her project of professional life” (Male, 59 years old, Building Sector).

In this vein, participants marked the crucial role played by some personal soft skills that project managers should possess in order to progress in their career. Accordingly, project managers should be “networkers” and “facilitators,” because they always work on the

borders between external stakeholders' demands and management and colleagues' expectations and should be able to manage these claims. To accomplish this difficult task, they should be leaders and motivators of the teams, but at the same time, they should be able to take the initiative and to make important decisions even autonomously.

- (10) "A project manager, according to me, absolutely needs to share his work [...] because of the nature of his job a project manager needs to 'measure' his performance [...] the first feedback is a relational one [...] the sharing of the project generates agreement or disagreement [...] people are the strength, the possibilities, the ideas [...] this what daily feeds a project manager to give him strength for the peak decisions [...]" (Male, 56 years old, Industry Sector).

Diatextual analysis contributed to highlight some recurrent discursive features in project managers' descriptions of soft skills: the use of modal verbs (e.g. "should") and of interpersonal meta-discursive cues such as relational markers (e.g. "frankly" and "naturally"), intensifiers (e.g. "absolutely" and "strongly") and personal markers (e.g. "I" and "me"). These discursive markers concretely conveyed a general agreement of participants about a sort of ideal job profile of this category of professionals. Further, the use of modals underlined the awareness that these features are not only abstract requirements, but rather they come out from managers' concrete experience acquired on the field. Therefore, the main discursive act that emerged from these extracts is "to prescribe" attitudes and behaviors that can assure success to the project and leadership within the organizational context by focusing especially on the "side effects" if professionals do not follow these indications.

- (11) "A project manager should be a facilitator between individuals and organizations, his aim should be to promote collaboration for the sake of the management of the project [...] it is fundamental to make coherent choices and to express sound positions [...] this could be done if decisions are taken basing on stable and mature values (no one will accept a leader that will suddenly change ideas) [...] the guidelines should be clear [...] anyway reasonable and sustainable decisions could be taken if there is a shared authority and autonomy [...] no one will promote a project manager who was unable to manage a project." (Male, 40 years old Industrial Automation Sector).

From a thematic point of view, a final contribution given by project managers as for the exploration of the meaning they attach to career was referred to the role played by the organization in managing the career development of this category of professionals. Most participants agreed about the evidence that the organization might play a crucial role, as it is responsible for training and development initiatives that might involve also project managers. Certainly, it depends on the organizational culture and on the organizational mission and vision if it gives centrality to these professionals with reference to the core business or not.

- (12) "Very much [...] and in many ways [...] the organization can give and deprive me of possibilities [...] and I can give and deprive organizations as well [...] it is a cooperative game and it cannot be different [...] if a company cuts your wings (or better this is your interpretation of the organizational behavior) it is better to change route [...] and this is the journey" (Male, 49 years old, Energy and Utilities Sector).
- (13) "Well, a healthy company promotes a talented project manager and it is a game where both wins and there is no other winning combinations" (Male, 40 years old, Automotive Sector).

Discursively speaking, the relationship of fruitful interdependence between managers and their organizations was constructed through the image of a "win/win game": both actors have

the power to conduct the game but only through the identification of a common goal both can achieve their objectives. From a diatextual point of view, interpersonal meta-discourse cues (e.g. through the occurrence of personal markers and relational markers) helped developing this representation of the person/organization interplay.

... *based on sustainability*

After having explored the features and meanings career might have in this specific professional field, the interview concentrated on the objective and subjective aspects that according to the managers involved in the study could contribute to make a career successful and, therefore, sustainable.

Thematic analysis showed that, according to the managers, career sustainability mainly derives from both personal and organizational elements. More specifically, project managers affirmed that career sustainability can be “measured” by a sense of self-fulfillment and satisfaction with the project but above all with the positive relationships with both the stakeholders and the team.

- (14) “Generally speaking, having success for a project manager is simply to finalize one’s own project [...] in my case, which is a very peculiar case, success is a team following you with enthusiasm [...] the appreciation of the employees or the acknowledgment of your colleagues, it is the positive evaluation of the stakeholders [...]” (Male, 59 years old, Building Sector).

In line with what was discussed about the meaning attached to career, managers underlined that a positive indicator of their career success cannot be simply referred to the delivery of a well-designed plan. Conversely, to achieve success, professionals must engage time, spend energies, exercise soft skills and be constant across time. In this vein, metaphorically speaking, career success is a path that needs to be built through a hard technical and interpersonal work. Therefore, project managers have a primary role in this process because they should act like a performer, trying to read and interpret the demands and the expectations of their stakeholders. Therefore, time frame, agency and meaning were confirmed to be very important dimensions of project managers’ career sustainability. The use of metaphors, personal markers and models was a diatextual trace that recurrently contributed to convey this conclusion (ex. 15).

- (15) “Success is a path driving you to gain the stakeholders’ trust day by day [...] the project manager is like an actor: to be credible he should perform as if he was a stakeholder [...] the project manager should work on the understanding of the motivations and of the decisions that stakeholders take in order to empathize with all of them” (Male, 47 years old, IT sector).

In addition to the proactive role assigned to managers, some participants also introduced another crucial dimension of career sustainability, which is social space. In this vein, sustainability derives from the interplay between subjective and objective factors: project manager’s abilities and a feasible context for the realization of the project. In this case, project managers’ agency was discursively reshaped by the metaphor of “magic,” namely a conceptual domain that concretely opposes to ability. Accordingly, a magician works with chance and sometimes “makes miracles,” while a project manager is a professional who relies upon his skills and can make feasible plans after having analyzed the pros and contras of any situation.

- (16) “We are not magicians [...] magic is not our ability [...] projects beginning with unrealizable plans or with a zero cost slow down a project manager’s career success or they might even destroy success [...] conversely if a project has a strategic relevance, has good resources and there is sufficient time to develop ideas and economic incomes

are good [...] well, therefore, I think career success could have a rush" (Male, 40 years old, Automotive sector).

Therefore, managers recognized that there are both objective and subjective factors that could foster or hinder career success, such as economic crisis or difficulties in managing teamwork. In both cases, managers' soft skills are crucial, once more stressing the active role that professionals might play in coping with a rather unpredictable working context.

- (17) "During the career of a project manager it might happen a moment of obfuscation, few convictions [...] this can slow down and even stop the achievement of success [...] I am saying nothing new [...] some failure maybe consecutive might produce a loss of concentration, a general disengagement [...] the leadership fails, namely the most distinctive feature and the reputation of the project management outside the company breaks down steeply." (Male, 59 years old, Building sector).

As for the factors that contribute to shape the meaning of career sustainability, participants declared that having prestigious responsibilities and engagements, promotions and advancement within the organization are very important. However, continuous learning and, therefore, an intrinsic motivation to improve one's self was recognized as a peculiarity for this category of professionals.

- (18) "The two things cannot be divided [...] there should be a sort of average between the winning of the 'bread' and, therefore, tangible results as a higher wage, more important engagements and being gratified for having contributed to a good performance of the company" (Male, 55 years old, IT sector).

Conclusions

The main aim of this paper was to contribute to the development of career sustainability theory, adopting a qualitative and socio-constructivist perspective in examining project managers' discourses about their careers.

More specifically, the paper argued for the need to integrate the study of sustainable career with further insights coming from qualitative investigations in order to understand the discursive elaboration of the sense-making processes substantiating career as a personal experience.

To this purpose, the study focused on a very peculiar category of knowledge workers, project managers, namely those professionals appointed by their organizations to lead teams responsible for achieving the project objectives and meeting the stakeholders' expectations, which proactively interact with several stakeholders in order to create a positive influence to fulfill human, technical and financial needs and must be both managers and leaders by balancing these two roles.

The career of a project manager is usually dynamic, flexible and characterized by continuous learning (Lloyd-Walker *et al.*, 2016): improving own skills is essential to deal with more and more challenging projects; a static leadership model is not enough, and their professional growth is closely linked to personal growth, which also in tune with interests and values. This is consistent with the concept of sustainable career (Van der Heijden and de Vos, 2015), stressing a more agentic and proactive attitude of individuals toward their career management and a strict interconnection with the individual's family, peers, employers, etc. Hence, we can assume that a project manager career could be a prototypical example of sustainable career, basically described in terms of four basic constitutive dimensions: time frame, social space, agency and meaning.

The qualitative perspective granted by the thematic and the diatextual analysis conducted on their discourses allowed to trace back how the dimensions of sustainable career

were disseminated within texts. Moreover, the psycho-semiotic markers of SAM allowed organizing these discursive traces into coherent career profiles, accounting for the complex link between subjective claims, cultural contexts and discursive choices.

As for time and space, data coming from the interviews confirmed that project managers' career is unique since it is based on temporary assignments and often lacks formal positions. It is, therefore, conceived as a "project-based career" (Bredin and Soderlund, 2013), namely as a career featured by constant changes. Project managers generally work as consultants and practitioners. They often move across different organizations; therefore, they need to adapt to different professional contexts and colleagues and to stay employable to cope with an extremely competitive market (Lo Presti and Elia, 2020). Discursively speaking, project managers used vivid and powerful images to describe their career that allowed penetrating the way they thought about it through the way they talked about it. They compared career to a project, journey and cargo, thus emphasizing the traits of intangibility and boundarylessness that feature its relationship with time and space. This also depends on the increasingly complex scenarios that are affecting our way of living and working. In a world characterized by high speed, constant changes, business transformation, teams geographically and culturally distributed, and situations such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, project managers must balance all these constraints as new challenges to cope with can arise constantly.

As for the dimensions of agency and meaning, diatextual analysis was proved to be a precious tool to explore career identity through the peculiar rhetoric that project managers used to make sense of it. They acknowledged they have a crucial role within the organizational context, even if often they are not formal and stable part of the organizational chart. They mostly perceived them as networkers and facilitators working across processes and activities, relying on their individual soft skills such as leadership, decision-making and problem-solving. Therefore, their agency derived from the awareness that they are the creators of their career, which consequently is described as a precious handicraft product, resulting from their hard work, talent and ability. By this, career to them is highly meaningful, and it is a personal fulfillment and source of intrinsic satisfaction. Moreover, personal gratifications can be also found "outside" the organization because project managers are increasingly considered leading actors in relation to some topical contemporary issues. For instance, the issue of environmental sustainability needs being mentioned, with reference to the 17 sustainable development goals defined by the United Nations and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Social generativity is another concept that has recently been linked to project management, because it offers a model of leadership based on a new way of thinking and acting personally and collectively, socially oriented and responsible and able to develop team members' selfhood. Hence, it appears meaningful that many project managers serve as volunteers (e.g. the global community of the Project Management Institute (PMI)), because they believe that project management can help to have a better life and a better society, with a consequent strong motivation to contribute in several ways to develop the knowledge and culture of the discipline.

In the end, results coming from thematic and diatextual analysis showed a fruitful possible integration of research perspectives on sustainable career. Being the definition of a sustainable career mostly focused on the meaningful sequence of an individual's different career experiences across time and space (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015), the qualitative and discursive perspective granted by thematic and diatextual analysis seemed to provide privileged psycho-semiotic tools to investigate the subjective making of career experience that through discourse reconnects to cultural and individual meanings.

Overcoming the limited perspective of these conclusions, linked with the qualitative nature of the study, which should be meant as an original and "intensive" case study rather than a generalizable and extensive survey, results also provided some precious insights for project managers' future career management interventions.

A first aspect could be related to the lessons learned about what these professionals could do to improve their career management by their own. Actually, the peculiarities emerged about how project managers considered their career and, in general, how the meaning they attached to their work could be useful for the implementation of specific training paths addressed to foster their career identity and to enhance some key soft skills (e.g. resilience, transformational leadership, people management and networking) that could enrich the competitiveness of their job profile.

On the other hand, results showed also some interesting implications about what the organizations, where often project managers work as consultants, can do to contribute to their engagement and motivation. Yet, the study confirmed largely shared evidence according to which these professionals might play a strategic role in organizations, often being partner of their success. Although often involved by a transitory and short-term relationship with the organization as a function of the project they are carrying out, these professionals might be crucial resources to reach challenging goals and to make the difference on the market. In view of the above, thematic and diatextual analysis of project managers' discourses contributed to give suggestions to organizations about how to manage this special category of human resources, encouraging them to feel part of the organization, to share its vision and mission and to collaborate with the other organizational members to reach its objectives.

Note

1. The main personal and professional features of the project managers interviewed such as gender, tenure and working sector are described between the brackets.

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Appendix

Outline of the interview

Career: definition, peculiarities and career development modalities in project management

What does "career" mean to a project manager?

How much important are the following aspects of career for a project manager: professional collaboration with other persons and organizations, following one's own values, feeling autonomous in decision making about future career choices, etc.? Why are these aspects so important to a project manager?

How and to what extent can the organization impact on a project manager's career development?

Career sustainability: the subjective and the objective dimensions counting for project managers

What does "having career success" mean to a project manager?

What are the factors that can foster or hinder a project manager's professional success?

According to you, what are the most important aspects of your career: the acknowledgment of your expertise, the gratification of your performance or the achievement of more "measurable" goals such as higher wages, career advancements, challenging assignments, etc.?

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