

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'No regrets, they don't work': Utilizing repair strategies to embrace difficulties in individuals' careers

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Abstract

As scholarly interest in the impact of career difficulties like career setbacks grows, research increasingly aims to understand how individuals navigate these difficulties. To explore how individuals handle them and prevent career regret, we conducted a qualitative investigation with a total sample of 109 participants. Our findings reveal that many individuals embraced difficulties in their careers instead of regretting them. We saw that the difference between regretting and embracing these difficulties lies in whether individuals employ repair strategies: embracing difficulties was possible through repair, whereas failing to engage in repair led them to feel a sense of regret about the difficulty. We identified three repair strategies—*reclaiming* (i.e., realigning career with personal values or restoring measurable, tangible conditions), *enriching* (i.e., adding new knowledge or extending career towards greater fulfilment), and *mobilizing* (i.e., disrupting the career, or transitioning into a more promising career)—which enable individuals to embrace difficulties. Additionally, our findings revealed that two triggering factors foster engagement with repair, namely, *adopting a protean career attitude* and *exercising courage*. Taken together, our findings promote the importance of repair strategies as a crucial response that can alter how people perceive difficulties in their careers and avoid emotions of regret.

KEYWORDS

behaviour response, career regret, career setbacks, difficulties in careers, protean careers, repair

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Practitioner points

- People experience various difficulties throughout their careers. While some of these difficulties merely create periods of hardship, others can lead to feelings of regret. This suggests that the emergence of regret is shaped by more than the presence of a difficulty alone. We found that engaging in repair strategies as a response to difficulties in careers, such as setbacks (e.g., not gaining a promotion) and failure (e.g., underestimating the importance of salary negotiations), enables individuals to avoid the feeling of regret. We uncover three main repair strategies used to address career difficulties: *reclaiming*, *enriching*, and *mobilizing*.
- Individuals engage in reclaiming through realigning their career with personal values based on subjective success factors (e.g., standing up for oneself, establishing clear personal boundaries), or restoring objective career conditions (e.g., reassessing and negotiating one's salary). Individuals engage in enriching when they accumulate new knowledge (e.g., by attending a seminar) or extend their current job by adding new tasks or projects that provide greater fulfilment. Lastly, they engage in mobilizing when they make career changes (e.g., returning to a prior position, founding their own company, or linear transitioning into a more promising environment).
- Awareness about the benefits of engaging in repair strategies can help individuals embrace career difficulties. Career counsellors and developmental practitioners can help individuals develop the tools for this by teaching clients to strive for repair and how to engage in repair strategies. More specifically, they can help individuals foster a protean career attitude by enhancing clients' understanding of their values and how to act accordingly, as well as helping them develop self-confidence and exercise courage. Consequently, individuals can learn how to avoid career-related regret and the negative implications of regret for their well-being and satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

No regrets, they don't work. No regrets now, they only hurt.

(A phrase from the song 'No regrets' by Robbie Williams)

Regret is conceptualized as the painful emotion when people realize or imagine that their current situation could have been better if they had done something differently in the past, accompanied by a clear sense of self-blame about the current situation that the person wishes to undo (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Scholars from various fields have sought to better understand regret (e.g., Brehaut et al., 2003; Martinez & Zeelenberg, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2006). Prior research has focused on whether actions or inactions lead to greater regret (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1982) and has proposed that individuals often engage in ameliorative behaviours—either behavioural or cognitive strategies—to resolve or rectify the situation (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1994). However, insights from prior studies primarily come from research on consumer decision-making, where regret is viewed as a temporary emotion that fades over time (Zeelenberg, 1999), raising the question of how relevant and applicable these insights are for more long-lasting regrets.

Indeed, career-related regrets are expected to differ from other regrets, such as consumer decision-making, because careers represent work experiences developed throughout one's professional life (c.f. Arthur et al., 1989) and are characterized by ongoing reflection and reevaluation of past decisions throughout one's professional journey. We know that as individuals navigate their professional paths, they often face difficulties, such as setbacks (e.g., Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023) and failures (e.g., Rieger et al., 2023), which can trigger feelings of regret (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2007). A meta-analysis by Roesé

and Summerville (2005) showed that individuals experience the strongest regret for educational and career decisions, yet almost 20 years later, the topic of regret in terms of careers remains rather nascent (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019; Byington et al., 2019). Furthermore, the changing nature of careers means individuals now exercise greater self-directedness and agency in determining their career paths (e.g., Arthur et al., 2005; Hall, 2004). While this increased freedom empowers individuals, it also shifts the responsibility for career decisions onto them, which can lead to greater self-blame—a key factor for regret development (Roese & Summerville, 2005; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Research into regrets in careers has to date focused predominantly on occupational choice regret (e.g., Budjanovcanin et al., 2019), which is defined as the persistent negative emotion about the inability to undertake a particular profession (Wrzesniewski et al., 2006) or having chosen the wrong profession (e.g., Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). Other scholarly efforts devoted to understanding career-related regrets have focused on specific samples, such as laid-off individuals (Sullivan et al., 2007). These previous studies have focused on understanding the notion of career regret by studying different regret types (Sullivan et al., 2007), its social-related antecedents (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019), and consequences of occupational choice regret (e.g., Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022), leaving us with a constrained view of which types of challenges, in the context of careers, promote the feeling of regret and the ways that individuals might avoid it.

Moreover, recent research points to an interesting proposition that not every career difficulty results in regret (e.g., Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023; Rieger et al., 2023). This research highlights that difficulties may sometimes offer opportunities to grow or change one's career course instead of only being something to avoid (e.g., Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023; Mansur & Felix, 2020). This research also emphasizes that individuals use cognitive strategies (e.g., reflection etc.) to manage occupational choice regret (e.g., Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022) or to learn from career setbacks (e.g., Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023), aside from actions like changing occupations or seeking career coaching (e.g., Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022; Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023). However, the knowledge about how individuals navigate career difficulties through behavioural strategies to prevent regret from emerging remains lacking. This knowledge is critical for research to develop interventions that can enable or help individuals to engage in behavioural strategies to deal with difficulties in their career, and eventually, prevent regret from developing.

In this article, we aim to answer the following question: *how do individuals navigate the difficulties they encounter in their careers so as not to experience them as a regret?* Given the nascent state of research (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), we took an inductive, explorative research approach (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Accordingly, we started with collecting retrospective narratives. Prompted by the insight that not all our informants experienced regret despite facing difficulties, we were intrigued to discover how the pathways of these individuals differ from those who experience regret.

We explored this further by drawing on qualitative data collected from professionals who, in addition to their regular work, engaged in developmental programmes (i.e., executive education or career coaching). Our study contributes to the regret and career literature in several ways. First, we extend prior insights into the importance of action and inaction in regret development (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1994). Building on the argument that inaction tends to elicit stronger regret than action (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020), we propose that engaging in repair strategies not only alleviates current regret but also serves as a proactive way to prevent future regret. Notably, as we offer new insights into the development of career regret and how individuals can mitigate it, we address an important yet underexplored aspect in research on regrets in careers (e.g., Budjanovcanin et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2007). Specifically, we identify repair strategies for addressing career difficulties and the factors that facilitate this repair cycle. Building on this, we propose a theoretical model that illustrates how these strategies can transform experiences of difficulty into a sense of embracing. In doing so, our study offers valuable theoretical insights into the dynamics of embracing and regretting, thereby extending the emerging conversation on regret in careers (e.g., Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022).

Second, by identifying three distinct behavioural repair strategies, we provide valuable insights into approaches for addressing career difficulties, an area whose importance has been underscored by

prior scholars (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). We further suggest insights into factors that foster engagement in repair strategies and contribute to understanding how personality traits shape the response to career regret, a question raised in earlier studies (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019; Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). Lastly, by providing novel insights into how individuals navigate career difficulties to prevent the emergence of regret, we extend research on the imperfect side of careers, including difficulties such as career setbacks and failure in careers (e.g., Baruch & Sullivan, 2022; Baruch & Vardi, 2016) and the role regret plays (Byington et al., 2019).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although our research is explorative, and therefore, not determined by a priori concepts, we begin by providing an overview of prior work to guide the reader towards our emergent findings.

Regret (in careers)

Regret differs from disappointment and frustration about situations (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019; Gilovich & Medvec, 1994) in that it relates to a person's behaviour: individuals believe their current situation would be better if they had *behaved* differently, whereas disappointment relates to aspects of a *situation* that they wished to be different, in particular, outcomes (Zeelenberg, van Dijk, der Pligt, et al., 1998). Regret also differs from other emotions because it is cognitive in nature. As Zeelenberg (1999, p. 327) states, 'to *feel* regret one has to *think*', meaning that regret is the result of an evaluation process. Although regret has been defined in various ways in different literature streams, we build on the definition stated in our introduction of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2007), in which a person's responsibility for the situation is underlined as a crucial factor for regret (e.g., Roese & Summerville, 2005; Zeelenberg et al., 2000). Notably, a study by Gilovich and Medvec (1994) on a diverse sample of 77 participants (10 professors, 11 residents of a nursing home, 40 undergraduate students, and 16 adults employed as clerks and facility staff), found that of 213 regrets, only 10 were about a situation that was outside of a person's control. This finding underscores that personal accountability is a crucial precondition for the experience of regret because self-blame, which constitutes a core characteristic of regret (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007), is rather absent when agency is not attributed to the self.

Given the long-term nature of careers (c.f., Arthur et al., 1989), they inherently involve uncertainty and the possible trajectories and outcomes into which they might unfold are seen as potentially wide ranging. When these are mentally contrasted against reality, often prompted by the question, 'What if?', they give rise to counterfactual thoughts, which can, in turn, lead to regret (Byrne, 2005; Roese, 1997). Research on regrets in the career context has focused predominantly on studying occupational choice regret. While these research endeavours provide important insights on antecedents of occupational choice regret—including social comparison and social influence (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019), they also highlight the cyclical nature of occupational choice regret (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). More specifically, the authors use the term cyclical to represent how the emotion of regret is recurring and dynamic, prompted by specific triggers. Throughout a career, regret can recur when individuals encounter situations that remind them of their now unwanted career choice decision and trigger the emotion. For example, an individual who regrets not becoming a medical doctor might find that this regret returns when they find themselves in a hospital for medical reasons and they are reminded of their missed opportunity.

In contrast, Sullivan et al. (2007) took a broader perspective on regrets in careers, extending beyond occupational choice regret to encompass decisions made throughout one's career. Specifically, they found that regret can stem from not engaging in more political behaviour in organizations or not pursuing alternative career paths due to, for instance, wanting to focus more on work-life balance and family. In summary, previous research has mostly addressed occupational choice regret and has been

based on informants who have experienced regret (there have been only a small number of participants in previous research who have reported not feeling regret) or very specific contexts (i.e., individuals being laid off). As such, this research offers only limited insight into different kinds of regrets in careers, the factors that lead an individual to experience regret, and how individuals can prevent regret development in the first place.

Responses to difficulties in careers

In the past, much research has been devoted to the concept of job crafting, defined as proactive and self-initiated changes that employees make to their jobs to better align their work with their skills, interests, and values (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting can be further differentiated between task crafting (i.e., altering the task itself in terms of type, score or amount), relational crafting (i.e., modifying the nature and/or extent of personal interactions) and cognitive crafting (i.e., reinterpreting the meaning or purpose of one's work) (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Accordingly, job crafting has been explored from different perspectives, such as its role for well-being and burnout (e.g., Tims et al., 2013), work engagement (e.g., Petrou et al., 2017) and meaningful work (e.g., Berg et al., 2013). In so doing, prior research suggests that job crafting serves as a proactive mechanism for employees to mitigate negative work experiences and workplace difficulties, reduce stress and burnout, and enhance overall job satisfaction, work engagement and well-being (e.g., Petrou et al., 2017; Tims et al., 2013). Nevertheless, these proactive and self-initiated changes can generally be understood as ongoing efforts to adjust and improve one's work experience (e.g., Tims et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). While job crafting may at times be triggered by difficulties, it is more commonly driven by a desire to enhance job fulfilment on a day-to-day basis. Thus, although it can be linked to prior difficulties in careers, addressing them is not typically the primary motivation behind job crafting. Moreover, to date, the role of job crafting in shaping experiences of regret, or the absence thereof, has not been examined in the literature.

Once the emotion of regret has occurred, some people seek to address it. For instance, Budjanovcanin and Woodrow (2022) showed that individuals respond to occupational choice regret after a trigger through 'avoidance' strategies (such as distraction with holidays), which aim to mitigate the effects of regret, 'primary approach' strategies (such as career coaching or occupation change), which focus on directly addressing the source of regret (i.e., the wrong occupation), and 'secondary approach' strategies (such as adapting cognitively to the regret), which is related to one's mindset. However, except for their 'primary approach' strategies, the responses they found were more cognitive in nature. Thus, the authors called for future research to investigate which behavioural strategies (beyond an occupational change) people engage in to deal with their regrets, as well as how personality traits, career agency, or workplace environment shape these responses. Moreover, their study explored strategies as a response to existing occupational choice regret. However, it is possible that individuals use behavioural responses that prevent regret before it occurs, which needs further investigation.

Knowing that career-related regret can arise from not only occupation choice but also broader contexts, a rich stream of potential sources of regret can be difficulties, such as career setbacks (e.g., Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023) and failures (e.g., Rieger et al., 2023). This prior research highlights the importance of engaging in action to deal with failures. For instance, Kutscher and Mayrhofer (2023) find that people who experience setbacks engage in more thoughtful reflection, adjusting their career goals and expectations based on their experiences. However, Kutscher and Mayrhofer (2023) did not explore any strategies that individuals undertake to deal with career setbacks except suggesting they engage in reflection.

Research into life regrets offers further insights into how individuals try to respond to regret, noting that regretful individuals may undertake repair attempts in response to regret. Gilovich and Medvec (1994) discussed the possibility of individuals engaging in ameliorative behaviour, which includes both behavioural actions (i.e., seeking to rectify a mistake) and cognitive repair (i.e., mentally

reframing or rationalizing a decision to minimize feelings of regret). Notably, ameliorative behaviour is shaped by momentum, meaning that once individuals begin taking steps to address a regret, this action can create momentum for further change. In other words, the act of beginning to rectify a regret can lead to sustained efforts, as individuals feel motivated to continue building on their initial attempts to reduce feelings of regret (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994; Roese, 1994; Zeelenberg, 1999). This, however, raises the question of whether regret is the sole trigger for engaging in repair actions. In fact, as we suggest in our findings, these repair efforts may themselves transform difficulties in careers into opportunities, rather than leading to regret, which is the central focus of our study.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to better understand how individuals navigate difficulties in their careers so as not to regret them. The nascent state of research on career regret provided an opportunity for more exploratory inquiry (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). We used grounded theory as our methodological approach (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), adhering to its core principles and following the interpretive approach from Gioia et al. (2013). By following its tenets, we engaged in systematic data collection and constant comparison, allowing themes to emerge organically from our participants' perspectives. This iterative process enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of the complex experiences (Lee et al., 1999) that could denote individuals' difficulties in their careers, how they responded to them, and their later perceptions of those difficulties while taking an interpretivist perspective.

Data collection

We used two different strategies for qualitative data collection from the sample of 109 professionals. The first set of qualitative data, reflective narratives collected from 50 professionals in an executive MBA programme (henceforth, EMBA), helped us gain initial insights into our participants' career trajectories and a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest. These written reflections were part of a coaching-related assignment in one of the EMBA courses and were collected in September 2020. Participants were requested to reflect on their past careers to uncover potential difficulties and regrets. Specifically, we asked them to reflect on the question: *'If you could go back ... years ago and give yourself career-related advice that you wish you had received at that time, what would it be?'* This broad question was designed to gain insight into individuals' careers and the regrets they may have. Since research into the phenomenon is nascent, we decided to retrieve initial insights from the first set of data to develop our understanding. In so doing, we discovered that all informants were able to recall moments when they faced difficulties in their careers, however, experiences of negative emotional responses to these difficulties varied. In fact, while some informants expressed regret (i.e., actively stating they experienced regret or had a strong desire to 'undo' a choice), other participants even expressed gratitude or validation for the difficulties in their careers. This prompted us to explore why some experience regret from such difficulties while others do not.

Hence, our research focus, aiming to understand how individuals navigate their difficulties to avoid regret, emerged inductively from this first set of data. The data resulted in 26 single-spaced pages in MS Word (Times New Roman, 12). Participants were assured that their answers would be anonymized and that they could withdraw at any time. To balance out potential bias and obtain the most insightful answers, we advised the participants to indicate beforehand whether they felt comfortable with their answers being used for research.

The second set of qualitative data was made up of semi-structured interviews with 59 professionals and built on the abovementioned insights, delving deeper into how professionals dealt with difficulties in their careers. Specifically, in the first round of interviews, we collected data on a sample of $N=27$ professionals in Spring 2021 to gain more insights on regret in the context of careers—still in an

explorative manner. Thereby, we aimed to better understand the nature of the phenomenon and how people viewed it as shaping their careers, as well as how they addressed it. These data helped to advance our understanding of why some individuals experience their difficulties as regret, whereas others view them in a positive light. Specifically, our initial data analysis revealed that all our participants faced difficulties at some point in their careers. When comparing the cases of those individuals who reported experiencing regret with those who did not, we found that the different outcomes could be attributed to how the individuals responded to the difficulty in their efforts to resolve or improve their situations.

Although there were some instances of individuals hinting at the importance of agency in their career as a triggering factor of repair, because we did not explicitly ask about these factors, we could not make any strong conclusions in this regard. Therefore, we entered a second round of interviews and collected data from a sample of $N = 32$ professionals in Fall 2024 to gain more insights into the factors shaping these repair efforts. Accordingly, the interview protocol has been adapted in line with the principles of grounded theory to gain more insights into these findings and further support our emerging model. Specifically, we aspired to better understand which factors shape whether they respond to the difficulties they experienced in their careers.

We used semi-structured interviews to collect rich data to discover difficulties in our participants' careers, their feelings concerning them, and the impact the decision had later in their careers. The interview protocol included four parts. First, we asked about individuals' career paths, with particular attention to key events and milestones. Starting the interviews with this narrative approach helped the informants to recapitulate their careers, reflect on events and decisions, and serve as an 'ice breaker' as they got the opportunity to talk about something they lived firsthand. We then asked them to reflect on difficult career moments and what advice they would give their younger selves based on their current experiences and knowledge.

To encourage our informants to reflect on their career trajectories and disclose potential regrets, we asked questions about decisions and situations they wished they had handled differently, as well as the career-related advice they would offer to their younger selves. Given the exploratory nature of our research through which the focus on regret emerged, we did not explicitly use the word 'regret' during the data collection unless participants referred to it themselves. To ensure that individuals were indeed referring to the phenomenon of regret, we added verifying questions to our interview protocol to elicit references to key characteristics of regret, such as self-blame. To determine whether the informant experienced regret, we drew on the conceptualization offered by Zeelenberg and Pieters (2007, p. 6). Their definition outlines four key characteristics of regret, namely, *feeling that one should have known better*, *feeling that one lost an opportunity due to a mistake*, *feeling a tendency to correct a mistake*, and *wanting to undo the event and get a second chance*. To identify these elements and thereby assess the presence of regret, we asked specific verifying questions aligned with each characteristic.

Moreover, many of the informants also actively used the word 'regret' to describe their feelings about the situation. Some participants referred to regretful emotions in these moments, whereas others pointed out that their difficulties were part of their journey or that they valued the difficulties they had faced and did not wish the situation to be different (which would have been a key characteristic of regret). In fact, those participants who expressed regret also articulated a strong desire to be able to 'undo' something and blamed themselves for the situation, reflecting the notion of regret discussed in prior research (c.f., Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Next, we asked the participants about their initial feelings about the career difficulties, if their impressions changed over time, and how this shaped their future careers. Lastly, we offered interviewees the opportunity to add something to the interview that they viewed as important to their experiences to ensure that we covered all insights. We concluded by asking participants for their demographic data. The final interview protocol can be found in the [Appendix](#). Similar to our first set of data, we also actively compared all interviewed individuals from the second data set who stated they had regret about the difficulties in their careers with those who did not experience regret.

The interviews were conducted in English and German via the online platform Zoom and in person and lasted 30–75 min. The first round of interviews took place in March and April 2021, October 2022, and April and May 2023. The second round of interviews was conducted in September–October 2024.

Participants signed a consent form beforehand, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed by the first and fourth authors. We opted to conduct an additional round of data collection in the Fall of 2024 to explore the findings from the first round of interviews in more depth to increase the rigour of the findings and reconfirm our previous findings. After no new insights were gained from the interviewees in relation to our research question and our informants' experiences validated our findings, we decided to stop conducting interviews.

Research setting and sampling

This qualitative study took place in the context of two leading European business schools. In alignment with our research approach, we decided to conduct this study in a context that enhanced reflection and sensemaking, which is the essence of an educational environment. We sampled different groups of working professionals (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990) who, in addition to their regular work, engaged in postgraduate education in these European business schools at the time of data collection. Specifically, 43 participants were in an Executive PhD programme, 14 professionals in an EMBA, and two individuals in career coaching ($N=59$). These programmes were expected to foster sensemaking of their prior careers and address potential difficulties.

We chose our participants because working professionals who decided to pursue an educational curriculum next to their regular job were expected to actively engage in sensemaking and reflection on their career path and difficulties (De Déa Roglio & Light, 2009; Warhurst, 2011). Indeed, many individuals decide to undertake such developmental programmes to have the space to reflect on and address difficulties, with the aim of determining how to develop their future career paths. Both EMBA and Executive PhD programmes, as well as career coaching, create a framework for managers to engage in self-exploration and development of their 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986), thereby supporting the notion that they may have a clear idea of their past, present, and possible future selves (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

Furthermore, we purposefully recruited working professionals from the EMBA and executive PhD programmes because such educational programmes require work experience in managerial positions. The average work experience of participants was 21 years. Building on Super's (1957) work on career stages, we define early-, mid-, and late-career individuals as those with <10, 10–20, and more than 20 years of work experience, respectively. We reasoned that it was important to study more experienced individuals as we wanted to explore reflections on careers over a longer period (c.f. Arthur et al., 1989). We expected these professionals to provide reflective insights into their career trajectories and the difficulties they were facing, as well as how they dealt with these experiences. We approached all our participants face-to-face or via email and elaborated on our research goals without revealing our research question. We told them that we were interested in understanding their career paths, as well as critical moments and difficulties.

The study consisted of a total of 109 professionals, 64 of whom were men and 45 of whom were women. On average, our informants were 42 years old, with a range of 28–61 years. An overview of their demographic characteristics, the strategy of data collection (i.e., reflective narratives or semi-structured interviews), and their experiences of their difficulties (regret: yes or no) is presented in Table 1.

Data analysis

In line with our exploratory research design, we followed established grounded theory techniques for the data analysis (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We chose this approach as it provides a robust framework for qualitative analysis that emphasizes our participants' perspectives, enhances rigour, and supports the development of relevant theories. The structured approach and its flexibility make it

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of participants.

Number	Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Position	Regret	Source of data	Educational programme
1	Jasmin	40	Female	Poland	Solutions Architect (Manager)	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
2	Ferdinand	37	Male	Russia	General Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
3	Philipp	44	Male	Belarus	Senior Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
4	Enzo	37	Male	Malaysia	Senior VP	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
5	Elise	45	Female	Bulgaria	Founder and Managing Director in Start-up	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
6	Wouter	38	Male	Denmark	Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
7	Marianne	45	Female	Russia	General Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
8	Gerd	41	Male	Spain	Global Product Line Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
9	Amba	46	Female	Mexico	Regional Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
10	Dexter	43	Male	Germany	Senior Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
11	Sylvie	40	Female	Germany	Business Owner	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
12	Connor	35	Male	Denmark	Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
13	Aisha	43	Female	Australia	Senior Expert	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
14	Giovanni	38	Male	Netherlands	Manager Projects and Services	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
15	Ramon	55	Male	Germany	Finance Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
16	Ali	43	Male	India	Project Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
17	Markus	44	Male	Germany	Director	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
18	Fleur	29	Female	Germany	Director (HR function)	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
19	Ivana	39	Female	Germany	Senior Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
20	Roman	38	Male	Poland	Operations Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
21	Matilda	45	Female	Germany	Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
22	Romy	39	Female	Poland	Operations Director	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
23	Jana	38	Female	Germany	Director (Quality)	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
24	Sarah	33	Female	Brazil	Engineering People Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
25	Enno	28	Male	Germany	Executive Assistant to the CEO	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Number	Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Position	Regret	Source of data	Educational programme
26	Michael	43	Male	Germany	Senior Sales Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
27	Johannes	35	Male	Germany	Senior IT Project Manager	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
28	Hans	33	Male	Germany	Medical Advisor	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
29	Theo	33	Male	Germany	Sales Director	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
30	Simon	45	Male	China	VP of Strategic Project Management	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
31	Anthony	34	Male	Israel	Managing Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
32	Heidi	37	Female	Ukraine	VP of Operations	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
33	Jenny	35	Female	Germany	Senior Manager	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
34	Emil	35	Male	Congo	Founder	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
35	Erik	28	Male	Poland	VP of Strategic Development	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
36	Artelle	32	Female	Iran	Senior Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
37	Lars	34	Male	China	Head of Proposal Management	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
38	Thorsten	36	Male	USA	Founder and Partner	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
39	Benjamin	45	Male	Iran	CEO	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
40	Zayn	36	Male	India	Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
41	Jonas	32	Male	Israel	Director and Project Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
42	Jim	38	Male	USA	Country Lead	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
43	Alkan	35	Male	Germany	Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
44	Josephine	33	Female	Germany	Director	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
45	Patrício	36	Male	Germany	Senior Manager	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
46	Justin	42	Male	India	Head of R&D	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
47	Christopher	31	Male	Brazil	Senior Product Owner	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
48	Susanne	38	Female	China	Global Senior Marketing Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
49	Nemo	36	Male	Brazil	Senior Manager	Yes	Reflective narratives	EMBA
50	Joachim	32	Male	Germany	No information	No	Reflective narratives	EMBA
51	Anne	47	Female	UK	Sustainability and Stakeholder Director	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Number	Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Position	Regret	Source of data	Educational programme
52	Bob	51	Male	Netherlands	Assistant Professor	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
53	Anton	47	Male	Netherlands	Freelancer	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
54	Thomas	42	Male	Iran	Engineering Position	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
55	Miriam	51	Female	Netherlands	Founder	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
56	Bill	35	Male	Netherlands	Project Manager	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
57	Joren	48	Male	Belgium	Lecturer	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
58	Chiara	55	Female	Netherlands	Senior Managing Consultant	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
59	Charly	30	Male	Netherlands	Project Manager	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
60	Annika	57	Female	Netherlands	Executive Team Coach/Management Consultant	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
61	Lennard	55	Male	Netherlands	Chairman	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
62	Thaisen	52	Male	Netherlands	Business Leader	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
63	Louis	50	Male	Netherlands	Chief Human Resource Officer	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
64	Bex	53	Female	Netherlands	Lecturer	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
65	Meike	36	Female	Lithuania	Lecturer, Freelancer in Consulting	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
66	Chloe	47	Female	Netherlands	Organizational Health Psychologist	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
67	Verena	43	Female	Germany	Accountant	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
68	Lena	48	Female	Canada	Human Resource Manager	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
69	Alex	61	Male	Netherlands	Supervisory Board Member, CEO	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
70	Veronica	45	Female	Austria	Executive Consultant, Lecturer, Researcher	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
72	Julia	42	Female	Netherlands	Well-being Manager, Teacher, Entrepreneur	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
72	Lukas	42	Male	Netherlands	Technical Sales	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
73	Martin	33	Male	Morocco	Consultant	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
74	Mark	40	Male	Netherlands	Head of Engineering	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
75	Melinda	39	Female	South Korea	Senior Manager	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Number	Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Position	Regret	Source of data	Educational programme
76	Omar	32	Male	Germany	Regional (multi-country) executive	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
77	Hannah	54	Female	Netherlands	Manager	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
78	Maximilian	30	Male	Romania	Technical Manager	No	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
79	Bernhard	34	Male	Indian	Manager of Product Line	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
80	Mirella	45	Female	Nigeria	Lecturer	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
81	Ashley	47	Female	Lithuania	Purchasing Global	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
82	Mary	46	Female	Germany	Head of M&A	No	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
83	Jan	49	Male	Netherlands	Leader of Change Management	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
84	Jennifer	47	Female	Russland	Consultant	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
85	Hendrik	45	Male	Germany	Team Leader	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
86	Lara	52	Female	Italy	Self-employed Coach	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
87	Lasse	40	Male	Germany	Director of Distributions Operations	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
88	Lorenz	39	Male	Ukraine	Solutions Architect (Manager)	No	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
89	Arthur	39	Male	Sri Lanka	Vice President	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
90	Claus	35	Male	Georgian	Head of HR and Organizational Development	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
91	Tanja	45	Female	Ukraine/ Germany	Medical Education	No	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
92	Mohammed	37	Male	Russia/ Netherlands	Unemployed	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
93	Miranda	41	Female	Russia	Head of Currier Operations	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
94	Milo	42	Male	Russia	Pre-Sales	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
95	Jeannet	53	Female	Netherlands	Coach and Entrepreneur	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
96	Carla	48	Female	Russia	Acquisition Bank	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
97	Mohammed	45	Male	Netherlands	Business Controller	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
98	Inge	43	Female	Germany	HR Generalist	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
99	Nico	37	Male	Croatia	Sales Higher Education	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Number	Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Position	Regret	Source of data	Educational programme
100	Sabrine	51	Female	Netherlands	Freelancer in own company	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
101	Zara	43	Female	Russia/ Luxembourg	Executive Role, Consultancy	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
102	Karim	37	Male	Russia	Principal Engagement Manager	No	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
103	Dieter	49	Male	Austrian	Coach and Entrepreneur	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
104	Clemens	44	Male	Russia	General Manager	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
105	Clara	40	Female	Netherlands	Self-employed at Consulting Company	No	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
106	Cecille	33	Female	Germany	Scientific Consultant	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Executive PhD
107	Jerome	29	Male	Netherlands	Compliance Officer	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	EMBA
108	Jamil	36	Male	Netherlands	Entrepreneur	Yes	Semi-structured interviews	Career Coaching
109	Hailey	46	Female	Netherlands	Career and Team Coach	No	Semi-structured interviews	Career Coaching

particularly valuable for qualitative research that aims to build new theories (Gehman et al., 2018; Gioia et al., 2013).

Data analysis was performed using the ATLAS.ti software by the first author in consultation with the other authors.¹ The first and second subsets of the collected qualitative data were processed in the same way, and hereafter, we discuss the analysis procedure without specifying the data subset, instead treating them together as one. Below, we provide a detailed explanation of the three-step coding process. For clarity, the steps are discussed in chronological order; however, given the iterative nature of our research, we collected and analysed the data while simultaneously engaging with prior literature.

Step 1

First-order concepts

We started with open coding of our data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), where we tried to stay as close as possible to our participants' own words and terms by using mostly 'in vivo' codes (Gioia et al., 2013). In line with the inductive research approach, we remained very open in this first step and tried to capture as much of the phenomenon as possible. After generating more than 800 open codes in this first step, which referred to emotions, actions, views, and events related to difficulties in individuals' careers, we realized that not all difficulties led to regret. Indeed, only some individuals referred to their difficulties in careers as regret: *'One of the decisions which I regret in the past is that...'*, *'what I always regretted...'*, whereas others emphasized not experiencing regret for the difficulties: *'I don't see it as a bad thing, I don't regret it'*. To investigate this further, we identified differences and commonalities between the first-order codes, grouping similar codes into first-order themes. This process clarified the distinction between regretting and not regretting. We further coded individuals' explanations for why they did or did not regret difficulties in their careers, helping to clarify the distinction between them. Regretting was described as a negative state marked by a desire to 'undo' situations and is characterized by a feeling of helplessness and being stuck. In contrast, not regretting was characterized by feeling in control and doing something about the situation. Individuals often referred to the event as a learning experience. Therefore, the participants viewed these difficulties in their careers in a positive light.

Step 2

From empirical codes to theoretical (second-order) themes

We proceeded with axial coding to summarize statements into primary classifications (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initially, first-order codes were identified and summarized into more generalizable classifications. This step aimed to align participants' statements with theoretical constructs, identifying overlapping concepts to classify them into theoretical themes. As mentioned, we first found differences in the ways that individuals think about the difficulties in their careers. Accordingly, we engaged in an iterative refinement of our codes until we felt that our data accurately represented the themes. We focused solely on the themes that directly addressed our research objectives, which yielded 345 first-order codes. Here again, we focused on both regretting and not regretting to compare outcomes.

¹The research team consisted of four scholars affiliated with a European institution, having extensive knowledge of careers and qualitative research experience, ranging from four to more than twenty years.

We continued by focusing solely on difficulties that were not regretted. The data indicated that individuals who reported this absence of regret actively responded to their difficulties using a variety of strategies to try to change the situation. This helped them to view them positively, for instance, as 'gifts' or 'part of the trajectory'. We observed that the distinction between experiencing regret and avoiding it is contingent upon individuals' behavioural responses. In comparison, those who ended up regretting stated, 'I am kind of stuck. I am ceiling [sic.] [at the upper limit] at my job', or admitted feeling cowardly about a decision because they did nothing about it.

During a discussion with the research team about how to capture these emergent findings, we noticed that one of the participants described the way he addressed the difficulties in his career as 'a big repair'. This prompted us to investigate the concept of repair, which we found was mentioned in research on social relationships (e.g., Dindia & Baxter, 1987) and customer relationships (e.g., Xie & Peng, 2009). In making sense of our data, we drew inspiration from prior work on regret in other contexts (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1994; Roese & Summerville, 2005). Specifically, it has been noted that some individuals respond to regretted events by coping, reversing, or compensating for the negative outcome. Gilovich and Medvec (1994) mentioned that individuals may engage in *behavioural repair work*, which is defined as steps initiated to correct a regretted action. We proceeded to use the notion of *repair* in relation to difficulties in one's career and use this emergent concept to capture how participants dealt with difficulties in their careers so that they did not regret them. This is an example of how, during the data analysis, we engaged in dialogue between our emergent findings and prior research to make sense of our data (Gioia et al., 2013).

Next, we attempted to understand the implications of these repair strategies for our participants. Our data revealed that engaging in repair enabled participants to learn and develop from their difficulties; thus, they were viewed positively. We returned to the interview transcripts and coded the ways that participants viewed their difficulties after they engaged in repair strategies and how their perspectives differed if they failed to engage in repair. Further, we coded for factors that prompted or inhibited engaging with repair strategies. We noticed that individuals highlighted the importance of acting according to their values, as well as feeling in control. We found that these characteristics share similarities with the concept of protean careers, which highlights that people take control of their own career paths and shape them based on their personal goals and needs (Hall, 2004). Thus, *adopting a protean career attitude* has been found to be an important shaping factor. We further saw that participants who engaged in repair felt self-confident and were willing to take a risk to repair their careers. Building on the insights of Norton and Weiss (2009), who define courage as a person's continuous efforts even though they experience fear, we named this factor *exercising courage*. In line with the principles of grounded theory, we engaged in data collection and data analysis simultaneously, which allowed us to adapt our interview protocol to explore these factors further.

This phase of analysis produced 12 second-order themes, reflecting the outcomes of engaging in repair strategies (or the lack thereof)—regretting versus embracing; the three different strategies that individuals used and two repair-triggering factors.

Step 3

Developing aggregated theoretical dimensions

These second-order themes were aggregated into six overarching theoretical dimensions, which served as a basis for theory development. Through this process, it became apparent that individuals differ in their responses to difficulties in their careers, either *embracing* or *regretting* them. Individuals were able to embrace difficulties in their careers when they engaged in at least one of the three *repair strategies* to deal with their difficulties. These three repair strategies lead to separate aggregated dimensions (*reclaiming repair strategy*, *enriching repair strategy*, and *mobilizing repair strategy*). Lastly, we formed an aggregated dimension that encompassed the *triggering factors* for repair strategies. The aggregated dimensions form the

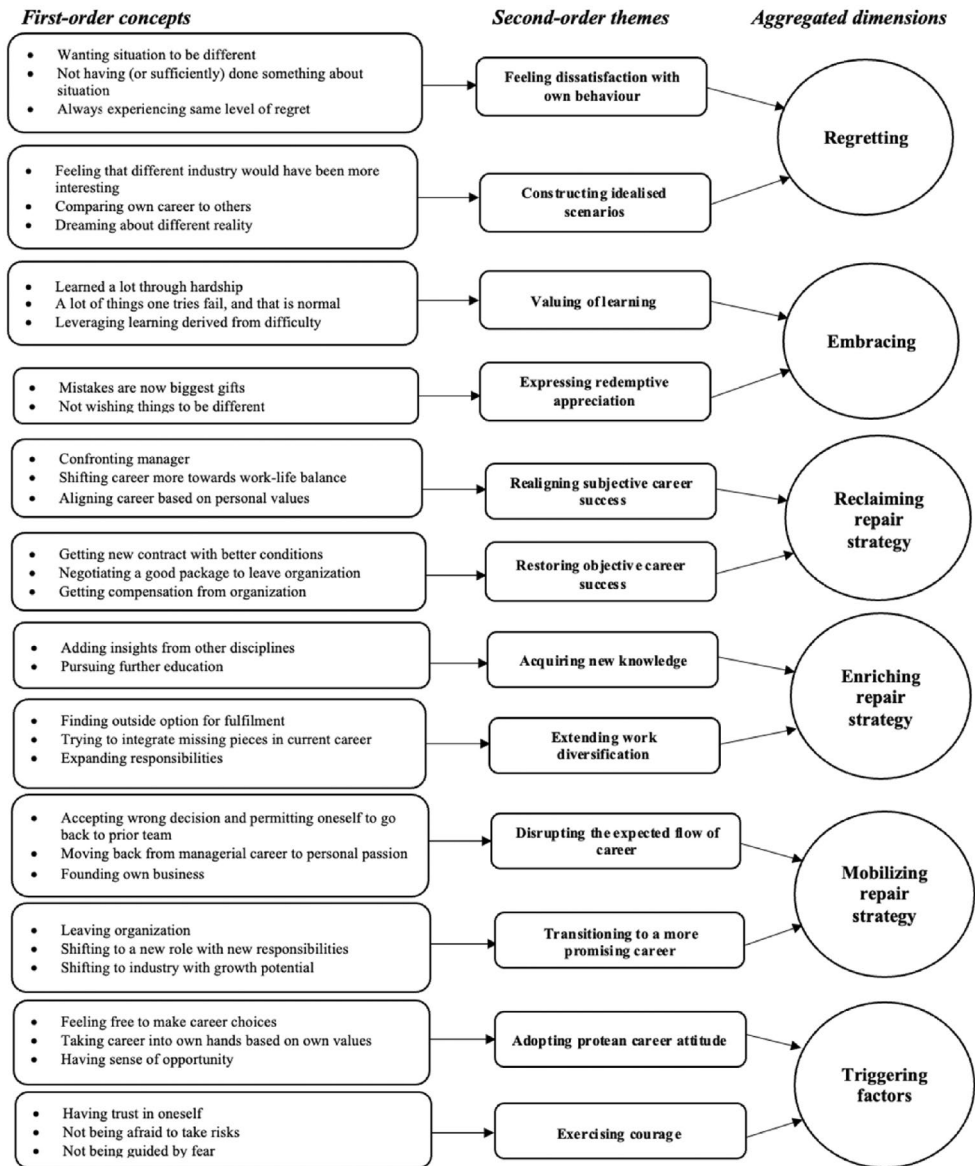


FIGURE 1 Data structure.

basis of our findings, telling the story of how individuals navigate difficulties in their careers to avoid regretting them. The analytical process is depicted in the data structure (Figure 1), illustrating the steps taken to organize the data (Gioia et al., 2013).

To ensure the trustworthiness of our research, we have described our analytical process in as much detail as possible, demonstrating how our data structure evolved. All data were transcribed, anonymized, and stored in line with research integrity standards. We also aimed to represent the different perspectives of our informants accurately. Furthermore, to increase the consistency of the interpretation of our data, the research team undertook regular brainstorming sessions to discuss the exemplifying empirical data to ensure alignment in the observations. Whenever different interpretations occurred, they were discussed until a consensus was reached (Flick, 2007; Levitt et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	Example quotes
Reclaiming repair strategy	Realigning subjective career success	<p>And the only thing I was doing was data entry and just like business cards in the system, and that. Okay, you know what, there is nothing to do. And there was no money. They did not pay for the work, for the simple work that I did. They even did not pay only twice a year or so. So, I thought, 'Okay, this is not okay'. But I wanted that experience. But yet I thought: 'This was not the right experience. This is not what I'm proud of. This is not fair. And I need to speak up'. And I did. So I stopped it, and I think throughout my whole career, I will never not speak up if it's really like needed [...], and I tried to do those things in the best way so that it can be received. But I think it is important to not be afraid in careers, which is still like a taboo sometimes. And it is challenging. (Jeannet)</p> <p>CV wise, maybe it would be would have been smart to stay a bit longer because I had two relatively short jobs [...], but I also know that by doing that, I am where I am today. And now I feel so much happier and I have so much more freedom to take my own decisions. So, no, I don't regret it. Back then, it was quite a difficult choice because I knew it is smarter for my career, but also money wise because I had like shares in the company, etc., to stay. But my happiness was more important to me. (Clara)</p>
	Restoring objective career success	<p>A lot of times, I was so excited and honoured by the opportunities that I simply did not think about the value of my own work. I noticed 6 months in my first manager position that I basically earned less than any of my employees. Also, in my first regional director position, I was so proud of being promoted to this position at the age of 29 that I didn't really invest too much effort in the salary negotiations ('You can fix this later'). Only when I talked openly with a colleague about his salary, I recognized that I basically made half of that. [...] This gap only closed/got significant[ly] smaller because I have been approached by an external company and my company made a counteroffer. (Jenna)</p> <p>The job [...] was limiting me in my growth and visibility. [...] I stayed in it for 5 years and while I learned a lot it was only out of sheer chance that I left it to start something new. This was a wake-up call and I feel like slowed down my overall growth in the long run. I have tried to make up for it through some good stretch assignments since and built a good track record. I use that as a lesson now to decide on future assignments. (Enzo)</p>
Enriching repair strategy	Acquiring new knowledge	<p>And now [...] I have a tipping point now in my career. Two years ago, so around one and a half years ago, something happened what was really new to me. [...] So, I worked for [company] in 6 years. And when I asked for a promotion or being a part of the talent pool, [it was] always said: '[Hendrik] you are very young, you will make it. So, no problem'. Then, I think 2 years ago, [...] my initiative was to apply for the talent pool just because there was an intranet article where you could apply for that. And then I wrote an application for the talent pool and the answer was from the HR person: 'You are really great, [Hendrik] You have everything you need, but you are too old'. And I thought, 'Okay, talent pool, no option anymore'. I was 44. I don't think so. Then, [...] in parallel I got [...] a new boss. So, my boss was 37, so younger than I. [...] And then I made my decision to start with a PhD. (Hendrik)</p> <p>[Struggled with feeling differently in engineering setting] But then, I was also very much in designing the strategy of the company because I was working directly with the company's director. And I always felt like—he was an engineer himself—and I always felt like if you had studied some management, maybe you would be better at managing this company. So, I felt like, I mean, my objective was not necessarily to become a director or getting in a leadership position, but I was just in touch with these management issues. So, I decided that I need some more academic education on this. So, more training. So, I went for a Master of Business Administration. (Cecille)</p>

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	Example quotes
	Extending work diversification	<p>But I got bored because it started being an automatism that didn't fulfil me any longer. And then that was the moment when I had this epiphany about my own self of what can I do with this next skill, this talent of simultaneous listening and speaking and this talent of listening deeply because when you interpret you really have to listen for the essence of what is being said, look for the words. [...] And that was the moment when I said, 'Okay, I would like to train people'. (Veronica)</p> <p>And then, in this new job, it was really nice. And I also discovered new things about me. For example, that I am really good at communicating with people from different cultures. And having a diplomatic communication, even with the directors from that I advised and at the ministries, [...] there would have been so much reason and failing it. And I suddenly I was able to see what I am capable of. Because somehow and I am not saying that is the fault of anybody. I think the one who is guilty for it is myself. Because I have been too strict with myself, but suddenly, somehow, I gained confidence in myself and in my capacities again, which was also necessary, actually, to get this PhD done, because I think I would not maybe I would not have been able to get this far without this positive work experience. Also, by this time, I mean I was working from home, but I have been travelling every 2 or 3 weeks for 4 days. Show me one mother who does this with kids who are aged under 5. Everybody looks at you and says, 'Are you crazy?!' Yes, I am! But I actually needed this. (Cecille)</p>
Mobilizing repair strategy	Disrupting the expected flow of career	<p>An important moment also, as I recall it, was that I was driving in my very nice car in I think 2001, around that period of time. And, I was listening to the audiobook 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' [...]. In this audiobook, they said: Well, imagine that you are climbing the ladder of your career and after 40 years, you're at the top and you're looking down [...] and then you see that this ladder is against the wrong wall. And I thought: Well, how did I end up here in this car with this role that I have? And it was as I, as I already told you, it was just they asked me for my first job and I said 'yes' [...], so that was not a very conscious decision in the sense that I had looked for what kind of jobs would I like? [...] I also still really like this technical aspect of things. [...] I do hardly anything with this technical aspect and the knowledge I have in my job. And well I miss that sometimes [included as a response to more technical tasks in subsequent role]. (Jan)</p> <p>During my time at [company], I started a podcast with now my colleague about how to set up HR in young, fast-growing environments. Now everyone has a podcast, but we started like almost 6 years ago when no one had a podcast yet or almost no one. And based on that podcast, we got so many questions, and I was not really happy at [organization] that I decided, okay, let us give it a go and start our own company. (Clara)</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	Example quotes
	Transitioning to a more promising career	<p>I do not [experience] regret about anything. Of course, there was one job in my career that I didn't like. [...] And despite that, I worked for eight years for this company. [...] So, looking at that, and only because of that I am now where I am. So how to regret it? [laughs] So, I don't know. So looks like it was one mistake. [...] I gained a lot of experience, and only because of my position in this company. I got a new position at my current company. So, it's, it's related. [repair] I ... just I was ready to move ... Again, it was a conversation about my salary. It was, as usual, each month and we didn't agree on, it [with the manager]. And just I thought that I go out and my manager said: 'Okay, it was [a] mistake. He will pay me. And next month he will pay again, as we agreed'. After a month, we again had the same conversation, the same arguing. We were arguing, and I left. So, it is just, just I was ready to leave, and I left. (Ashley)</p> <p>I have been working there for about a year, and after 3 or 4 weeks, I thought this is not a good decision [...] and I ended this job after a year. They wanted me to stay. And I said: 'No I'm not doing that'. But that was a different kind of regret [throughout the interview acknowledged that she does not regret that choice] like quitting journalism regret is like...this is a part of me. I didn't develop, whereas the regret about going to a secure job and not going to a more adventurous job was very practical at the moment. And I solved that. So that kind of regret. [...], when I think about these which to [organization] [...], no, I think [...] it was great. It was pretty experienced that way because it really helped me embrace my Pippi Longstockings [metaphor for being explorative] with like, it was out of fear that I did not take a step that I should have taken right then, and I realized well the safe route isn't for me. (Annika)</p>
Triggering factors	<p>Adopting protean career attitude</p> <p>Exercising courage</p>	<p>I am trying to fix it right now. And now it is easy or much easier to say that this is also of course different from before. I am financially in very comfortable states. So, it is now also a little easier to kind of do things a little differently. But, for example, looking kind of towards my next step. [...] Now, I'm really looking for an opportunity where we can do the thing that I kind of previously didn't. So, I'm trying to kind of correct it, [...] kind of my next adventure. So that is kind of present in the 2 years when you gotta [have to] figure out what you want to do next and realize you get this hourly consulting firm. [...] There is little less risking them kind of, [because] for example, we're a product kind of route. [...] And now I'm willing also because of financials to kind of make these routes a little easier. So, I'm kind of redirecting what I want to do, based on kind of this learning. (Anton)</p> <p>I realized there is always a new day. Because if people stay too long in the company, they tend to think that this is that. It is like if the world is flat, that you will fall off the earth. And if you stay too long in the company, it feels like if you move away from that company, then everything will be doomed and nothing will grow anymore. Which if you change jobs, we know that is not true. There is always a new day there is always a future. That is something that I found out then that it is that there are some new decisions you can take and just move forward. (Louis)</p> <p>If you are downgrading me from to, to like to tackle it, I can switch projects, switch companies, switch organization[s], without being that take the lead back. And there is nothing wrong with me. So that part also took me building self-esteem and being sure of my strong sides. And what can I achieve, did well. (Lorenz)</p> <p>If you feel something is really valuable, do some conscious experiments around it, small incremental experiments. If you don't, as a personality, if you're not confident enough to kind of directly voice it out and say that. Do a little bit of pre-validation go prepared in such kind of discussions or such kind of forums, and then table it out, have an opinion and try it out. At least trying is better than just failing, right? (Bernhard)</p>

FINDINGS

Our analysis revealed that after individuals experienced a difficulty in their careers, they either *embraced* it (i.e., they viewed the difficulty in their career as a learning opportunity that is an important part of their career journey) or *regretted* it (i.e., viewed the difficulty in their career as a negative situation for which they felt a sense of self-blame and that they wished to undo). We found that what enabled individuals not to regret the difficulty in their career was undertaking *repair*, which we define as individuals proactively fixing what was not working or was negatively impacting their career by using different strategies. We identified three repair strategies that participants utilized to fix difficulties they encountered in their careers, namely, *reclaiming* (i.e., realigning one's career based on personal values (subjective career success) and restoring tangible and measurable conditions (objective career success)), *enriching* (i.e., acquiring new knowledge or extending their current career with tasks and projects that provide them with greater fulfilment), and *mobilizing* (i.e., making career changes by disrupting the expected flow of one's career or transitioning into a more promising career by shifting to a new position, team, organization, or industry). Our analysis further revealed that two triggers explained individuals' engagement with career repair strategies, namely, *adopting a protean career attitude* (i.e., feeling in control and bringing one's career in alignment with one's values) and *exercising courage* (i.e., being self-confident and not guided by negative emotions).

Additional qualitative evidence for themes related to the identified aggregated dimensions is provided in [Table 2](#).

Dealing with difficulties in one's career: Regretting versus embracing

Our findings revealed that throughout their careers, participants faced different kinds of difficulties: some were directly concerned with making career decisions, whereas others were concerned with workplace situations that impacted how they experienced their careers. For example, difficulties related to career decisions could be the consequence of choosing the wrong occupation or industry. In comparison, difficulties related to situations at work with career impacts were, for example, conflicts with co-workers or a lack of personal fulfilment. Independent of the type of difficulty, we saw that participants referred to these difficulties as something either regretted or embraced in their careers.

Specifically, those participants who felt a sense of regret about difficulties viewed them as negative situations for which they blamed themselves and wished to undo. In turn, the participants who embraced their difficulties looked at them as learning opportunities that played an important role in their careers. The notion of embracing was expressed by some of our participants, which we consider a positive view of the difficulties in one's career. We discuss both regretting and embracing in detail below.

Regretting

As not all informants regretted the career difficulties they faced, we describe regretting as a persistent negative feeling about difficulties in one's career. Specifically, individuals experienced an emotional trigger, they wished the situation was different and experienced a sense of self-blame. Notably, the emotion was described as persistent throughout one's career, with continuous rumination on alternative scenarios.

[It] comes up every now and then and stayed with me. Ever since I made that decision, and sometimes it's more obvious, and that's mainly when I'm bored or when I am feeling bad

about my current job, then it pops up, but it's always there, it's like this always this level of regret.

(Annika)

Regretting difficulties in careers was reflected in participants feeling dissatisfaction with own behaviour and constructing idealised scenarios.

Feeling dissatisfaction with own behaviour

Regretful informants reported a sense of dissatisfaction with their previous actions or decisions and wished that they had done something differently in the past. Moreover, they expressed not having done something about the situation (repairing) or having failed to correct it. For instance, Joren regretted his choice of an industry that hindered his movement to a different industry in his subsequent career:

I did always ... regret that ... there's always a few times throughout your career, where you think: 'I'm not liking it. I want to do something else'. [...] What I always regretted ... I think it was always difficult for me to change to a different role or a different company. It was [like] you get this stamp on your forehead [used metaphorically to describe a situation where a person feels labeled in a way that is difficult to escape].

(Joren)

Another example stemmed from Dieter, who faced a difficult situation when he narrowly missed out on a general manager role because of inaction, which he later regretted. This example highlighted the importance of action and repair attempts in navigating a difficulty in order to avoid regret, as he underlined that he could have acted on it.

The one thing [...] I would say I probably regret [...] is that I didn't make that move to General Manager at [the organization]. That is the thing that I regret because it was already informally agreed; [...] it didn't work out at the last moment. And what I did not do back then was I did not use my network that I had, which was a pretty strong network, to try to talk to very influential people in the background before that nomination would have happened. And I didn't talk to them [...], so I misread a little bit the [organizational] culture.

(Dieter)

Thus, this theme reflects informants' general sense of dissatisfaction with their past behaviour. Yet, it did not involve imagining alternative outcomes.

Constructing idealized scenarios

In contrast, constructing idealized scenarios involved the mental construction of a better alternative outcome which had been more appealing to the individual than reality. Since these imaginations were not subject to reality, constructing idealized scenarios could lead to feelings of regret as individuals reflected on what might have been rather than focusing on their current circumstances. Yet, this is an extended cognitive process and could be seen as a consequence of the previous theme. For instance, Inge constructed an idealized scenario in which her current career would have been better if she had stayed in a bigger city. However, the possibility of having more career options was not grounded in reality, as she imagined a better alternative.

I think the biggest regret was that I moved here with my husband because it is so far off from anything where you could pursue a career. [...] And then, if I had stayed in a bigger city [...], then I would probably have had more career options and more choices.

(Inge)

Because people could not know how these situations would have actually developed, they tended to imagine this other reality as more desirable—an upward counterfactual. In all narratives, individuals created alternative selves in these different, more desirable realities. Consequently, they believed their current situation would be better if they had made a different decision in the past. Thaisen explained that he is reminded every now and then of his forgone role as an engineer, which seemed more desirable to him than being *'this banking guy'*. He explained:

I tried to become an engineer to build airflow airplanes. That was my main goal when I was younger. Really highly technical and stuff. [...] I came into banking, but I'm a more science kind of guy. [...] So, I don't know how the path would have been. [...] If you talk about regrets, yes that might be one... might be one...

(Thaisen)

Yet, Thaisen never actually worked in this alternative role, and therefore, could not have determined whether this career would have suited him better.

While regretting one's difficulties is one way of viewing them, many informants did not experience regret about their difficulties but rather embraced them. Notably, $N=35$ informants did not experience regret at all (see Table 1). The other informants experienced both difficulties that turned into regret and difficulties that they embraced.

Embracing

Embracing as a response to difficulties in careers was reflected in participants viewing these difficulties positively and describing them later as 'part of the journey', one's 'purpose', and 'biggest gifts'. Specifically, we saw that individuals valued the lessons derived from their difficulties and had a sense of gratitude for them, which led them to not regret them. As Anton highlighted: *'I made a lot of mistakes, don't get me wrong, really bad mistakes, but I can't actually acknowledge one single thing I actually regret'* (Anton).

Valuing of learning

Those informants who embraced the difficulties they encountered in their careers were able to derive lessons from them. For instance, Chiara viewed the difficulty in her career as valuable and helpful in guiding her in the right direction. In particular, after switching teams within her organization, she experienced difficulty when the actual situation did not align with her expectations. However, she embraced it as an opportunity to really understand her values: *'Taking the wrong decision [...] and then changing it after a while [going back to the previous team], it also taught me that it's important to really stick to what you want to do and what really fits you'* (Chiara). In so doing, she saw her wrong decision as a way to develop as a professional. Jeannet further elaborated that some difficulties may even return until they become a learning opportunity. She faced a difficulty when she decided to work in the company of a former supervisor, where she felt bored and unchallenged. Eventually, she took the step to leave. Thereafter, she valued the learnings derived from the difficulty, particularly in terms of leaving.

It [repair] made me, indeed, learn about myself and also learn about others. [...] And I don't say that I did everything right after that. [laughs] So, you keep learning. And, sometimes, I

think you need to keep learning the same kind of things. I also believe that the same kind of challenges come back in careers. If you step out too early and you want to, like, quit the lesson, then the lesson is coming back in the new role. [...] So no, I don't regret that [choice which became a difficulty].

(Jeannet)

This suggested that people understood that difficulties happened for a reason and guided them in their careers.

Expressing redemptive appreciation

Viewing the difficulties as lessons learned allowed individuals to subsequently engage in transformative appreciation because they viewed the difficulties as important turning points in their careers. Specifically, informants shifted the discourse about their difficulties, from 'mistakes', 'failure', and 'wrong decisions' and increasingly articulated them with a sense of appreciation. Jennifer described why and how she left an organization after her position was restructured. She underlined that she would do the same again and did not view any of her decisions related to this situation as wrong: *'I wouldn't call it regret. [...] There's no wrong decision. So, there's a good decision or bad decision or a less good decision. But there's no wrong decision. So, if I go back, I would do the same'* (Jennifer). Notably, Jennifer felt regret for a different phase in her career, which further underlined that not viewing these decisions as wrong was not a cognitive strategy of hers but rather the result of her engagement with repair related to this situation.

During our interview, Miriam even refused to respond to our question about whether she would undo any of her prior choices and underlined that she viewed all her mistakes in such a positive light because they guided her to where she is now: *'I like my world now so much, and I am so aware of how all these mistakes have led to where I'm now. That my mistakes are now my biggest gifts'* (Miriam). This showed that not every difficulty was perceived in a negative light. Instead, many individuals valued the learning experience and expressed gratitude.

Not regretting but embracing: Repair strategies as a response to difficulties in careers

When comparing the groups of 'regretters' and 'embracers', we found that the key difference in their outcomes lied in their response behaviours to the difficulties. Specifically, we discovered that those who engaged in repair were able to embrace the difficulties. The data revealed three repair strategies that individuals engaged in, namely, *reclaiming, enriching, and mobilizing*. Notably, the term repair was derived from one of our informants who underlined that leaving the organization (that is, mobilizing) was a *'big repair for a lack of freedom'* (Thaisen), other informants referred to terms such as *fixing* or *resolving*.

Reclaiming repair strategy

Reclaiming involved two pathways for individuals seeking to repair their career difficulties. The first focused on *realigning* one's career with personal values and intrinsic goals, emphasizing *subjective career success*, where fulfilment and self-advocacy were prioritized. The second pathway involved *restoring* one's *objective career success* by improving tangible, externally recognized success factors. Both aimed to reclaim a more satisfying and balanced career.

Realigning subjective career success

This approach was evident in actions participants took to address the misalignment of their career priorities with their personal beliefs and values, for example, when participants stood up for themselves or shifted their priorities. Through this reclaiming, participants demonstrated their desire to change behaviours as they addressed unclear boundaries or other aspects of self-neglect. For instance, Julia described how she discovered that prioritizing her career over her personal boundaries was a difficulty in her career: *'When I was younger, I wasn't clear to my environment, especially my manager, about my personal boundaries'* (Julia). She explained that she did not stand up to her manager, who did not trust her, but instead worked even harder to try to convince her manager of her capabilities. After being in this unfavourable situation and neglecting her personal boundaries for too long, she engaged in the repair strategy and confronted her manager:

So, what I did, I confronted my manager that there was a line, and she passed it and that I wanted to talk to HR. [...] And so, we had a good talk with HR, and I prepared very well. So, I had a file on every decision... things she made. And it was a very professional setting with HR, and so she ended like, 'What do you have to say?!' and I was like: 'Okay, well, let me tell you'. And I went through all the things I said: 'This is for you!'

(Julia)

Afterwards, she also experienced positive emotions as she realized that she was able to change her situation: *'I'm in control, I can do something about it. [...] and that gives you courage and made me proud of myself'* (Julia). Eventually, she did not experience regret but navigated the difficulty into learning. Moreover, she used the insights derived from this difficulty in her early career for subsequent difficulties and kept employing repair strategies.

Restoring objective career success

With this strategy, individuals sought to address career difficulties which were related to measurable, observable indicators of achievements. In comparison to realigning subjective career success, where individuals sought to improve their personal perceptions of their career, restoring objective career success focused on tangible outcomes. Accordingly, this repair strategy usually targeted salaries and promotions that individuals viewed as negatively impacting their objective career successes. For instance, Thomas experienced his switch to a different country as difficult because he experienced severe disadvantages in his contract and salary due to the move. Through repair, he managed to avoid regret, instead embracing the situation:

The first days of coming [to the new country] and also saying, 'oh wow, even the terms and conditions are even worse'. Then I was thinking because of the tax benefits which is [sic.] not coming. [...] So, I had the first six months, I would say, before I made that deal [renegotiation]. [...] And now, I don't regret any of these opportunities.

(Thomas)

Another example stemmed from Miranda. When she changed her job, she found herself in a tremendously difficult situation because many of the things that had been promised to her during the job interview did not materialize. In particular, she and her team were in disadvantageous situations in terms of organizational chart and salary. Through restoring not only for herself but also for her team, she managed to shift the difficulty into a more positive experience, which she described as representing *'upper level of energy, emotions and everything'*.

No, it's not a regret. [Because] I started pushing the things for the team. [...] Everything was much, much, much better. I started to feel more support [...], and I felt that the teams were more satisfied because, finally, they received what they wanted to receive. They were recognised as HR. They received a bit higher salaries. And we added a bit more resources to the teams. And I was very positive about that.

(Miranda)

Both informants underlined that they did not view the prior difficulty as a regret because they proactively fixed the situation. As Miranda explained, she had not experienced regret for the difficulty because she took action to address it: *'I don't feel regret now because [...] I'm a person of action. So, I need to make actions [...] I made this choice, and I need to resolve this situation, and I can move forward'* (Miranda).

Enriching repair strategy

When undertaking the enriching repair strategy, individuals *acquired new knowledge* outside of their job on a topic that interests them or that they wished to add to their current career, or they *extended their work diversification* with tasks and projects that provided them with greater fulfilment.

Acquiring new knowledge

We saw in the data that many individuals used the enriching repair strategy by gaining new knowledge from other disciplines. More specifically, they either engaged in other projects with the goal of better strategic positioning for their subsequent career (e.g., obtaining an MBA) or hoped to broaden their current career by adding new insights (e.g., by researching a topic they are passionate about). In particular, some informants actively pursued further education to gain more insights to help them in their current career in which they no longer felt successful. There could have been various reasons for this. For instance, some individuals, like Mohammed and Lasse, realized it was difficult to grow in their field due to hierarchies and rigid structures. Hence, they sought new knowledge to have a stronger positioning.

Other informants realized they were particularly interested in certain subjects or topics and hoped to broaden their scope. For instance, when we asked Zara why she obtained her MBA, she responded: *'I wanted to change the area. So, I didn't want to stick to the media and advertising world anymore. I wanted to go grow beyond. I wanted in particular to go into the financial sector'* (Zara). She explained that she wanted to change to finance for monetary reasons but also because she had some role models in the financial sector. She realized that she did not want to stay in her prior field, and that realization turned out to be a difficulty in her career, which she successfully navigated by using the enriching strategy. Accordingly, she did not experience any regret regarding her initial choice to pursue a career in media and advertising, describing it as an important milestone. However, she acknowledged that if she had not pursued an MBA, which led to a shift to a different field, she would have regretted this choice, stating emphatically: *'For sure! [I would regret it today]'*. This indicated that employing the enriching repair strategy played a critical role in avoiding regret.

Acquiring new knowledge to prepare for a shift into a different sector further showed that some individuals used the enriching strategy as preparation for the mobilizing repair strategy.

Extending work diversification

In addition, the enriching strategy also entailed individuals broadening the existing task field of their career. Specifically, they augmented their current job by introducing new aspects, such as new tasks or projects, to make it more engaging. For instance, Meike, a consultant, experienced

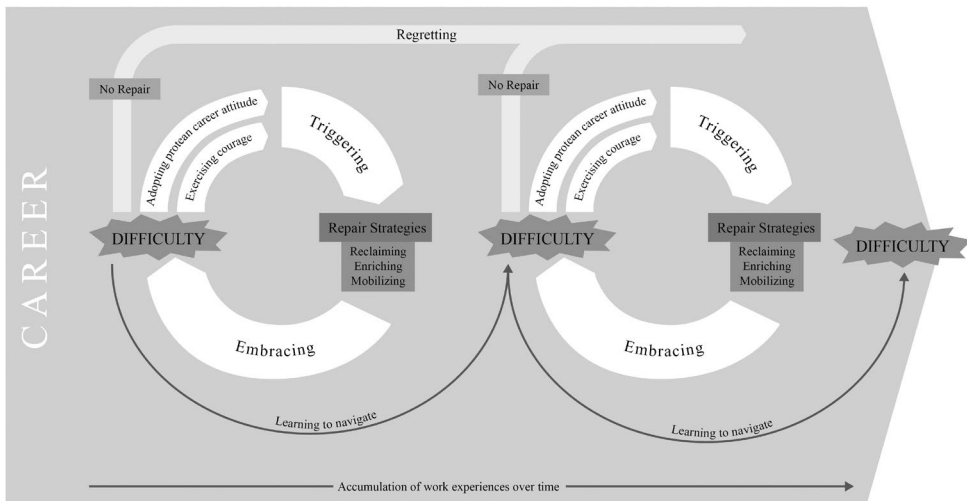


FIGURE 2 Framework model of repair strategies allowing individuals to embrace difficulties instead of regretting them.

difficulties with her career due to a lack of international experience. She acknowledged that she would have liked more cultural and international insights. In fact, she explained that she refused to go abroad at the outset of her career, balancing out advantages and disadvantages. Eventually, reflecting on her career, she realized: *'I would say this international perspective, that's something that I missed' (Meike)*. Yet, she did not regret this choice because she had tried to include international projects in her current career to respond to this difficulty:

In terms of this international part, I was definitely looking for a project where I would have more international partners. So, I would say I tried to find a way [to] add it to my existing life.

(Meike)

Meike actively compared the difficulties in her career with experiences of regret and concluded that engaging in repair strategies and deriving the learnings from these difficulties made her embrace the gains: *'But I guess in both of those cases, I really jumped into embracing the gains that I got from both of those decisions [which led to difficulties]. And that's why, I guess, I don't feel them as regrets' (Meike)*.

Mobilizing repair strategy

This repair strategy involved individuals shifting either in terms of *disrupting the expected flow of their career*, represented by a person leaving a linear career path by, for instance, returning to their old position, team, or organization, or by founding their own company. Additionally, the mobilizing repair strategy was used to *transition to a more promising career* when individuals realized that their current environment was not a great fit for them. Here, they continued to develop within their established careers.

Disrupting the expected flow of career

With this strategy, individuals broke the traditional career path as a response to a difficulty. Usually, this happened when they faced a difficulty, but also realized that their career did not need to develop along

a traditional, straight path. Specifically, those individuals used disruption to respond to difficulty and shift it in a direction that suited them better, which was not in the logical flow of their career. We saw in the data that some individuals engaged in a course correction, meaning that they understood that some of their choices had gone awry and they returned to an earlier career direction. For instance, Chiara's example stemmed from such course correction. In fact, she was approached to change the team and functional area, and after some time, she realized that this was a mistake:

So I went to the new team with HR and during the year I thought, 'This isn't my cup of tea anymore'. [...] I am really a person who likes coaching, who likes to come to discuss behaviour, to see hiccups some people have, the naughty thoughts, the evil ideas [that] bother them, and I like to loosen up things and to also support leaders and their leadership. [...] But I also said, 'Well I'm just here, I just decided to do this new thing'. So, that troubled me because I also had my commitment to my colleague as she wanted to build this new group, but after a year I said, 'I have to go back it's this is not right, not for me'. [...] So, [...] although I'm a person who really commits herself to decisions she makes, this was one I thought, 'I have to change this... I have to [go] back'. So, I did!

(Chiara)

This example showed that individuals also corrected difficulties by returning to original situations because they realized that those were a good fit for them, as we saw earlier in the findings. Chiara recognized the value of making incorrect decisions and engaging in course correction, as it contributed to her personal development and reinforced the importance of pursuing her interests.

Other individuals also acknowledged that they were happier in prior positions or roles. For instance, Jan realized that he was happier in a technical position than in the management position that he had aspired to for so long. In fact, although he engaged in further education to achieve promotions and get more managerial tasks, he faced difficulty when realizing that this did not align with his interests. For many of our informants, founding their own organization became a way to repair their career and break the linearity (e.g., Clara, Dieter, Anton) as they decided to step out of their current career and go down a different path.

Transitioning to a more promising career

Next to disrupting the expected flow of their careers, participants further used the mobilizing repair strategy to shift to different positions, teams, organizations, or even industries. However, here, they still pursued their careers in a linear way. In particular, individuals reached a point where they decided that a new environment was required to repair a difficulty. For instance, Verena described how she realized she needed to leave her organization during an appraisal meeting. She stated that she experienced difficulty after becoming a partner because she realized that the consultancy environment no longer suited her, that she differed from her colleagues, and that she was tired of the political games. During an appraisal meeting, she recognized that she needed to take action, which prompted her to search for jobs in a different industry. Verena's case is particularly interesting since she objectively had a very successful career as a partner in a consultancy firm but still experienced being in the wrong environment as a career difficulty. Although she remained in the same field, and therefore, did not break the career linearity as in the previous case, she decided to transition to a new company.

Jamil told us how he discovered that focusing on policy-making became a frustration in his role. In fact, he could not see his future self in this field, and therefore, decided to search for an environment with a different focus.

What I noticed is that I got frustrated [...] the more I got involved in the higher ranks of the organization, let's say, the board of directors. And because I got invited to get them

up to speed on certain topics and to write some policy stuff [...]. But the more I got into that, the more I noticed that it's basically politics instead of education. [...] So, I applied two times [to fix it]. The first time, I got a job offer, but I rejected it because of the salary. Because I would have to earn less than I did [...], and I felt like I was worth more. So, I rejected that offer. And [...] maybe half a year later or something, I applied again in the same organization with a different department. And then I got the job and also the salary that I wanted and all the other things.

(Jamil)

While Jamil aimed to transition to a new environment, he kept in mind his linear career progress since he did not accept a lower salary offer. This is also the greatest distinction between disrupting the career flow and transitioning to a new environment. In particular, while individuals who disrupted their career flow were willing to accept disadvantages or interruptions in terms of salary and status, individuals who transitioned into a new environment were still focused on progress.

Again, we saw that after successfully engaging in repair strategies, individuals were able to embrace the difficulties in their careers as they acknowledged that challenges guided them in the right direction. For instance, Anton, who broke the linearity and founded his own business (mobilizing repair strategy), reported feeling the difficulties had a purpose for his career: *'So, there are some things in there that [...] don't feel [...] like they worked out like they were planned. But [it] also feels that I kind of had a certain part purpose in the whole [journey]'* (Anton).

Triggering factors

When looking at the differences between 'regretters' and 'embracers', we also saw that certain factors triggered individuals' engagement with repair, whereas other factors were more likely to lead to regret. Accordingly, we identified two triggers from our data, namely, *adopting a protean career attitude* (i.e., taking control over career paths by making intentional choices and taking initiative based on own values) and *exercising courage* (i.e., trusting in one's own skills and judgement).

Adopting protean career attitude

This factor refers to an individual's belief in their own ability to control or influence the difficulties in their careers. More specifically, when people adopted a protean career attitude, they felt a strong sense of career agency and were driven by their values, explaining their proactive steps to repair the difficulties in their careers.

I'm in control. I can do something about it. So was the saying from Einstein, 'It's madness to expect a different outcome if you do the same thing over again'. So, I thought, 'Okay, for me to change this [difficulty], I need to show a different behaviour'. And that's what I did.

(Julia)

Moreover, they were aware of their values and repaired their careers in line with them. Louis described a situation in which he recognized the importance of taking ownership of his career by aligning his decisions with his personal values rather than conforming to others' opinions.

I was in my early 30s when I left [name of organization]. And nobody leaves that company [...] nobody voluntarily left that company. Because [...] it is seen as one of the top companies from an employer perspective and big package salary, opportunities going all over

the world. But I realised that this was for me the best because I took the career into my own hands.

(Louis)

Notably, all individuals faced situations during their careers that could impede their ability to adopt a protean career view, such as feeling dependent *on* others (e.g., supervisors) or feeling responsible *for* others (e.g., family). However, it was an individual's perception that determined the influence on their behaviour. Individuals who ended up with regret believed that they were not able to repair the difficulty in their career based on these restrictions.

Exercising courage

The second triggering factor we identified reflected an individual's level of self-confidence and their resulting willingness to be brave and take risks. We observed that those who successfully navigated difficulties in their careers had confidence in their own abilities and did not allow fear to dictate their actions. As Lasse emphasized, being highly risk-tolerant allowed him to consistently overcome career difficulties and find solutions along the way. He explained that every career-related choice involved a risk, but having this mindset also helped to stay open and be able to repair. Yet, he underlined the importance of understanding the consequences of each of these courageous steps.

But it is all about your acceptance of risk [...] the last ten years I drove on a very, very risky path. [...]. I'm a risk seeker. So, I see a chance, and there's always a risk to related. Whether it's a corporate site. Or it's a different country. Or is this an unknown environment. [...] So my recommendation for these situations is ... yes, make decisions, make bold decisions, change your environment. That's fine ... but [consider] the impact of this whole situation.

(Lasse)

On the contrary, the data showed that the emotional experience of feeling trapped by the difficulty affected participants' responses to these difficulties and was crucial in the emergence of regret. Specifically, when informants experienced low self-efficacy or fear concerning their situation, regret was likely to develop as individuals were unable to employ repair strategies. When we compared our participants, we saw that those with regret described a feeling of helplessness and incompetence, which impacted their repair intentions, and they regretted not being able to fix the situation. In fact, very often, the individual felt unable to escape the dissatisfying situation. Inge described:

Sometimes, I regret that I didn't say clearly what I wanted or also did not have the courage to say, 'Okay, if you will not pay me the same or give me a pay rise within the next month because I did this project, I did that, and I achieved the goals we were set for this year. Otherwise, I will leave'. So maybe I should have been stricter or more courageous and against the employer. [...] But I'm a very security seeking person.

(Inge)

Towards a model of repair strategies allowing one to embrace difficulties in careers instead of regretting them

Based on our findings, we constructed a model of repair strategies leading to embracing difficulties in careers (Figure 2). Figure 2 shows how the triggering factors connect to repair strategies navigating not only the current difficulty in one's career but also fostering learning of how to navigate future

difficulties. This is illustrated by a subsequent repair cycle. Because engaging in repair strategies fosters a positive perspective for individuals on the difficulties in their careers, it encourages them to address and embrace them rather than shy away from them. What is more, the model illustrates the other pathway: regret. Specifically, if individuals do not respond with repair strategies, the same difficulty in their career could be experienced with regret, underlining the importance of repair strategies for avoiding regret.

As our findings show, successfully engaging with repair enabled individuals to learn through this work experience and to create a positive feedback loop (Hall, 1996). Verena described how her decision to employ the mobilizing repair strategy and to leave the consultancy firm helped her foster self-confidence and make choices to address difficulties in the future:

I think the more you make decisions and it turns out right [...]. When you make [...] professional decisions that not everyone decides to take [engaging in repair] you feel more self-confident after you make it. So, [...] my self-confidence is increasing by making [these] decisions [repairing].

(Verena)

Indeed, she stated that she did not regret this phase and was glad for the lessons she derived. In particular, she valued the time being a partner but also highlighted being happy that she stepped out and improved her career. Moreover, as we saw, engaging with repair strategies helped individuals to learn how to address new difficulties in the future. This was underlined by Miranda, who explained that she did not regret any of her difficulties. She was aware that past experiences and her proactivity in addressing the difficulties involved with repair strategies helped her to react differently thereafter, meaning that she learned to respond with repair:

I will tell you that, neither in my career nor in my life, would I make anything different. I think it's okay how it happened or [that] what happened has happened, and it gave me learnings. It gave me lessons [...]. It's a learning curve. So, I think, these things made me stronger. And I would rather have this experience, and in the future, in case I face a similar situation, I can react differently.

(Miranda)

We build on insights from the protean career theory, which suggests that careers do not follow a single lifelong trajectory but instead consist of a series of shorter learning cycles (Hall, 1996, 2004). Building on these insights, we argue that repairing a difficulty in a way that fosters acceptance and embracing enables individuals to better navigate future difficulties through ongoing reflection on their current coping strategies. This learning occurs through repeated repair cycles, as shown in Figure 2. A person's willingness to respond with repair strategies encourages self-compassion towards their difficulties (Neff, 2015), nurturing their triggering factors for repair to better navigate difficulties in the future.

Moreover, protean careers stand in contrast to the traditional career view (Hall, 2004) and are characterized by individuals' control over their careers. Accordingly, protean careerists are adaptive to changes and manage their careers, oriented on free, individual growth, constant learning, and intrinsic motivation (Hall, 1996). A protean career attitude implies a greater sense of awareness and adaptability, allowing individuals to better identify difficulties in their career and to respond to and deal with them by engaging in repair strategies. Next to this, exercising courage further supports the ability of individuals to respond to difficulties in their careers. Prior research shows that courage motivates individuals to reach their career-related plans and to think of different possible ways of implementing them and having more coping skills to achieve them (Ginevra et al., 2018; Magnano et al., 2017). Taken together, while a protean career enables individuals facing difficulties to be aware of themselves and be adaptable, exercising courage equips them with coping skills, together triggering their engagement in repair.

Figure 2 also illustrates what occurs if repair does not happen, the situations where difficulties in one's career are regretted rather than embraced. Our findings show that individuals who lack adopting a protean career attitude and exercising courage (our identified triggering factors) were less likely to engage in repair strategies, making them more prone to experiencing regret. This aligns with existing theories on regret, as previous research has shown that personal responsibility and self-blame are key characteristics of regret (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1994; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). While our results demonstrate that difficulties in careers can still be navigated and eventually embraced, they also suggest that when individuals feel incapable of responding to difficulties with repair strategies, they are likely to experience self-blame. In so doing, regret intensifies the negative emotions of fear and helplessness, making it even less likely to engage in repair strategies in the future.

DISCUSSION

This article aimed to explore how people navigate difficulties in their careers to not regret them. Drawing on data collected from 109 professionals, we discovered that participants embraced difficulties in their careers if they were able to engage in their repair. We identified three repair strategies that individuals can use to navigate the difficulties in their careers, helping them to embrace rather than regret these challenges, as well as the factors that prompt their engagement in these repair strategies. Building on these findings, we developed a model to illustrate the connections between factors that foster repair, the various repair strategies identified, and the outcomes of repair and non-repair. We now discuss our findings in terms of their theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Theoretical implications

Building on our findings, we contribute to three literature streams, namely, regret (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1994), regret in careers (e.g., Budjanovcanin et al., 2019), and career disappointments, such as setbacks and failure (e.g., Byington et al., 2019).

First, drawing on our participants' insights and inspired by the concept of behavioural repair work in the context of regrets in life (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994), we developed a model of repair strategies that lead to either embracing or regretting (Figure 2), which helps explain the role of repair strategies in career contexts. The model puts forward three repair strategies as explanations for how individuals embrace difficulties and proposes that engagement in these strategies is facilitated when individuals adopt a protean career attitude and exercise courage. Our model extends prior insights on setbacks in careers, which suggest that overcoming setbacks promotes personal development, enabling individuals to make better-informed career choices and enhancing their resilience throughout their professional journeys, which is key to navigating setbacks effectively (e.g., Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023; Rieger et al., 2023).

In this way, we extend the role of behavioural repair work, serving not only as a potential response to regret (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1994) but also as a crucial factor to mitigate regret within careers, thereby preventing its development. While the concept was mentioned by Gilovich and Medvec (1994) in their conceptual piece, repair work was never fully conceptualized, nor were its manifestations explored, especially in terms of careers. We thus extend the idea into the career domain and define repair in the context of careers as individuals' proactive behaviours to address difficulties that hinder or negatively impact their careers and work experiences to not regret them. Our findings further show that repair can manifest through reclaiming, enriching, and mobilizing repair strategies in response to difficulties in one's career and preventing regret in careers.

This perspective offers a novel understanding of the dynamics between action, inaction, and regret, moving beyond the traditional focus on whether action or inaction leads to greater regret (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). Instead, our findings indicate that individuals who employ repair strategies are more likely to embrace difficulties than regret them. This aligns with the idea that inaction

often yields stronger regret, as it limits opportunities to address missed chances (see also Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). Thus, we propose that engaging in repair strategies not only mitigates regret in the first place but may also have implications for preventing future regret. Moreover, while the concept of behavioural repair work has been introduced as a response to regret, we argue that repair strategies help to prevent regret and should, therefore, be utilized at an earlier point. While employing repair work *after* a regret occurred helps to minimize the negative emotions resulting from the regret, engaging in repair work *before* a regret occurs helps to prevent difficulty from developing into career regret. Therefore, we propose a re-examination of the term 'behavioural repair work' in the context of regret and suggest that repair work may be most effective when applied proactively rather than reactively.

Second, this study makes a valuable theoretical contribution by extending the emerging body of literature on career-related regrets (e.g., Budjanovcanin et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2007). Our study is one of the first to explore what leads some individuals to experience regret while others do not. Prior studies on regret in careers either aimed to investigate the antecedents that contribute to occupational choice regret (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019), focused on understanding how occupational choice regret evolves over time, identified different profiles of individuals based on their experiences of regret (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022), or explored different categories of career regret (Sullivan et al., 2007). However, to the best of our knowledge, none of the prior studies examine how career-related regret initially develops. Our research contributes to this understanding by showing how individuals navigate difficulties in careers through specific repair strategies, enabling them to embrace difficulties rather than experience regret.

These findings build on Budjanovcanin and Woodrow's (2022) work, which highlighted the cyclical nature of occupational choice regret and identified 'early responders', individuals who avoid or adapt to their regret early on. While the authors primarily discussed cognitive strategies and behavioural strategies used by early responders to address occupational choice regret, we extend their research. Specifically, we show that managing career-related regret includes a multitude of behavioural responses (i.e., three repair strategies). While Budjanovcanin and Woodrow (2022) called for deeper insights into the strategies individuals use to manage occupational choice regret, our findings identify specific behavioural strategies that individuals apply to overcome a broader range of difficulties in their careers and avoid regret. In so doing, our identified mobilizing repair strategy is closest to their identified response to occupational change. By progressive transitions into a more promising career by changing jobs, industries, or organizations, or even by disrupting the expected flow of their career to pursue entirely new directions, participants were able to manage difficulties and mitigate regret. Occupational choice regret is just one difficulty our participants addressed with the mobilizing strategy, and it is possible that other strategies (reclaiming or enriching) could also address this form of regret.

Notably, among our three identified strategies, extending work diversification within the enriching repair strategy aligns most closely with the established concept of job crafting (particularly task crafting). Yet, the two differ in both motivation and temporal focus. While job crafting aims to reshape one's job to enhance outcomes such as well-being (e.g., Tims et al., 2013) and engagement (e.g., Petrou et al., 2017), repair strategies are employed to proactively fix what was not working or was negatively impacting a person's career. In job crafting, individuals 'shape, mold, and redefine their jobs' (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 180) occasionally by actions that are frequently subtle, ongoing, and task-specific such as seeking feedback or choosing enjoyable tasks. In comparison, work diversification is driven by the wish to resolve a specific difficulty in one's career, such as deciding to forgo an international job, with the aim of avoiding regret. While job crafting results in short-term, incremental changes, work diversification reflects a strategic, long-term adjustment aimed at improving one's broader career trajectory and avoiding the feeling of regret.

Third, although careers literature acknowledges that professions are not linear and are often marked by career setbacks, mistakes, missed promotions, and other disappointments (e.g., Baruch & Sullivan, 2022; Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Byington et al., 2019), attention remains focused on understanding topics such as career success instead of embracing career imperfection and how people deal with

challenges they face (Baruch & Vardi, 2016). We contribute to this nascent body of research by identifying how individuals navigate and embrace career difficulties instead of regretting them by employing repair strategies. We know that some individuals may regret difficulties in their careers (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2007), whereas other individuals may, instead, view them in a positive light (e.g., Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023) or even feel that they do not have any regrets at all. As a complement to prior work that emphasizes individuals' engagement in purposeful sensemaking (Kutscher & Mayrhofer, 2023), our study shows that individuals can proactively address career difficulties by engaging in repair behaviours. In so doing, we provide more insights into understanding how regret and its negative implications can be avoided, but also how individuals respond to the imperfect side of careers.

Practical implications

Our study has valuable practical implications for organizations, career counsellors, and individuals. Organizations can offer development opportunities, such as regular coaching sessions, to encourage individuals to reflect on their careers and take proactive steps to manage them effectively. Everyone will face difficulties at some point in their careers, and repair strategies can be used to help embrace rather than regret these difficulties. Organizations can assist employees in developing the best repair strategy for their personal situation, for instance, by actively providing resources such as taking time off or providing a safe environment that facilitates individuals speaking openly about their difficulties and how they plan to address them.

Career counsellors can help clients identify and face their difficulties in the first place. Although many individuals presently associate difficulties with something negative, our evidence shows that this is not necessarily the case. However, the data indicate that remaining inactive is likely to lead to regret. Therefore, individuals can be educated about the role of action in regret development. We found that by fostering factors that prompt individuals to engage in repair strategies, counsellors can help their clients to be aware of such factors to better understand their implications and make changes accordingly.

Moreover, our study helps individuals gain a new perspective on their career ownership and responsibility. Prior scholars have highlighted the importance of being open to new opportunities, being self-confident, and taking risks to navigate one's career effectively (e.g., Briscoe & Hall, 2006). By demonstrating that difficulties in careers do not necessarily lead to regret, we hope that our findings change how people view their careers and are less guided by fear of difficulties but more willing to react to them and to engage in repair strategies as a response to the difficulties they are facing throughout their careers. Therefore, our findings help avoid career inaction leading to regret and the associated negative impacts on well-being (e.g., Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020).

Limitations and future research directions

One limitation of our study lies in the inability to address the effectiveness of separate repair strategies and their timing. Specifically, certain career difficulties, such as an unsuitable occupational choice, may be more challenging to repair than others (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019), like having a disagreement with one's supervisor. This disparity may influence whether individuals engage in repair strategies. Also, our qualitative data did not provide insights into whether some repair strategies are more effective than others (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). Related to this, our findings reveal that individuals engage in repair strategies before experiencing regret, contrasting with existing literature that typically views repair as a reaction to regret after its emergence. This suggests the potential for more reciprocal relationships existing between repair and regret. However, the nature of our research design does not allow us to explore this.

Consequently, we encourage scholars to further explore how individuals engage in repair, the effectiveness of different strategies, and their timing. For example, quantitative studies could examine

how different career difficulties vary in their ‘adjustability’ or potential for repair by means of surveys or quantitative diary studies. Similarly, in responding to Budjanovcanin and Woodrow's (2022) call, researchers could assess the effectiveness of various repair strategies across types of career difficulties using longitudinal survey methods before and after strategy implementation. Also, we acknowledge that we had fewer informants who used extending one's work diversification as an aspect of the enriching repair strategy. Future studies could focus specifically on individuals who have used the enriching repair strategy to better understand their experiences and emotional outcomes using quantitative surveys and questionnaires.

Our second limitation relates to sampling. Even though we tried to collect data from the best possible sample, we acknowledge that it was imbalanced in terms of nationality, which limits how widely our findings can be applied. Although qualitative research does not pursue generalizability as its goal, we believe that our findings can still be relevant to other individuals. However, most of our participants were European, which makes it unwise to extrapolate the findings to all working individuals. We must consider that cultural backgrounds likely play an important role in how people experience their careers. Therefore, perspectives from subjects of different nationalities and cultures would likely contribute crucial insight into repair behaviour. Additionally, this sample targeted people who, by default, have the resources to undertake postgraduate educational programmes. In contrast, those from more precarious personal and professional backgrounds may not have the opportunity to pursue similar educational opportunities. This disparity highlights the ‘luxury’ of our sample, as it reflects a privilege not universally available to all individuals in the workforce. Hence, future research should explore if and how individuals in less privileged conditions repair the difficulties in their careers. They could, for instance, investigate minorities, blue-collar workers, or gig workers to obtain different perspectives on career difficulties and repair attempts. Lastly, the second set of data collection was not conducted with the same participants. This factor helped us obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. However, we acknowledge that it would have been interesting to obtain richer insights into participants' narratives and observe their career trajectories over time.

Our third limitation relates to personal factors. Our findings suggest that while individual factors (e.g., proactive mindset, Briscoe et al., 2006) shape engagement in repair strategies, demographic characteristics, such as age and gender, likely shape their use. For instance, age may affect how individuals face career difficulties, engage in repair strategies, and experience regret. Previous research already highlights that older workers' ageing experiences (e.g., experiencing ageing as social loss vs. gaining self-knowledge) play a crucial role in influencing their future career choices (even after retirement) (e.g., Fasbender et al., 2014). Moreover, it has been found that workers' career adaptability has a positive influence on their late-career planning (Fasbender et al., 2019), which indicates that psychological perceptions of age and growth may shape whether workers are willing to engage in repair strategies or not. Interestingly, building on the insights of Fasbender et al. (2014), it could be that workers who experience social loss due to ageing are more likely to engage in repair strategies.

Also, in line with the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999), older individuals may feel a greater need to repair, perceiving time as limited. Positive self-perceptions, like personal growth, can drive continued career engagement despite setbacks. Younger individuals, in contrast, may focus more on developmental goals and see time as abundant, often overlooking the need for repair. However, if they do not act, they may experience regret in line with the opportunity principle (Roese & Summerville, 2005). Future research could explore how age and gender differences influence engagement with repair as a response to career difficulties, using quantitative surveys to assess relationships between demographic factors and career experiences, as well as repair efforts. In addition, as Hall et al. (2018) note, further research is needed to better understand the antecedents and changes in the protean career orientation. In this light, we also encourage more in-depth investigation of the second trigger ‘exercising courage’ to advance knowledge on the role of courage in navigating life and career difficulties (Ginevra et al., 2018; Magnano et al., 2017), and to identify the personal factors that facilitate it.

CONCLUSION

This research questions how individuals navigate the difficulties they face in their careers and mitigate experiencing regret. Drawing on qualitative data by means of reflective narratives and semi-structured interviews, we found that those individuals who responded to difficulties in their careers by using repair strategies were eventually able to embrace difficulty. However, when repair was not undertaken, individuals viewed their difficulties with regret. We further discovered two triggering factors that foster engagement with repair: adopting a protean career attitude and exercising courage. Thus, our findings promote the importance of repair strategies as a behavioural response that alters how people think about career difficulties. In so doing, we provide valuable practical implications for individuals, career counsellors, and organizations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Claire Schulze Schleithoff: Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; data curation; conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; project administration. **Evgenia I. Lysova:** Supervision; project administration; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; conceptualization; methodology. **Svetlana N. Khapova:** Supervision; writing – review and editing; conceptualization; resources. **Konstantin Korotov:** Data curation; resources; writing – review and editing; conceptualization.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflict of interest to declare.

DISCLOSURE

We disclose any financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that could be viewed as inappropriately influencing (bias) our study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Our research is in accordance with the ethical standards and integrity policies.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Stage 1: Outline career path and identify possible difficulties:

- First of all, I would like to know what is your current role/position? For how long have you been working in this role/position?
- Please tell me the story of your career path with particular attention to any key events and milestones.
- Imagine you would have the chance to make things differently in your career, what would you do differently?
- Which advice would you give your 'old self', based on your current knowledge and your current situation?
- Now I want you to think about decisions or situations that went awry in your opinion that influenced your career path. Please tell me also about these [difficulties]. *Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?*

Stage 2: Reveal feelings about difficulties and (in)actions:

- How did you come to realize that this situation was critical for your career? (for example, you talked with someone about it/compared yourself to others etc.)?
- What are the events or experiences that stand out in your memory as of particular importance leading you to realize your mistake? Please describe an event or episode that happened during this time that stands out as significant in some way.
- How did you feel in that moment, when you realized that you should have made a different decision? Please explain in detail how you felt and your thoughts about the difficulty.
Perhaps check with the participant if the following characteristics were given (c.f. Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, et al., 1998, Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2007):
 - Feeling that one should have known better
 - Feeling that one lost an opportunity due to a mistake
 - Feeling a tendency to correct a mistake
 - Wanting to undo the event and get a second chance
- How do you feel about the difficulty now?
In case of difference: what changed your perception of the event/situation? What did you do about it?
Can you provide an example of when you realized that your perception changed?
- Did you try to fix the impacts of the event/situation (third point → feeling tendency to correct mistakes)?
If so, what exactly did you do (repair)? In what way did this correction change the difficulty?
Thinking about that time, what motivated you to repair the event/situation?
If not, what hindered you?
Can you tell me what exactly you did in response to the discovered difficulty? Please provide an example.

Stage 3: Consequences of difficulties on future career decisions:

- Can you tell me how your career developed after this event/situation? What happened after you fixed the difficulty? Were there other important events/situations that followed?
- How do you see that this shaped the development of your career?
- How do you think you would feel about the difficulty if you would not have fixed it?

Stage 4: Personal demographics:

- Thank you once again for your participation in this interview.
- In order to analyse the data, we need some information regarding your personal characteristics:
 - What is your date of birth?
 - What is your highest level of education?
 - How many years have you worked already regarding your professional career, excluding internships and part-time jobs (working experience)?
 - What is your nationality?
 - What gender do you identify with?