



Towards a Grounded Theory of Mid-Career Stuckness

RESEARCH

IBEN TREEBAK

RIE THOMSEN

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the phenomenon of mid-career stuckness through a grounded theory approach to the analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with five life science professionals in the midst of their career. The study shows that career stuckness is an *emotion*, a long-lasting, complex sense of professional unfulfilment and stagnation in a job or career path. At the same time, however, it is also a *situation*, in that the individual is subject to labour market conditions and discourses regarding successful or expected career development – external circumstances which they cannot control, but to which they must actively relate. The experience of career stuckness is rooted in corporate and labour market structures and an understanding of ‘a good career’ as a linear and upward process.

Denne artikel undersøger fænomenet fastbrændthed. Artiklens analyse bygger på grounded theory og analyserer dybdegående, kvalitative interview med fem life science akademikere midt i karrieren. Studiet viser, at fastbrændthed i karrieren er en *emotion*; en langvarig, kompleks oplevelse af faglig uforløsthed og stagnation i et job eller et karrierespor. Samtidig er det en *situation*; idet individet er under indflydelse af vilkår på arbejdsmarkedet for mennesker midt i karrieren, og påvirket af diskurser om, hvad der udgør succesfuld karriereudvikling. Det er ydre omstændigheder, som de ikke kan styre, men som de må forholde sig aktivt til. Fastbrændthed er forbundet til forståelse af ‘en god karriere’, som en lineært opadgående proces, og til arbejdsmarkedsstrukturer og lokal organisering i virksomheder.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Iben Treebak

University of Copenhagen, DK

ibt@science.ku.dk

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There is ample self-help literature on mid-career crisis (e.g. Knight, 2018; Minsky & Peters, 2019; Setiya, 2017, 2019) and existing literature (Baldwin, Lunceford & Vanderlinden, 2005; Clark, Oswald & Wart, 1996; Stengård et al, 2016; McInnes, 2016) in the field of career development provides valuable insights into issues that are closely related to career stuckness, such as job satisfaction/dissatisfaction and difficulties relating to career transitions.

Studies suggest that the mid-career period is often characterised by low job satisfaction. In 1996, the economists Clark and Oswald and the psychologist Warr documented a clear, U-shaped relationship between age and job satisfaction in a large-scale study of 5,192 employees in the United Kingdom. Their study shows that job satisfaction declines from a moderate level in the first years of employment, reaching a low point in the middle of the career and then rising steadily until retirement age (Clark, Oswald & Warr, 1996, p. 57). A similar U-shaped development in job satisfaction among scientific staff at three American universities was found in 2005 by education researchers Baldwin, Lunceford and Vanderlinden in a small exploratory study showing that job dissatisfaction is greatest in the middle career stages and least in the final stages within academia. These insights, however, do not seem to fully capture the reasons behind and consequences of the stuckness phenomenon.

Swedish economist Carlsson defines career stuckness ('fastbrändhet' in the original Swedish version) as 'having spent so long with job functions or in a work environment that does not fit that confidence in one's own ability has waned' (Carlsson, 2018, p. 263, our translation). The central themes in Carlsson's work are that unemployment and labour shortages exist side by side in society and that 20–25 per cent of those who are in employment feel that they are in the wrong job or have the wrong employer (Carlsson, 2018, p. 41, p. 164).

A few studies propose constructs very closely related to career stuckness. A Swedish quantitative, longitudinal study of 3,491 employees introduces the term 'being locked-in' to describe 'being in a non-preferred workplace while at the same time perceiving low employability' (Stengård et al, 2016, p. 1) and concludes in very general terms that 'being locked-in is detrimental to individuals' well-being' (Stengård et al, 2016, p. 17). In a Canadian phenomenological study, McInnes (2016) introduces the term 'career paralysis' to describe the experience of wanting to make a career change toward something more meaningful but being unable to actually make that change.

In this study, we have chosen to use the term 'career stuckness' (in Danish, *fastbrændthed i karrieren*) and continue the exploration of this still emerging concept through in-depth interviews with mid-career life science professionals. We will hereby contribute with a deeper understanding of the underlying causes and consequences as experienced by the professionals themselves and attempt to tie the themes together in a grounded theory of mid-career stuckness. Thus, the research questions guiding the study are: How can the experience of stuckness in the middle of a career be understood? What are the causes for career stuckness? And what are the consequences?

METHOD

This study was part of a project that sought to develop new career guidance services in Pharmadanmark, a trade union for life science professionals. The union wanted to develop relevant career guidance for the large group of its members who are not necessarily in transition or threatened by unemployment – members who are often well-established and successful specialists, project managers and leaders, but who are not content and feel stuck in their job or career path (Thorsted, 2020). To produce knowledge about users' perspectives that can inform the development of such new services, the trade union's career specialist conducted a qualitative study among mid-career members regarding their experiences at this stage of their working lives.

PARTICIPANTS

This study takes an in-depth, qualitative approach to the development of a constructivist grounded theory of career stuckness. Interviewees (n = 5) were 40–55 years of age and

experiencing a self-reported state of career stuckness. The study's definition of mid-career covers the end of the establishment stage (24–44 years) and the beginning and middle of the maintenance stage (45–65 years) in Super's life-career rainbow model (Super, 1975, 1980).

Participants were recruited at an event about career stuckness for members of a trade union for life science professionals. As such, they were not strategically selected to represent different segments of the target group. Characteristics of the informants are presented in **Table 1**.

NAME	EDUCATION	AGE	GENDER	POSITION, WORKPLACE AND YEARS IN CURRENT JOB
Bettina	Pharmacist	Mid-40s	F	Senior specialist in a large pharmaceutical company, where she has been employed for approx. 10 years.
Carina	Pharmacist	Mid-40s	F	Jobseeker with approx. 10 years of experience in pharmacovigilance at different pharmaceutical and consultancy companies.
Dorte	Pharmacist, PhD	Mid-50s	F	Senior consultant at a government agency, where she has been employed for approx. 8 years.
Erika	Pharmacist	Early 40s	F	Deputy manager at community pharmacy, where she has been employed for approx. 13 years and in a managerial position for approx. 8 years.
Frederik	Pharmacist	Early 40s	M	Project manager in a large pharmaceutical company, where he has been employed in the same position for approx. 4 years.

Table 1 Characteristics of the informants.

The interviewees are all trained pharmacists. The Danish labour market for pharmacists is very different from that of pharmacists in most other countries. In Denmark, only a small minority of pharmacists work in the pharmacy sector. The large majority work in the life science industry. The labour market and job opportunities for pharmacists are therefore much broader than in most other countries.

THE INTERVIEWS

The interviews were conducted in March 2020 by the first author. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the interviews were conducted by telephone. The interviews have a duration ranging from 31 to 44 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Memos with ideas and questions for the analysis were written while transcribing. The study's data consists of five interviews of 6–10 pages of transcribed text: a total of 39 pages. The interviews were semi-structured in order to follow the interviewees' line of reasoning related to their lifeworld (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2010, p. 35) and focused on the interviewees' subjective experiences. The interview strategy was to 'double-click' on (i.e. pursue) the topics that the interviewees brought up. Initially, the following open questions were asked:

- What is your interest in this phenomenon of career stuckness that we are going to talk about today?
- Which aspects of career stuckness do you recognise?
- What forms does career stuckness assume in your life?

The open-ended questions allowed interviewees to focus on what they considered most significant and hence laid the ground for an open approach to exploring the properties of mid-career stuckness.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

With the aim of further developing the emerging concept of career stuckness, an inductive approach was chosen that allowed analysis of the empirical data without a strong pre-existing conceptual and theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. The analyses were inspired by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), particularly Charmaz' (2011, 2014) constructivist grounded theory approach.

As suggested by Charmaz (2011), interview data were coded on three levels: first line-by-line coding, then thematic coding and finally axial coding to identify links between themes. This provides a basis for formulating a more in-depth understanding of the concept of mid-career stuckness and developing a grounded theory of career stuckness.

CODING – IDENTIFICATION OF ACTIVITIES, THEMES AND CONNECTIONS

Initially, open line-by-line coding was conducted where, for each sentence, we asked: ‘What’s going on here?’ This coding strategy is inspired by Charmaz’ line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2011, p. 172–173), which focuses on capturing the observable activity and conceptual action, and labelling it with short, active terms. This first round of coding is a sense-making process that helps to create an overview of the data material, thus forming the basis for the second and third levels of coding.

The second level of coding, identification of themes, was based on reading across the interviews and attaching thematic labels to their individual elements. The thematic coding process was performed twice: firstly to identify themes, and secondly to integrate some of these themes, developing a smaller number of more abstract thematic codes, which formed the basis for the thematic analysis.

The third level of coding, identification of connections, is inspired by axial coding, as described by Boolsen (2015, pp. 251–254), where coding attempts to connect the subcategories of a phenomenon to formulate the core category: the grounded theory of career stuckness itself. In this case, the subcategories are the perceived problems, causes and consequences.

- **Problems** – Passages in the data material where interviewees indicate how they experience stuckness.
- **Causes** – Passages in the data material where interviewees state reasons why they experience stuckness.
- **Consequences** – Passages in the data material where interviewees indicate the impact that stuckness has on their everyday lives.

Based on the third-level codes, a vertical analysis of each interview was conducted to uncover the connections expressed by the interviewees and reformulate and represent their individual experiences of career stuckness in a condensed form. Finally, a horizontal analysis was conducted that integrated the themes identified during the second level of coding and the connections established during the third level of coding.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study includes a limited number of participants, all pharmacists and mostly female, and therefore does not claim that the findings can be generalised to a broader population. Rather, this study claims communicative validity (Kvale, 1995), which means testing the validity of our knowledge claim in a dialogue with the field of practice as well as research.

In this study, there was only time for one round of data collection, and our version of the grounded theory approach may thus best be described as an abbreviated grounded theory (Willig, 2008). An extended implementation of a grounded theory approach would have collected data, explored this data through coding and established tentative categories, before collecting further data.

The limited number of participants challenges the ideal of ‘theoretical saturation’; i.e., the point in classical grounded theory analysis where the researcher can claim that collecting and analysing additional data does not add new insights (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, we would claim to have reached what may be referred to as ‘conceptual density’ or ‘theoretical sufficiency’ (Nelson, 2016), meaning our analysis has reached a sufficient depth of understanding to allow us to start building a grounded theory of career stuckness, which can be further tested or developed in future studies.

FINDINGS

The model below (**Figure 1**) represents the main findings of the study. It summarises the interviewees' accounts and explanations of the causes and consequences of mid-career stuckness. The arrow indicates temporality, as career stuckness seems to be a condition that develops over a number of years.

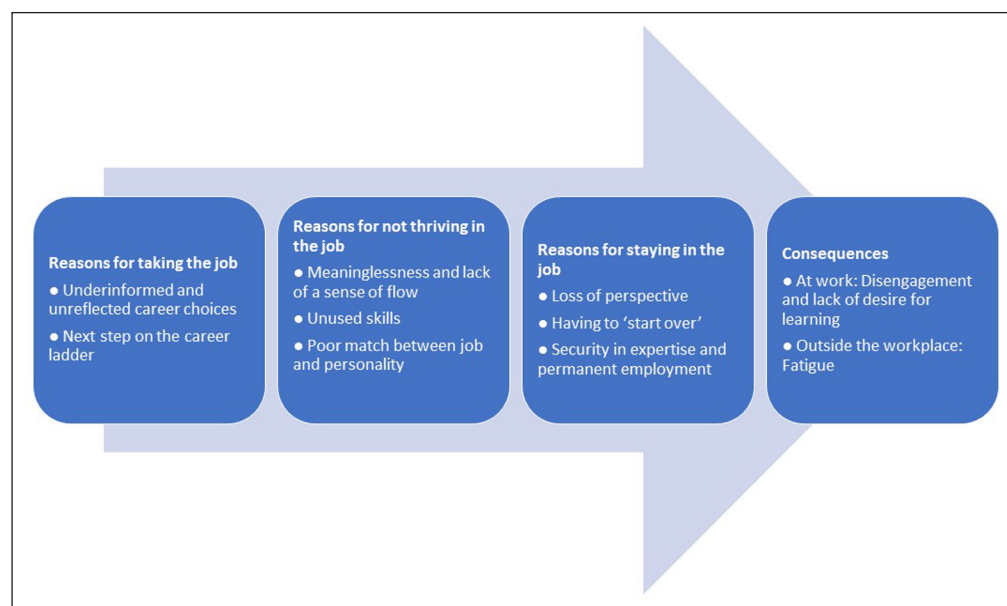


Figure 1 Summary of causes and consequences of mid-career stuckness.

The causes and consequences are divided into four categories:

- 1) Reasons for taking the job
- 2) Reasons for not thriving in the job
- 3) Reasons for staying in the job
- 4) Consequences in- and outside the workplace

The findings are presented in more detail below with headings indicating the sub-categories of the grounded theory as summarised in **Figure 1**. We include passages from the interviews to illustrate how our analytical interpretations are grounded in the data.

REASONS FOR TAKING THE JOB

Underinformed and unreflected educational and career choices

Educational and career choices that were made without sufficient knowledge of alternative options can lead to career stuckness. The interviewees described these choices as driven by the feeling that they are 'natural' or even 'necessary' and thus something that cannot be questioned.

One interviewee (Bettina) describes how, as a student, she did not realise that a pharmacy degree could lead to the kind of work that she does now, and that it was not something that she chose to do, it just 'happened by accident'. She also explains that the university did not provide an introduction to the many different fields of work that a degree in pharmacy can lead to. In addition, Bettina finished her studies during the financial crisis, so when a job opportunity arose, she took it without considering whether the job was something she wanted to do. Another interviewee (Frederik) notes that he wished he had known about different alternatives when he chose to study pharmacy, because in hindsight he would rather have pursued a degree in data science.

Next step on the career ladder

Career stuckness appears to be linked to the idea that a career is comparable to climbing a ladder. Frederik explains that the job he now feels stuck in was an opportunity that presented itself somewhat randomly but was a 'natural next step on the career ladder'. Carina, on the

other hand, explains how she feels ‘stuck’ because she has not been able to ‘move a step up’ and ‘advance to a specialist position’. Erika, who is a deputy manager of a community pharmacy, explains how that has become a hindrance for her when she applies for other jobs in other community pharmacies, because the owners think she is not genuinely motivated to ‘take a step down the ladder’.

The interviewees refer to positions in their careers as steps on a metaphorical ladder and it is clear from the interviews that an upward movement on the ladder is considered the natural, desired and only acceptable direction. The ladder metaphor echoes the idea, embedded in many corporate career systems mapped out by HR departments, that a career means a progression from entry-level positions to positions with higher levels of skill, responsibility, or power.

REASONS FOR NOT THRIVING IN THE JOB

Meaninglessness and lack of a sense of flow

Career stuckness is linked to a sense of meaninglessness, which is expressed by the interviewees in several ways. In some instances, it is a question of having to solve tasks that seem meaningless because they do not help create solutions/improvements. In other cases, the tasks themselves seem important and meaningful, but the meaninglessness consists in an experience of problems that crop up year after year and remain unresolved despite continuous efforts to resolve them or prevent them from occurring again.

Career stuckness is also associated with performance and time-monitoring practices that do not feel meaningful to the employee; i.e., it is not the task itself, but the way the work is organised.

One interviewee (Carina) repeatedly mentions that pharmacovigilance, her area of work, involves many ‘tedious routine tasks’ – tasks that are not particularly complicated and which she describes as pointless ‘pseudo work’,¹ i.e., work that creates no real value, does not concern anyone and does not make any sense. She realises that these tasks must be carried out, but she finds doing so meaningless as it is simply a matter of following rules and procedures without considering the quality of the data she is analysing or the usefulness of the results. Another interviewee (Frederik) does not refer to his duties as boring; however, as a project manager, he finds that he is just a ‘post office’, distributing information to those who need it. For Frederik, the meaninglessness lies in the fact that he does not feel that he is contributing to the creative process.

Dorte, on the other hand, is very passionate about the importance of her work, but describes how, after many years in the same job, she finds that problems tend to reappear and the changes she tries to create fail to happen. Dorte, who has been in her job for eight years, sees life-threatening and sometimes fatal adverse drug events² being repeated. ‘It’s the same issues, the same drugs, and I can’t do anything. It’s really tough. Frustrating. And you get more and more upset to see those terrible events. You’re passionate about wanting to do something, but you can’t. In the position I’m in now, I’m limited in terms of what I can do.’ She uses several metaphors to describe the situation: ‘You go around in circles’, ‘It’s often two steps forward and one step back’ and ‘I feel like I’m stuck in quicksand.’

Another interviewee (Bettina) explains that the way her work is organised has changed over the last ten years. The working day is now governed by so-called key performance indicators rather than the individual employee’s creativity and preferences: ‘We’ve put in place a system now where we have to register in 10–15-minute increments what tasks we’re doing, so my whole day... when I’m done, I have to record that I spent, for example, half an hour on a deviation³ and then I was in a meeting. I feel like a factory worker punching the clock.’ She

1 The term ‘pseudo work’ is borrowed by the interviewee from Jensen & Nørmark (2018) and is related to the concept of ‘bullshit jobs’ forwarded by anthropologist David Graeber.

2 An adverse drug event is an injury resulting from medical intervention related to a drug, including medication errors, adverse reactions to drugs and overdoses.

3 In this context, a deviation is any unwanted event that represents a departure from approved processes or procedures or instruction or specification or established standard or from what is required during manufacturing, packing and testing of pharmaceuticals.

understands that top-level management wants such data, but she describes how the constant measurements make it ‘difficult to get into [a state of] flow.’⁴ For Bettina, therefore, it is the demand for tight time management, self-monitoring and reporting – the organisation of work – that is experienced as pointless and unproductive, even though she can see that it makes sense for management.

Unused skills

Career stuckness also appears to be rooted in a lack of opportunity to make the best possible use of one’s skills, instead having to complete tasks that do not offer professional fulfilment, or where time constraints prevent professionally satisfactory solutions. Some interviewees (Erika and Carina) express that their jobs involve too many tedious, routine tasks that do not require and make use of their skills as trained pharmacists. Workplaces are described as being under so much pressure that there is no longer time to immerse oneself in interesting, professionally challenging tasks.

One interviewee (Dorte), who holds a PhD in her area of work, feels that her job has changed from the specialist role she originally had to a more generalist role. She explains that she has become ‘a sort of communications officer whose only role is to make sure that what we write is correct.’ Another interviewee (Bettina) finds that her role has become so highly specialised that her many other skills and resources are not used. She feels that she has been placed in a ‘specialist silo’ with limited contact with the world outside the silo.

Poor match between personality and job

In the interviews, a central explanation for career stuckness is a feeling that certain job tasks do not fit the interviewee’s personality. Interviewees express that they have certain personality traits that make their job more demanding, forcing them to play a role or perform tasks that do not come naturally to them. For Bettina, this is a key element in her sense of stuckness. She describes how she must ‘stretch’ herself to do the job, elaborating:

I’m not the type, [...] I’m not the perfectionist type that some of my colleagues are, where they can really work in-depth with very small details. [...] It’s just not natural for me, because I’ve got seven thousand other good ideas that I just have to follow up on.
(Bettina)

Dorte explains that her sense of stuckness is related to the fact that she has lost some of the tasks that she enjoyed as a ‘nerdy professional’. She explains that, as her job has changed, she increasingly finds that ‘the job no longer fits me as a human being’ and that it is psychologically demanding for her to fill the role that her job has become. Frederik expresses a similar sentiment:

I think I see myself more as an introverted character, where many of the tasks really require you to be on with other people and engage with teams. And I find that demanding. Of course, I try to do it as best I can, but I don’t think it comes as naturally to me and the person I am as it probably does for others, so I think I’m probably not in the right position. (Frederik)

His surroundings seem to disagree. He explains that he is told that he is doing a good job, all around, both by his boss and the people in his team. He notes that there is a ‘clash’ between his own sense of how he is doing and the way he is perceived by others.

REASONS FOR STAYING IN THE JOB

Loss of perspective

The analysis shows that stuck mid-career professionals have lost their perspective. They have a hard time seeing other opportunities after many years in a particular field, and employers (current or potential) do not allow employees to try their hands at tasks other than those they have been doing for many years – the tasks that, in reality, they want to put behind them. Their many years of experience and high salary expectations may also have a negative impact in terms of allowing them to try their hand in a new field of work where they have less experience.

⁴ The term ‘flow’ is borrowed by the interviewee from Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

In an attempt to escape the stuckness, some interviewees have asked for new roles or tasks, while others have tried to find a new job but found themselves limited by the high degree of professional specialisation that they have achieved throughout their working life. This is true of Carina, Erika, Bettina and Dorte, all of whom, in different ways, express that they feel burdened by their experience.

Dorte, who is in her mid-fifties and the oldest of the interviewees, is the only one to mention that she suspects that, as a jobseeker, you are not selected when you 'reach a certain age'. She says she does not get many interviews, even though she is an active jobseeker and has been for two years.

Similarly, Erika finds that the fact that she is currently employed in a management position puts her out of contention for non-executive positions. However, it is not only prospective employers who have a hard time seeing her in other positions; she finds it difficult to see herself working in sectors other than community pharmacy or hospital pharmacy. This is partly because she is not familiar with the opportunities in, for example, the pharmaceutical industry, where the large majority of Danish pharmacists work, and partly because she is unsure whether she is still qualified for such jobs so many years after graduation.

Having to 'start all over again'

The idea that a change of career path will mean having to 'start over' was present in all the interviews included in this study. This theme is a continuation of the previously mentioned 'next step on the career ladder' theme. The interviewees are prepared to 'start over' – on a lower level in the hierarchy and at a lower salary if necessary. Meanwhile, either the skills requirements appear too high or the potential employer considers them overqualified due to their many years of experience in a specialist or managerial position. Bettina would find it 'frustrating' if she had to move a few rungs down the ladder in terms of her levels of expertise and competence, and does not like the idea of becoming a novice again in a new field of work. The understanding that a change of career path will lead to a reduction in skill – and perhaps salary – is at the core of career stuckness.

Security in expertise and permanent employment

Career stuckness also seems to be rooted in a need for security – both the security of having permanent employment and of being competent at one's job. This theme is very prominent in the interviews. Dorte explains that one of the reasons why it has taken her so long to come to the realisation that she must change career paths is the comfort and security she finds in her own expertise. Bettina talks about how the need for stability and the fear of unemployment have contributed to her being in a job which she does not actually enjoy. She was hired during the financial crisis, when unemployment was high, and believes this has contributed to her 'sticking with' a job that offers stability. Erika describes herself as a 'security addict' and says that other job opportunities are often fixed-term positions, entailing a lack of security that she finds it difficult to overcome.

CONSEQUENCES

At work – disengagement and lack of desire for learning

Examining how the interviewees describe the consequences of being stuck in a job or career path, the interviewees express strong emotions. They do not just experience slight irritation at the circumstances of their working lives, there are strong feelings at stake.

The analysis shows that the interviewees lose their motivation and commitment, no longer putting the same effort into work as they did earlier in their careers and no longer wanting to devote extra hours to professional development. Bettina explains how she is starting to feel indifferent about the company's goals. Frederik describes himself as becoming 'tone deaf' and 'resistant to all the updates from senior management', even though he does not 'want to be that kind of person'. Dorte describes herself as a very dutiful employee, but lately she feels she is turning into an 'argumentative whinger' at work and, like Frederik, she does not like the person she is becoming. Erika used to take work home to get things done, but she does not feel obliged to do so anymore and says that she is no longer passionate about her work.

Frederik expresses similar sentiments, no longer wanting to spend his own time improving his professional skills. Both Frederik and Erika express regret that their passion for the job is gone.

Outside the workplace – fatigue

The study indicates that career stuckness also impacts life outside the workplace. The interviewees report feeling drained of energy and exhausted when they return home after work. Frederik keeps coming back to how he feels that the role of a project manager is very demanding for him and that he feels exhausted after work. He notes that he is ‘not at all overworked’ in his current job compared to earlier in his career when he worked much longer hours. Instead, he links the fatigue he is experiencing to constantly having to ‘pull himself together’ to interact with many people, as the role requires. Bettina reports that her stuckness played a significant role in her long-term sick leave due to stress a few years ago. Dorte also experiences that stuckness has a profound impact on her life outside work: ‘there is just nothing left in me’, she says, explaining that she has had to give up socialising on weekdays and that she has to keep her Sundays entirely free from obligations because she needs them to ‘recharge her batteries’. She isolates herself to make sure she has the energy to go to work again Monday.

TOWARDS A GROUNDED THEORY OF MID-CAREER STUCKNESS

Based on the subcategories – causes and consequences – of the phenomenon of mid-career stuckness outlined above, we identify two core categories: stuckness as emotion and stuckness as situation. The analysis shows that mid-career stuckness can be understood as a combination of these two components. The first concerns complex *emotions* of professional unfulfilment and stagnation in the psychological sense; i.e., in the sense that, as humans, our emotions signal a bodily and felt change that is seen as prior to an action or response (Meijers & Wardekker, 2003). The second has to do with a *situation* in the existential, philosophical sense; i.e., in the sense that, as humans, we are always enmeshed in extraneous circumstances that we have not brought upon ourselves and over which we have no power as individuals. At the same time, however, every situation contains an openness that makes it necessary to make active choices (Klausen, 2013, 2015) and act (Dreier, 1999).

The emotional component of mid-career stuckness is observable when the interviewees talk about *feeling out of place* because they have the ‘wrong personality for the job’; when they express *fear* of losing financial security; the *frustration* they feel regarding their inability to change jobs; the *meaninglessness* they experience e.g. when work is organised in certain ways; when they describe their feelings of *disengagement* and *fatigue* as a result of the stuckness; and even *sadness* at having lost the passion they used to feel for their work.

The situational component of mid-career stuckness is evident when the interviewees refer to the *career ladder* they have been and are expected to be climbing; when Erika, who is in a managerial position, is *rejected* when she applies for other types of positions that are lower in the hierarchy of authority; when Bettina, whose job is highly specialised, is *not allowed* by management to spend time on other project, because she *is too expensive*; when Dorte, as the oldest of the interviewees, is *never called for* an interview and suspects that she is exposed to *age discrimination*; and when Frederik and Carina both would have to study again to be qualified to do the jobs that they would really like to do, but realise that *further education is too costly* and they cannot afford to go back to school. To understand mid-career stuckness we hence need to consider both emotional and situational aspects.

DISCUSSION

Examining the results of the analysis in light of Donald Super’s (1975, 1980) life-career rainbow model, we can understand mid-career stuckness as a result of not having made conscious career choices while in what Super refers to as the establishment stage (25–44 years). According to Super, if people choose to change their career path later, during what is normally a maintenance stage (45–65 years), they will have to return to the earlier stages and deal with the need to explore and establish themselves in new surroundings (Højdal & Poulsen, 2012, p. 51; Super, 1975, 1980). Providing professional mid-career guidance services might help support such exploration. In a Danish context, career guidance for adults is sporadic and primarily

remedial (Cort & Thomsen, 2014), offered to individuals once the damage has been done, typically in connection with career disruptions such as unemployment, stress, occupational injuries etc. (Cort, Thomsen & Mariager-Anderson, 2015).

Carlsson (2016, 2018) advocates for a person-centred labour market policy, where the shared exploration of individuals' unique combinations of competencies constitutes a central supplement to what he describes as Swedish society's universal remedy: 'more education'. In Carlsson's view, equipping individuals with the prerequisites to manage their own careers and ensuring access to suitable career guidance and support are crucial elements in creating a more efficient and healthier labour market. Carlsson thus argues that people at all stages of life ought to have access to career guidance to prevent and counteract career stuckness, among other things.

The findings corroborate Carlsson's (2016) theory of career stuckness and contribute with the perspective that the security of expertise and the feeling of being privileged – having climbed the career ladder – can be barriers to career change. Changing to a different type of job or career is perceived as 'starting over', which is the opposite of the vertical advancement that is expected to characterise a successful career path, moving upwards in the hierarchy on a metaphorical ladder to a position as a more senior manager, project manager or specialist. This understanding is also built into, for example, collective agreements and many corporate career systems, where employees are placed in a particular career track and are expected – and expect themselves – to advance within this track.

The careership theory (Hodkinson, 2009; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), which draws upon Bourdieu's concept of field, offers a way of thinking about this interrelationship between individual agency and issues of social structure. It substantiates that career decision-making and progression are bound by a person's 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, 2009, p. 6). In light of this theory, mid-career stuckness can be understood as a consequence of a narrowed horizon for action and a phenomenon produced in a complex interaction between the individual and the fields s/he inhabits. This resonates with our conceptualisation of mid-career stuckness as a combination of emotion and situation.

Our small-scale exploratory study of mid-career stuckness calls for further studies on how professional career guidance can prevent and ameliorate career stuckness. However, the study strongly indicates that professional guidance should not just be a service offered to young people during transitions or unemployed adults. Adults in stable employment experiencing career stuckness should not be left to their own devices and trade unions may have an important role to play in this regard (Thomsen, Mariager-Anderson & Rasmussen, 2020). In this study, a trade union professional and a researcher together explores the potential for developing career guidance activities based on lived experiences of career stuckness in the working lives of its members.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests a preliminary grounded theory that describes career stuckness among mid-career professionals as a complex *emotion* that is rooted in feeling privileged to have what is perceived as a good job/career but at the same time feeling professionally unfulfilled and frustrated that one's capabilities are not being fully utilised. Moreover, the study suggests that career stuckness is a *situation*, in that the individual is influenced by labour market conditions and discourses about what constitutes a successful career – external circumstances outside the individual's control. At the same time, career stuckness is rooted in labour market structures and corporate career systems entailing e.g. an understanding of 'a good career' as a linear progression.

The findings indicate that career stuckness builds up over a period of time, in some cases over several years, and that there are a multitude of possible underlying causes, such as: underinformed and unreflected educational and career choices; the idea of a career ladder that one ought to be climbing; meaninglessness at work – both regarding tasks and the organisation of work; a poor match between work tasks and personality; not being able to fully utilise use one's skills; and a need for security – both the security of having a permanent job and being

competent at the work one does. Furthermore, the prospect of being a novice if switching to a new field of work seems daunting. The analysis also shows that stuckness in a job is closely intertwined with a loss of perspective and a narrowed 'horizon for action'. The experience of career stuckness may cause a lack of motivation and commitment to work tasks and may have a far-reaching impact on life outside work; for example, in the long term, career stuckness may contribute to stress and burnout.

The study provides a preliminary grounded theory on which to base further studies that can increase our understanding of this increasingly common and important phenomenon that seems to have a profound impact on the lives of many. The study and its suggested grounded theory have caught the attention of a wide audience of trade union career professionals and members in Denmark (e.g. Elsig-Pedersen, 2021). This attention fuels a continued dialogue with professionals and users and thus constitutes a degree of ongoing communicative validity (Kvale, 1995). Finally, the study indicates the need for research into the potential for professional career guidance services to prevent career stuckness and promote professional development.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The first author was a career specialist employed by the trade union Pharmadanmark when the study was undertaken but the management of the trade union was not in any way involved in the design or conclusions of the study. The study was done as part of a part-time professional master's programme at Aarhus University.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Iben Treebak  orcid.org/0000-0003-3963-8004
 University of Copenhagen, DK

Rie Thomsen  orcid.org/0000-0001-5054-6800
 Aarhus University, DK

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