



Exploring Social Representations of Career Planning: Insights From Finnish University Students

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the types of social representations that university students conceive concerning career planning. Our study draws from an extensive dataset comprising 999 short descriptions that students provided. The data analysis employed a thematic and inductive approach, resulting in the identification of six distinct social representations of career planning: a) matching, b) securing employment, c) embracing the field, d) self-realisation, e) strategising and f) coping with uncertainty. These social representations provide new insights into how individuals conceive of and navigate their career paths. This study offers significant contributions to the understanding of everyday perspectives on career planning in the higher education context. These diverse representations underpin students' thoughts, behaviours and actions, which also can be instrumental for career counsellors. Notably, when career planning is represented as coping with uncertainty, it redirects the focus of career counselling from traditional self-oriented activities, opportunity exploration and decision-making, towards addressing inherent challenges of uncertainty itself.

ABSTRAKTI

Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee yliopisto-opiskelijoiden urasuunnitteluun liittyviä sosiaalisia representaatioita. Tutkimuksemme pohjautuu laajaan aineistoon, jossa 999 opiskelijaa kertoi syitä sille, miksi he ovat tyytyväisiä, tyytymättömiä tai epävarmoja omasta alavalinnastaan. Aineiston analyysissä käytettiin temaattista ja induktiivista lähestymistapaa, jonka tuloksena tunnistettiin kuusi erilaista sosiaalista representaatiota urasuunnittelusta: a) alan ja itsen yhteensopivuus; b) työllistymisen varmistaminen; c) alaa kohti kurkotteleminen; d) itsensä toteuttaminen; e) strategioiden laatiminen ja f) epävarmuuden kanssa selviytyminen. Tutkimus tarjoaa oman panoksensa korkeakoulutuksen kontekstissa tapahtuvan urasuunnittelun ymmärtämiseen. Urasuunnittelun sosiaaliset representaatiot vaikuttavat opiskelijoiden ajatuksiin, käyttäytymiseen ja toimintaan. Ne tarjoavat näkökulmia siihen, miten eri tavoin opiskelijat käsittävät urasuunnittelun ja suunnistavat urapolullaan. Tämän ymmärtäminen on hyödyllistä myös uraohjaajille. Erityisesti silloin, kun urasuunnittelu nähdään epävarmuuden kanssa selviytymisenä, se ohjaa uraohjauksen painopistettä perinteisemmistä itsetuntemuksen lisäämisestä, mahdollisuuksien kartoituksesta ja päätöksenteon tukemisesta kohti epävarmuuden työöstämistä.

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Careers and career planning are broad and multifaceted concepts approached with various interpretations and understandings (Collin, 2007). This variability underscores the importance of examining career-related processes, such as career planning, from diverse perspectives. This study aims to analyse the everyday understanding of career planning through a qualitative approach using a large amount of survey data collected from Finnish university students. By 'everyday understanding', we refer to common, ordinary perspectives held by non-experts. Similar to the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1973, 2008), the present study recognises that individual understandings of career planning are the basis from which students orient themselves towards action with regard to thinking about their future and careers (see also Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2013, 2015). This study seeks to contribute to an emerging discussion on common-sense understandings of career planning, also called 'a folk theory of career' (Hodkinson, 2009, pp. 4–5).

Furthermore, to understand complex career-related phenomena, this paper extends the application of social representation theory (SRT), which was initially conceived in career development research by Bergmo-Prvulovic (2013, 2015). With this approach, we wish to examine the use of SRT to capture career behaviour's complexities, with a particular emphasis on career planning as a research object. This study's uniqueness lies in shifting the focus towards university students in the higher education (HE) context, in which numerous normative tasks in career planning, including choice of study field, unfold over the course of the academic journey (see also Super, 1990).

UNDERSTANDINGS OF CAREER PLANNING

It has been asserted that policy, scholarly and everyday understandings of career and career planning intersect, vary and diverge across contexts (e.g., Bakke, 2020; Bakke & Hooley, 2022; Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2013, 2018, 2020; Hodkinson, 2009). According to the Council of the European Union (2018), career planning skills encompass the ability to envision future career paths and gather information about labour market opportunities. Obtaining career management skills – often defined as the possession of information about oneself, educational and occupational opportunities, and the skills necessary for making informed career decisions (e.g., ELGPN, 2015; Sultana, 2013) – plays a crucial role in this process. In Finland, career planning skills are built during formal career education running through basic and upper secondary levels of the educational system (Toni & Vuorinen, 2020). However, a growing emphasis on employability and efficient study paths has also led to increased attention being paid to career education, guidance and counselling within HE institutions, which is this study's context (Toni & Vuorinen, 2020).

Policy and education curricula are also shaped by career theories and research. Diverse theoretical discourses about careers and career planning have emerged as a response to evolving societal needs (Brown & Lent, 2013). Career theories strive to explain individuals' career behaviour, suggest how career decisions are made optimally and how people should lead their lives, and provide advice on what should be considered when planning for the future (Hodkinson, 2009; McCash, 2017; McMahon & Arthur, 2019).

Within the extensive theoretical framework, career planning and decisions can be viewed as being grounded in either content or process factors (Patton & McMahon, 2021; Yates, 2020). In content theories, the core idea of career behaviour is the dual orientation towards self and the environment, both of which are viewed as relatively stable constructs (McMahon & Arthur, 2019; Patton & McMahon, 2006). Thus, career planning is described, for example, as matching oneself with opportunities (Holland, 1973). Similar approaches are also outlined in the model proposed by Law and Watts (1977), who claimed that the essence of career education comprises developing decision-making (D), opportunity awareness (O), informed career transitions (T) and self-awareness (S), making these domains the core of career planning activities in educational settings (DOTS).

However, with process-oriented career theories, people and their environments are viewed as ever-changing. Individuals progress through different stages, and they have normative tasks, such as making decisions about their educational paths (Super, 1990). Moreover, chance,

constant change and insecurity, which are featured in the process perspective, also affect career planning. This requires that individuals cultivate flexibility, adaptability and resilience (Patton & McMahon, 2006; Pryor & Bright, 2011), develop confidence as part of career adaptabilities (Savickas, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009) and nourish attitudes such as persistence, curiosity and optimism (Mitchell et al., 1999). Therefore, career planning has been described as a lifelong process with inherent uncertainty (Bimrose, 2019; Patton & McMahon, 2006), and individuals need to figure out how to live with it (Jokinen, 2016). Clearly, coping with this uncertainty adds complexity to career planning activities.

Career research and its practical implementations interact with common understanding about careers and career planning. Inkson (2004) has asserted that the shared meanings of the 'career' construct are embedded both in theories and in ordinary people's minds. These meanings are expressed through metaphors, viewing career, for example, in terms of fit, journey, construction or resource. Individuals use metaphors to comprehend and interpret the idea of a career and act, behave and make decisions based on these perceptions. Inkson (2004) later inspired several studies on how individuals make sense of their careers. For example, Creed and McIlveen (2018) recognised Inkson's 'construction' and 'encounter' metaphors in university students' perceptions of their university experience. Pryor and Bright (2009) suggested 'game' as a new career metaphor. Smith-Ruig (2008) demonstrated that the 'journey' metaphor was used to illustrate traditional and boundless career trajectories.

One notable strand of discourse in the career research field has focused on examining how ordinary people perceive the career concept and the processes related to it (Bakke, 2020; Bakke & Hooley, 2022; Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2013, 2015, 2020). Utilising Social Representation Theory (SRT), Bergmo-Prvulovic (2013, 2015) clarified how examining everyday understandings of career help enhance conceptual clarity in the career field and provide support for individuals facing career challenges. More recently, Bakke and Hooley (2022) highlighted the importance of recognising both young people's and career professionals' understandings of career to recognise career planning and guidance challenges. They identified five themes in Norwegian teenagers' career thinking: *unfamiliarity with the phenomenon*, *career being about work*, *seeing career realised in own aspirations and motivation*, *intentionality* which recognised choices as the core of the career, and finally, as a *risk* that choosing one option would exclude other choices.

Bergmo-Prvulovic's research (2013, 2015, 2020) extensively explores the complex and evolving social representations of career. In her 2013 study with people undergoing changes in work, she identified four social representations of career asserting that the concept of career is attached to conflicting social representations of stability (career as an *individual project* and *self-realisation*) and of change (career as a *game of exchange* and an *uncertain outcome*), where stable representations are anchored in the past and the dynamic representations are anchored in the changing world of work. In her study with career professionals, Bergmo-Prvulovic (2015) identified social representations of career as personal growth and life-development, a movement towards a future goal and a career as the goal itself. Recently, she has identified several career navigation dilemmas, such as how to understand the labour market and uncertainty in forthcoming roles (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2020).

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION THEORY FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this study is to increase knowledge about how ordinary people – in our study, HE students – understand career planning. Recognising these everyday understandings is vital, as they underpin students' thoughts, behaviour and actions. To achieve our purpose, we grounded our empirical study in social representations theory (SRT), introduced by Moscovici (1973), who asserted that social representations encompass everyday systems of meaning, values, ideas and practice, providing a cognitive structure that helps people make sense of and share their understandings about different phenomena. However, people interpret the same phenomena differently, leading to varied social representations with distinct content and intentions (Moscovici, 1973; Purkhart, 1993). This gives rise to a multi-voiced reality situated in culture and results in diverse behavioural outcomes (Marková et al., 2007; Moscovici, 2008). Drawing on insights from Bergmo-Prvulovic (2013, 2015), we found SRT particularly appealing because it allows us to capture the diverse and sometimes conflicting understandings that students had about career planning.

Social representations develop in complex historical, social and individual processes in which common understandings are formed and exchanged via tradition, education and social interaction (Moscovici & Marková, 1998). Representations are not merely passive reflections of the external world; they become visible in daily practices, are in dialogical tension with one another and undergo a constant cycle of reproduction, modification and reconstitution (Chaib et al., 2011; Flick et al., 2015; Marková et al., 2007; Purkhart, 1993; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). According to Moscovici (1984, 2008), social representations are formulated through two processes: objectification and anchoring. The objectification process generates representation's figurative, comprehensible form, and anchoring attaches a meaning to it and integrates it into an existing conceptual framework (Moscovici, 1984; Purkhart, 1993). In our case, the meaning given to career planning differs depending on whether it is anchored, for example, in employment or the self.

This study aimed to examine what types of social representations university students have about career planning. Following SRT, we assumed that social representations are frequently grounded in pre-existing knowledge. Thus, scientific, policy, curricular and cultural discussions on career planning significantly influence common knowledge due to the dialectical interplay between individuals and their cultural contexts, as Moscovici (1984, 2008), Marková (2003) and Purkhart (1993) asserted.

To achieve our research aim, we drew on a dataset comprising short descriptions and narrative motifs in which students stated why they were satisfied, dissatisfied or indecisive about their study choices. We understand career planning as a (meta)perspective encompassing assumptions behind career behaviour and study choices. We assumed that while expressing reasons for their (dis)satisfaction, students also revealed their systems of meaning and assumptions on which their career planning was based. It is from this perspective that students' expressions are interpreted. The following research question guides our inquiry: What social representations of career planning feature in university students' utterances about their choice of study programme?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

The data was collected via a large questionnaire about career planning administered at two Finnish universities. The survey was sent to 9,754 students who had begun their studies in bachelor's or master's degree programmes in 2016–2018. Altogether, 1,224 students filled out the questionnaire (response rate: 12.5%), and of these, 999 (81.6%) also answered a question about study programme choice satisfaction. A 'yes/no/cannot say' multiple choice question was followed by an open-ended question inviting the respondents to explain the 'why' of their satisfaction levels. These explanations used in this study. The answers varied from a few words, or even one word in some cases, to a couple of sentences or even a short paragraph. Of the 999 respondents, 80% stated that they were satisfied ($n = 803$) with their study choices, 5% stated they were not satisfied ($n = 48$) and 15% ($n = 148$) stated that they could not say whether or not they were satisfied.

The study's two universities the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Helsinki, one rural and one urban, have majority female student populations: 68% compared with 32% males (Education Statistics Finland, 2023). However, our data comprised an even further overrepresentation of females (79.5% females; 18.5% males; 1.9% other). Our respondents were ages 19 to 65 ($Mn = 27.1$; $Mo = 22$; $Md = 24$). The median (24) is the national average age of entrants in bachelor's programmes (OECD, 2019). Most participants (66.9%) were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program. Approximately one-third (32.8%) reported that they were enrolled in master's studies. The study's bachelor's and master's studies distribution corresponded with national figures – 70.2% and 29.8%, respectively (Education Statistics Finland, 2023). Over half the participants (54.9%) reported studying towards formal qualifications or for a specialist degree. Approximately one-third (31%) indicated they were studying in a generalist programme. All disciplines at the two universities were represented in our sample, with the biggest respondent groups being STEM fields (14.8%), social sciences (14.4%), education (12.5%) and humanities (11.9%) students.

The dataset maintained anonymity, with no associations able to be drawn between participants' identities and their respective responses. The survey was conducted following ethical scientific practice principles and guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2023).

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis focused on social representations of career planning, captured in open-ended explanations, across categories of satisfaction with study choice. Study choice represented concrete action in individual career planning, and the students' satisfaction level with their study choices was interpreted from this perspective. Although the data were originally collected with a different framework in mind, we adopted SRT for its comprehensive approach to understanding how societal and cultural contexts shape individual perceptions and actions (Moscovici, 1984, 2008). In our analysis, SRT was particularly instrumental in uncovering the diverse perspectives on career planning. We emphasised the role of language in understanding social representations, drawing on Abric (2001) and Moscovici (1984). Consequently, we assumed that the open-ended answers would reveal social representations of HE students' everyday knowledge of career planning.

Studies on social representation have used a variety of different methods (e.g., Flick & Foster, 2008). We combined the SRT framework with thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) and found intriguing intersections between our theoretical and analytical approaches. First, the idea of language producing meaning could be detected in both approaches (Byrne, 2022; Moscovici, 1984). Second, with TA, themes are generated by organising codes around a central organising principle that the researcher interprets from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019), similar to Abric's (2001) idea of a core of social representation having an associative value. Third, TA's latent coding seeks to uncover underlying meanings and assumptions that may influence or inform descriptive or semantic content (Byrne, 2022). In our view, this resembles the analysis of anchoring, with its meaning-making process (Moscovici, 1984). Finally, both SRT and TA are highly interpretive, so they demand that the researcher assume a creative and active role. From these perspectives, we could solidify a set of categories that function as social representations of career planning.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) TA phases, i.e., based on an inductive, bottom-to-top procedure. The first phase started by becoming familiarised with the data to attain an overall understanding of students' responses and possible variations in the data, in which the guiding question was, 'What are the students talking about?' At this stage, the first author translated students' answers into English, giving special care to maintain meanings. During the second phase, initial codes that retained the original wordings from the data were derived. The excerpts from the three groups of students who had stated being either satisfied, dissatisfied or indecisive with their study choices were coded independently to assess any differences in their expressions. This phase, along with the following one, was recursive. Coding and categorisation involved continuous iteration between the codes, raw data and later categorisations (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Horizontal reading between groups revealed that the same codes and categories emerged consistently across all student groups, regardless of whether they were expressed positively or negatively, or whether the students expressed, lacked or desired a certain sentiment about their study choices. Therefore, responses were combined with their respective groupings (e.g., 'corresponds with my value base' vs. 'feeling unsuited' → correspondence → matching). Here, we trusted Billig's (1993) notion that people can share the same representation even if they have different attitudes about it.

In subsequent phases, the codes were categorised and defined systematically, generating empirical subthemes to capture career planning patterns. As we proceeded, we focused increasingly on what students meant with their expressions. We aimed to uncover the larger framework into which these meanings were integrated. In this case, a central organising principle was used to group subthemes by interpreting associative ties between them (Byrne, 2022). This principle was treated similarly to the core element in social representation (Abric, 2001). The thematic framework was refined continuously through discussions with the second author and the supervisory group. Furthermore, the material was read in relation to previous

cultural understandings of career planning. Finally, the various themes were interpreted as social representations of career planning.

RESULTS

Six social representations of career planning were identified from our data – *matching, securing employment, embracing the field, self-realisation, strategising* and *coping with uncertainty* – and they appeared to be anchored in diverse aspects, such as self, employment, field, compatibility, decision-making and, ultimately, change and ambiguity. To facilitate a comprehensive examination of these diverse social representations of career planning, we begin below with an overview of our findings in Table 1, in which illustrative excerpts, subthemes and organising principles serve as a starting point for our analysis of each theme. We then discuss each finding in detail.

EXCERPT*	EMPIRICAL SUBTHEME	ORGANISING PRINCIPLE	SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF CAREER PLANNING
<i>I feel that the field reflects my values and interests (S706).</i> <i>The job suits my personality (S8).</i> <i>I am in a field that is not suitable for me (D42).</i> <i>Feeling unsuited (I28).</i>	Correspondence	Fit	Matching
<i>I'm in a field I love (S111).</i> <i>The field I study is my passion (S765).</i> <i>I feel that I am studying for a calling (S256).</i>	Passion and calling		
<i>It feels like my own thing (S59).</i> <i>Because I feel 'at home' (S247).</i> <i>Wondering if the field is right for me (I10).</i> <i>Not my thing anymore (D130).</i>	Ownership		
<i>I will have the qualification, which will increase the career opportunities in my field (S7).</i> <i>When I graduate, I will receive a clear professional title of a social worker (S166).</i>	Acquisition of a qualification	Employability	Securing employment
<i>I know that I will get a job with my degree in the future (S153).</i> <i>You will surely get a job with this (S777).</i>	Assurance of obtaining a job		
<i>I believe it is a field of the future, and it can be combined with many jobs (S699).</i> <i>It's a field that inspires, empowers, is important and is staffed by wonderful and kind people (S328).</i>	Appeal of the field	Openness	Embracing the field
<i>[---] Career plans are not locked --> there are more options (S704).</i> <i>Versatile career prospects, not just a teacher (S598).</i> <i>I get really versatile opportunities in working life to work in different positions (S633).</i>	Versatile opportunities		

Table 1 Overview of Social Representations of Career Planning.

*Note: The excerpts with designations that contain the capital letter 'S' comprise statements from satisfied students, those with a 'D' comprise dissatisfied students and those with an 'I' comprise indecisive students.

(Contd.)

EXCERPT*	EMPIRICAL SUBTHEME	ORGANISING PRINCIPLE	SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF CAREER PLANNING
A burning interest in the subject (S264). My own motivation, interest and passion for the field of education (S639). The topic is really interesting; it doesn't matter if you have a job or not – it has been meaningful to me to study this' (S801). At the beginning of the second year, I've started to feel that I'm not really interested in the studies I'm doing in my major (D43).	Meaning-orientation	Personal meaning	Self-realisation
The courses are interesting. I feel that I am developing and suitably challenging myself (S659). It has opened enormous new perspectives (S592). Every day is interesting, and I want to learn more all the time (S769).	Developing oneself		
The choice opens up more possibilities for me and closes off less than the other options I considered (S49). This was the only possible option (I143). Difficult to choose between two options (I74).	Valuing options	Planning	Strategising
I know my goals, and my choice of education supports me in achieving them (S327). An interesting field that helps you achieve your career dreams and goals in the future (S561).	Setting goals		
Uncertainty about being capable enough in a professional role (I59). Unpleasant to think about the future (I28). I am really unsure about the future (S506). Transition to career in research with working class background causes uncertainty (I38).	Overall uncertainty	Security	Coping with uncertainty

CAREER PLANNING AS MATCHING

As depicted in Table 1, the first social representation of career planning was termed *matching*, organised around the principle of achieving fit between oneself and the field. The representation was constructed through three subthemes: correspondence, passion and calling, and ownership. Respondents emphasised how their personalities, values and interests aligned with their fields. Second, the emotional aspect was highlighted, with words such as 'love' and 'passion' indicating a strong connection between individuals and their fields. Finally, a recurring subtheme was a strong sense of ownership, with respondents frequently using terms such as 'mine', 'my thing' and 'right' to describe their relationship with the field. These subthemes (correspondence, passion and calling, ownership) occurred concurrently. For example, feelings of passion or ownership were also linked to the feeling of correspondence. Moreover, the social representation of matching also featured in dissatisfied and indecisive students' expressions, in which descriptions of mismatch and lack of right feelings were present.

The second social representation of career planning was termed *securing employment*. Compared with career planning as matching, emphasising fit, securing employment portrays career planning as an instrumental process in which the main purpose is to ensure favourable employment prospects. As depicted earlier in Table 1, the organising principle in this representation was underpinned by employability.

This representation comprises two subthemes: acquisition of a qualification and assurance of obtaining a job. The notion of having a qualification was viewed as a means to expand job opportunities and provide a clear path to employment. Furthermore, the word ‘clear’ was used several times to explain the straightforward trajectory from education to employment. Moreover, the second subtheme regarding assurance of obtaining a job encompassed recurring utterances about employment situation and one’s own personal chances of securing a job. Many statements expressed optimism and even certainty about the employment situation. Interestingly, the social representation of career planning as securing employment was also evident among indecisive and dissatisfied students, but in this case, the theme appeared from a negative perspective. The sentiments towards the job market were notably different, with recurring utterances highlighting bad employment situations. Examples of the phrasing included descriptions of employment situations as weak, abysmal and difficult to realise.

CAREER PLANNING AS EMBRACING THE FIELD

Another social representation related to opportunities within the data was termed *embracing the field*. While the field was emphasised primarily as a source of employment in the previous representation, in this representation, the field was viewed as inherently attractive. Furthermore, the field’s educational and occupational aspects merged in a way that it was sometimes impossible to detect whether students were thinking about the field in a present study or future work context. The organising principle in this representation emphasised openness, which was deemed essential for perceiving, generating and capturing these opportunities.

As presented in Table 1, this social representation comprises two subthemes: the field’s appeal and versatile opportunities. Within the subtheme of the field’s appeal, the central focus was on the emotional connection and perception associated with the field. Many expressions highlighted the positive aspects, describing it as fascinating, interesting and inspiring. Furthermore, the field was often portrayed as forward-looking and of significant importance. The field’s appeal was also associated with tangible benefits, such as excellent pay or prestigious status. In the second subtheme, versatile opportunities, a recurring element focussed on the myriad kinds of employment options and roles. This theme also emerged in the utterances of indecisive and dissatisfied students, but from a negative perspective. Here, the field lacked attractiveness, with expressions about the perceived smallness of the field, lack of value, and the presence of social pressures. Furthermore, opportunities within the field were viewed as versatile, but lacking in specificity, which was deemed a disadvantage. This latter perspective seemed to intersect with the earlier social representation on securing employment, highlighting how different representations can co-exist even within the same individual.

CAREER PLANNING AS SELF-REALISATION

The fourth social representation identified in the data pertained to the self and was termed *self-realisation*. In this representation, career planning was described as a process of learning, pursuing one’s interests and maintaining motivation. Unlike the representations that focussed on the field, this representation shifted the focus towards the individual, indicating that effective career planning necessitates active personal involvement. The organising principle of this representation, as depicted in Table 1, was personal meaning, evident in numerous statements that emphasised significance, motivation and personal development associated with career planning.

This representation comprised two closely connected subthemes: meaning-orientation and self-development. The subthemes were intertwined strongly because students often expressed their interest in the subject matter and their personal growth. Within this representation, students extensively discussed their academic interests, clearly revealing the link between their studies

and careers, similar to the previous representation on embracing the field. In the meaning-orientation subtheme, the focal point was students' genuine interest in their studies. Numerous statements reflected how their interest was connected to various other self-oriented positive aspects, such as motivation and sense of meaning. Some utterances reflected a strong sense of personal engagement and fulfilment, regardless of whether the studies led to employment. The other subtheme focussed on self-development, in which studies were viewed either as a way to enhance existing knowledge and skills or as a means of gaining entirely new insights, such as theory, leadership, technical skills and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, studying also opened new perspectives, contributing to a sense of personal growth.

This social representation also existed in indecisive and dissatisfied students' utterances, but in contrasting directions. A decline in interest was paralleled by a notable decrease in motivation and a growing sense of meaninglessness. In some utterances, decreasing interest in studies led to a sense of detachment, resulting in reduced motivation and a perceived lack of significance.

CAREER PLANNING AS STRATEGISING

Strategising was the fifth social representation of career planning. A small number of students reflected on how they made decisions in the past and mentioned future goals. Furthermore, descriptions of their decision-making processes included thinking of different options, then in one way or another putting these options in an order of preference. Thus, the organising principle for this representation was planning.

The representation encompassed two subthemes: valuing options and setting goals (refer to Table 1). The valuing-options subtheme pertains to the decision-making process. Words such as 'option', 'choice' and 'choosing' were repeated. The process of prioritising these options was described as straightforward or more complex. Furthermore, strategic thinking played a role in the ranking of different options because the order could be based on factors such as multiplying prospects or managing studies. Also, decision-making processes were described, offering insights into various strategies. Decisions resulted from extensive consideration, compromise, or happenstance, or served as a backup plan. Such decisions sometimes could lead to doubts about chosen paths, which were evident particularly in indecisive students' utterances. The second subtheme within this representation focussed on setting goals and moving towards these goals. Many students mentioned having specific career goals or plans, and viewed education as a means of achieving these goals. Furthermore, a university degree was viewed as a gateway to new opportunities, a means of moving in a desirable direction or a way to enhance one's own situation in the job market.

CAREER PLANNING AS COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Before delving into the final social representation of career planning, something about the group of students who were indecisive about their choice of study must be noted. Even if uncertainty could be detected in all groups, it was within this specific group that uncertainty seemed the most pronounced. Notably, the words 'uncertain' and 'uncertainty' recurred frequently in students' utterances. One student wondered: *'Is the field right for me?'* (I10). Concerns also were voiced in questions such as *'Will I have enough knowledge?'* (I13), *'Will I be enough?'* (I17), *'Will I reach my goal?'* (I20) and *'Will I succeed?'* (I40). The value of efforts also was a point of concern in questions such as *'Studying in vain?'* (I62). Job prospects were on the minds of many: *'Will I get an interesting job related to the field?'* (I133); *'Will I want to work with this for the rest of my life?'* (I90) or *'Is my field employable?'* (I137). Also, overall worth was questioned: *'Is this worth it?'* (I144). Some of these questions, along with other utterances, demonstrate a connection to previous social representations – i.e., they could be associated with matching, self-realisation, securing employment, embracing the field and strategising representations – and were categorised accordingly.

Within the category *coping with uncertainty*, students' accounts featured descriptions of ever-present, 'ontological' uncertainty. Among the statements listed, questions about self-worth (I17), concerns about studying in vain (I62) and reflections on choices' worth (I144) seemed to exemplify this type of uncertainty. Within this representation, only one subtheme was identified: overall uncertainty. The concept of career planning as a means of coping with uncertainty revealed a profound hesitation regarding the future, with the organising principle identified

as security. This ontological uncertainty became evident in recurring utterances that stressed the future's uncertainty, a sentiment recognised even among satisfied students. At times, uncertainty was attributed to broader societal structures. Moreover, difficulties in balancing life, health issues and age-related concerns were linked to feelings of uncertainty.

DISCUSSION

This article examined social representations of career planning featured in university students' utterances about their choice of study programmes. Six distinct social representations of career planning were identified: a) *matching*; b) *securing employment*; c) *embracing the field*; d) *self-realisation*; e) *strategising* and f) *coping with uncertainty*. Interestingly, the first five are all connected to career theories focussing on content, with a dual orientation towards self and the environment (McMahon & Arthur, 2019; Patton & McMahon, 2006). Also, resemblance to the DOTS model of career planning – encompassing self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision learning and transition learning – as described by Law and Watts (1977), is evident here. Furthermore, when career planning is socially represented as strategising, it includes many folk theory assumptions that career planning is about rational decision-making, as Hodgkinson (2009) suggested. Thus, these five social representations seemed to offer a formula for behaviour, as McCash (2017) suggested. These domains are also well-recognised in the typical range of career planning activities.

Notably, in the two career planning representations about the environment, the orientation was different. When career planning was socially represented as securing employment, the primary dimension involved playing one's cards in such a way that future employment and income were ensured, whereas in embracing the field, the focus was more on observing the horizon of opportunities, keeping attractive options alive and seizing opportunities in a flexible manner. This latter representation also implies certain attitudes such as curiosity and flexibility, as proposed in planned happenstance -theory (Mitchell et al., 1999).

Furthermore, uncertainty was a common thread present in two social representations of career planning: securing employment and coping with uncertainty. The two representations demonstrated how individuals manage uncertainty either through strategic planning or emotional responses. In securing employment, individuals manage uncertainty through choices that elicit a feeling of safety, such as acquiring qualifications. However, the representation of coping with uncertainty encompasses both ontological questions and existential states, as individuals prepare for an unpredictable future. As Jokinen (2016) noted, coping with uncertainty can elicit small-scale agency, ranging from positive to neutral to negative emotional responses, and the process may not necessarily be observable externally. When career planning is represented as coping with uncertainty, it resembles career development ideas that emphasise the uncertain nature of the future and the importance of adapting to it (e.g., Savickas, 2005).

In this study, we identified several social representations of career planning that intersect with career metaphors, providing insights into the complex nature of everyday career planning and its theoretical foundations, as Inkson (2004) highlighted. When career planning is represented as matching, it echoes the matching metaphor, emphasising the necessity for a harmonious fit between individuals and their career environments. Similarly, the craft metaphor, emphasising creativity, aligns with the social representation we termed embracing the field, with both highlighting the significance of a creative approach to one's career path. The path metaphor, acknowledging decision-making and choices, shares similarities with the social representation that we termed strategising, involving planning and decision-making during one's career journey. Finally, the economic metaphor, focused on gaining resources through work, touches on the social representation identified as securing employment, emphasising the importance of taking actions to secure future employment and income.

One aim of this study was to contribute to the research discussion on everyday understanding of career planning. Our results bear similarities to Bakke and Hooley (2022) and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2013, 2015, 2018, 2020) and strengthen the notion that understandings of career phenomena take similar forms regardless of age and geographical context.

Our finding on social representation of career planning as self-realisation aligns with Bakke and Hooley's (2022) concept of career thinking as being about promoting self-realisation. It

also mirrors Bergmo-Prvulovic's (2013, 2015, 2018) identification of social representations among both ordinary individuals and career professionals. Bergmo-Prvulovic described these representations as 'career as an individual project' and 'self-realisation and career as personal growth and life development', respectively. Furthermore, intentionality about choices in Bakke and Hooley (2022) is similar to career planning being represented as strategising. Moreover, Bakke and Hooley (2022) identified a theme in which career was about work, whereas Bergmo-Prvulovic's (2018) career professionals stated that career was a goal. These both resemble career planning as securing employment in our results. Employment could also be viewed as a reward, touching on the elements in Bergmo-Prvulovic's view of career as a game of exchange (2013, 2015).

Importantly, under the concept of uncertainty, which is evident in the theme of risk (Bakke & Hooley, 2022) and in the social representation of career as an uncertain outcome (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2013), this study further strengthens the notion through the social representation of career planning as coping with uncertainty. The coded responses in our study resemble ever-present uncertainty in the form of career navigation dilemmas discovered by Bergmo-Prvulovic (2020). Coping with uncertainty seldom is recognised as the focus of career guidance in educational institutions and definitely needs more attention in the future.

With the use of SRT, we wanted to capture the complexity of career planning. Each social representation of career planning offers unique insights into how individuals navigate their career paths and reveals the dual function of social representations as both meaning-making and generating behaviour (Abric, 2001; Moscovici, 1973, 2008). We can assume that students strived to make study choices based on their social representation of career planning, and that expressions of (dis)satisfaction or indecisiveness were linked to feelings of how successfully this representation was implemented. This unique contribution will help HE institutions understand students' behaviour. Consequently, different social representations should be considered in career support programmes.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our research has several limitations. Firstly, as stated earlier, the data were not collected originally to be examined in the context of social representation theory. Students were asked to specify why they were (dis)satisfied with their study choices, not about their ideas on career planning, posing advantages and disadvantages for the present study. According to Moscovici (1984), it has been posited that social representations are present in language; thus, it could be assumed that students' statements revealed how career planning was represented socially. Secondly, there is a potential bias due to the selective group of participants who were willing to respond to the survey and provide answers to the open-ended why-question, which could affect the generalizability of the findings. Thirdly, the influence of social representations on the researchers themselves is another limitation. Our minds are also inherently shaped by social representations (see Flick & Foster, 2008), which means that we did not code the data in an epistemological vacuum.

However, the study offers important insights on everyday understanding of career planning for HE career services. The various representations set the behavioural framework for individuals; thus, a career counsellor could use these findings to understand the rationality behind students' career behaviour. Furthermore, the social representation of coping with uncertainty also shifts the focus in career counselling from more traditional activities that concentrated on the self, opportunities or decision-making, towards tackling uncertainty.

Future research should delve deeper into why social representations that reflect certain career theories hold such dominance among ordinary individuals. We also need to develop a better understanding of uncertainty while university students are experiencing it. Furthermore, we should prioritise uncertainty as a central focus within career planning activities.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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