Careers in the Greek public sector: calibrating the kaleidoscope

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Abstract

Purpose – The authors draw upon the kaleidoscope career model (KCM) to explore the career perceptions of public service employees in Greece.
Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative semistructured interviews were conducted with 33 civil servants.
Findings – The authors' demonstrate how context frames career perceptions and propose an additional KCM parameter (security).
Research limitations/implications – This context-based study proposes an extension of the KCM theory beyond the original three parameters that were dominant at its inception.
Practical implications – The authors provide recommendations for human resource practices, such as empowerment through training, fair promotions and providing meaning. Despite the common perception, the need for challenge exists even within the public sector, such that satisfying it can help organizations to gain strategic advantage.
Originality/value – This study expands a prominent career theory by exploring it in a unique context. By doing that, the authors are able to better understand how the parameters of the model are readjusted in different settings and to uncover a previously unidentified theme.

Keywords Career development, Kaleidoscope career model, Human resource management
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The kaleidoscope career model (KCM) was developed based on the phenomenon of people opting out of organizations (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006) suggesting that career behaviors are being driven by three needs: authenticity, balance and challenge. At different time points, different needs become dominant, reflecting the individual's situation at that time. While the model had demonstrated relevance to the changing world of work (Elley-Brown *et al.*, 2018; Mainiero and Gibson, 2018), its generalizability may be limited across contexts. As posited by Arnold and Cohen (2008), multiple contextual factors, including economy, politics, culture and society, shape and structure available employment opportunities, which then serve as boundaries for career development. Forrier *et al.* (2009) point out differences between the American and European traditions regarding the career theory, when the European tradition emphasizes institutional rules and structure, whereas the American view often assumes free choice, thus underestimating boundaries. Our study aims to explore the KCM within a different national, cultural and occupational context, which is different from the context that the KCM originated from.

We chose Greece as the setting of the study because it is considered to be culturally different from the United States: while the United States is highly individualistic, Greece tends to be a more collectivist society (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Prior studies demonstrated how national values might affect career perceptions (Afiouni, 2014; Woodhams *et al.*, 2015), and

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due to the influence and importance of context and culture within management research (Baruch and Vardi, 2016; Khapova and Korotov, 2007), we argue that researching in Greece, with its unique history and culture, may shed additional light on the conceptualization of KCM. In the current study, we focus on the Greek public sector, which represents well the national culture as the most desirable workplace and the largest employer and adds value as a unique occupational setting. Our research question is "*how and in what ways do Greek public sector employees perceive authenticity, balance and challenge in their careers*".

Theoretical framework and context

The KCM (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2006) was introduced following the changes in the concept of work: in a boundaryless world, with psychological contracts breaking apart, people become the drivers of their careers, which may include opting out of work within organizations. The model consists of three central needs that affect career decision-making, namely authenticity, balance and challenge.

First, the need for authenticity means being genuine to one's values, a need to align work and personal values (Cabrera, 2007; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Authenticity is often displayed through behaviors that resonate with personal strengths or involvement in activities that bring pleasure or reflect the individual's inner nature. Next, the need for balance refers to individuals' wish to have quality experiences in both work and family domains, combining personal life with work (Litzky *et al.*, 2013; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Balance represents work–family management and integration efforts to adjust attention to both work and nonwork domains. Thus, to meet an increasing need for balance, individuals may choose career paths that allow them to restrict work hours or slow down their career progression. Finally, the need for challenge refers to the individuals' wish to participate in motivating work (Godshalk and Litzky, 2018; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Consistent with the idea of intrinsic motivation, challenge is about stimulation, learning and skill growth. It may be represented in an individual's desire to make progress in his/her career, whether vertical, lateral or taking a whole different direction. While in the KCM challenge is described as a desire to be stimulated, this stimulation can come from an external source, for example work responsibilities and problems (Sullivan *et al.*, 2009).

While all three needs may remain active throughout one's career, the model suggests an interactive approach, such that one's need may ascend at a given point, affecting the career decisions accordingly. Hence, this approach views careers as dynamic and a part of a larger context: for example, research found that the sequence of needs creates different patterns: the alpha pattern, which is more typical to men, is sequenced as challenge, authenticity and balance, while women often follow the beta pattern: challenge, balance and authenticity (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007a). Together, these three needs form a set of career parameters that allow understanding of individual career decisions (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006).

The model has been used in various studies, exploring career perceptions within different sectors; however, the majority of studies have been conducted mainly within Anglo-Saxon contexts such as USA, Australia and Ireland. For instance, the model was used to interpret the findings of the careers of CEO's within the sports industry in New Zealand (Shaw and Leberman, 2015, and healthcare workers in Australia (O'Neill and Jepsen, 2019). In the United States, the model was used to examine the career needs of male and female head coaches (Dabbs and Pastore, 2017) and entrepreneurs (Sullivan *et al.*, 2007), as well as midcareer professionals from various occupations (Mainiero and Gibson, 2018). In Australia, a few studies examined career intensions and choices of women (Elley-Brown *et al.*, 2018; O' Neill and Jepsen, 2019) and young professional couples (Clarke, 2015). These studies mainly have tested the model (Cabrera, 2007; Sullivan *et al.*, 2009) or used it to interpret their findings rather than developing the theory. Some exceptions are O'Connor and Crowley Henry (2020) that claimed to extend the theory beyond gendered patterns,

applying it to skilled migrants and Elley-Brown *et al.* (2018) who suggested a potential new pattern in which authenticity was dominant over time and overlapped with the other needs. In general, while research into the KCM is increasing, the model has not been substantially extended beyond its original formulation.

We argue that at this stage, theory development for the KCM is vital. In a cross-cultural project, Mayrhofer *et al.* (2016) identified seven globally recognized dimensions of career success: financial security, financial achievement, learning and development, work–life balance, impact, positive relationships and entrepreneurship. While some of these dimensions correspond with the KCM parameters, the dimensions related to financial wellness are not reflected in the KCM, which warrants further investigation. We propose that because the KCM was developed in North America during relatively prosperous times, it represents specific values and views of career success that are typical to the American culture, while capturing a mindset of relative financial security. Baruch and Vardi (2016) point out a limitation of the model, proposing that the order of needs in the KCM pattern might not be voluntary but imposed by unpredictable events, and that the need for authenticity is often a "luxury" that is suppressed in order to survive financially. For example, we can see how following the economic crisis of 2008 and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, financial survival became a major concern, thus suggesting reevaluation of the KCM.

In addition, there is growing evidence for the importance of context in organizational research, as contexts can shape meanings and help in explaining variation in research findings (Johns, 2006; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007a, b, 2008; Woodhams *et al.*, 2015). Because the KCM has been primarily used in the Anglican context, there is scarce evidence of its applicability to other cultures. Studying the KCM in other cultures may provide additional insights into potential needs and patterns that have not been included in the original theory (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Forrier *et al.*, 2009).

Finally, while the model has been used to explore careers within various occupations such as CEOs, health workers, sports coaches and entrepreneurs, it has not been used within the public sector administration. This is a unique context because of its closed organizational structure, which affects career opportunities, and therefore frames career paths (Forrier *et al.*, 2009). Hence, we are extending the application of KCM to an organizational context that is characterized by boundaries. Given the existing research on KCM and the limited context in which it has been studied, the model deserves not only to be used for explaining findings but also to be expanded and enriched. In the present study, we aim to examine the KCM in the public sector in Greece. As such, our study attempts to explore, indigenize and add value to the KCM to enhance its applicability to different contexts (Berkema *et al.*, 2015; Counsell, 1999).

Context

Greece is a southern European country with a rich history and cultural heritage. In the seminal cultural dimensions classification study (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010), the Greek culture is considered to be average collectivist, where people are born into extended families and expect their in-group or extended family, such as grandparents, uncles, etc. to look after them, in exchange for loyalty. With that, the GLOBE study (House and Javidan, 2004) differentiates between institutional collectivism, where collective action and group loyalty are encouraged even at the expense of the pursuit of individual goals, and in-group collectivism, where loyalty is limited to close social circles such as family, and the in-group interests are above the wider collective goals. In this framework, the Greek culture can be classified as low on institutional collectivism and high on in-group collectivism, such that within the "in-group" people's behavior is cooperative, whereas behavior toward out-group people is suspicious and competitive (Papalexandris, 2008). Hence, it is common to take employees' in-groups

(such as family, friends or people with similar political views) into account when making hiring and promotion decisions (Bozionelos, 2014). In terms of the KCM, it is possible that authenticity, which is more typical to highly individualist countries, might not be perceived in the same way in countries that are more collectivist. This dimension may also have an impact on the need for balance, since relationships – both with the in-group and the larger society – have increased importance in collectivist cultures.

Historically, employment in the Greek public sector was highly desirable, as it offered high levels of job security and status. Greece scores highest on the uncertainty avoidance cultural dimension, which considers how a society copes with an unknown and unforeseen future (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010), and working in the public sector is labeled as the "Greek dream" since it embodies this cultural preference for security (Saiti and Papadopoulos, 2015). In cultures that are high in uncertainty avoidance, people appreciate clarity and structure, and prefer to remain in jobs even if they are not fulfilling, to avoid ambiguity and change (Hofstede, 2011). As a consequence, the Greek public sector is the largest employer in the country, with about 567,000 employees (Georgiadou, 2016). We therefore argue that uncertainty avoidance may be reflected in the need for challenge, when people high on uncertainty avoidance prefer to maintain status quo rather than experience changes.

The Greek public sector is highly bureaucratic at three main levels: the organizational/structural, the personnel and the operational (Michalopoulos and Psychogios, 2003). The structural level is characterized by high centralization and formalization: the laws and regulations that govern the sector are complex and high levels of red tape constrain and standardize employee activities. The personnel level is associated with questionable hiring practices. Many civil servants have been appointed through the system of clientelism (Michalopoulos and Psychogios, 2003). In order to deal with this issue, in 1994 the process of personnel recruitment in the public sector became mandated by ASEP, the Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection, an independent authority responsible for transparency, publicity, objectivity and meritocracy in the civil personnel selection. However, governmental changes over the years limited the power of ASEP, allowing loopholes that lead to misallocation of human resources (Spanou and Sotiropoulos, 2011). Hence, employee selection is formally based on meritocracy, but in reality, politicians are inclined to offer jobs in exchange for support (Bozionelos, 2014). Thus, some employees have neither the appropriate skills nor educational background to accomplish their work, and promotions are based on clientelism or political connections. The operational level refers to the limited use of fundamental management functions like planning, evaluation and leadership. Culturally, Greece scores low on the performance orientation dimension in the Globe study (House and Javidan, 2004), and many organizations in the public sector are not investing in effectiveness and efficiency (Michalopoulos and Psychogios, 2003; Moschuris and Kondylis, 2006). As a result, people who look for challenge, achievement and advancement might not be satisfied in this line of work.

With the economic crisis of 2007–2008, employment and working conditions in the public sector became a prime target of government responses. A series of austerity measures were implemented, including the reduction of the number of civil servants by 18% (Georgiadou, 2016) and extensive pay cuts (Mylona and Mihail, 2019). As a result, the sector was slimmed down, thus making career progression harder (Kornelakis and Voskeritsian, 2014). This situation created conditions that may affect career options on a national level, potentially limiting ambitions for career development.

In this study, we employ a qualitative methodology that can help to reach a deeper understanding of career perceptions, which are socially constructed and context-dependent (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Forrier *et al.*, 2009; Thomas and Inkson, 2007). We examine careers in a different cultural context, as "careers do not occur in a vacuum" (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009, p. 1,549), but rather evolve within a country's unique

historical and sociopolitical factors. Exploring career theories in contexts different from where they have been originated allows extending and enriches these theories beyond the original propositions.

The current research makes the following contributions to the understanding of careers. First, we demonstrate that our participants do not follow the previously identified alpha or beta patterns (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007a), as their need for balance is the most dominant and is relatively stable. This might suggest an existence of another pattern, which can be further explored in a future study. Second, while the KCM uses three "mirrors" that create patterns, different or additional "mirrors" may exist that were not identified at the time and place when the KCM was conceptualized. Our investigation proposes an additional "mirror" that we recognize as a need for security. Finally, we focus on civil servants, whose careers take place in a closed hierarchical system, which is often overlooked in the search for boundary less careers (Clarke, 2013). We argue that giving voice to public sector employees can substantially advance a career theory.

Methodology

This qualitative study considers the career perceptions of civil servants in Greece regarding their understanding of the kaleidoscope needs. Between November 2014 and July 2015, the first author conducted 33 in-person interviews with employees from the two largest social insurance organizations in Greece at the time of data collection (one that is responsible for salaried employees in the general sector, covering dependent employment in Greece except for a few specific industries such as agriculture and one that is responsible for professionals and business owners), thus being typical examples of the Greek public sector. We took a purposive and a subsequent snowballing sampling approach. The interviews were conducted in Greek and then transcribed and translated by the first author in order to allow analysis the second author to be an equal partner in the analysis and discussion process (Mouratidou *et al.*, 2020); the average interview length was around 46 min. The risk of intragroup contamination was minimized by asking each interviewee not to discuss the interview with their coworkers. The interviews continued until no new unique insights have emerged, and suggestions for new informants became repetitive, thus reaching saturation (Morse, 2000). The sample consisted of 23 women and 10 men with average age 44 and average work experience of 17 years. Table 1 provides demographic details about the participants (names have been replaced with pseudonyms).

The protocol of the interviews was semistructured to facilitate the understanding of unique perspectives on the research phenomenon. First, the career history of participants was explored to understand their career decisions. The study was specifically focused on the KCM needs, such that the research questions aimed at capturing the perceptions of the interviewees regarding authenticity, balance and challenge. Participants were asked to reflect how they understand work–life balance, the meaning of work for them and what does a challenge at work means for them.

Both researchers analyzed the data set separately and systematically. Individual extracts of data were coded in as many different themes as they fit and as many times as deemed relevant. Our analytical process combined deductive and inductive approaches: the first step was deductive, using a template analysis procedure (King, 2012). A coding template was developed based on the three KCM dimensions, thereby allowing for the inclusion of *a priori* themes to be applied to the full data set. Next, all of the text was coded for first-level themes using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines to thematic analysis: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

Thus, the major themes – authenticity, balance and challenge – were predefined (deductive approach), but in the second step, subthemes were formed inductively without

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Highest qualification	Years of service	Job title
Alexis	Male	51	High school	24	Front line
Antonis	Male	35	High school	8	Front line
Apostolos	Male	39	High school	18	Front line
Athanasia	Female	46	High school	23	Front line
Christina	Female	39	MA	11	Front line
Chrysa	Female	45	Technological	14	Front line
Eleftheria	Female	42	MBA	13	Front line
Eleni	Female	48	Technological	23	Middle manager
Eva	Female	43	High school	9	Front line
Gianna	Female	48	High school	26	Front line
Giannis	Male	38	Technological	10	Front line
Hermione	Female	50	Bachelor	28	Senior manager
Iliana	Female	33	Bachelor	8	Front line
Irini	Female	42	MA	13`	Front line
Konstantina	Female	36	BA	7	Front line
Koula	Female	63	BA	31	Senior manager
Litsa	Female	49	BA	22	Middle manager
Liza	Female	55	BA	26	Middle manager
Magda	Female	38	BA	10	Front line
Makis	Male	41	High school	18	Front line
Maria	Female	37	Technological	15	Front line
Mihalis	Male	57	Compulsory	33	Front line
Nikos	Male	40	Technological	17	Front line
Parthena	Female	51	Technological	29	Middle manager
Petros	Male	41	BA	8	Front line
Sofia	Female	38	MA	10	Front line
Stefania	Female	32	Technological	8	Front line
Stella	Female	37	MA	10	Front line
Theodor	Male	45	High school	15	Front line
Toula	Female	48	Technological	9	Front line
Urania	Female	49	Technological	26	Middle manager
Vaso	Female	41	MA	15	Middle manager
Zaharias	Male	41	MA	12	Front line

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of the study participants

trying to fit them into a preexisting coding framework. Examples of first-level codes: *helping; compromise; meaning in relationships; separation of work and private life and routine work*. The first level-codes were classified and arranged using the previously developed template (authenticity, balance and challenge) and then aggregated within them into second-level codes or subthemes inductively. Examples of second-level codes: *values, free time and disdain*. Codes that did not fit with the preexisting categories, as defined by the KCM, for example *holding on to a job* were kept separately in an "other" category, which was later analyzed inductively, forming second-level themes (*stability, survival and money*) and a third-level theme (*security*) in an iterative process via discussion. This process allowed us to examine how ideas were evolving, and frequent online meetings were held to discuss themes until consensus was reached (Saldaña, 2015). Our findings are outlined below, together with illustrative quotes from participants. Figure 1 presents the data structure.

Findings

Authenticity

Authenticity means being true to one's values, and it is expressed as the focal point in decision-making being the self rather than the surrounding context (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Interestingly, when our participants described their authenticity concerns, the

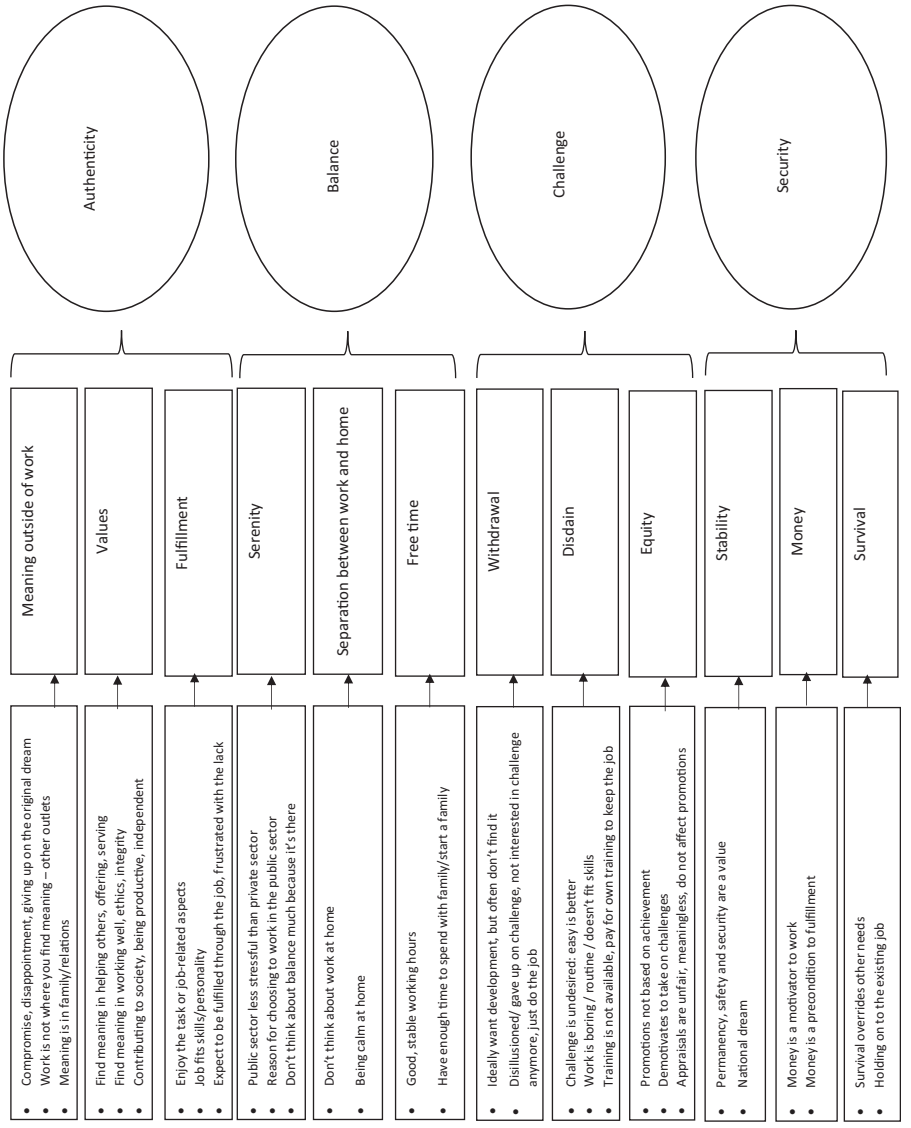

Figure 1.
Data structure

discourse included other people, such that the self was not separate but rather was part of the context. A major theme regarding authenticity was *finding meaning outside of work*: while our participants indicated having dreams in the past and wishing for having fulfilling and meaningful work, they shifted the focus for finding meaning in other aspects of their life, such as family and relations.

> . . . It gives me a place to go to and a salary. Meaning, I do not think so. [This job] does not define me or give me meaning. . .Meaning for me is deeper than my job. . . Meaning, I think comes from the relationships that I have built. My husband, kids and dear friends. That is meaning to me (Konstantina).

Apostolos provides similar insights as follows:

> . . .Meaning in life is related to love and happiness of your family and friends. . . I do not think that meaning in life lead me to this job but via this job I made friendships that are strong. The work itself does not lead to meaning in life but it helped me connect with people that I care about and have created bonds with. I think that the most important thing in life is to have lifetime relationships. That is meaning in life.

Apostolos gave up on his original dream of becoming a lawyer and entered the public sector to "adapt to reality". In general, for most participants, the job in the public sector appears to be a compromise rather than a choice that reflects their authentic selves. Yet, some of them found ways to explain how these jobs still connect to their personal *values*. The main value was the importance of helping others or serving society.

> I am here to provide my services the best way I can. . . I also feel that as a human being offering help is important, it is part of our nature, I believe that offering your services is a way of providing meaning, not in life but in one's career. (Stella)

For Stella, giving back to society is a way of finding meaning in one's career, and this value was echoed by many other interviewees. Another salient value was ethics, or the need to work well:

> I am motivated to do my job correctly, I was brought up to work hard, this was the motto of my father and still is. He is 73 years old and still works at the farm. . .when we were young, we were taught to work hard, and never complain, so yes my values are working hard and doing it well. (Urania)

Finally, a few interviewees referred to a *sense of joy and personal satisfaction*, when their task was connected to their identity:

> . . . I love my working task. I was offered 2–3 times the opportunity to change department and task. . . The position would be more prestigious, with more money. . .Despite that, I refused. . . I did not want to go out and conduct controls. It is not who I am. I get attached to people and situations and things. So I would not be able to take this post (Nikos).

All in all, most participants reported that their careers do not provide them with meaningful work. With that, they found creative ways to reconcile their work with their identity by finding values that the job can satisfy or shifting focus to find meaning elsewhere, mainly relationships.

Balance

The second KCM need is balance – people choose careers and/or find strategies to balance their work lives with their personal lives (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Our study focused on the public sector, where working hours are relatively stable, and overtime work is rare, thus making it an ideal working place for people with a strong need for balance. This was reflected in the interviews, although in an interesting way: because balance was present, the majority of participants did not mention any work–life conflict; thus, balance was taken for granted.

The need to balance their lives was one of the most important considerations to enter the public sector, especially for participants who had previously worked in the private sector. Our participants reported low tension between work and nonwork because of the stable working hours and less stress in general, demonstrating *serenity*:

> Yes, quality of life, more free time, and that was a decisive part as well when choosing the public sector. I may earn less now, but I have more time to do what I like. In the bank, where I was working previously, I worked over 10 hours a day, I had no spare time, my children were little, my wife was nagging and I wanted to find a job where I could have more free time. (Zaharias)

An interesting notion of balance is the *separation between work and home*. Konstantina described the notion as follows:

> Not focusing only on work all the time, but having other things in your life and spending an equal amount of time on all of these things, like family, work, friends. . . I have work to go to, but when I leave the office, I have forgotten everything about it. I am doing my things. I do not allow work to take over. I know the boundaries. . . I work and as I said I leave and I am fine, I do not carry the work with me.

In general, lack of balance was rarely a concern, since this factor motivated the career choice, and that is why this theme was relatively small in the interviews, taken as a basic component. Its relative absence from the narrative does not mean it is not important but rather the opposite: the need for balance was stable and dominant among all participants while they expressed concerns regarding satisfaction of other needs. Balance is a major factor that reflects the national culture, and as it is satisfied, it leaves space for other issues to appear.

Challenge

The third career need in the KCM is challenge – the desire to grow and find stimulating, interesting work (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Our findings show that the interviewees' view of challenge is complex. Given the routine work, most tasks are boring, repetitive and not providing any challenge or stimulation.

> Day in and out we do exactly the same thing, we complete the same reports, we use the same manuals and screens, and we listen to the same stories of people (Gianna).

This feeling was voiced by the majority of participants, which is not surprising, given the nature of the work they chose. However, many participants also reported that they initially were interested in challenge in terms of progress but came to the understanding that their work was monotonous with little opportunities for development and learned to accept it, demonstrating *withdrawal*:

> I think that we all like to be challenged so that we do not rest on our laurels with what we have already. Here you are appointed, and you stop searching for anything else. . . So, I do not think that I am looking for challenge. (Sofia)

> I do not want to reach anywhere. Mainly because I do not have any prospects. One must have a university degree to become a senior manager and this means that I never will. (Theodor)

Another reason to see challenge as progress, that is desirable but unattainable, was the bureaucratic structure of the public sector, and specifically, the inherent *inequity* or *lack of fairness*. First, the advancement is based not on performance but on tenure and/or personal connections, while permanency does not encourage personal initiative either:

> In the public sector, the years of service determine the development or promotion, not your personal effort. (Petros)

> [knowing people], in Greece it is everything. That is the fuel. If you do not have people that will help you, you will just be a simple employee. You will not do anything, I mean reach a higher level or whatever (Koula)

As a result, the more tenured employees are likely to become complacent, and the newer employees receive demotivating signals. Lack of fairness leads to frustration: performance does not lead to recognition, and progress seems impossible. As a result, taking on challenges (i.e. more responsibilities and investing in professional growth) means doing extra work without incentives, thus becoming a source of stress and not a motivator.

An interesting finding was that unlike in North America, challenge can be seen as a negative, undesirable thing. When asked about challenge, some interviewees showed *disdain*: rather than a way to improve oneself, a challenge was perceived as a burden that is laden with negative emotions.

> [challenge is] when meeting difficult people and serving them. . .people that are rude, demanding, coming here and demand their issues to be solved at once. . .some of them are shouting, not all but some and that is really annoying and challenging, to keep calm. (Mihalis)

> I have never been to a seminar regarding my department. . . I learned about the tasks by reading previous policies and by asking colleagues who showed me things. But the multitude of laws and their complexity which is bombarding us, is only confusing staff and makes work harder. . . It is a nightmare. (Zaharias)

Security

In addition to the topics of authenticity, balance and challenge, the participants described in additional factors their stories that were important to them: *stability*, *money* and *survival* through uncertainty. These subthemes could not be classified into any of the predefined categories, which suggest that they belong to a separate, previously unidentified theme, that can be defined as the need for security.

The choice to work in the public sector was explained by most participants as a desire for stability, which is a national value:

> I always wanted to join the public sector. When I passed the exams in order to join the public sector, I was joyful because there is the Greek mentality of the public sector being the Greek dream. . .I like the security and stability at work (Maria).

Liza explained how she was socialized to that value, although it took time:

> . . .it was not my dream, it became my dream over the years. Yes, I like what I do. In the beginning, when I was appointed. . . this was not the dream [job], I was 22 years old and maybe I chose it because of the way we were brought up. I mean it was security, it gave a wage, it was different back then. . . We were different, back then it was The Job.

> I chose the public sector for survival and permanency purely. . .it is purely an issue of survival. (Athanasia)

> I think that the main reason was because of the security it provides. . .Certainly the money was also a reason. . . For me money is important, and I think for everyone who is working, money is important. Why would we work, if it was not to make a living? . . . I think that in order to work, you need to be motivated and this means to have a good salary. I think that, this is a precondition, you need to have the money. (Stefania)

The need for security was part of every narrative. Sometimes, the crisis was mentioned as triggering feeling of insecurity, but in general, stability emerged as a permanent part of the Greek work culture, which became even more dominant in the light of recession.

> The way things are going [in Greece] I see no improvement. Unemployment everywhere, debts, and fear. If you have a job, you are lucky. . .if you lose it, it's probably impossible to find another one (Antonis).

> Everything changes constantly. The government changes laws, and no one knows what is going on. You wonder constantly, will I be fired? What is going to happen next? There is continuous general insecurity and fear in our society (Irini).

To sum up, participants provided a shared understanding of authenticity that is found in moral/relational aspects of the work or outside it; balance as a need that is stable and that is satisfied to a large extent and challenge as something desirable yet often unattainable, although sometimes described with a negative connotation. In addition, the need for security and financial stability emerged either tangled with the other themes or separately, creating a new theme.

Discussion

Our findings support the idea that career perceptions are socially constructed and context-dependent (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Forrier *et al.*, 2009). In our case, the Greek culture and context create conditions that influence people's understanding of their career needs. For some of participants, work in the public sector was really "the Greek dream" from the beginning, while others grew to accept it and let go of their early dreams. Although the need for authenticity means being true to oneself, the in-group collectivist nature of the country (Papalexandris, 2008) is reflected in the fact that people seem themselves as socially embedded and their self-concept is relationship-based. When no meaning was found in the work itself, people found ways to reconcile their identity with their line of work, looking for meaning elsewhere, often in relationships, a dominant part of the national culture. Other values that are fulfilled even if the job is not a "dream job" are social, ethical, helping people, working well and being a productive member of society. This finding is consistent with previous knowledge of intrinsic motivational factors in the public sector (Perry and Wise, 1990).

The need for balance between personal lives with work was shared by all the participants, and for most of them, it was satisfied. This also may be interpreted as a cultural factor, since the interest in a stable career that allows to separate work from life and spends time with loved ones exists on a national level. This wish was the major factor that guided the career choice, for people who have always worked in the public sector (often following their parents' advice) and even more so for those who worked previously in the private sector. Balance seems to be a crucial need that is largely satisfied, such that not much time and effort is spent on thinking about it, and other issues become salient. The importance of balance throughout the narratives suggests that neither alpha nor beta patterns (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007a) apply to the career trajectory of the participants. The unique dynamic with a relatively stable need for balance is consistent with Elley-Brown's *et al.* (2018) findings regarding the stable dominance of authenticity, which can potentially lead to the identification of new career patterns.

Challenge was often described as something that was initially desired but not anymore. The participants became disillusioned, as they learned that the system is constructed in a way that will not provide them with growth opportunities or interesting tasks. While for most of the participants, challenging work meant targets, promotions and incentives, they found their work to be as repetitive and bureaucratic, where rules and procedures had to be strictly followed, not providing them with opportunities for development. On the one hand, public service work is not known to be intellectually stimulating, yet we see that many interviewees expected challenge upon entering this line of work, and only later realized that it is unattainable, the work will not become more interesting and that they will not be promoted.

Another obstacle for fulfilling the need for challenge is a systemic lack of fairness, demonstrated in the way appointments and promotions are made and in performance

evaluations. Distributive injustice, where instead of meritocracy-based promotions, favoritism and political connections play a major role, is an idiosyncratic feature of the Greek public sector (Bozionelos, 2014) and is therefore important in shaping careers (Arnold and Cohen, 2008). As a result, people are not motivated to take on challenging work or even exert much effort in the current role, as they do not believe they have good chances to be promoted or even maintain their job in case of layoffs, compared to more connected peers.

In this reality, challenge becomes associated with negative factors, stressful work that will not be recognized, and therefore is undesirable: if everyone will eventually be paid the same, nobody wants to work harder. In this sense, challenge is seen as a potential stressor, which is consistent with Godshalk and Litzky's (2018) argument, stating that when career aspirations are limited, challenge is not always perceived as desirable. Also, as pointed out by Mylona and Mihail (2019b), challenge through training and development in the public sector in Greece is specifically associated with the need to improve performance under budget cuts, which gives it a negative connotation.

Finally, an important theme that was expressed by all the study participants is a desire for security and stability, which is also reflected in the aspiration to work in the public sector (Lewis and Frank, 2002). Some of the participants referred to it in regard to authenticity, balance or challenge. Yet, it was hard to classify this theme under one of these needs, as it seemed be distinct, suggesting a category of its own. This finding requires further investigation, as it was salient in the interviews. Perhaps we can attribute it to the cultural idea of security being passed on through generations as a way to avoid uncertainty (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; Papalexandris, 2008) and the current financial context, in which people hold on to the jobs that they have. Before looking for challenges and fulfillment, people first need to make a living (Baruch and Vardi, 2016). However, it is important to point out that this need was not necessarily linked to the financial crisis. Rather, it was present before the crisis, in the initial career choice in the public sector. The crisis confirmed this choice: despite the negative changes, public sector workers still had more security compared to private sector, considering themselves as lucky to have a job. This strengthens our findings, which suggest an expansion of the KCM framework by adding a fourth "mirror" of security.

In terms of theoretical contributions, this research advances the understanding and relevance of the KCM (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006) in exploring career perceptions and needs in a different context than the one the model originated from. While contemporary careers are characterized by the individual's ability to cross boundaries, our research supports the notion that boundaries are not necessarily crossed (Inkson *et al.*, 2012), by showing how people make sense, find meaning and adapt their career perceptions within the boundaries that are created by their context. Our participants reframe their career narrative upon realizing that their work will not become more meaningful and that they will not be challenged, and they find consolation in work–life balance and relationships. This reconstruction of career narratives is interesting and warrants further attention. Moreover, we identify a new "mirror," which corresponds with the financial security dimension of career success (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2016). As this need for security was uncovered in a specific cultural and industrial setting, it is possible that more "mirrors" or needs exist, or nuances of these "mirrors", that can be identified in future studies that will be conducted in other contexts in terms of national culture and/or industry. Finally, we also see that alpha or beta career patterns were not applicable in this context, such that there are multiple potential ways to extend the KCM framework.

In terms of practical contributions, while acknowledging the inherent structural barriers, we recommend investing in human resource management practices that could be useful in the public sector. While the New Public Management approach was expected to improve the effectiveness of the public sector through structural changes and performance management (Diefenbach, 2009), in reality, the Greek public sector is lagging behind in its implementation, which also can be attributed to the sociopolitical environment (Lampropoulou and

Oikonomou, 2018). Hence, it might be more practical to invest in small-level changes, such as increasing psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995). Providing employees with meaning (strengthening the link between work and values) and self-determination (making work less rigid) to increase authenticity and improving their competence (through training) as well demonstrating their impact (promotions based on merit) for a positive challenge are likely to have a positive impact on employee attitudes and behaviors. Psychological empowerment has been previously linked to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, innovation, organizational citizenship behavior and performance (D'Innosenzo *et al.*, 2016; Liden *et al.*, 2000) as well as to reduced strain and turnover (Seibert *et al.*, 2011; Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997). Satisfying the suppressed KCM needs such as the need for authenticity and challenge while providing security will have a high practical value both in times of stability and crisis, signaling support and care for the employees.

Limitations and further research

As our study was conducted in a narrow context of public sector employees in Greece, its findings cannot be generalized. We recommend expanding the study to see how the KCM applies to the public and private sectors in other countries that differ in their economic conditions. In addition, it would be interesting to explore the existence of our identified need for security and other patterns beyond the currently recognized alpha and beta. Further investigation of the model in different cultures and industries can provide new insights, including additional "mirrors", advancing theory and practice.

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