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Published Version

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Budjanovcanin, A. and Woodrow, C. (2022) Regretting your occupation constructively: a qualitative study of career choice and occupational regret. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 136. 103743. ISSN 0001-8791 doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103743 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/105537/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103743

Publisher: Elsevier

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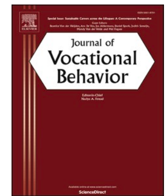
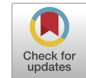
Journal of Vocational Behavior 136 (2022) 103743

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Vocational Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb





# Regretting your occupation constructively: A qualitative study of career choice and occupational regret

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A R T I C L E I N F O

*Keywords:*
Regret
Occupation
Coping
Cycle
Careers

A B S T R A C T

Regret is a universal emotion that can be experienced throughout the course of life, with varying degrees of consequence. However, studies have rarely explored regret as it pertains to one's occupational choice. Through an inductive qualitative study drawing on 51 career-based interviews, we develop a model of occupational regret that reveals how individuals experience and deal with this emotion over time. This model shows that the experience of occupational regret is episodic in nature, involves cycles, and manifests differently dependent upon the path taken through episodes. Five different pathways through regret episodes emerged from our analysis, each leading to a distinct regret profile. These profiles are termed Early Responders, Explorers, Stagnaters, Reconciled Acceptors, and Crystallisers. The findings expand our knowledge of domain specific regret and facilitate the identification of possible strategies to constructively navigate this emotion.

## 1. Introduction

The 'Pollyanna principle', so named after the eponymous character of a book about an overly optimistic girl, refers to the human tendency to focus on the positive. Career scholars are not immune to this principle, and "tend to look for and emphasize the positive and the hopeful, whereas the dark side of careers is often left unconsidered" (Byington et al., 2019: 240). Consequently, Baruch and Vardi (2016: 355) have called on fellow scholars to "recognize and study the less celebrated facets of careers", highlighting such experiences as failure, indecision, and regret. This study responds to that call, focusing on the last of these: regret. Regret is "the emotion that we experience when realizing or imagining that our current situation would have been better, if only we had decided differently. It is an unpleasant feeling coupled with a clear sense of self-blame concerning its causes and strong wishes to undo the current situation" (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007: 3). As this definition illustrates, regret is a cognitive emotion, because it comprises both an affective dimension (Lecci et al., 1994) - a generalised experience of feeling bad - and a cognitive dimension - captured by counterfactual thinking (Buchanan et al., 2016).

Regret can be felt about career-related decisions, and the choice about the career path one takes is a unique type of decision with far-reaching consequences that can be relatively difficult to undo. Wrzesniewski, Tosti and Landman (2006: 24) succinctly state that "occupational regret is lived out on a daily basis as individuals labor in occupations they wish they had never entered." This type of regret, if not addressed, may be highly damaging. However, as Canivet and colleagues indicate, "there is a paucity of studies about

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103743
Received 8 March 2021; Received in revised form 13 May 2022; Accepted 25 May 2022
Available online 30 May 2022
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employees who remain at their workplaces or in their occupation although they no longer prefer them" (Canivet et al., 2017: 334).

### 1.1. Occupational regret

When asked whether, given the opportunity, they would undo some aspect of their past, it is certain that the majority of individuals would do so (Wrosch et al., 2007). But unfortunately life does not have an undo button, and a preoccupation with regret often stems from a tantalising, better alternative possibility than the one being lived. This feeling can be intensified when the possibility of escaping the current situation feels constrained. In the past, many people suggested that forgone education was a regret (Pink, 2022). Today, however, individuals often regret the result of their education: the career that it has resulted in. Yet, there has been very limited development of the concept of occupational regret, despite it being more common, painful, and hard to reverse than other forms of regret.

Occupational regret is ripe for study because its prevalence is only likely to increase; more than ever, there is an abundance of choice and far greater access to information about potential career paths and consequently, much more awareness of foregone alternatives (Obodaru, 2017). This 'counterfactual thinking' - defined as mental representations of alternatives to past events, actions, or states (Byrne, 2005) – is a central element of regret. Greater knowledge of alternative options arguably makes counterfactual thoughts, and hence regret, more likely (Gottfredson, 2005). Indeed, Byington et al. (2019) encourage career scholars to explore whether the adage of the 'grass is greener' is one that has merit for occupational choice. Occupational regret may also be more prevalent with the emergence of the 'new' career; the protean career concept (Hall, 2004), for example, is characterised by being self-driven and self-directed, thus increasing the likelihood of self-blame for a career misstep – a key ingredient of regret (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

Existing studies that have begun to progress our understanding of occupational regret have focused on its nomological network. This mapping of the theoretical framework of a concept, and identifying other key constructs' associations with it, is an important step in knowledge development. However, Storberg-Walker (2007: 64) states that "conceptual development is arguably the most substantive and important component of theory-building research." This stage is where the researcher "depicts current, best, most informed understanding and explanation of the phenomenon, issue, or problem relevant in the real world context" (Lynham, 2002: 231). Given the early stage of knowledge development of occupation-specific regret, understanding of the concept remains very limited. The purpose of the present study therefore is to contribute to its conceptual development. Specifically, this paper aims to explore the phenomenon of occupational regret, using a grounded theory approach that is based upon qualitative interview data.

Research questions and contributions.

Based on the current research landscape and state of knowledge in the field, we adopt an interpretivist approach in seeking to understand the experience of occupational regret through the narratives of individuals confronting it. Through the way regretful individuals make meaning of this process, we seek to address the following research question:

How do individuals experience and resolve occupational regret over time?

In answering this question, we make two primary contributions. The first is to the careers literature. By bringing the emotion of regret into the domain of careers, we help to provide a more balanced understanding of how careers are experienced and the ways in which difficult periods are navigated. Our empirical work confirms and extends theorising in the careers realm, such as of Verbruggen and De Vos' (2020) career inaction phenomenon, shedding light on how regret can underlie career inaction. Our focus on the 'dark side' addresses what Baruch and Vardi (2016) describe as a deficit in our knowledge of this domain, and demonstrates the individual changes required to escape a dark side emotion such as occupational regret.

Second, by adopting a grounded theory approach to studying occupational regret, we depict the phenomenon in a level of detail that has previously been omitted. This is important for two reasons. First, by examining the process of navigating occupational regret over time, we uncover its heretofore unreported cyclical and episodic nature. By revealing alternative pathways through the experience, we uncover a more complex theoretical landscape to investigate and further theorise. In doing so, we begin to address Pieters and Zeelenberg's (2007) suggestion of examining the implications of different strategies for dealing with regret for outcome maximisation, and we provide a foundation for future researchers to do the same. Second, by providing this detailed understanding of occupation specific regret and the different ways it is experienced, our findings can inform the design of more tailored career-based interventions.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section, we describe the contours of the research landscape on regret and identify in which fields and in what ways it has been studied, as well as summarising research insights to date. We then provide an argument for why we believe that occupational regret is distinct from other forms of regret and thus worthy of study. We go on to explain our methodological approach to the study, including describing our use of grounded theory principles. In the findings section that follows, we reveal the process that individuals navigate as they experience occupational regret, highlighting the different triggers and numerous pathways through it and ultimately different consequences. We conclude the paper with a discussion that highlights how the study has added to the research landscape and provides a foundation for further research in this space.

### 1.2. Regret inside and outside of the occupational domain

There is little extant research on regret in the context of careers or organisational behavior more broadly (Dalal et al., 2010), however, the subject has been studied elsewhere for some years. This omission, allied to our belief that regret in the occupational domain is a qualitatively different experience to regret in other domains (addressed below) led to our focus on occupation specific regret.

Regret research in other domains covers a varied set of concerns; in the behavioral economics and decision science fields, theories

reveal how individuals take account of expected future emotional outcomes when making decisions (Bell, 1985; Loomes & Sugden, 1986). More recently, psychological approaches have examined the lived experience of regret with adult development and aging studies considering how regret intensity changes over time (Wrosch et al., 2005) and how this emotion affects future motivation and behavior (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). However, these studies fail to depict the way that regret is navigated and negotiated over time, which is important to understand given it its propensity to cause distress and the need to identify strategies to address it.

The psychological basis of regret has also emerged as an important foundation for some other areas of business and management studies. In particular, regret has been studied in consumer behavior, where it has been heavily implicated in the purchasing process. Regret is a determinant of motivation to purchase (Dholakia, 2001) and an important component of propensity to observe (Simpson et al., 2008), where consumers use the purchase decisions of others to guide their own behavior. Regrets also influence post purchase attitudes, emotions, and behaviours, leading to rumination (Bui et al., 2011) and decreases in satisfaction and brand loyalty (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 1999). An important contribution to emerge from studies in this field is a model of regret regulation (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). This model specifies the conditions under which regret is felt and its behavioral implications, offering several testable propositions concerning relationships with past or future decisions, missed or taken opportunities, and potential undoing strategies. This conceptual contribution, along with others that have built on it (Inman, 2007; Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2007; Roese et al., 2007), offers a generalised theory of regret by amalgamating findings from numerous disciplines and fields. However, its focus is skewed towards consumer behavior, where much of the research that it draws on resides. Indeed, Zeelenberg and Pieter's opening line reflects this: "The average consumer makes a couple of thousands of decisions daily" (2007: 3). As such, the propositions within regret regulation theory relate to the types of decision taken in one's leisure life role. These may be quite different in nature to decisions taken in the career domain.

Research in healthcare has examined causes of career regret; Sierra et al. (2019) compared physicians assistants with and without regret, finding regret to be associated with schedule control, work hours, salary, work-life balance, burnout, and career satisfaction. Other scholars have considered regret as an outcome; Verbruggen and De Vos's (2020) recent examination of 'career inaction' draws on the psychology of 'doing nothing' to propose the causes of 'dysfunctional staying' in one's career. The authors of this conceptual offering position regret as a consequence of a failure to take action in one's career. Wrzesniewski et al.'s (2006) working paper reports one of the first studies to examine occupation-specific regret, a quantitative study of nurses that links regret to lower work satisfaction. Beyond this offering, Budjanovcanin et al. (2019) focus on the antecedents (social influences and social comparison) and consequences (occupational commitment and intention to quit the profession) of occupation specific regret in a sample of 559 cardiac physiologists. Thus, the research to date on this domain specific regret is sparse, with the two studies mentioned here focusing on its nomological network rather than developing it conceptually, as the present study does.

In the next section we present our rationale for why occupational regret is distinct from regret in other domains and hence worthy of detailed study.

### 1.3. Distinguishing occupational regret from other forms

To establish the rationale for our in-depth examination of occupation-specific regret and before we report the findings of the study, we offer our reasoning for distinguishing between regret relating to one's chosen occupation and regret related to other life domains. The Salience Inventory, developed through the Work Importance Study, identifies six major life roles that individuals hold: child, student, leisurite, citizen, worker and homemaker (Claes, 1994). Four of these (student, worker and homemaker, leisurite) correspond to life domains that prior research has revealed to be significant sources of regret literature: education, career, romantic and consumer regret (Bui et al., 2011; Roese & Summerville, 2005). It is important to specifically investigate occupational regret because there are several key features that distinguish it from regret in these other domains.

The first distinction between regret domains is that there are large differences in the extent to which they are identified as being a source of regret. In their meta-analysis, Roese and Summerville (2005) report that the decisions that individuals most frequently report regretting relate to education (32%), careers (22%) and romance (14%). All other domains were at 10% and below, including leisure and finance (both 2.5%), into which consumer regrets would fall. The relative ubiquity of occupational regret, which is potentially represented by both the education and career decision domains, is its first distinguishing feature.

A second distinction between occupational and other forms of regret is that occupational regret is likely to be felt particularly strongly. Here, we turn to Decision Justification Theory (DJT; Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002), which states that regret is based upon two factors: the extent to which one blames themselves for the decision, and the degree to which one negatively evaluates the outcome of the decision relative to other potential decision outcomes. These may operate independently or in tandem, such that neither, one, or both may be experienced with respect to a particular decision. It is useful here to compare occupational regret with romantic regret, since both pertain to decisions about relatively long-term commitments that we might expect to be similarly experienced. Both romantic choice and occupational choice may lead to a negative evaluation of the outcome. However, occupational choice has a particularly high potential for self-blame regret. This is because the decision and events leading up to an occupational decision (be it entering or leaving) are usually made on an almost entirely individual basis. Decisions around romantic partner choice, on the other hand, are (by definition) jointly made, and involve some level of shared responsibility, shared experience, and (potentially) blame. Consequently, we expect occupational regret to be particularly intense.

A third primary difference between occupational and other forms of regret concerns the difficulties in reversing a regretted decision, which explains the infrequency of decisions taken in this domain (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). Occupational changes are rather rare: the Institute of Labor Economics states that the rate of occupational change is 3% per year for European workers (Bachmann et al., 2020). Returning to the comparison of occupational choice with a romantic relationship, occupational decisions

include several unique factors that make them particularly hard to reverse. First, there are rather high barriers to entry in many occupations since they often require a period of training prior to entering the field. Romantic decisions, on the other hand, do not require the same kind of pre-entry investment. This means that there are often likely to be very high 'sunk costs' in career decisions. Second, occupations are tied to financial rewards in a way that relationships usually are not. Leaving an occupation may be difficult or impossible for many people because they are financially dependent upon it. There is also the added difficulty of finding an immediate replacement when leaving an occupation, which is not the case for romantic decisions. Finally, occupations are strongly tied to individual identities, which can be very difficult to change (Kielhofner, 2008). Consequently, regret pertaining to occupational decisions are particularly hard to reverse or act upon. In summary, occupational regret has some distinct features that make it worthy of specific examination. We now turn to describing the study itself.

## 2. Methods

We set out to explore the process of occupational regret, including the way it is experienced, the conditions that affect this experience for different social actors, and the way it is resolved. We employed grounded theory principles, a key method in theory building (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and conceptual development (Storberg-Walker, 2007), uncovering a process that describes the experience of occupational regret over time.

The grounded theory approach is concerned with developing empirically derived theory via contact with the social world, such that researchers typically approach data collection in the absence of detailed a priori theorising (Locke, 2001). We therefore considered it an appropriate approach for the current study, which aimed to explore the underdeveloped concept of occupational regret. We followed a process of analysis that is typically utilised in grounded theory studies. This begins with 'open coding', where data are broken down and coded on a line-by-line basis, such that emergent codes reflect provisional categories or conceptual names (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These codes are then connected and developed into a framework of higher-level theoretical categories via a process known as 'axial coding' (Strauss, 1987). 'Selective coding' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is used to check that categories are appropriate and fully refined, wrapping up the theoretical development. Grounded theory is underpinned by the 'constant comparison' method, whereby elements of the data and emergent codes are compared against one another and assigned meaning, such that coding and analysis of data occur jointly (Locke, 2001). It also typically involves extensive memo-writing during analysis, as well as theoretical sampling, where the sample is added to on the basis of the emergent theory, including the inclusion of potentially disconfirming cases (Draucker et al., 2007).

### 2.1. Participants

Individuals who self-identified as experiencing regret about their occupational choice were recruited via several routes. We began by recruiting these participants via personal networks, coaching networks and organisations that provide support for career change. Later, we began to additionally recruit individuals via the alumni network of a Business School.

**Table 1**
Table of participants.

| Interviewee | Age | Sex | Occupation at time of interview 1 | Interviewee | Age | Sex | Occupation at time of interview 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | 32 | M | Actuary | P27 | 55 | M | Academia |
| P2 | 34 | F | Marketing Communications | P28 | 35 | F | Academia |
| P3 | 38 | F | Teaching/ Dog Walking | P29 | 43 | F | Medical Writing |
| P4 | 34 | F | Academia | P30 | 35 | M | Marketing |
| P5 | 39 | M | Academia | P31 | 34 | F | Business Consulting |
| P6 | 31 | F | Accountant | P32 | 27 | M | Business Consulting |
| P7 | 37 | F | Accountant | P33 | 50 | M | Insurance |
| P8 | 36 | F | Digital advertising | P34 | 38 | F | Law |
| P9 | 34 | M | Private Equity | P35 | 39 | F | Teaching |
| P10 | 32 | F | Academia | P36 | 26 | F | Public sector |
| P11 | 36 | M | PR | P37 | 29 | M | Tech Consultant |
| P12 | 42 | F | Researcher | P38 | 29 | F | Doctor |
| P13 | 28 | F | Scientist | P39 | 41 | M | Counselling/Psychotherapy |
| P14 | 44 | F | Human Resources | P40 | 37 | F | Counselling |
| P15 | 40 | M | Teaching | P41 | 31 | F | Coaching |
| P16 | 40 | M | Social Work | P42 | 32 | F | Human Resources |
| P17 | 44 | M | Social/Market Research | P43 | 35 | F | Teaching |
| P18 | 34 | F | Pharmacist | P44 | 32 | M | Finance |
| P19 | 39 | M | Doctor | P45 | 56 | M | Private Equity |
| P20 | 32 | F | Investment banking | P46 | 34 | F | Marketing |
| P21 | 39 | M | Law | P47 | 36 | F | Business Consulting |
| P22 | 42 | F | Nursing | P48 | 67 | F | Small Business Owner |
| P23 | 40 | F | Armed forces | P49 | 31 | M | Business Consulting |
| P24 | 44 | M | IT | P50 | 40 | F | No occupation |
| P25 | 46 | M | IT | P51 | 26 | F | Accountant |
| P26 | 32 | F | Risk and Finance | | | | |

The final sample consisted of 51 participants (31 women, 20 men) ranging in age from 26 to 67. Interviewees were employed in a wide variety of occupations including accounting, armed forces, insurance, dog walking, law, medicine, pharmacy, marketing communications, social work, and finance. Within the total sample we identified 45 regretful people and 6 with no regrets. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample.

### 2.2. Data collection

We used in-depth, semi-structured career history interviews in line with our interpretivist approach to comprehensively examine the phenomenon of occupational regret with retrospective and real-time accounts from individuals experiencing it. The authors jointly developed an interview schedule based on knowledge of relevant literature and the research questions. It was constructed using principles from life story and career narrative approaches to qualitative research (e.g. Atkinson, 1998; LaPointe, 2010), such that interviewees were encouraged to narrate their own experiences across the span of their careers. All interviews were based upon this interview schedule, which we provide as supplementary material.

During interviews, participants were first asked to provide an overview of their career to date, their feelings towards their occupation at various stages, the nature of any regret, and how they responded to it. At this point, the interviewer probed various aspects of their career history, including their reasons for choosing their occupation and the role of education. This helped us to establish the wider context within which each participant's career and occupation was situated and to reveal their frames of reference. Participants were asked about their regret at this point (further details below) and to share alternative choices that they might have made. The second part of the interview focused on career transitions and the role of regret in their experiences of moving through their career. The final part of the interview focused on the phenomenon of occupational regret specifically. Here, participants were asked to describe the characteristics of regretful individuals and those with no regret. All participants were invited to offer any other information that they felt might have been relevant to the issue of regret.

We coded individuals as having occupational regret using the definition of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2007). This involved asking two sets of questions: what (if anything) they regretted about their occupational choice, why they regretted it, and how this made them feel; and whether they would undo this regretted occupational decision if they could. Later in the interview, they were asked about how the regret could have been avoided. These questions allowed us to assess the presence of both wishes to undo their current situation and the degree to which they blamed themselves for it.

Interviews lasted between 44 and 99 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim with personal identifying details removed. The interviewers made in-depth field notes and wrote memos after each interview (Emerson et al., 1995). All interviews were conducted by the authors. The first ten interviews were undertaken jointly, whereas all remaining interviews were conducted individually. All data were coded by the authors. Twenty transcripts were double coded, which involved both authors performing detailed line-by-line coding individually on these 20 transcripts, with any disagreements resolved by discussion. This informed ongoing coding that was undertaken individually. Regret profiles, which emerged later in the coding process, were reviewed at length by both authors jointly. This involved a detailed discussion of every participant to establish their profile.

We used theoretical sampling to identify and recruit particular types of individuals using vetting conversations. Theoretical sampling is a cornerstone of the grounded theory approach (Draucker et al., 2007) that has been used in various studies examining career narratives (e.g. McMahon et al., 2012; Obodaru, 2017). After we had conducted 15 interviews with regretful individuals, we began to identify themes concerning 'triggers of regret' and the 'consequences of regret'. To establish that these perceptions were related specifically to feelings of occupational regret, we began to theoretically sample for individuals who were seeking to change their occupation but did not identify as feeling regret. Six such individuals were recruited and interviewed at this stage.

Following this, we undertook further theoretical sampling to examine in greater depth the concept of 'regret cycles', which had strongly emerged as a key concept up to this point. First, in line with recommendations for data collection in grounded theory and other forms of qualitative research (e.g. Charmaz, 2014; Wengraf, 2001), we amended the interview protocol slightly at this stage so that it included additional probes to help systematically examine the cyclicality of occupational regret, which had emerged as a concept in initial analysis. Second, we sought to examine the extent to which regret cycles could endure for long periods of time. Theoretical sampling was therefore employed to select further participants who could describe experiencing an extended period of occupational regret lasting over a period of years, in order that multiple episodes could be examined. We also re-interviewed 6 of the 51 regretful participants at this time who had talked about imminent change in their first interview.

### 2.3. Data analysis

In accordance with Corbin and Strauss's (2008) grounded theory method, transcripts were examined word by word and line by line. In the initial phase, open coding was used to identify recurring concepts, known as first order codes (Gioia et al., 2013), for example, '*rumination*', '*changing occupation*'. During the early phases of coding, the interviews with individuals who wanted to change their occupation but did not regret their career choice enabled constant comparison of emerging concepts within different contexts. For example, comparison between these individuals and others revealed that they would not 'undo' their choice given the opportunity, that they viewed their earlier 'incorrect' choice as an accepted part of their career story, and that they did not experience 'triggers' of regret. This led to these individuals being coded as a separate group (termed 'never-regretters') with no regret. Constant comparison of this type also facilitated axial coding that identified relationships between categories (Mills et al., 2006). Extensive memoing was employed to record reflections on the data and memos were coded using the same principles.

During the coding process, we developed several second order categories from the first order codes via a process of axial coding.

First, the authors' memos identified various 'triggers' of regret. These were events or situations that activated feelings of regret that were linked to the occupational choice made previously. Initially, we noted that participants identified various significant events that led them to feel regret more keenly. As we interviewed more regretful individuals, this concept was developed as it became clear that there were different 'types' of trigger, including the 'origin trigger' and triggers that prompted later regret episodes.

Second, memos constructed by the researchers during early data collection noted what we originally termed as the 'ebbing and flowing' of regret. We noted that regret was episodic. In some cases, this ebbing and flowing was implicit in the narrative of a career history. As we collected more data, we found other cases where it was referred to explicitly by participants as the existence of 'episodes' or as 'coming around again'. This led to the theoretical sampling for individuals who could discuss multiple 'episodes', as outlined above.

Third, we identified a wide range of responses to regret. As further data were collected, the authors noted that some of these responses addressed the feeling of regret, whereas others were aimed at addressing the cause of the regret. The researchers noted these differences, which were further integrated in the analysis as additional cases were added to the dataset. This process led to the identification of the use of different coping strategies by individuals.

We again employed the method of constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to refine the theory with the addition of each new case. During the later stages of the study, we noted when adding new cases and comparing across our entire sample that several differences existed with respect to the theoretical categories and the process of regret described by participants. Initially, we viewed these differences as contributing to different 'pathways' through regret across cases. This promoted detailed investigation, involving further review of all cases. Following this, we noted that these differences across participants were in fact better described as a series of discrete 'profiles', with membership defined by the way individuals reacted to episodes of regret, and how (or if) they experienced repeated episodes. Categories were developed and related in this way until theoretical saturation occurred. At this stage, we finalised the emerging model (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); this model identifies five regret profiles. Table 2 presents the data structure, outlining first order codes (using participant language), second order categories (authors' labelling of concepts following axial coding) and aggregate theoretical dimensions (following theoretical coding).

## 3. Findings

We present our findings organised around our grounded methodology process and the order in which we completed analysis. This begins with the finding that regret involves episodes, before moving on to describe the analysis concerning stages of regret and regret profiles.

### 3.1. Finding 1. The process of occupational regret is usually episodic

> "*A big part of me looks back and thinks, 'you know, you've been doing this since you were like – what was I, twenty-five – you're now nearly forty'. And I'm thinking 'that whole time you've had periods of regret, so maybe it's not for you'*."
>
> (P35. Teaching)

**Table 2**
Data structure.

| First order codes | Second order categories | Aggregate theoretical dimensions |
|---|---|---|
| Bullying; Poor management; Long hours; Stress | *Work environment* | Regret triggers |
| Age; Promotion; Achievements | *Career milestones* | |
| Death; Redundancy | *Career shocks* | |
| Low Mood; Being 'off balance' | *Affect* | |
| Missing events; Losing touch with friends | *Sacrifices* | |
| Rumination; Grass is greener | *Counterfactual thoughts* | Regret episodes |
| '*It's not anybody else's fault*' | *Self-blame* | |
| '*I would definitely undo my decision*' | *Wish to undo past* | |
| '*It's coming around again*' | *Regret cycle* | |
| Changing within occupation; Holidays; Spending | *Avoidance* | Regret responses |
| Retraining; Career coaching; Occupation change | *Primary approach* | |
| '*It's about mindset*' | *Secondary approach* | |
| '*It's always kind of there*' | *Dormancy* | Regret outcomes |
| '*I'm in a better place*'; Relief | *Resolution* | |
| Impaired affect; Depression | *Impaired mental health* | |
| '*Suck it up*'; Finding peace | *Acceptance* | |
| '*Shutting the door*' | *Crystallisation* | |
| '*Experimental*'; Productive regret | *Exploring behavior* | |
| Occupational tenure; Qualifications; '*Sunk costs*' | *Career investment* | Barriers to change |
| Identity; Pay; Prestige | *Occupational rewards* | |
| Fear of unemployment; Loss of income | *Aversion to risk* | |
| Parental guidance; Family responsibility | *Pleasing others* | |
| Older age; Life stage; '*Emotional maturity*' | *Temporal processes* | Facilitators of change |
| Burnout; '*An epiphany*'; '*Hitting rock bottom*' | *Inflection points* | |
| Regret is related to occupation | *Recognising regret* | |

The first notable pattern that emerged from many of the career narratives during our early coding and memoing concerns the repeated occurrence of regret over time. Specifically, many accounts of individuals who were coded as regretful were characterised by repeated episodes of regret, rather than single instances. We noted here that participants' narratives contained indications that regret tended to 'ebb and flow'. P2, for example, had been working in marketing communications since graduating. She had never intended this to be a career but, with each passing year, found herself going further in this direction. Her regret stemmed from working in an occupation for which she lacked interest or passion. In describing a particular period of her career, she identified a recurring pattern in her feelings of regret:

> "*it [the job] was nice for a while, but I ended up staying there for about three years and again kind of getting to the point of 'oh I'm bored and this actually isn't feeling right'. And a crisis kind of… and I felt it more, much more deeply at that time, I really felt it was like this is kind of like, it's coming around again… like that, like I feel like I'm going through another cycle of what I've done before.*"
>
> (P2. Marketing communications)

Similarly, P34, a lawyer, realised during the initial years of her career that she was '*quite disillusioned*' with law. At the time of interview, she was exploring the possibility of becoming a coach or a therapist. She described regret as being particularly felt at various critical points:

> "*I feel like I've come out of the, yes, I feel like I've come out of the regret cycle, but I have definitely been in cycles of regret around the decision that I've made. But I think I look back now more objectively and I'm in a better place, so I feel like I've moved out of that cycle and can kind of – I guess that's why I keep coming back to the idea of well like I'm comfortable, finally, with where I am on one level, and so I wouldn't be where I am now if it hadn't have been for what's gone before. […] And I think when I was in that cycle, there was regret.*"
>
> (P34. Law)

As more data were collected, we further probed participants' experiences of regret over time, comparing new cases with our existing idea that occupational regret occurred in episodes. This analysis led to the development of our understanding of the episodic nature of regret, as it revealed that participants' regret did not necessarily fully dissipate and then return. Rather, the regret laid dormant, and then returned to the fore at particular times. As P7 explained: "*It's still kind of, you know, it's always kind of there, it's just to different degrees of how I'm feeling and how much I can accept it and just, you know, ignore it, but it's always kind of there.*" Additionally, it became clear that whilst some participants described a point at which the feelings of regret finally departed permanently, others remained in this pattern of 'ebbing and flowing'.

A second key finding from the memos constructed during early phases of coding revealed that participants referred to specific events or situations that were associated with the onset of regret. Like many other regretful individuals, P31, a business consultant who sometimes wished she'd pursued a career in pharmacy, described how regret is always present, but is usually manageable. This can be conceptualised as a state of dormancy that lasts until a 'trigger' surfaces the regret, at which time it is felt more keenly. In this case, the trigger was a stressful period of work:

> "*So whenever I'm kind of, kind of going through those regretful phases of like, you know, I'm not that interested in what I'm doing; it's kind of like you can continue going down a path as long as it's not stressful, but the minute you kind of again get that last minute ask, or it becomes stressful in some way, then it's kind of like it just, it triggers, like there's that trigger towards like 'OK, well like I'm already regretting going down this path and where I am, so then like why should I again kind of give up so much to do this thing and now I'm stressful about it…' But yes, I think otherwise you can kind of just like tick along kind of doing what you're doing.*"
>
> (P31. Consulting)

### 3.2. Finding 2. The process of regret is cyclical

After identifying from our analysis that episodes of occupational regret were triggered, we explored in more depth during subsequent interviews what happens after regret is triggered (i.e. during a particular episode, leading to our second major finding: further data collection and analysis revealed that regret triggers were in fact the first stage of a three-stage process). We termed this three-stage process the 'regret cycle' (see Fig. 1 for a graphical representation). Most regretful participants described going through such cycles during an episode.

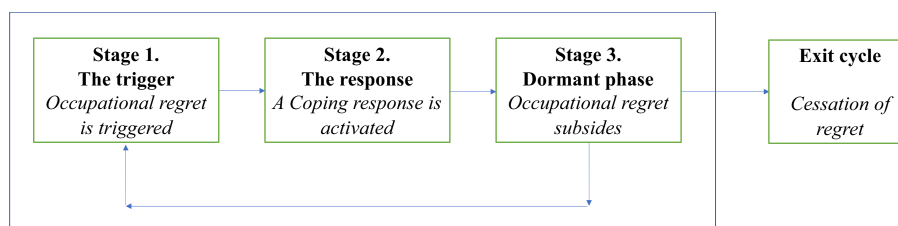


**Fig. 1.** The regret cycle.

### 3.3. Stage 1. The trigger

Stage 1 of the regret cycle begins when a trigger prompts an individual to become preoccupied with regret concerning the occupation they have chosen. Triggers led to unpleasant feelings of regret concerning the choice of occupation. One participant described this feeling of regret that followed their trigger as a "*response to misalignment and a lack of congruency*." This perceived misalignment also involved perceptions of what interviewees believed that alternate career paths might have provided e.g. more stability, fulfilment or achievement; fewer time demands; less work-life conflict. For regretful individuals, the comparison was always with a better alternative self (Obodaru, 2012), and whilst they often recognised the benefits of their current careers, they were primarily focused on their perceived loss from not having taken an alternative path.

As we collected more data, ongoing comparison across cases revealed different 'forms' of trigger. One of these is the *origin trigger*, which occurs the first time that an individual becomes preoccupied with regret. For some interviewees this happened for the first time as early as their higher education; for others, it was as recently as two years prior to their interview, and more than a decade into their careers. The distinguishing feature of this origin trigger was that it began a process of what we termed 'regret episodes'. Following the origin trigger, other triggers occurred later, often repeatedly, during the time spent in the regretted occupation. We termed these *episodic triggers*; they performed a different function: rather than catalysing the overall experience of regret, they began individual episodes of preoccupation with regret.

Whilst origin and episodic triggers have different functions, they can involve similar events. We found two major categories of these events. First were factors or events that we labelled work-related triggers, such as P31's example which highlighted specific aspects of the job; in her case, work stress and long, unpredictable hours. Other examples of work-related triggers that were identified included redundancy, workplace bullying, intrinsically unsatisfying periods of work, and missed promotions. Instances of work-related comparison also triggered regretful thoughts. Here, individuals made comparisons with friends and family related to aspects of their work or career progression:

> "*So I had lots of friends who are lawyers and doctors who were like progressing like nicely and neatly through something. And I'd look at them, they're like three years out of uni and they're like doing this and I'd compare where we're at, like I'm just not going anywhere.*"
>
> (P2. Marketing communications)

A second group of triggers comprised non-work-related factors or events. These included age milestones, missing important family events. These often came in the form of career shocks - disruptive events, that are to some degree outside the individual's control (Akkermans et al., 2018). For example, the extreme shock of the death of someone close was identified by three individuals as a regret trigger. In the following excerpt, P6 recalls two separate trigger events. The first of these represents her origin trigger, whereas the second is an episodic trigger:

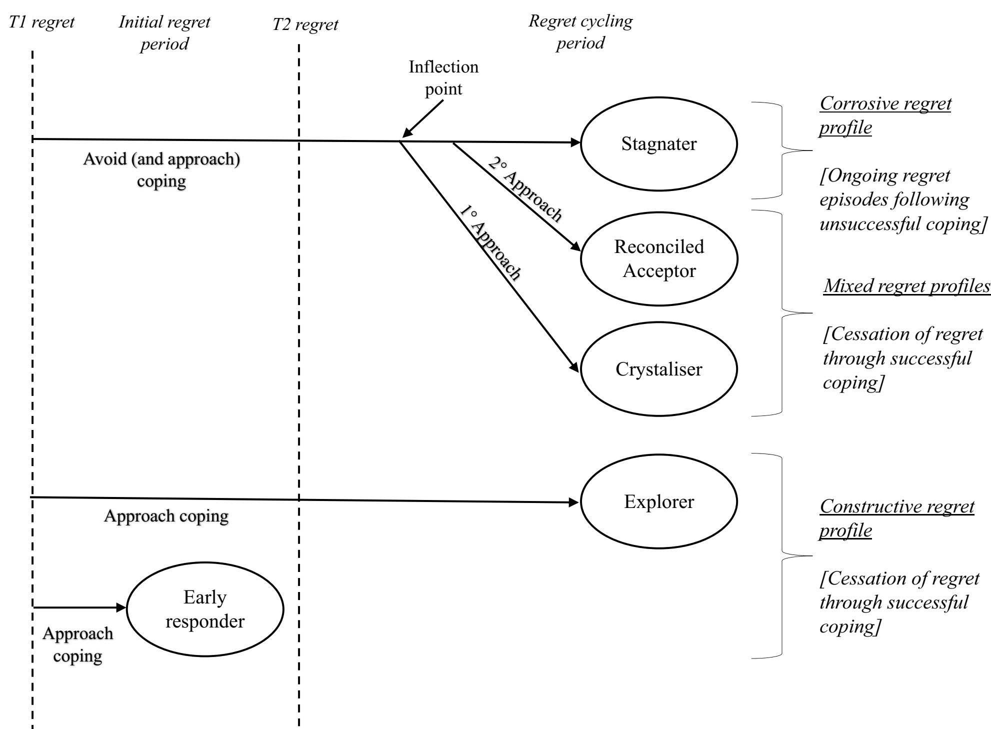


**Fig. 2.** Occupational regret profiles.

> "*My grandmother passed away in 2011. When she passed away, that was a really bad trigger point for me when I was like... And that was probably that first point when I was like, you know, something like reflecting. And then my mum, my mum was killed in 2013 and that – sorry, I don't want to... That was probably a point where I was like eh-er-eh, this is like, you know, she was turning fifty-four and I was like my god […] I was like fuck, I was twenty-seven at the time and I was like I'm halfway through how old my mum lived and I fucking hate my job. And I was like shit, like what am I doing? And so I had a really bad time then.*"
>
> (P6. Accountancy)

The frequency with which regretful feelings emerged varied across individuals. One participant stated that this happened '*at least once a year*' (P7. Accountancy). For others, this happened more or less frequently, depending on the intensity of regret and the environmental triggers. Regardless of the regret's duration, a key finding concerned responses to it. Following these trigger points, individuals pause and then become motivated to act on their regret to regulate it. We noted that at this point, across all regretful individuals, a second stage began. During this stage, we noted various examples of attempts to regulate and remove feelings of regret.

### 3.4. Stage 2. The response

Following the identification of regret triggers, we noted that a second stage was experienced by all regretful individuals, whereby they respond to their regret after it is triggered. Analysis of the wide range of responses that emerged from the data led to clusters of individuals who took different pathways within and beyond regret cycles, representing different 'regret profiles' (discussed in detail under 'finding 3'; see Fig. 2 for an overview).

A key set of second order categories that were identified from the data at this time concerned the coping responses used by individuals following a trigger. Specifically, in line with Rothbaum et al. (1982), these were classified as either 'avoid' (actions taken to address the effects of regret), 'primary approach' (actions aimed at directly addressing the object of regret) and 'secondary approach' (actions aimed at cognitive adaptation to the regret). Some individuals attempted to address the source of regret, by revisiting the regretted decision itself. Examples of this type of response included changing occupations or undertaking training to enable this to happen. Others instead attempted to assuage the feeling of regret, often by distracting themselves from the negative emotion through leisure activities such as taking holidays. Where an avoid strategy was successful, or primary and secondary approach strategies were unsuccessful, individuals remained in a regret cycle. Where this happened, they moved on to stage three, having regained stability in their emotions and controlled (but not removed) the cause or feelings of regret. This usually meant remaining in their current job, or a different job within the same occupation.

### 3.5. Stage 3: the dormant phase

Following the response to a new episode of regret, we noted that two potential outcomes emerged. Some individuals described successfully removing the source of their regret, often by changing occupation. In these cases, individuals were able to permanently remove their feelings of regret (denoted by 'exit cycle' in Fig. 1). However, where the response did not alter the object of regret (i.e. the misaligned occupation) and halt the cycle, the individual returned to their pre-episode mode of functioning – or as P31 put it: "*things kind of settled down, so it was just like yes, I'll just kind of mosey along.*" We termed this the 'dormant phase' because the regret had not been completely removed; it remained until another trigger brought it to the fore again.

This dormant phase is evident in the way that P11 described his 'laps' or 'episodes' of regret. He had '*fallen into*' a PR career thirteen years previously, a career choice that he regretted. He explained how at some point, the regret subsided, and he returned to how he was. Asked about how long he'd been experiencing this, he responded by describing an ongoing series of unsuccessful attempts at approach coping, followed by periods of dormancy:

> "*I've been doing it for about ten years now - I have a self-help library. Up until now.. of course, this lap is different now! I kind of go through a 'I'm not enjoying it, need to make a change'; frantically Google something. Ah I've got an idea, usually it's something about freedom and flexibility […] you always get to a point where you're like 'yes, but I'll never see how this is going to manifest itself as a real thing'. And then you kind of, well at the end of the episode you go 'yes, but maybe you should just, you know, just put up with what you've got, everything's fine' and you just, you know, go back to watching the telly. But then it comes back again, you know.*"
>
> (P11, PR)

A key aspect of living with regret is the notion of "*just putting up with*" the feelings of a regretted occupational choice. Whilst regret was never far away, individuals were able to reach a state where it was manageable because it was dormant; this state could last for some time. P31, the consultant, explained the inaction in this way: "*I'll just keep doing this thing [occupation] because yes, I'm good enough at it and I get paid well enough and I kind of get to more or less enjoy, enjoy enough about the rest of my life, that it's great…then sure enough five years pass and you're like 'what the hell am I doing*?'" At this point, the cycle restarts with a fresh trigger, and the individual returns to stage 1.

### 3.6. Finding 3. Regret profiles involve different pathways through the response phase

The experiences described by participants as they negotiated their way through, and in some cases beyond, episodes of regret highlighted different 'journeys' or 'pathways' through the regret process. As more cases were added, we noted five distinct groups of regretful individuals. We termed these 'regret profiles', because each one is based on a number of distinctive characteristics (see Fig. 2).

Specifically, the profiles differed from one another in terms of the longevity of regret, whether individuals experienced cycles, the types and combinations of response made to regret episodes, and the outcome of the regret cycle. These differences emerged in our theoretical formulation following constant comparison and are summarised in Table 3. There were no emergent differences relating to the type of regret triggers experienced by individuals across the five regret profiles.

The five profiles can be broadly categorised into 'corrosive', 'mixed' or 'constructive' types. Within the corrosive category is the 'Stagnater' profile, where occupational regret results in long-term impaired affect. The mixed category includes individuals who are labelled as 'reconciled acceptors' or 'crystallisers'. These are both mixed because, whilst the pathways result in contentedness with the occupational choice, the process leading up to them involves long-term impaired affect. Within the constructive category are 'early responders' and 'explorers'. The individuals in these profiles regret constructively, meaning that regret is used as motivation to deal with its causes (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Early responders deal with their regret very early on at the origin trigger, never cycling, whereas explorers make several attempts at dealing directly with the source of their regret prior to being successful in this endeavour. The five profiles are examined in detail below.

### 3.7. Profile 1. Stagnaters

> "*It's really difficult not to dwell in it, but I just think I know that I'm stuck in it, I know I'm stuck in it. It's really difficult and I think, I think you can get to a depth of regret which just kind of sucks you in.*"
>
> (P35. Teaching)

Stagnaters are individuals who live with their regret over a period of years, characterised by ongoing regret episodes. They attempt to cope with their regret over time, which always involves some degree of avoidance strategies that are aimed at mitigating the effects of regret, rather than dealing with its causes. Examples include changing jobs within the same occupation, taking holidays, or retail therapy. Stagnaters may or may not also attempt to employ approach coping strategies, which deal with the cause of the regret, but are always unsuccessful in their endeavours. This is a corrosive regret profile because it results in long-term impaired affect whilst individuals maintain the status quo and continue cycling repeatedly over time. There were 14 Stagnaters in the sample.

P7 was identified as a stagnater. An accountant, she had gone into the occupation because the company she'd interned with during her degree offered her a job when she graduated. After starting her career in accountancy, she came to regret it because she found it misaligned with her interests and unfulfilling:

> "*With hindsight I wish I had like, you know, done something else, like I wish I'd, I don't know, even like I could have been a vet or I could have done whatever I wanted really. Because I apply myself and do, I can do it, it's just that I was more focused on just having a good time*"

Her regret would usually be triggered – in her estimation, '*probably at least once a year*' – by periods of having to work excessive hours or missing a family event due to work. These triggers led to intensely negative feelings of regret characterised by '*unhappiness*', '*feeling a failure,*' '*a lack of self-worth*' and feeling '*unfulfilled*'. P7 repeatedly engaged in avoidance coping strategies (addressing the effect rather than the cause of her regret) during her career, including taking lavish holidays to distract herself, explaining:

> "*I think I use like material things, like I'll buy a new bag, for example, as a way of kind of, you know: 'I've been through all of this this month, I deserve a reward'. Whereas if you're happy with what you're doing and you think that you're not regretting your career choice and stuff, you don't have that feeling or you don't feel like you have to resort to material things to be able to kind of offset how unhappy you are with your career.*"

A key distinguishing feature between stagnaters and other profiles, demonstrated by P7, is that these individuals remained in their regret cycles for extended periods of time, never managing to break free and never managing to address the object of their regret.

**Table 3**
Primary characteristics of regret profiles.

| Regret profile | Regret cycling over time? | Response to regret episodes | Outcome of regret cycling |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stagnater | Yes | Ongoing avoidance and unsuccessful attempts at approach coping | Remain in cycle<br>Long term impaired affect |
| Crystalliser | Yes | Initial avoidance and unsuccessful attempts at approach coping<br>Later crystallisation of regret leading to successful approach coping | Change occupation to a preferred alternative<br>Positive impact on affect |
| Reconciled acceptor | Yes | Ongoing avoidance and unsuccessful attempts at approach coping<br>Later secondary approach coping | Acceptance of regretted occupation<br>Positive impact on affect |
| Explorer | Yes | Ongoing primary approach coping, initially unsuccessful | Change occupation to a preferred alternative<br>Positive impact on affect |
| Early responder | No | Primary or secondary approach coping strategies immediately employed | Early occupation change or acceptance of regretted occupation<br>Positive impact on affect |

Asked about what stopped her from trying to change the occupation that she regretted entering, P7, like others in this group, identified the large investment that she had made as a barrier to change. Where investments were deemed to be high, or the loss of accumulated reward was threatened, individuals would remain in their regret cycles. Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) may explain why stagnaters remained on this pathway: they strove to maintain their current resources. Investments included the years spent in an occupation, the accumulated human capital, and the qualifications taken to get there. Stagnaters also revealed concerns about losses related to financial rewards ("*we've got a certain lifestyle*"- P7).

A second factor identified as preventing regretful individuals from making a change was their aversion to risk. P21 had investigated attending a programming bootcamp, which would take him out of the legal profession he regretted entering and into IT. However, his aversion to risk meant he'd decided against it and continued stagnating; "*And the risk, because it costs quite a bit of money, well you have no income for a couple of months and then you might not get a job at the end of it*" (P21. Law).

Other stagnaters mentioned the expectations of others as contributing in some way to their regret experience. P3, a music teacher who regretted not finding out what other options existed beyond music, explained that her initial occupation choice had been proposed by her parents - "*I think that path was pretty much set for me.*" This individual blamed herself for not doing her own research at the time, and highlighted an alternative path within music - in the military - that she could have pursued instead, had she known about it. This preoccupation with the expectations of others also contributed to stagnaters' inability to leave their regretted occupations. At the time of the interview, P7 was still going through regret episodes, without any indication that she was trying to change occupation. As well as sunk costs, she attributed this in part to the expectations of her parents:

> "*They're really proud of us [her and siblings] and what we've achieved, and they kind of go around telling everyone about it and things like that, and it's quite difficult to almost be a disappointment.*"
>
> (P7. Accountancy)

The stagnater profile is related to two other regret profiles. Specifically, it is what we term the 'stem' pathway for the 'crystallisers' and 'reconciled acceptors' profiles. Whilst some individuals continued to stagnate indefinitely, others developed into one of these other two profiles, described in detail below. Some stagnaters, like P7, did not seem close to leaving the stagnater pathway; they had been cycling for a long time, putting a 'sticking plaster' on their feelings to deal with the regret. Others seemed close to accepting their regret and thereby becoming a reconciled acceptor. P49, for example, talked about how his regret had changed over time: "*Do I have a regret, any regrets? Yes, I do, but it's easy to say now, because now I have these regrets with a different mindset*". Although he was feeling better about his regret of not fully pursuing a footballing career, it was still not resolved, and he continued to move through business-related roles, trying to find the highly competitive environment and team camaraderie that he missed from his sporting career.

### 3.8. Profile 2. Crystallisers

> "*I feel like I know myself a lot better than I ever did as a result of being, you know- hitting rock bottom is not the right term – but as a result of being so unhappy that I realised I needed to make a change.*"
>
> (P34. Law)

Crystallisers are regretful individuals who experience a 'crystallisation' in their regret, leading them to deal with it by changing occupation. Crystallisers spend time in the stagnater profile, living with their regret over long periods, experiencing regret cycles, and responding to regret the same way as stagnaters - through avoidance or unsuccessful approach coping strategies. However, the crystallisers divert off this pathway (or 'stem') because they are eventually successful in using a primary approach coping strategy, which addresses the object of their regret. This means moving out of the occupation that they regret entering and, for most, beginning training for a different one (often an occupation they regret not having pursued). Unique to this profile is the identification by participants of an 'inflection point', where their new occupational path becomes crystallised in their minds, often in the form of an 'epiphany', or when they reach crystallisation of discontent - "part of a subjective process in which the individual concludes that the negative aspects of a certain life condition outweigh the positives" (Bauer et al., 2005: 1182). There were fifteen crystallisers.

We encountered individuals who were at various stages of their post-crystallisation journey. Type one crystallisers had exited their regretted occupation, having closed the door on it, but had not yet have found their new occupation. Type two crystallisers had experienced an epiphany about their new occupational pathway and were in transition – this could involve being in the process of gaining credentials or pursuing the new occupational path alongside their original one to fund the transition. Type three crystallisers had moved into their new occupation completely. All these individuals were united by having experienced an inflection point, leading to the crystallisation of regret and the successful use of primary approach coping. We provide an example of each of these types, below.

P19 was a *type one* crystalliser who had left his occupation and was in the process of finding a new one. A 39-year-old doctor, he had not felt comfortable in his occupation for some time and regretted not considering alternative occupational choices at the outset of his career. He had cycled through medical specialties, believing that this would diminish his regret, trying emergency medicine, oncology, and anaesthetics, before taking a master's degree to move into clinical dermatology. P19's inflection point came when he experienced burnout and decided to take time out of his career due to mental health challenges. Eventually, he closed the door on his medical career:

> "*Then it sort of, I guess, culminated in probably two years ago now where, you know, I was kind of no longer on the medical register. And so for me that was kind of like a shutting, kind of shutting on the door of doing clinical medicine*"

This was a deliberate act, aimed at ending his medical occupation. It forced him to search for an alternative career path, a process

that he was still undertaking. His approach coping came in the form of seeking careers advice. It is this inflection point, and the subsequent successful approach coping, that primarily distinguishes Crystallisers from other regret profiles.

P8 was a *type two* crystalliser who was in transition to a defined new occupation. A 36-year-old who had '*fallen into*' a career in advertising, P8 regretted not pursuing a career more in line with her values and interests. Earlier in her career, she had engaged in strategies to avoid dealing with her regret by temporarily removing herself from the situation; she recalled: "*I took that break off to go travelling and came back and said, you know, I'll stick with what I'm doing.*" However, after many more years of '*sticking with*' advertising, she came back to the same feelings of unfulfillment, explaining: "*I think I've sort of known for the last four/five years I'm not really happy doing what I'm doing.*" For P8, the inflection point occurred when attending a leadership training course. Delegates were tasked with an exercise that focused on what 'made them shine'. P8, to use her words, '*had an epiphany.*' She had realised, after twenty years in advertising, that her real passion was in food. Describing this epiphany, she said: "*that happiness I felt of suddenly thinking oh God, I can actually see where I want to go - it was amazing.*" P8 was a type two crystalliser, because she had left advertising and was in transition to a food-based occupation:

> "*I've signed-up to do a course next April, which is the essential evening course, so you get a certificate at the end but for ten weeks you learn all the skills, how to menu-plan, how to budget-forecast. So yes, so then I'll get that credibility and hopefully then the connections to start something in that area, even if it's food journalism or photography or whether it is going: 'right, quit the day job and go and work in a kitchen'.*"

Like the above example, P4 was also transitioning, from her original occupation (academia) to clinical psychology. P4 had previously been similar to P7, the accountant and stagnater, who felt the expectation of others keeping her on the career path:

> "*So I think it was the investment and it was worrying about what other people were going to think about me having given everything up and then walking away from that [..] Thinking about parents and what they would think about it.*"

However, P4 had been galvanised to escape the weight of expectation when her situation became untenable. Her inflection point came after a long period of bullying and being told the day before leaving for a holiday that her job may not be secure upon her return. At the time of interview, she had found a clinical team that would take her on the following year, and she was putting in place what was needed to complete the transition.

P9 was a *type three* crystalliser who, following an inflection point, had made a successful transition to a new occupation. P9 had spent several challenging years in private equity and banking. His regret concerned a foregone career linked to his passions – healthcare and science – which was triggered by the lack of fulfilment he had felt in his original occupation:

> "*I think the biggest time I felt it was two years ago or a year and a half ago, end of 2018, when I was like look, actually I've done two really high-profile deals and, you know, we'd bought these two incredible businesses and I should be, you know, feeling on top of the world… and I don't, I don't enjoy this.*"

For P9, Baumeister's (1994) concept of the crystallisation of discontent captures the psychological switch that was his inflection point; or, as other interviewees labelled it: '*reaching max capacity*' or '*hitting rock bottom*'. P9 described this in the following way:

> "*It was when I was pushed to my absolute limit – I think it's when I genuinely get to a point when I'm like 'God, actually the status quo is definitely worse than the potential alternative'. And it takes me a long time to realise that because – it's that balance, isn't it, it's a case of the status quo has got to get really bad.*"

Most crystallisers in the sample were type three, now practising in their 'new' occupation. Like the pure stagnaters, crystallisers also pointed to investments as a reason for remaining in their cycles until they crystallised; for example, investments in identity ("*there was a huge identity around being a lawyer and so it felt like a waste to throw that away*" – P34) or status ("*I was worried people will kind of devalue me*" – P19).

### *3.9. Profile 3. Reconciled acceptors*

> "*There comes a point in time, when you're dealing with the regret, that either you're going to fix it or make peace with it.*"
>
> (P36. Public sector employee)

Reconciled acceptors are individuals who, following a period of regret cycling, come to accept their chosen occupation. Like crystallisers, reconciled acceptors start out as stagnaters, later developing into a different profile. They differ from the crystallisers, however, because instead of leaving their current occupation, they accept it and stay in it, coming to describe themselves as no longer regretful. Reconciled acceptors may or may not recognise the cause of their regret early on in their regret experience, but always do so prior to finally accepting their occupational situation. Unlike early responders (described below), reconciled acceptors always undergo regret cycling prior to resolving their situation. There were eight reconciled acceptors in the sample.

During their time on the stagnater stem, reconciled acceptors' coping attempts involve avoidance strategies, and in some cases unsuccessful approach coping strategies. However, after a period of cycling, something catalyses reconciled acceptors to switch to a secondary approach strategy – which involves changing their perception and cognition of the object of regret, allowing them to "accommodate to events, placing less effort on trying to change them" (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016: 7). In other words, through the psychological process of cognitive reframing (Robson & Troutman-Jordan, 2014), it is the person rather than the environment that changes, with beliefs about the unwanted occupation being reformulated. Reconciled acceptors learn to live with their regretted

occupation, for example, highlighting its positives and, in doing so, come to accept it. The occupational status quo is therefore maintained for those in this profile; reconciled acceptors are individuals who indicate that they would not now undo the decision that led to their original regret, although they did not always feel like this. P12 is a typical reconciled acceptor. Aged 42, she describes having had regret her whole career about not becoming a dancer, instead becoming a psychology researcher:

> "*So I'd grown up dancing and I always wanted to be a dancer or do something with dancing. And that's where my regret comes in because I was very sensible and I went to uni and did a proper degree to get a proper job, because I was like 'dancing is not a sustainable career and it's very hard to be successful'. So I did my university like I should and I came out the end and went 'but I still want to dance'*"

P12 recalled drifting between administrative jobs not linked to dancing and she also engaged in avoid coping strategies at the outset of her career: "*I didn't really know what I wanted to do, so travelling seemed like a good alternative.*" Although P12 cycled through many jobs that were not linked to dancing, her resolve to enter dance as an occupation strengthened over time and she shifted to approach coping strategies i.e. focused on helping her to achieve this, rather than avoid the regret. She taught dance classes after work to try to gain the right experience, she auditioned for parts in dance shows, and she took a master's in dance science. Ultimately, though, her strategies to address the object of her regret were unsuccessful, and she would find herself back in research. P12 admitted that '*when things aren't going well*' that she would dwell on her regret, but explained that since getting older, the nature of her regret had changed; whereas once it was 'jealousy driven', and eating away at her:

> "*now it's probably a bit more wistful and just like, you know, oh yes, that would have been nice, but it didn't happen. And yes, I think that probably comes a bit with maturity and getting older [...] Because I think you can go down two pathways, you can either kind of dwell on it and then it makes you very bitter and, you know, frustrated and sad and discontent with your life, or you can kind of suck it up and go OK, but these are all the good things I have because of what I've done, and so focus on that instead, like you kind of had that choice at the end of the day.*"

P12 pinpointed psychological techniques such as mindfulness and gratitude exercises as key to achieving acceptance. In line with other reconciled acceptors, she accepted her regret and stated that she wouldn't undo the earlier decisions she had taken, citing all the things that her actual path had brought her (children, friends, financial security). Other reconciled acceptors reframed their experiences as 'having made the best of their situation', or as enabling them to help others:

> "*I mean it's definitely healthy in the sense that for me, I can use it with – I mean I coach a bunch of kids, right [...] So for me it's those examples when somebody says, you know, 'I'm thinking of doing this', and I probably might say 'well go for it because I regretted this, you might regret it if you don't do it' [...] So yes, it is definitely healthy and it's a reason to exist and a driver as opposed to bitter, twisted and looking at the whisky bottle.*"
>
> (P45. Private Equity)

In addition to maturity and age, a variety of other catalysts for the change to a secondary approach coping strategy were identified including illness, realising the benefits of the current occupation and coaching. Some reconciled acceptors reappraised the importance of their career in the context of the rest of their lives; a change in life stage was often a catalyst in this regard. P42, for example, had been in human resource management for her whole career, and had only recently begun to let go of her regret by reducing the salience of her career identity:

> "*I try to be thankful for what I have in my life and take my career as a side thing... I think that after I became a mother, because my priorities shifted and I see like that the essence is my baby, I just, you know, came to peace with that.*"

Ultimately, all reconciled acceptors resolve the regret they had originally felt, and found peace: "*If you accept something, you learn just to get on with it, but it's not in your mind all the time*" (P48. Small Business Owner).

### *3.10. Profile 4. Explorers*

> "*My fear was then, like, what would I do? And so what I've done in that time, three years, is I've picked up so many skills and I'd got the chance to really just test out different things. So like, you know, my interest in music, my interest in people and relationships, I picked up marketing. I love writing, so I ran a writer's group for a while. And I was like, so I felt like so many things I could do, but then how do I figure out what to focus on?*"
>
> (P18. Pharmacist)

Explorers are individuals who regret their occupational choice and live with their regret, experiencing regret episodes that involve several unsuccessful attempts to deal with it. However, they do not travel along the 'stagnater' stem (like crystallisers, stagnaters, and reconciled acceptors) because the defining feature of this profile is that explorers *only* employ primary approach coping strategies i.e. they attempt to deal with the object of regret by, for example, undertaking entry qualifications for a different occupation or career coaching to pinpoint a more suited career. In other words, these individuals explore alternative career opportunities. Whilst some of the attempts that explorers make to deal with the object of their regret are unsuccessful, they persevere, and ultimately come to believe that they have dealt with its cause. They achieve this by making a significant career change, either out of the career that they regret entering, or into the career that they regret forgoing. Because explorers always respond to regret triggers with attempts to deal with the source of their regret, this profile was considered a 'constructive regret profile' containing individuals who engage in what we term 'constructive cycling'. There were five explorers in the sample.

A feature of the explorer profile is a perceived lack of maturity at the time that the original career choice was made. As P16 recalls, he dropped out of an early college course because of "*the distraction with friends and stuff at a young age*." Another explorer, P44, discussed being unequipped by his education for making decisions about careers that require a degree of self-knowledge and reflection. Additionally, explorers generally recognise early on in their career that the cause of their unhappiness was linked to their occupation, and therefore knew to target the cause rather than the effects of their regret. When asked whether they thought regret to be a useful emotion, all responded that they thought it was useful because it could be motivating, suggesting that they see the regret as a challenge, rather than a threat (Blascovich, 2008). When describing the difference between a person who is in an unproductive cycle of regret and one who tries to focus on its causes, P44 pointed to the role of resilience:

> "*They've been in an active enquiry rather than, you know, and they've been experimental in their approach. They've also been generous with themselves in terms of dealing with failures and allowing failures and moving on from them*"

Two main types of explorer were identified in the dataset. The first were those who were in transition to a new career. P16, a male in his forties, is an example of this type of individual. Early in his interview, he stated that the major cause of regret in his working life was not pursuing a more creative career path. Despite being lauded for his ability to connect with clients in his social work, he believed he hadn't pursued his true interest. The regret was triggered several times throughout his career by events including encountering suicide and abuse in social work. Each time he was triggered, he attempted to deal with the source of his regret. On one occasion he registered for an educational course in music, and most recently he was undertaking a professional marketing qualification that he saw as a 'creative' occupation.

The second type of explorer identified included individuals who were a little further along the process, in that they had successfully switched occupation rather than being in transition. An example of this type of individual was P18, a pharmacist. She regretted this occupational choice and had explored new occupations including coaching and change consultancy. Her primary approach coping strategies included working with organisations that support individuals seeking career change and very deliberately trying her hand at different roles within potential new occupations:

> "*I then worked as a career advisor, a career coach, and that was really helpful for me to put things together, to see and to understand what were the interests, because I had several and what was more, what made me tick. And so that's how I narrowed it down […] I realised it was to do with business and it was to do with psychology*"

P18 referred to a lack of vocational maturity (Super, 1955) when she chose to become a pharmacist stating: "*it hadn't really clicked in my head that that was what I would be doing for life.*" She finally addressed her regret by moving into career coaching, ultimately becoming a learning and organisational development practitioner.

### *3.11. Profile 5. Early responders*

> "*I think: 'would I choose it again?' No, but I'm in it and I'll bloody well try hard to make the most of it, you know. And my focus is more on finding the positives in the situation, than thinking 'oh, woe is me, I've made such a huge mistake.'*"
>
> (P14; HR)

Early responders are individuals who respond effectively to their origin trigger i.e. the first regret trigger. As such, early responders differ from every other regretful individual in one important respect: they do not experience the repeated regret episodes that are common to other regret profiles. Instead, early responders act to deal with their regret before any repeated cycling can begin, and they are subsequently able to live fulfilling careers. For this reason, we classify early responders as belonging to a 'constructive' regret profile. Early responders recognise the cause of their regret at an early phase, which enables them to act so decisively. They do this through using either primary or secondary approach coping strategies which deal with the cause (rather than consequences) of their regret. There were three early responders in our sample.

P14, an HR professional, employed secondary approach coping. P14 entered a career in Human Resources following a postgraduate degree in the field and had been doing this for 20 years. Early on, she realised that she would have liked to have done something else related to interior decorating or design, stating: "*So whilst I'm proud of being an HR professional, would I choose it as a career? No, not in a million years, if I had my time again, you know*". However, P14 reported having immediately reframed her feelings of regret. It is this early action that led P14 to be coded as an early responder rather than a 'reconciled acceptor'; she was able to deal with her regret very early, prior to any cycling taking place. When asked why, she explained:

> "*I don't think there's any point wallowing in any regrets. I am where I am, it is what it is. My focus is to make the most of my – I'm an HR professional, that's what I am, you know. I could sit and moan and cry about it, what good would that do me? That would just, you know, adversely impact on my mental health, on my, you know, my self-worth, you know, I don't believe in that.*"

Consequently, P14 reported that she had a fulfilling career, stating that '*I'm very happy to tell people I'm in HR. I'm proud of being an HR person.*' She looks on the positive side of her career, noting that she is '*doing projects that are interesting*' and '*adding value*'. As P14 herself notes, the key to her feelings of fulfilment is her ability to reframe her regret: "*it's all about paradigm shifts, you know, adjusting the paradigm to current realities… it's about mindset.*"

Other early responders differed in the mechanism used to address with the regret. However, they were nonetheless coded as early responders because they dealt with their regret very early in their occupational tenure avoiding any cycling. Rather than reframing regret, these individuals used primary approach coping strategies that involved making a swift and decisive career change. P10 trained

for a career in hospitality management and began a promising career in this area. Her regret was triggered, however, when she realised that what she observed were the values of many clients and colleagues did not match her own:

> "*It was the industry that I was not liking, and I saw there was a lot of excessive, you know… people spending lots of money and […] that really shocked me. And I guess I realised I don't, I mean I could see my colleagues, that they were aligned to that, you know […] I don't feel this is my, this has meaning to me […] I don't know, I started having like all these questions*"

P10 then decided, very early on, to make a major switch, undertaking a PhD with a view to becoming an academic. It is this early action, rather than the mechanism used, that defines her as an early responder. She quickly moved up the ranks in academia, finding the career to be a much better fit with her interests and values:

> "*I've always been really geeky like, I was the kind of student like, in the library, like just on my own there like studying for hours. So no, I feel like I'm doing that again. I guess obviously now with more intellectual people, but yes, I just enjoy it.*"

In pinpointing the type of individual that would more likely be an early responder, like those on the explorer stem, these individuals were not felled by a regretted choice and were resilient in the face of wrong turns and conveyed optimism:

> "*Those experiences have made me who I am now, you know. If you think of your life as a tapestry, I think mine's quite colourful and, you know, so I don't want to detract from those experiences either.*"

(P14; HR)

Drawing on the idea of a positive outlook, one participant suggested, it's the difference between '*but people*' and '*and people.*'

### *3.12. Profile 6. Never-regretters*

> "*It's funny because, you know, I've sort had a couple of junctures where I've tried to consider what I should do and I have taken a couple of periods of time out, and it's difficult to think of what else I would have done. And I don't really know why, I don't have the imagination or the kind of exposure to figure it out but as a sort of career, I don't really regret it.*"

(P13. Scientist)

A subset of participants were theoretically sampled - those who did not regret their choice despite seeking a change. There were six individuals in this profile, all of whom were seeking to make or had recently made a change in their careers. Some were apathetic about the career path they had picked, and others reported having chosen the 'wrong' career path, but none wished to undo their past – a key feature of regret.

Two participants explained the lack of regret about their current occupation by describing how it contributed to their future career aspirations. Thus, the never-regretters were able to see their prior occupation as a 'means to an end'. For example, P32, a consultant, revealed his aspiration to start his own business in the future. Despite not being one that he '*loved*', his current occupation was important to his ultimate aim - allowing him to save money to start his venture, and also to gain relevant experience for it. P13, a 28-year-old who had just applied and was accepted to medical school, was another individual who didn't regret her occupational choice. Prior to deciding on medicine, she'd tried several avenues, and explained:

> "*I don't like having regrets, I think the place that you are now is… you get there by doing the things that you've done already. So if I hadn't done marine biology I wouldn't know that I liked watching things and liked movement and stuff. And then my cancer degree, like I figured out that I like doing research but I need to apply the things, so that was like 'OK, so how do I do that?' […] And then when I was doing my developmental biology, I was doing embedding of little mouse embryos and like working under a microscope and doing like very fine hand movements and things, and I was just like 'this is basically surgery and this your favourite part of this job'. And I was just like 'you should just go be a surgeon, like why have you not figured this out already? You should just go do that'. It was just kind of like an epiphany moment where I was just like 'oh that's what I should be doing with my life, OK, yes'. So yes, no, I don't regret it because I think everything has pointed in this direction and it's just taken me a little bit longer to get there, but now I'm on that path.*"

(P13. Scientist)

A further factor differentiating never-regretters from many of the participants *with* regret is the lack of expectation they felt from others. P13 described her parents as being laid back with both her and her sister's careers, whilst another never-regretter (P20) described how there had been no pressure on her to perform or succeed from her parents, which meant she could take '*wrong turns*' in her career without feeling regret.

Ultimately, none of never-regretters wished to undo their past or their initial, albeit incorrect, choice providing various reasons. Some pointed out that any alternative choices may have been equally wrong, whilst others believed that wrong decisions were opportunities for learning; as P32 stated, the experience is '*useful and valuable*'. Finally, P20 explained:

> "*I make it a personal thing to enjoy the journey and I'm quite an optimistic person, I find it quite easy to see the best in situations and to turn them into something good*"

## 4. Discussion

Regret is a ubiquitous emotion (Roese & Summerville, 2005), and with the abundance of career choice, access to information about

potential career paths and, consequently, far greater awareness of foregone alternatives (Obodaru, 2017), it is likely to grow in the context of individual careers. Occupational regret is distinctive from other forms because occupational decisions are infrequently taken (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020) and entail significant temporal, financial and identity-based investments. Indeed, Wrzesniewski et al. (2006) describe occupational regret as a chronic state that must 'be lived' and 'endured'. Its high potential for self-blame and enduring nature underscore the importance of more fully understanding how it plays out in order to inform individual and organisational mitigation strategies. Yet little research to date has focused on regret in the domain of careers, or in relation to occupational choice. To this end, our study sought to capture the lived experiences of self-identified regretters.

This study reveals the complex, cyclical and episodic nature of occupational regret, and identifies significant variation in the experience of this chronic cognitive emotion dependent upon the pathway taken through it. Our study identifies five major paths through regretted careers. *Stagnaters* experience corrosive regret, where a preoccupation with expended resources and rewards leads them to avoid dealing with the cause of their regret and stay in the regretted career indefinitely. At the other end of the spectrum, two profiles represent constructive regret that is successfully dealt with using approach coping strategies: *early responders* do this at a very early stage of regret, whereas *explorers* try out various ways of addressing the cause of their regret before finally dealing with it for good. In the middle, two further profiles represent mixed forms of regret that involve a period of avoidance followed by successful approach coping: *Reconciled acceptors* achieve this via secondary coping strategies, whereas *crystallisers* use primary strategies upon reaching an inflection point. This process model explains why some individuals remain 'in regret' over a lengthy period, whilst others do not. A key determinant of the pathway taken by individuals is how regret is dealt with. Those who are successful in removing their regret do this by dealing with its causes, usually by accepting or changing their regretted career path. Those who avoid their regret by addressing only its consequences, on the other hand, are rarely successful in removing it. In sum, our model expands understanding of occupation specific regret, contributing to both the careers and regret literatures, and highlighting theoretical and practical implications.

### *4.1. Enlightening the dark side of careers and career inaction*

Our first contribution is to the careers literature. The careers research landscape is characterised by a focus on the positive, leaving the 'dark side' relatively untouched (Baruch & Vardi, 2016). Seeking to understand what happens when individuals remain in undesired or mischosen occupations, Canivet et al. (2017) challenged scholars to investigate. We took up this challenge and our findings show that despite regret being a 'dark side' emotion, there are possible routes to acceptance and even resolution, and that these can be determined by an individual's psychological resources. Resilience and optimism (exhibited by the '*and people*', as opposed to the '*but people*', as one participant phrased it) are key to 'doing regret' constructively. In sum, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that provides a more balanced view of careers and redresses the balance to focus on the experience of missteps as well as successes.

A further contribution to the careers literature concerns the idea of career inaction – "a systematic analysis of why and when stable careers are sometimes dysfunctional" by Verbruggen and De Vos (2020: 5). Our study is empirical support for their contention that despite ostensibly little occurring in objectively stable careers, there may be much activity beneath the surface. We show that whilst not necessarily actively re-routing their careers, regretful individuals are nonetheless being active during their period of career inaction– engaging in psychological or career capital building work, albeit not always immediately successfully (i.e. those on the explorer path) or employing other coping strategies as outlined. Thus, our findings prompt us to suggest the inclusion of occupational regret (and its coping pathways) in their model as a possible cause of sustained career inaction. Although regret is included in their conceptual model, it is positioned as an outcome of career inaction (in the 'recall phase'), because individuals may come to regret their inaction. Whilst we support this theorising, our study demonstrates that regret may also feature much earlier too – during the 'awareness phase'. In other words, an individual may regret their occupation, as well as their inaction in addressing it, thus potentially compounding their career-related regret. This also highlights how regret at different levels (job, occupation, career) of the same domain (work), may interact or be related in important ways.

### *4.2. Revealing alternative pathways through regret*

Our second contribution is to depict the phenomenon of occupational regret - conceptual development that has not yet been engaged in and our study made unexpected findings about the complexity of this phenomenon. One key implication here lies in the identification of different regret profiles, which raises questions about treating occupational regret as a homogenous concept. In the same way that regret and other similarly valenced emotions can be separated by their causes and the behaviours they elicit (Lerner & Keltner, 2000), our different profiles within occupational regret suggest that they also need to be treated as discrete. Although not systematically examined, we found that different personal characteristics (e.g. resilience, maturity) and contextual factors (changes to life stage) might predict a particular profile. We challenge researchers to further investigate the different profiles of occupational regret.

A second key implication of our findings with respect to the concept of occupational regret concerns the concept of 'regret triggers'. Our study shows that occupational regret is characterised by an 'ebb and flow'; it may remain 'under the surface', but still felt, for significant periods of time. The key to bringing it to the fore is the regret trigger. This finding builds on one of the few previous studies of occupational regret (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019) by distinguishing between the underlying cause of occupational regret and specific triggers of a regret episode. Regret triggers take a variety of forms that fall under the categories of work-related events (such as features of the work environment) and non-work-related events (such as personal crises). Our research therefore shows that the cognitive

emotion of regret appears to be a key mechanism through which life and work events of various types can affect behavior in the workplace. Others may fruitfully investigate triggers in the future, for example, by examining the effects of the non-work event of the Covid-19 pandemic on the changes in regretful individuals' careers.

### 4.3. Occupational regret as a domain specific phenomenon

A further contribution lies in foregrounding the importance of examining domain specific regret. Verbruggen and De Vos (2020: 30) have advocated for exploring career decisions more systematically, as they recognise that "potentially important decision characteristics may be revealed." In taking up this challenge, our study suggests that generalised regret theory, such as Zeelenberg and Pieters's (2007) theory of regret regulation, can obscure issues that may be domain-specific, such as decision characteristics. Zeelenberg and Pieters (2007) state that: "undoing previous decisions occurs frequently. For example after buying a product which proves to be suboptimal, regret can motivate us to ask for our money back, or to switch to another supplier of services or product the next time around" (2007: 13). The assumption that decision reversal frequently occurs may have emanated from the large volume of regret research from a consumer decision making perspective. However, our findings indicate that in the domain of careers, and more specifically occupational choice, that decisions are typically neither frequently nor immediately undone. Moreover, career-related regret may be related to and triggered by a variety of factors besides the object of regret, including aspects of the wider work environment and non-work-related factors. Because of this, the way regret is experienced is distinctive. In particular, the majority of regretful subjects we investigated found themselves cycling through episodes as their regret ebbed and flowed. This insight suggests that regret theorising, such as the regret regulation model proposed by Zeelenberg and Pieters, may require attention to the complexity within certain domains, and the inclusion of a temporal dimension for decision domains in which choice reversal is less feasible.

### 4.4. Practical implications of our study

There are practical implications of our study at different levels – individual, organisational and occupational - and relating to different points in the career life cycle, namely prior to the career decision being made and once occupational regret has been triggered. We will take these in turn.

The regretful people in our study talked about a fundamental lack of fit with their occupation that manifested in different guises (e.g. not enjoying the nature of their work, a mismatch with desired lifestyle, or a lack of meaning). As such, at an individual level, the findings indicate that many of our regretters either lacked self or occupational knowledge at the time of choosing. This points to a need for more reflection and exploration at a younger age. Indeed, many of our participants stated wishing they had taken time to more fully explore when they were younger. However, it can be hard as an adolescent to recognise this need; the realisation often doesn't occur until after life experience is gained, making this advice futile. As such, a more impactful suggestion resulting from our study would be to encourage those who regret their occupation to use their knowledge in the service of others; specifically, to help others avoid cycling through occupational regret at the time when they are most likely to set the wheels of regret in motion – late adolescence. Indeed, several participants acknowledged that their experience could be passed on to their own children as advice to avoid occupational regret.

Our findings also have implications for individuals once they are experiencing regret, related to reflection, self-knowledge, and exploration. Many of our participants found themselves cycling because they were unsure of what else they could do, how they could make a switch, or because their attempts to change failed. The art of reflective practice and seeking others with whom one can examine oneself are particularly effective processes for self-learning (Schön, 1983). There are now numerous communities for career change, which can help in this respect. Such groups also provide a source of motivation and accountability for action taking and experimenting. This can help minimise regret cycling and can lead to individuals switching regret paths, as they employ approach rather than avoid coping strategies.

Individuals may also consider embracing different career 'designs'. Driver and Brousseau's (1983) 'spiral' career type emphasises that rather than moving up linearly within the same occupation, individuals can move to related positions, building on the skillset and the knowledge they have already accrued. Our regretful doctor, for example, upon realising that practising medicine was an issue for him, tried to seek out an alternative career based on helping burnt out doctors with a view to applying his knowledge of the medical profession.

Our study may also be informative to the helping professions (e.g. career counsellors and coaches). Our findings reveal multiple paths that follow from the realisation of a desire to change. Consequently, interventions can be targeted and tailored to the particular pathway that an individual currently treads. Those on a corrosive pathway can be aided to switch from avoid to approach coping strategies and facilitated in achieving success in the approach strategies they employ. For example, stagnaters can be directed to psychological tools to help undo regret (e.g. reframing) or towards reflection tools to help build self-awareness of career-related values and interests (vocational identity) to help make changes specifically addressing the object of the regret.

At an organisational level, the findings should help managers recognise the signs of occupational regret. Where a realistic option – such as in contexts/roles with high autonomy like professional occupations – managers could encourage job crafting, which Burgess et al. (2020) have identified as being associated with lower withdrawal effects among individuals who report having a foregone preferred career path. However, many occupations and roles may not present such opportunities; here, an alternative may lie with HR professionals. HR practices that help to reveal individuals' true passions and strengths can improve the deployment of people into jobs where these passions are fulfilled and where talents are better used. This is aligned with a positive psychology approach to career development involving strengths-based talent management, instead of a deficit approach that focuses on the remediation of

'development needs'. As noted by one participant, having a career counselling service within one's own organisation, as they did, can be crucial to reflecting on and evaluating career direction candidly with a third party. This solution, however, is often a luxury that only large resource-rich organisations can afford.

As already noted, much regret comes from a lack of understanding about the occupation one has chosen to enter. This only becomes clear once an individual has sufficient experience therein (by which time they will have made the usually high investment required to enter that occupation). This points to an implication for professional bodies or occupation-specific institutions. These organisations could assume greater responsibility for helping prospective members of their occupation truly understand the career path upon which they are considering embarking. This would mitigate both the negative individual outcomes - regret - and occupational risks - unnecessary occupational turnover or a workforce of individuals who feel trapped in their mischosen occupation and the accompanying lack of commitment to it (Budjanovcanin et al., 2019).

The final implication is also aimed at a broader level. The dormant phase described in our study suggest that regret can remain unaddressed over long periods and potentially be repressed, which may be detrimental. Where individuals do not feel equipped to take action against this, policy could play a role. Notable statistics about the numbers of people unhappy with their career situation or wishing for career change (London School of Business and Finance, 2015), point to the need for better career advisory or guidance structures at earlier life stages, which government policy could tackle. Most of our participants bemoaned the poor careers advice received during school, with one of our accountants joking that her guidance had pointed her towards becoming a fence erector. To minimise the individual, organisational and economic costs associated with the lower engagement that comes with regret, governments could be working with schools and colleges to provide more effective initiatives for gaining self and career insights – capturing, like we have, the stories of regretful individuals, and providing a realistic preview of occupations, as well as the many investments they incur that make them difficult to undo. At later career stages, policies such as the OECD's "lifelong learning for all" is an example of a broader level intervention that could contribute to regretful individuals feeling able to make transitions later in their careers. However, such policy must move beyond rhetoric to actionable practices adopted at organisational and individual levels.

### *4.5. Limitations and future research*

Some limitations emerged from this study, along with several avenues for further research. One limitation is the retrospective nature of at least some of the interviews, which can lead to recall bias and may be subject to the effects of the current mind state of the interviewee (Pierret, 2001). Our interviews were conducted with individuals not only recalling their experience of regret but also currently experiencing it, allowing a more accurate recounting of their experience of regret. Nonetheless, prospective studies may provide further information on the dynamics of regret. A further limitation is that, whilst the sample includes a diverse range of interviewees, there is a bias towards more educated and professional individuals (86% hold a degree level qualification). This may be important because of the investment in a career that higher education represents; those with greater investments may experience and respond to regret differently. The sample was also biased towards younger participants; although the age of our sample ranged from 26 to 67, the average age was 37 years. Older individuals with longer careers and greater life experience may perceive regret differently. Research with a more diverse range of individuals may be fruitful, especially in determining if particular groups or occupations give rise to particular regret profiles.

More broadly, there are several areas where we suggest further research on this topic. First, both age and significant life events emerged from the data as factors that affected the way individuals thought about and reacted to their regret. Future research should consider how an individual's temporal focus, the 'extent to which individuals characteristically direct their attention to the past, present, and/or future' (Shipp and Aeon, 2019: 37), influences the type of regret that they are experiencing. Likewise, research may investigate whether interventions to alter time perspective (e.g. Marko & Savickas, 1998) are an effective way to ameliorate harmful regret.

Second, and related to this, another fruitful avenue for future research is to investigate aspects of regretful individuals' lived experience over time. One such area that warrants investigation is individual well-being over time within regret pathways. In particular, those on the stagnater pathway described to us a long-term process of living with (and in many cases repeatedly avoiding) feelings of regret. This suggests potentially substantial effects on individuals across time, whilst we might also hypothesise that long-term regret of this type can 'spill over' across work-life boundaries and affect relationships and other aspects of home life. Further research might therefore usefully investigate how long-term regret affects physical and mental health using objective health measures and prospective methods.

A further aspect of regret over time that could be usefully investigated concerns the experience of regret in the much shorter term and at the early career stage. Here, prospective research could examine how regret is experienced by neophyte workers such as recent graduates, how this experience is related to the processes of organisational and occupational socialization, and which contextual or individual variables assist individuals in dealing with these feelings in the way that the early responders in our sample did. It would also be useful to examine the mechanics of the specific episodes of exploring undertaken by the explorers in our study. In contrast to those on other pathways, explorers managed to make several career changes to deal with their regret, even if these were not always successful. Key questions here include which strategies were most effective, and how these individuals differ from others in terms of resources, individual differences, or other potential factors giving rise to feelings of agency. This information would be particularly useful from a practical perspective.

A third area that warrants further research attention concerns the concept of 'regret triggers' that emerged from our analysis. In our study, there was no emergent evidence of differences in the type of triggers experienced by individuals in different profiles, which is a little surprising. For example, we might hypothesise that the long-term regretful stagnaters are likely to be triggered by comparisons

with others' careers, whereas short-term regretful 'early responders' are more likely to be triggered by unmet expectations during early socialization. Further quantitative research with a larger sample of regretful individuals may explore this issue further. Additionally, research at the micro level may further investigate the mechanics of regret triggers. Such research should examine whether individuals are particularly susceptible to or vigilant towards regret triggers at certain times (such as during periods of organisational or personal instability), how the triggers affect well-being in the short term, and what determines individual tolerance to regret triggers. The temporal aspects of triggers may also be an important avenue of study, given that there was variance in the frequency with which triggers were reported to occur in our sample.

Finally, and more broadly, this study illuminates the intricacies of navigating occupation-specific regret. This suggests that conducting more detailed investigation of other domain-specific regrets may be fruitful and challenges regret scholars to examine other regret domains in a similarly detailed way to uncover domain specific decision attributes and processes. For example, it is possible that different profiles may also emerge within other regretted decision domains. Further detailed examination could also be conducted in relation to the foci of regret, within a particular domain. This is clearly illustrated in relation to work where regret can occur at multiple levels – the job, organisation, career or occupation. Examining interactions between these nested concepts could provide insights into how regret at different levels might be alleviated. Such approaches can help to develop the knowledge base of this ubiquitous emotion beyond mapping its nomological network in different domains.

## 5. Conclusion

Perceived career choice mistakes are common, painful and hard to reverse; these particular qualities make this emotion so critical to understand. Our offering towards this understanding provides the groundwork for developing a theory of occupational regret and comprehension of how this enduring emotion can be successfully navigated and resolved.

## Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Alexandra Budjanovcanin:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Chris Woodrow:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Visualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103743.

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