The Reasons Behind a Career Change Through Vocational Education and Training

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Abstract: We report the results of qualitative research on adults who enrolled in a vocational and education training (VET) program with the intention of changing their careers. The participants were 30 adults aged between 25 and 45 years. A modified version of the consensual qualitative research method was applied to transcriptions of semi-structured interviews with the participants. There appeared to be two main reasons underlying the decision to enrol in a VET program with the aim of initiating a career change. Based on the reasons given, two groups (career changers and proactive changers) and five distinct categories were recognized. The career changers included individuals who wished to change careers due to dissatisfaction with their current situation. In this group, the decisions were motivated by either health problems or personal dissatisfaction. The proactive changers included individuals who wished to reorient their career because of a desire to undertake new projects. In this group, there were three categories of reasons: a wish to attain better working conditions, a search for personal growth and a desire to have an occupation that fitted the person's vocation. Thus, the participants reoriented their careers according to various motivations, pointing to the existence of a heterogeneous population and the complexity of the phenomenon. The results highlight the importance of understanding the subjective reasons behind career changes and the need to adjust career interventions accordingly.

Keywords: VET, Vocational Education and Training, Career Change, Work Transition, Qualitative Research, Adult Learning, Career Choice

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1 Introduction

The contemporary world of work is characterized by constant and unpredictable changes. Consequently, careers are less stable and foreseeable, and work transitions increase in frequency and complexity (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Hall & Mirvis, 2014; Rudisill, Edwards, Hershberger, Jadwin, & McKee, 2010). Work transitions cover (re)entries in the labor market, role changes within an organization, advancements, as well as "leave-or-seek transitions" (Heppner & Scott, 2006, p. 157). The latter lead to actual career changes, i.e. shifts from an occupation to a new, different one (Ibarra, 2006). In these cases, work transitions might be complex, because workers have to integrate a relatively unknown occupational context and learn new skills. In order to be able to do that, they might decide—or are asked—to enroll in a formal qualification process (Carless & Arnup, 2011). In such cases, vocational education and training (VET) is often preferred, as it allows to obtain quite quickly a qualification and to integrate a new career domain (Masdonati, Fournier, & Pinault, 2015). Yet, little is known about the reasons explaining why people change their career through a VET program.

1.1 Career Change

According to Ibarra (2006), career changes refer "to a subset of work role transitions that include a change of employers, along with some degree of change in the actual job or work role and the subjective perception that such changes constitute a 'career change'" (p. 77). They consist then of a specific type of work transition, implying the shift to an occupation that is different from the past occupation. From an objective viewpoint, the difference between the past and the new occupation can be more or less radical. Whatever the case may be, the change is not part of a typical career path (Carless & Arnup, 2012) and must be subjectively considered as such by the person who experiences it. Career changes can be voluntary—e.g. the person autonomously decides to change—or involuntary—e.g. the person is laid off and forced to change—although it is often difficult to determine the actual person's agency on his or her transition (Fouad & Bynner, 2008).

Research on the topic focuses on three different aspects of a career change that we call *inputs*, *processes*, and *outputs*. *Inputs* refer to the reasons, motives, or antecedents of a career change, i.e. to the factors that initiate and lead to a change, and will be developed in the following paragraph. *Processes* refer to the experience of change itself, i.e. the stages and phases workers pass through during a career change. Négroni (2007), for example, identified five phases for voluntary career changes: countered vocation, disengagement, latency, bifurcation, and renewed engagement. Similarly, Barclay, Stoltz, and Chung (2011) also speak about five stages: precontemplation/disengagement, contemplation/growth, preparation/exploration, action/establishment, and maintenance. *Outputs* refer to the effects, outcomes, and impacts of a career change on the life of the individual, and are associated with the radicality and likelihood of change, the satisfaction with the new situation, and the speed and ease of the transition (Ibarra, 2006). A successful career change may then lead to workers' empowerment and confidence (Bahr, 2010),

as well as to higher job satisfaction (Carless & Arnup, 2012) and perceived mastery (Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007).

Concerning the *input* dimension, which we focus on in the present contribution, the reasons explaining a career change are generally divided into "push" or "pull" movements (e.g. Wise & Millward, 2005). Actually, the antecedents of career change are factors that "might pull individual toward a new career or push them away from the old" (Ibarra, 2006, p. 77). Beyond this bimodal classification, the reasons of career change highlighted in past research may be divided into five distinct categories: avoiding job insecurity or poor work conditions; coping with a particular life event or personal circumstance; reducing dissatisfaction and work frustration; performing a meaningful, interesting work; looking for a work-life balance (Bahr, 2010; Barclay et al., 2011; Carless & Arnup, 2011; Dieu & Delhaye, 2009; Donohue, 2007; Fournier, Gauthier, Perron, Masdonati, Zimmermann, & Lachance, 2017; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014; Khapova, Arthur, Wilderom, & Svensson, 2007; Négroni, 2007; Peake & McDowall, 2012).

1.2 Career Change through Vocational Education and Training

Besides input, process and output factors, some *moderator* factors may influence the experience of a career change. Past research stressed, e.g., that career changes vary according to personal (e.g. age, gender, education) or psychosocial characteristics (e.g. personality, attitudes, perceived mastery, professional identity), to the environment (e.g. family situation, network, social support), and to situational factors (e.g. concomitant life circumstances, timing, chance events, socioeconomic context) (Bahr, 2010; Carless & Arnup, 2011; Higgins, 2001; Hostetler et al., 2007; Ibarra, 2006; Khapova et al., 2007; Peake & McDowall, 2012). Among moderator factors, the necessity to go back to school in order to qualify for a new occupation may influence the decision and the experience of a career change, and is sometimes considered as an obstacle to it (Ibarra 2006; Juntunen & Bailey, 2014). Actually, when a career change implies returning to school, individuals have to take into account a supplementary, sometimes dissuading step in order to implement their plans (Donohue, 2007). We consider that the case of career changes implying a return to school is a particular one since it concerns adults who were able to engage in a time- and resource-demanding additional stage in order to realize their project (Carless & Arnup, 2011). We expect then that this population presents particular and specific motivations for a career change.

Surprisingly, few studies have specifically focused on career changes involving a return to school (Hostetler et al., 2007), the latter being at best considered as one among different configurations of career changes (Bahr, 2010; Dieu & Delhaye , 2009; Négroni, 2007). VET constitutes an educational option that can be chosen by adults who want to change career. It enables to learn an occupation in a quick and direct way, which confines the costs—in terms of time and money—of a career change project (Juntunen & Bailey, 2014). In western societies, VET consists in the combination of theoretical and practical courses, often associated with direct learning in real companies through internships or a dual education system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014).

The present research was carried out in the province of Quebec, Canada, where VET students enroll in one- to two-year programs, and most of them are offered theoretical education and practical training in vocational schools and benefit at the same time from internships in real companies (Cournoyer, Fortier, & Deschenaux, 2016; Lehmann, Taylor, & Wright, 2014). These secondary-level programs are available to students who did not obtain their general high school diploma. Although adolescents can enroll in a VET program already during compulsory education, most VET students in Quebec are adults, the mean age being higher than 25 years old (Doray, 2010; Ministry of education of Quebec, [MELS], 2010). The Quebecer education system is indeed very flexible, so that returning to school—at different education levels, from high school to university—is facilitated thank to an effective adult education system (Charbonneau, 2006). The latter is the result of education reforms that intended to encourage workers who had integrated the labor market without a qualification to return to school (Lavoie, Levesque, & Aubin-Horth, 2008). The main goal of these reforms was to reduce labor market precariousness in the knowledge society, i.e. in a context where formal qualifications are a key protective factor against job insecurity (Doray & Bélanger, 2005). The high proportion of adults enrolled in a VET program suggests that people wanting to change career might consider VET as an attractive option in order to get a new—or a first—qualification (Doray, 2010).

1.3 Career Change as a Psychosocial Transition

From a theoretical viewpoint, we conceive and analyze career change through VET as a psychosocial transition (Masdonati & Zittoun, 2012; Parkes, 1971; Zittoun, 2009). This perspective implies considering intra-psychological, interpersonal, and social influences on career change processes. It also involves focusing on subjectivity and meaning making, i.e. on the reasons for a career change as they are experienced and perceived by the individuals—consciously omitting the possibly divergent objective reasons (Fournier et al., 2017; Rudisill et al., 2010, Murtagh, Lopes, Lyons, 2011). Moreover, the psychosocial perspective implies integrating a time dimension in the understanding of transitions and career changes (Hostetler et al., 2007; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014). That means that we are interested in the specificities of a career change as an adult's transition, i.e. a transition that is biographically paced and anchored in (and articulated according to) concrete past experiences (Boutinet, 2007; Juntunen & Bailey, 2014; Merriam, 2005). The temporal dimension also stresses that a transition has to be considered as a process covering three main phases (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012): a sort of "incubation" period, where the person anticipates the changes and the new situation he or she is preparing for; the moment of the concrete movement, where people focus on coping with the changes that are prompted by the new situation; an integration phase, where the person pursues a kind of stability within the new situation. In that sense, analyzing the reasons for career change means concentrating on the first phase of the process, i.e. on the factors that initiated the transition movement. Finally, like every psychosocial transition, a career change encompasses formal or informal learning processes and the acquisition of new social, cognitive, or technical skills (Carless & Arnup, 2011; Masdonati & Zittoun, 2012; Merriam, 2005; Zittoun, 2008). Preparing and

integrating a new occupation actually means, for example, learning how to be competent in doing that job and how to manage work role transitions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), as well as how to interact with new colleagues in order to be accepted in their community of practice (Wenger, 1998). In our research, learning processes are formalized through the enrollment in VET programs, but we also suppose that informal learning processes already occur before the transition and might initiate career changes.

The aim of the present research was to explore and categorize the reasons underlying career changes through VET as they are subjectively experienced and explained by career changers at different moments of their life course. In line with our theoretical psychosocial perspective, we opted for an idiographic approach and focused on the inductive understanding of different reasons of career change, which respects the richness of subjective data as well as the complexity and specificities of this transitional process. We then tried to fill in the gap of knowledge on the reasons motivating a career change that includes a return to school, particularly to VET, and proposed a research that was neither focused on specific occupations nor limited to a particular life stage of adults' development.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

Participants were 30 VET students, 14 females and 16 males, aged between 25 and 45 years old ($M = 30.10$, $SD = 4.81$). Inclusion criteria were being between 25 and 45 years old and having worked for at least two years before enrolling in VET. VET programs were selected in two steps. First, we identified the VET domains where students were the oldest according to the statistics about the Province of Quebec[1]. Second, we contacted VET schools in the Quebec City area and asked the school directors who were interested in participating in the project to have access to the programs where the students' mean ages were the highest, according to their own school statistics.

Twenty-five out of 30 participants were in a VET program that had nothing to do with their previous occupational field, whereas five of them enrolled in a program leading to a new occupation within the same field or in a near field. According to the 2016 Canadian National Occupational Classification[2], the selected VET programs covered three occupational domains: health (licensed practical nurses, $N = 13$); construction and equipment (refrigeration mechanics and welders, $N = 10$); natural resources and agriculture (arboriculturists, horticulturists, and landscape designers, $N = 7$). Participants' occupation before enrolling in VET enclosed very diverse domains: sales and service ($N = 9$, e.g. salesperson); education, community and government services ($N = 5$, e.g. drug addiction worker); health ($N = 4$, e.g. patient care aide); arts and culture ($N = 4$, e.g. graphic designer); trades, transport and equipment ($N = 9$, e.g. truck driver); business and administration ($N = 3$, e.g. secretary). Ten participants were

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[1] http://www.inforoutefpt.org
[2] http://noc.esdc.gc.ca

single, 20 had a partner, including five who were married, and eight had one to three children. Concerning they education level, six of them already had a VET degree in another occupational field, 14 had diplomas higher than VET (e.g. technical education, bachelor degree), and ten had lower levels of education than VET (e.g. high school degree or less).

2.2 Material

Semi-structured, 60 to 120 min interviews were carried out individually with participants. The interview guide was tested with three adults having experienced a career change that implied a return to school, and adjusted according to their feedback. Interviews were structured into six themes: (1) sociodemographic information; (2) life path; (3) reasons for career change and of return to school; (4) systemic influences on career change and on return to school; (5) relationship to work and occupational identity; (6) articulation of student and adult roles. For the present contribution, we mainly focused on the third theme and on its main question: "What brought you to change your career and to go back to a VET program?" When the answer to this question was not satisfactorily detailed, interviewers asked follow-up questions, such as: "What were the triggers that made you take this decision?" and "Which particular events influenced this decision?"

2.3 Procedure

After having received the accordance of school directors, two members of the research team presented the project in the classes of the VET programs that were selected for the study. At the end of each presentation, they asked interested students to inscribe for an interview. Participation in the study was then voluntary. During the days following the class presentations, the research team members contacted the students who were interested in participating in the research in order to schedule a meeting. We then met each participant individually in an isolated room in their school or at Laval university, depending on their preference. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed with the authorization of participants. Data were collected and treated in conformity with the American Psychological Association ethics and with the approval of the ethics committee of our university.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using the software QDA-Miner 3.2.3 and consisted in an adaptation of the consensual qualitative research procedure (CQR, Hill, 2012), already tested in previous research (Masdonati, Fournier, Pinault, & Lahrizi, 2016). We selected CQR because of the exploratory and inductive aim of our research. Its adaptation was adopted in order to deal with a bigger dataset than traditional CQR, the latter being conceived for smaller samples and shorter interviews. The analysis team was composed of five members: a professor in career counseling and development (researcher 1), two PhD students (researchers 2 and 3), and two Master students (researchers 4 and 5). The

four students already had previous experiences as research assistants in qualitative research in the field of career counseling and development and were trained and supervised by researcher 1. Data analysis entailed three steps: domains identification; categories definition; coding. Our first step corresponds to the CQR stages of developing a domain list and identifying core ideas and was carried out by researchers 2 to 5, researcher 1 being the auditor. Our second and third steps correspond to the CQR cross-analysis stage and were mainly carried out by researchers 2 and 4, researchers 1, 3, and 5 playing the role of auditors.

2.4.1 Domains Identification

This first step was divided into three substeps. First, the team members shared and went through the 30 interview transcriptions. During a team meeting, they then consensually identified and defined seven domains: life and vocational path; reasons for the career change; process of career change; meaning of career change; future plans; work-to-school transition; representations of VET. Second, researchers 2 to 5 separately coded the domains of four common transcriptions, compared their coding and reached consensus in a team meeting with researcher 1. The remaining 26 transcriptions were then shared for the coding of domains of the whole sample. Third, researchers 2 to 5 fulfilled a summary sheet for each participant, summing up what characterized them in each of the seven domains. This substep replaced then the core ideas stage of the CQR.

2.4.2 Categories Definition

According to our topic, the second step was only applied both on the summary sheets and on the interviews sections covering the second domain, i.e. "reasons for the career change". Three substeps characterized the definition of categories. First, researchers 2 and 4 separately read all the summary sheets, went through the interviews sections, and identified a common preliminary categorization of reasons. Second, they submitted their categorization to researchers 1, 3, and 5, and the research team met in order to discuss and consensually adjust it. Third, researchers 2 and 4 wrote down a definition and a detailed description—including exemplary quotes—of each category. These definitions were sent to the three other researchers, who commented and completed them, leading to a final version of the categories definition, description, and illustration.

2.4.3 Coding

The third step was carried out by researchers 2 and 4, researcher 1 playing the auditor role, and was divided into three substeps. First, the two researchers identified meaning units within the selected interview sections and coded each unit independently, according to the categories defined in the previous step. They then compared their coding and found consensus in the case of disagreement. This substep resulted in the identification of the different reasons each participant had evoked in order to explain her or his career change. Second, researchers 2 and 4 independently selected, among the possible different reasons a participant could evoke, the main reason explaining career change. Again, they

compared their coding and found consensus in the case of disagreement. Cohen's Kappa inter-rater reliability indexes were almost perfect for the first substep, $k = .92$, and substantial for the second substep, $k = .73$ (Landis & Koch, 1977). Third, we calculated the frequencies of both evoked reasons and of the main reason for the career change, and we identified the most recurrent co-occurrences between evoked reasons—i.e. categories of reasons that were often simultaneously evoked by participants.

3 Results

Our analyses pointed out the existence of five distinct reasons for career change through VET: dealing with health problems; reducing dissatisfaction; attaining attractive working conditions; growing personally; pursuing a vocation. The five categories of reasons were assigned to two higher order categories or themes, i.e. reactive changes and proactive changes, and each category covered two to three lower-order categories or declinations. Table 1 proposes an overview of the types (themes), reasons (categories) and declinations (subcategories) of career changes.

Table 1: Overview of the Types, Reasons, and Declinations of career changes through VET

Type of change (themes)	Reason for change (categories)	Declinations (subcategories)
Reactive changes ($N_e = 21$; $N_m = 12$)	1. Dealing with health problems ($N_e = 6$; $N_m = 2$)	– Physical health problems
		– Psychological health problems
	2. Reducing dissatisfaction ($N_e = 20$; $N_m = 10$)	– Unsatisfying work characteristics
		– Unsatisfying employment conditions
Proactive changes ($N_e = 26$; $N_m = 18$)	3. Attaining attractive working conditions ($N_e = 20$; $N_m = 8$)	– Good integration perspectives
		– Desirable work context
		– High-quality employment conditions
	4. Growing personally ($N_e = 12$; $N_m = 3$)	– Learning of new skills
		– Need for a life change
	5. Pursuing a vocation ($N_e = 23$; $N_m = 7$)	– Fitting interests
		– Fitting values

Note. $N = 30$. N_e = number of participants evoking the reason. N_m = number of participants considering the reason as the main reason for career change.

The following sections report the definitions, descriptions, and illustrations of each category and subcategory of reasons within the two themes, as well as frequencies and co-occurrences within participants. Illustrations consist of participants' quotes that we considered being good exemplifications of each category and subcategory of reasons. The rationale for the selection of quotes also took into account the variety of our sample in terms of VET domains.

3.1 Reactive Changes

The first main type of change refers to reactive career changers, i.e. participants who changed their career primarily with the intention of breaking their current occupational situation ($N = 12$). Two categories of reasons were concerned here: the necessity to deal with physical or psychological health problems and the wish to reduce work or employment dissatisfaction.

3.1.1 Dealing with Health Problems

Six participants decided more or less voluntarily to change career because of health problems, which was the main reason for a career change for two of them. The latter could be physical, such as back pain, or psychological, such as stress, depression, or burnout. This decision could arise from a personal statement—e.g. introspection, feeling of a decreasing wellbeing—or from the recommendation of health professionals—e.g. physicians, psychologists, physiotherapists. As for physical issues, for example, participant 6, a 33 years old male, enrolled in a refrigeration mechanic VET program after having injured his arm when he worked as a roofer. He told us:

> *I had reached that point. I got hurt. So, now I choose another career that will look for similarities compared to where I was, but I will have to go back in a new career.*

Concerning psychological issues, for example, participant 8 (male, 28 years old) decided to change from nurse to welder in order to go through a depression:

> *You know, the events that happened to me, the attempt I made. When I did my depression, it was like... it made me decide to do it. That's why I say it's as if it was... somehow, not a choice, but an imposition that I made myself.*

3.1.2 Reducing Dissatisfaction

Twenty participants were unsatisfied with their former occupation, and among them, ten participants considered dissatisfaction as the main reason for a career change. This dissatisfaction was due to work characteristics or employment conditions. In the first case, participants no longer had an interest in the very nature of the job, which did not allow them to feel happy at work. They felt that they had "done their time", not being in their place, or that the tasks they had to perform were no longer appropriate, or had been modified. That is what stated participant 11 (female, 32 years old, future practical nurse) about her previous experience as waitress:

> *It's really a local restaurant, people get along very well, so it's fun. But I'm sick of catering; I know that, at some point... No, that's also what made me decide: do I want to spend my life talking about wine, while I've moved on to other things in my life?*

In the second case, people were unsatisfied with what characterized employment beyond work contents. They spoke about concrete hard conditions, job insecurity (e.g. changes in the organizational structure, risk of layoff), demanding work schedules and work hours, and a deteriorating work climate. Participant 18, a 28 years old male, future horticulturist who previously worked as personnel supervisor in a gaming center and in several other part-time jobs, said for example:

> *I couldn't stand it anymore to finish at 3am, then to arrive at home at 4am. Then you have the kids jumping into the bed at 6am. I could sleep until 11am, but it was not great nights, mentally. I was not very good, I had to work at day, at night: it wasn't good.*

3.2 Proactive Changes

The second main type of career changes refers to proactive changers, i.e. individuals who reoriented their career above all because they aimed at realizing new professional and personal plans ($N = 18$). Unlike reactive changers, proactive changers were more future-oriented, and their decision to change was less relied to their previous more or less unsatisfying occupation. This type included three categories of reasons: a wish to attain attractive working conditions; the search of personal growth; the desire to have an occupation that fits with one's vocation.

3.2.1 Attaining Attractive Working Conditions

Twenty people made the choice to integrate a new field since they were looking for a better professional future. Unlike the previous category, participants were here more driven by new attractive opportunities than by dissatisfaction toward their former occupational situation. General working conditions were considered attractive according to three distinct criteria. Firstly, the new occupation guaranteed good labor market integration perspectives, due to high job opportunities in the field. That is what participant 4 (male, 31 years old) experienced when he decided to stop working in the earthwork and snow clearing sectors in order to enroll in a welder VET program:

> *I said to myself: "I'm going to do something that will be quick, that at the moment is in demand". That's really the right timing to be a welder. It's like people who studied IT ten years ago. Today, it's saturated... But today, welding... I made an informed choice, with that.*

Secondly, the career change opened up to a desirable work context, i.e. a fulfilling work environment, a good working climate, or a diversity of tasks. For example, participant 16 (male, 31 years old), moved from a job as sporting goods salesperson to a VET program as arboriculturist in order to work in a more stimulating environment:

> *I wanted to be outside all the time, tripping. This is the main... in the types of jobs I was looking for, I made a selection in my career choice: being outdoors, physical endurance, these are things that I wanted.*

Thirdly, the new occupation led to high-quality employment conditions, such as good wages, job security, and satisfying schedules. The latter situation is illustrated by participant 5, a 27 years old male enrolled in a refrigeration mechanic VET program, who previously worked as an infantry soldier and hardware store assistant:

> *My salary allowed me to be OK, but it didn't allow me to make plans for my future. [...] It allowed me to save money, to pay a small trip, my holidays or maybe to change little things, to change my TV, for example. But not to the point of telling me: "I save to be able to invest in my retirement funds, or to be able to put money aside in order to have a down payment for a house".*

3.2.2 Growing Personally

Twelve participants chose to change career in order "to add a string to their bow", to grow, to develop as an individual, or even to flourish. Three of them considered this reason as the one best explaining their career change. This decision was based on personal or professional reasons and was related to two distinct sorts of needs. First, participants spoke about a need for a change in life, for surpassing themselves, and for succeeding. A career change represented then a personal rather than a mere professional development. Changing their lives could mean having the possibility to think about different future plans, meeting new challenges, or simply feeling alive. That is what motivated participant 19 (25 years old) to quit her job as secretary in order to become practical nurse:

> *I think that's what I needed: to make my life move. Nothing happened in my life. I didn't really like... You know, I didn't see myself being secretary all my life [...] Then I needed new challenges and, again, to find myself, I think.*

Second, participants spoke about the need for learning new skills. They changed their career mainly to deepen their knowledge, to learn new things, and were curious and eager to learn. That was the case of participant 13, 45 years old, future horticulturist, previously working as waiter and import-export salesperson:

> *I said to myself: "But what would I do to go on with my quest for knowledge?" [...] I don't have much knowledge, but I like to learn in this field. Then, at one point, when I read the descriptive sheet of the vocational training program, I said to myself: "OK, I might never be a great botanist, but I can be an excellent gardener, I can study gardening, horticulture".*

3.2.3 Pursuing a Vocation

Twenty-three people realized that there was an occupation that could fill them, seven of them considering that their decision to change career was first and foremost due to that reason. They experienced a sort of awareness, a realization of the existence of a vocation, hitherto hidden or not followed. This realization was related to their values or to their

interests. In the first case, people decided to change career to invest an occupational field that was closer to their work values, but also to their life and ethical principles, such as caring, sharing, lifelong learning or open-mindedness. For example, after having taken care of her grandmother until her death, participant 11 (32 years old) realized that working as a waitress impeded her to meet her core life values. She decided then to enroll in a VET program of practical nurse:

> *It's my grandmother [illness]. The contact with hospitals, all that, and the fact that I deeply love people. Then I find that injustice, mistreatment and those things, it completely revolts me. To be able to change the comfort of a person. You know, that's what matters to me.*

In the second case, some participants decided to integrate a field that would better meet their interests. These interests had been present for a long time or had emerged only recently or gradually. For example, at the age of 31 participant 12, who previously worked as helmsman, discovered an interest for working with plants, which led him to enroll in a landscape designer VET program:

> *I've always liked working in plants, you know: I'm manual. That led me to choose this program in particular. Then, when the first time, when I signed up, basically it was much more for... let's say, how do we call it? "Personal interest".*

3.3 Frequencies and Co-occurrences

Table 1 indicates the frequency of evocation of each category, as well as the number of participants considering each category as the main reason for their career change. Concerning these numbers, we state that most participants changed career because of several reasons, mentioning on average 2.7 reasons that explained their decision to change. An overview of the major co-occurrences of reasons for changing career indicates for example that heath problems were never evoked as an isolated factor. They were mainly associated with dissatisfaction toward the past occupation (first category of reasons, five out of six participants) and with the desire to pursue a vocation (fifth category, also five out of six participants). The latter was also evoked by 17 out of 20 participants who at the same time aspired to attractive working conditions. Finally, 17 out of 30 participants evoked both reactive and proactive types of change.

4 Discussion

An idiographic approach of the subjective reasons explaining a career change through VET indicates that people reoriented their career according to very diverse motivations, which suggests the existence of a heterogeneous population of adults, having specific life paths and experiences. Moreover, in line with Howes and Goodman-Delahunty's (2014) results, career change decisions are rarely explained by a distinct, isolated reason. They seem rather triggered by a combination of multiple reasons and by the articulation of

both intra-individual (e.g. need for a life change and for a job that fits personal values and interests, our fourth and fifth categories of reasons) and contextual influences (e.g. need for better employment conditions and integration perspectives, our second and third categories of reasons). In line with a psychosocial approach, this statement indicates that career changes suppose complex and challenging decisions. Particularly when it implies going back to school, adults probably decide to change career only when more than a single factor combine and simultaneously drive to such a decision. For example, some participants found the strength to initiate a change because they identified an occupation that was interesting both from a vocational viewpoint and in terms of working conditions. Others opted for a change because unsatisfying work and employment characteristics were coupled with threats to their physical or mental health. The fact that more than the half of participants evoked both reactive and proactive reasons seems to corroborate the "multicausality" of career change decisions.

Our results confirm the existence of two main categories of push and pull factors stressed in the literature (Ibarra, 2006; Wise & Millward, 2005), qualified here as reactive and proactive changes. The implications and meaning of a career change might then be different for a person who wants to quit an unsatisfying situation (reactive change), comparatively to those who are drawn to an appealing new job (proactive change). Although theoretically pertinent, from an empirical viewpoint this distinction needs yet to be nuanced: the splitting of push and pull factors might sometimes be artificial or difficult to detect in qualitative material, since many participants decided to change their career because of both reactive and proactive motivations. The more precise five categories of reasons for career change that emerged from our analyses also globally tend to confirm the typologies already highlighted in previous research (e.g. Carless & Arnup, 2011; Dieu & Delhaye, 2009; Donohue, 2007; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014; Khapova et al., 2007). Still, our results encompass some specificities.

4.1 Career Changes and Decent Work

The first specific characteristic is that, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014), health issues—i.e., our first category of reasons for career change—are rarely highlighted in previous studies. The notion of decent work, addressed e.g. in the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT, Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016), could help contextualize this result. We actually assume that the ultimate goal of adults' engagement in a career change is to find an occupation that approaches them to a work that they consider as decent. The definition of decent work relies on several indicators, such as suitable hours, shared organizational values, adequate wages, access to social protections, and safe working conditions. Threats to health might transgress the latter indicator and can be seen as a push factor motivating people to engage in a training that leads to safer working conditions. Although not new, the need to change career in order to avoid health problems could then be interpreted as a sign of the fact that the contemporary labor market is sometimes characterized by work that is not decent and that jeopardizes workers' health. This confirms that the world of work might be threatening not only because of precariousness and insecurity but also because

some occupations or occupational contexts, even if stable and secure from a contractual viewpoint, may become unhealthy and detrimental (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2016; World Health Organization [WHO], 2011).

The second specificity of our results is that, whereas past research stressed the importance for career changers of finding a meaningful work, some of our participants mainly aspire to attractive work conditions or integration chances (i.e., our third category of reasons for career change). This statement seems to confirm the existence of so-called instrumental relationships to work. Some workers do not expect from work to fulfill self-determination, but rather to guarantee survival (Blustein, 2006). Otherwise said, in some cases a career change may be envisioned to find an extrinsically rewarding job, in opposition to an orientation to work in terms of a career or a calling (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). This interpretation might confirm the existence of different configurations of work meanings, and the need to understand what subjectively binds people to their work. The definition of decent work should then go beyond the objective indicators listed above and include what people personally expect from it. Consequently, it stresses the pertinence of adopting a psychosocial lens in order to understand career change processes.

4.2 From Willingness to Volition

Our results might also indicate that, contrarily to previous studies that mainly focused on voluntary career changes, our sample covered different degrees of intentionality and control over the decision of changing a career. Although important for determining the constraining role of contextual factors on career transitions (Fouad & Bynner, 2008), the opposition of voluntary and involuntary career changes seems here artificial and difficult to detect "empirically". Most participants evoke indeed a combination of multiple reasons explaining their career change, ranging from independent—e.g. our fifth category: "pursuing a vocation"—to more or less forced choices—e.g. our first category: "dealing with health problems". We prefer then to situate career change inputs on a continuum ranging from rather intentional and controlled to rather unintentional and uncontrolled decisions.

In line with our psychosocial perspective, the notion of work volition—i.e. the "individual's perception of choice in career decision making" (Duffy et al., 2016, p. 135)—could be a complementary avenue in order to subtly capture the interplay between the intentionality of a career change and contextual constraints. Besides trying to objectively qualify a career change as voluntary or involuntary, it might then also be pertinent to identify the degree of perceived mastery on the decision within a configuration of given contextual influences (Fournier et al., 2017).

4.3 Temporality and Learning during Career Changes

Considering career change as psychosocial transitions also means addressing the temporality and learning issues underlying the process of change. Concerning the time dimension, our results confirm that the decision of changing is anchored in people's bi-

ographies (Fournier et al., 2017; Boutinet, 2007). Particularly, reactive changers took that decision above all because of an unsatisfying appraisal of their past career path, whereas proactive changers were more oriented toward building appealing perspectives in order to enhance their future career path. However, since a single participant often evoked both reactive and proactive reasons for career change, the latter might be more the result of a complex articulation between people's representations of their work trajectory and their anticipations of possible career options.

As regards learning issues, results stress that informal learning processes already occur before the enrolment in a VET program and might trigger the decision to change career. For example, changing career because of attractive working conditions (our third category of reasons) presumes that people have somehow become aware of the existence of more interesting working sectors, i.e. that they "learned" new information on the work context. Changing career with the goal of pursuing a vocation (our fifth category of reasons) can also be understood as the result of a learning process, leading to an enriched self-knowledge in terms of values and interests. Finally, the need to learn new skills (a declination of our fourth the category: "Growing personally") is itself one of the reasons for career change. Interestingly, in these cases, a career transition not only initiates learning processes but is also initiated by learning needs.

4.4 Implications for Practice

Our results stress the importance to understand the subjective reasons behind a career change in adulthood and to adjust career and educational interventions accordingly (Juntunen & Bailey, 2014). On the one hand, reactive changers should be invited not only to focus on past unsatisfying situations but also and at the same time on promising, motivating career plans (Boutinet, 2007). This could help them to identify occupations where they are sure not to experience the same difficulties again. Moreover, particularly for people changing career because of health issues, preventive interventions should be planned in order to better detect risk situations that might cause physical and mental problems at the workplace and force a career change.

On the other hand, proactive career changers should be supported—strategically, materially, and emotionally—in order to reduce possible barriers impeding them or threatening their motivation to realize their plans. From an educational perspective, VET schools should, for example, be aware both of adult career changers' specificities and needs as students and of the variations of incentives and motivations within this particular group. In some occupational fields, this could even lead to the development of specific VET programs for adult career changers that take into account their specific characteristics and offer a place where they can not only learn but also meet and support each other (Hall & Mirvis, 2014).

4.5 Limitations and Future Directions

This research has some limitations that should be taken into account for a satisfactory understanding of the complexity of career change through VET, leading to perspectives

for new research in the field. First, we exclusively focused on the reasons participants evoked to explain career change, omitting other potentially moderating variables. Future research should more systematically consider and situate these reasons according, for example, to the subjective meaning of career change within the life course and the professional path of the individual, as well as to her or is personal and social situation (e.g. family issues, environmental barriers and supports, duties outside the work sphere, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status). Second, we focused essentially on career change inputs, but not on the motivation to implement it through VET in particular. Additional research is then needed to investigate how and why some adults opt for enrolling in VET, as well as the perceived pros and cons of this specific option, comparatively to alternative "back to school" processes. Third, we met students in three specific occupational fields and only once during VET. Further research could test possible different configurations of reasons for change with students in other VET programs as well as with adults who already graduated and worked—or not—in their new career field. Indeed, given the importance of the time dimension when studying psychosocial transitions, the way participants recall their decision to change their career depends on the moment they are asked to explain it.

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