

Careers in context: An international study of career goals as mesostructure between societies' career-related human potential and proactive career behaviour

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[†]The quantitative part of this research endeavour has taken a number of years from conceptualisation through to implementation. During this time we have tried to ensure that we gained the maximum possible through this multi-author approach while maintaining the integrity of our research. Many of the authors were involved in conceptualising the research at face-to-face meetings held twice a year for this purpose during 2007–2014. Most of the authors were involved in data collection in some capacity in their representative countries. All of the main authors and many of the members in the 5C collaborative were then involved in the subsequent initial analysis and interpretation of the data in similar biannual meetings held during 2014–2019. In between each of the whole-collaborative meetings, the main authors took the group's inputs away to work on them in meetings held face to face, via email, and Skype. The article was drafted and revised equally among the three first-named authors; critical input and revisions from the 5C collaborative was invited at intervals throughout the process. The large number of authors has facilitated the collection of an extensive, multicountry data set, and has added credibility to both the data and its interpretation that, we believe, could not have been achieved with a smaller group.

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Abstract

Careers exist in a societal context that offers both constraints and opportunities for career actors. Whereas most studies focus on proximal individual and/or organisational-level variables, we provide insights into how career goals and behaviours are understood and embedded in the more distal societal context. More specifically, we operationalise societal context using the career-related human potential composite and aim to understand if and why career goals and behaviours vary between countries. Drawing on a model of career structuration and using multilevel mediation modelling, we draw on a survey of 17,986 employees from 27 countries, covering nine of GLOBE's 10 cultural clusters, and national statistical data to examine the relationship between societal context (macrostructure building the career-opportunity structure) and actors' career goals (career mesostructure) and career behaviour (actions). We show that societal context in terms of societies' career-related human potential composite is negatively associated with the importance given to financial achievements as a specific career mesostructure in a society that is positively related to individuals' proactive career behaviour. Our career mesostructure fully mediates the relationship between societal context and individuals' proactive career behaviour. In this way, we expand career theory's scope beyond occupation- and organisation-related factors.

KEYWORDS

career mesostructure, career-related human potential, careers, importance of financial achievements, model of career structuration, proactive career behaviour, societal context

1 | INTRODUCTION

To attract and retain the best employees, employers need to identify the society-specific conditions that are associated with the desirability of the career inducements they offer and comprehend how these relate to managing their human resources accordingly. This is particularly relevant for multinational firms operating in a diversity of institutional settings. These internationally operating employers need to understand that employees make sense of and enact their careers differently in different societal contexts (Shen et al., 2015). Deciphering why this is the case requires a focus on understanding employees' career goals, "the internal representation of desired outcomes" (Austin & Vancouver, 1996: 338), towards which employees direct their effort in their pursuit of career success and that guide their career decisions.

In this paper we address the question of the extent to which employees' career goals may be influenced by the context in which people make their careers, specifically the societal context of the country in which they live. Aligned to the employees' career goals in different countries, companies strive to define well-matched organisational career management practices as part of their human resource management that serve to advance their employees' careers. At the same time, to be successful in their careers, employees need to invest in their career self-management and, thus, know how societal conditions can facilitate or hinder their career in order to manage it accordingly (Lawrence & Tolbert, 2007).

Existing studies tend to concentrate on individual agency (Hall, Yip, & Doiron, 2018) disregarding the influence of context on individuals' career goals (as an exception see, e.g., Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2012). But as has often been pointed out, careers are contextually embedded and located at the intersection of societal- and individual-level phenomena (Barley, 1989; Grandjean, 1981). Thus, as we argue, we should expect societal context to influence the importance attached to specific career goals in predictable ways. Moreover, most career research that has addressed context has typically focused on the proximal social context (e.g., work environment), and societal and cultural perspectives remain largely overlooked (Brewster, Gooderham, & Mayrhofer, 2016; Johns, 2017; Lee, Felps, & Baruch, 2014). Here, we follow a call by Deci and Ryan (2012) and Deci et al. (2001) to give greater attention to the more distal macrosocietal context that frames employees' experiences and behaviours in terms of careers (Duberley, Mallon, & Cohen, 2006). We do so by taking as our focus countries' career-related human potential (cf. United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1997), that is, the resources provided by a given society that allow its citizens to grow, develop, and make achievements in terms of their careers.

This macrostructural view of societal context is, of course, somewhat distal from the employees' careers and complex. Although it may be of interest for employers to see *how* career goals vary between one country and the next (Shen et al., 2015), in order to understand *why* these variations occur, it is necessary to call on theory that connects the societal level with that of the individual. In this paper we use a combination of Barley's (1989) career structuration theory and Maines's (1979) concept of mesostructure to build a theoretical framework that addresses this issue. Barley (1989) introduces the career script as a construct that interposes between societal macrostructures at the level of the country (representing the career opportunity structure) and individual career action (Barley, 1989; Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Career scripts are the mediating mechanisms comprising norms, resources, and interpretive schemes that derive from the broader institutional context and on which individuals draw to structure their actions and interactions (Barley, 1989; Dokko, Nigam, & Chung, 2019). Here we focus on one facet of the interpretive schemes that constitute career scripts, namely, the importance to individuals of financial achievements (FAs) as a career goal. We show how this mediates the relationship between career-related human potential as macrostructural context and a key feature of career behaviour, namely, proactive career behaviour (PCB; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001).

However, we see two central weaknesses in Barley's (1989) model that we aim to overcome in order to further develop the career structuration model. First, the *definition of career scripts* remains vague (Laudel, Bielick, & Gläser, 2019), reflecting the vagueness of the corresponding concept of modalities in Giddens' structuration theory

(Giddens, 1984). We show how conceptualising the link between macrostructure and action within societies using the related concept of mesostructures (Fine & Hallett, 2014; Maines, 1982; Strauss, 1978) helps provide useful conceptual clarity. Second, the *mediating role of career scripts*, that serves to move beyond simple dualities such as societal macrostructure versus individual action in career, remains vague in Barley's model. Our use of mesostructure provides theoretical clarity, providing a well-defined link between societal context (here, career-related human potential) and career behaviour (here, PCB). In this way we connect to prior research that examines the impact of institutions on careers (e.g., Cappellen & Janssens, 2010; Duberley, Cohen, & Mallon, 2006; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Stovel, Savage, & Bearman, 1996).

We begin with the career structuration model (Barley, 1989; Giddens, 1984) and explain how we use a revised version of Barley's approach by referring to the concept of mesostructures (Maines, 1982; Maines & Charlton, 1985) to develop a mediated model linking societal context via mesostructure to career behaviour. Next, using empirical evidence and multilevel modelling, we analyse country-level secondary data and data collected from 17,986 employees from 27 countries. Finally, we discuss the conceptual and empirical contributions of this paper and derive implications for future research and practice.

2 | CAREER MESOSTRUCTURES AND THEIR CONNECTION TO SOCIETAL MACROSTRUCTURE AND CAREER BEHAVIOUR

Conceptualising context requires a theoretical angle. In this study we draw on Barley's (1989) model of career structuration and Maines's (1979) concept of mesostructure. Mesostructures are "the settings of rules, norms, and processes through which social life is mediated" (Little, 2012: 7), the "realms of human conduct through which social structures are processed and social processes become structured" (Maines, 1982: 277). They are "primary artefacts of organizations, national cultures, and subcultures" (Jacobson & Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001: 232).

Barley (1989) theorised career scripts as mesostructures (Dokko et al., 2019) that contain the "resources, interpretive schemes and norms that shape people's actions" (Barley, 1989: 54) in a limited domain and "for fashioning a course through some social world" (Barley, 1989: 53). Career mesostructures (as we shall call them here) are manifested in individual and organisational actors' shared stock of practical knowledge (Duberley, Mallon, & Cohen, 2006; Maines, 1982) about contextually possible, sensible, and appropriate career behaviours for fashioning a course through the societal world (Barley, 1989; Dokko et al., 2019; Giddens, 1984; Maines, 1982). As such career mesostructures define a socially recognised career; that is, they define the way careers "are" and "should be" in that society (Evans, Lank, & Farquhar, 1989).

Barley's concept of career scripts as mediating structures has generated considerable interest in the careers literature (e.g., Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Cappellen & Janssens, 2010; Dany, 2003; Duberley, Cohen, & Mallon, 2006; Duberley, Mallon, & Cohen, 2006; Jacobson & Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001; Laudel et al., 2019; Vough, Bataille, Noh, & Lee, 2015). The parallels with habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Sewell, 1992) have been noted as well (Valette & Culié, 2015). However, it has suffered from a lack of explicit definition, occupying a "position ... in social theory [that] is not clear and appears to shift with each new article" (Laudel et al., 2019: 933), if, that is, it is defined at all in any given paper. Laudel et al. (2019) address the problem by adopting a more precise and restricted definition than Barley's: "collective scripts that encode sequences of stages within a career and decisions that are likely to produce these sequences when made in specified situations in a specific institutional setting" (Laudel et al., 2019: 938). In this paper we address a different aspect of Barley's definition that focuses on interpretive schemes and norms and is operationalised in terms of career goals. We expand on this below. These two concepts—Laudel et al.'s (2019) sequences of stages and our career goals—fall within the overarching category of what we shall call here *career mesostructure*, because in their different ways they mediate between societal structure and individual career action.

The macrostructural conditions on which we focus are those that affect the development of human potential, because that domain is particularly relevant to careers. If mesostructures develop in specific macrostructural

conditions, as societal macrostructures vary so will the corresponding mesostructures. In terms of career goals our focus is on the importance that is attributed to FAs, to which we return below.

Mesostructures, in turn, are related to individual action. In terms of the career actions associated with the importance of FAs, we focus on PCB. A central feature of career is deferred gratification (Gunz, 1989; Stinchcombe, 1983; Wilensky, 1960), in which future time perspective (Simons, Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Lacante, 2004) plays a key role. Proactivity is central to adopting such a future time perspective: career actions that are directed at securing the career actor's future.

To summarise, we propose a mediation model: career mesostructures are hypothesised to mediate the relationship between societal macrostructure and individual action (Strauss, 1978). Next, we examine more closely the relationship between societal macrostructure and career mesostructure and between career mesostructure and individual career action.

3 | MECHANISMS LINKING CAREER MESOSTRUCTURE WITH SOCIETAL MACROSTRUCTURE AND BEHAVIOUR IN CAREERS

3.1 | Career-related human potential

In the following sections we develop theory that identifies contextually specific mechanisms that link societal macrostructures with the career mesostructure 'importance of FAs' to explain the first step in our mediation model.

Context is admittedly complex, and some aspects are more important than others in influencing careers. For societal factors that are relevant to careers, two criteria governed our choices. First, we sought factors that are more distal from career phenomena than more obvious, proximal aspects such as those relating to the structure and operation of labour markets. They allow a stronger test of the mediation model and are therefore of greater theoretical interest. Second, we looked for societal context variables, such as life expectancy or the educational level of a population, that are reasonably stable over time, so that one can say with some certainty that responses we measure in our sample are likely to be affected by the variables as they are now and are not biased by outliers or single events. Labour market variables such as ease of hiring or redundancy are often the product of political decision-making and can (and do) change significantly from time to time, so we can be less sure about the effect of the variable as it is now on the mesostructures of the sample.

As we show next, societal context variables that influence careers typically do not act independently, but often work together in complex ways. We therefore focus on a composite that reflects the development of human potential within countries. Our point of departure is the UNDP's definition of human development of countries in terms of individuals' capabilities (a) to lead a long and healthy life, (b) to be knowledgeable, (c) to enjoy a decent standard of living, and their opportunity (d) to participate in the life of the community (UNDP, 1997). The UN suggests a human development index that refers to the first three of these four dimensions (Hirai, 2017; UNDP, 1997). In this paper we extend it to address societal factors within all four dimensions that are particularly relevant to careers, in what we label the *career-related human potential composite* (CHPC). Next, we examine the components of this composite and show how they interrelate.

The human development index comprises three of the UNDP's four dimensions of human development with one indicator in each dimension: (a) the life expectancy of its population, (b) the educational level of the population, and (c) the gross national income (GNI) per capita (UNDP, 2018). For the CHPC, we added the level of a society's public health expenditure to the first dimension. A society's health care policies and health outcomes affect the life spans and quality of life of its citizens, in turn affecting the length and vitality of their careers. The educational level of the population, which constrains or enables the way in which resources can be used in careers, plays a key role in defining the context within which careers happen, as does the GNI per capita, that is, the purchasing power of income received by residents reflecting a country's standard of living and rate of economic growth.

Finally, we turn to the UNDP's (and our CHPC's) fourth dimension: the ability to be able to participate in the life of the community. The political and civil rights of a society's citizens affect their labour market participation and constrain or enable their chances of being paid fairly and making unconstrained career choices (Caligiuri, Lepak, & Bonache, 2010; Oppong, 2014; UNDP, 2015). Additionally, cultural norms, operationalised here in terms of gender inequality, provide further structure to national labour markets in the sense that, for example, a society with norms of gender inequality thereby segregates the labour market in ways that a society with strong gender equality norms does not (UNDP, 2015). Via a reduction of women's educational and employment opportunities, gender inequality reduces the competitiveness of women in the labour market and, thus, limits their career opportunities.

The seemingly different phenomena health, education, income, and participation are systematically linked through their common focus on broadening human choice, that is, the capability and opportunity of human beings to choose the careers and lives they want (UNDP, 1990). The phenomena can be grouped into *socio-economic* and *institutional* components of career-related human potential (CHP). The socio-economic component is based on the first three dimensions of the CHPC. It gives people the objective means of choice by increasing *resources* available to them. Rising incomes, skills, and health increase people's physical and intellectual resources but do not necessarily operate independently. For example, living standards do not only depend upon the resources available to people (GNI); a good education is important if people are to make good use of those resources. By enlarging people's resources, the socio-economic component of CHP diminishes the most existential constraints on human choice and gives people greater autonomy over their resources (cf. Welzel, Inglehart, & Klingemann, 2003).

But even when people have resources to broaden their scope of activities, they can be prevented from doing so by institutions that limit their rights. The *institutional* component of the CHPC, based on its fourth dimension (the ability to participate in the life of the community), consists of rules that sanction modes of social conduct and define legitimised behaviour (Giddens, 1984). It provides people with the necessary rules by increasing their *freedom rights*. Political rights and civil liberties are related to human choice because they institutionalise legal rights that guarantee autonomous choices in people's private and public activities (Welzel et al., 2003). Freedom rights are related to closure against women as a phenomenon that reflects violations of the equality of rights. Openness to women as a potentially underprivileged group is essential to the effectiveness of given freedom rights.

Economic development comes along with more professional activities that involve cognitive rather than manual work. Because cognitive work is far less dependent on sexual differences, female participation in both the labour market and higher education is likely to grow. Moreover, with larger proportions of highly educated women, their chances to take over leadership roles are growing. Hence, gender equality should improve with socio-economic development (Welzel, 2002), demonstrating how the socio-economic and the institutional components of the CHPC are interrelated.

In sum, people's resources and freedom rights—the socio-economic and institutional components of the CHPC—represent the means and rule component of career-related human potential. So the socio-economic component contributes capabilities, and the institutional component maintains opportunities in people's careers (see Table 1).

3.2 | Relationship between career-related human potential (societal macrostructure) and the importance of FAs (career mesostructure)

Career mesostructures, as we define them above, are individual and organisational actors' stock of practical shared knowledge (Duberley, Mallon, & Cohen, 2006) about contextually possible, sensible, and appropriate career behaviours for fashioning a course through the societal world. We focus here on one aspect of this stock of practical shared knowledge, namely, the subjectively felt need for FAs that is directed at being successful in terms of material gains. The importance of FAs represents a central feature of career mesostructure because, first, achievement-goals are important elements in the conceptualisation of life goals (e.g., Pöhlmann & Brunstein, 1997), and, second, FAs are an important element in the work value literature (Warr, 2008) and count among the hallmarks of career goals in many different societies (Appelbaum, Serena, & Shapiro, 2005; Shen et al., 2015). Thus, societal context factors are

TABLE 1 The two components of career-related human potential (CHP)

	The two components of CHP	
	<i>Socio-economic component</i>	<i>Institutional component</i>
Components' contribution to CHP	Larger capabilities	Wider opportunities
Underlying dimensions	Capability to lead a long and healthy life (health)	Opportunity to participate in the life of the community (participation)
	Capability to be knowledgeable (education)	
	Capability to enjoy a decent standard of living (income)	
Underlying indicators	Health: the life expectancy of its population; public health expenditure	Participation: political and civil rights; gender inequality
	Education: the educational level of the population	
	Income: GNI per capita	
Meaning of the CHP component	Resources	Freedom rights
Spheres in which the CHP components emerge	Sphere of means	Sphere of rules
↓		
Underlying theme	Growth of human choice on a mass level in terms of careers = CHP of societies	

Note. Loosely following Welzel et al. (2003).

likely to relate to individuals' careers in a society either by constraining or by supporting their financial earnings, and therefore to be associated with the importance assigned to FAs.

In this section we examine our reasons for expecting the level of career-related human potential in a country to affect the importance attached to FA in that country.

3.2.1 | Socio-economic component of the CHPC (capabilities)

Increases in private funding of health care are associated with declines in public expenditure (Tuohy, Flood, & Stabile, 2004), so that in societies in which *public health care expenditure* is low more of the burden of paying is placed on individuals. The more that individuals are responsible for paying for their own health care, the greater their interest is likely to be in FAs. *Life expectancy at birth* is directly connected with health. Following socioemotional selectivity theory “goals are set in temporal contexts, such that individuals focus their energy on goals that are feasible to pursue given the time they have available” (English & Carstensen, 2016: 1). Socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that when life expectancy is perceived as constrained, an individual's focus is drawn from long-term economic goals to shorter-term and more emotionally meaningful goals (Carstensen, 2006; Griffin, Hesketh, & Loh, 2012). Thus, we expect individuals in countries with low life expectancy to focus on FAs to realise short-term goals in order to have the resources to protect themselves from threats to their health as well as dealing with health problems. Gregorio and Lee (2002) show that *educational level* reduces income inequality. High-income inequality generates a sense of relative deprivation because of the increased gap “between an individual's income and the incomes of others to

whom they compare themselves" (Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014: 129), increasing the interest of relatively deprived people in FAs. And because wealth is typically concentrated in a small proportion of the population (Paris School of Economics, 2018), the proportion of those feeling this sense of relative deprivation is high. For a given country, then, the greater the income inequality, the greater the interest overall in FAs. We therefore expect income inequality to be positively related, and therefore educational level to be negatively related, to individuals' interest in FAs. GNI *per capita* indicates the living standard resulting from the income per person in a country. It is easy to intuit that the lower the level of economic prosperity in a country, for example, due to economic crisis or lack of work opportunities, the greater the importance of FAs in order to fulfil safety needs; lower-order needs become more salient (Maslow, 1943). The theory of absolute utility predicts that additional income allows each person to fill additional needs (Veenhoven, 1991), thus decreasing the importance of FAs. This suggests that the importance of FAs reduces as the GNI of a country increases.

3.2.2 | Institutional component of the CHPC (opportunities)

Political rights (e.g., freedoms of thought and speech) and *civil rights* (e.g., protection from discrimination) provide the means to secure "civil economic rights" associated with employment or pay (Diamond, 2015; Shin, 2013). In societies with repressed political and civil rights, fair pay, and minimum wages are typically not secured, public wealth tends to be plundered by ruling elites and their cronies in the business community and certain societal groups might be excluded from (full) participation in terms of, for example, education and work leading to economic inequality (Freedom House, 2012). Recognising the inequality of opportunities for economic advancement and getting ahead in life (Reich, 2009; Swaab & Galinsky, 2015), individuals strive for FAs to secure their living, satisfying the basic necessities for them and their families. *Gender inequality* in the economic sphere exists when a society maintains gender roles, typically viewing the male as the breadwinner and the female as the caregiver responsible for home and family matters (Treas & Tai, 2016). This emphasises the creation of employment in industries where men dominate, such as the primary sector and manufacturing, and undervalues the domains where women tend to prevail, such as the service sector and caring professions, thereby perpetuating a masculinised model of business (Johnson, 2005) and limiting possibilities for equal opportunities in access to jobs and education (England, 2010). Given that masculine societies emphasise material success and see acquiring money as playing a prominent role in work (Chiang & Birtch, 2012; Johnson & Droege, 2004), gender unequal societies would perceive achieving financial rewards through work to be a norm.

There are, thus, reasons to expect each of the components of the CHPC to affect levels of interest in FA within a country. However, as we argue above, because of the interrelationships between the components, we theorise here instead about the impact of the CHPC as a whole. To summarise the sense of the preceding arguments, as progress in human development goes hand in hand with rising incomes (UNDP, 2015), we expect FAs to be of lesser importance, the higher is the CHPC in a nation (see Figure 1).

To conclude, the career-related human potential approach consists of the expansion of individuals' set of capabilities and opportunities, which they have any reason to value. From this capability and opportunity set employees are provided with a range of choices and thus translate the potential to be or do a variety of things into actual beings or doings. Hence, employees are autonomous, but their choices are associated with societal norms and institutions that limit this autonomy, with the extent of freedom of choice varying across societies (Stewart, 2013). We expect individuals' choices to be reflected in their career goals, operationalised as the importance to employees of FA, that appears as a core requirement for human flourishing of individual capabilities and opportunities across countries (Narayan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000; Ranis, Stewart, & Samman, 2006):

Hypothesis 1. Societal macrostructure in terms of career-related human potential (life expectancy, public health expenditure, educational level, GNI per capita, political and civil rights, and gender equality) negatively relates to the career mesostructure importance of FAs in a society.

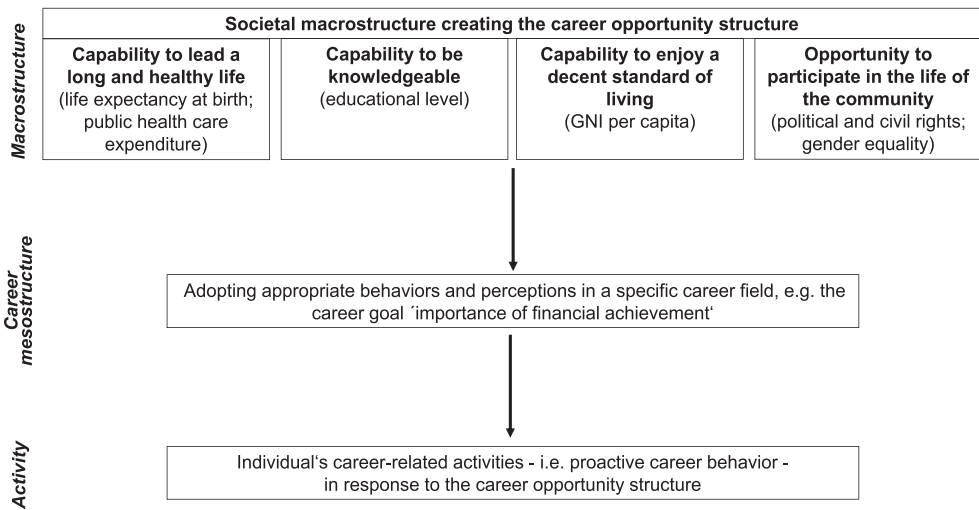


FIGURE 1 Careers as located at the intersection of macrostructure, mesostructure, and activities

3.3 | Importance of financial achievements (career mesostructure) mediating the relationship of career-related human potential (societal macrostructure) and proactive career behaviour (activity)

The model that we test proposes that career mesostructure fully mediates the relationship between societal macrostructure that create a society's career opportunity structure and individuals' career-related behaviours (Figure 1). Hypothesis 1 deals with the first step in this mediation. Career goals as mesostructure increase the probability of certain types of activities directed at implementing the chosen goals (Maines, 1982). Based on the identified career goal, individuals engage in career strategies that increase the probability that this career goal will be achieved (Noe, 1996). The career-related activities on which we focus is PCB (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010; Duberley, Cohen, & Mallon, 2006), the extent to which people display self-directed behaviours intended to build their career (Seibert et al., 2001).

Seibert et al. (2001) underscore the importance of PCB to successful career management. The proactivity literature characterises PCBs as involving three core components, namely, taking control, anticipation, and information retrieval (Parker & Collins, 2010; Seibert et al., 2001). Proactive career actors make a realistic self-assessment of their current personal capabilities in light of career opportunities and undertake concrete actions to realise their career goals (career mesostructure), including career planning, skill development, and consultation with more senior colleagues (Tharenou & Terry, 1998).

Most work on PCB has examined it as the antecedent of other phenomena, most commonly various forms of career success, in particular financial (e.g., Seibert et al., 2001; Vos, Clippeleer, & Dewilde, 2009). We are not aware of studies directly examining the association between the importance of FAs and PCB. Antecedents that have been studied include the Hofstede (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998) and other cultural dimensions (Gunkel, Schlägel, Langella, Peluchette, & Reshetnyak, 2013), and protean career orientation (for a summary see Hall et al., 2018). But proactivity is also a consequence of appropriate motivational states, in particular the extent to which the envisaged future is central to a subject's identity or values (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010) or future work self (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015), and this provides a useful indicator to the possibility that the importance of FA is an antecedent of PCB.

The importance of FAs can be seen as a component of identity or future work self, thus providing “social guidance,” external justification for engaging in a certain behaviour (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). We have already noted that PCB is instrumental in achieving financial success (Seibert et al., 2001; Vos et al., 2009). Thus, combining these two sets of findings, we can expect that an individual for whom FAs are important is likely to be proactive in bringing this financial success about. So in a country in which the career macrostructure strongly encodes the importance of FAs, people are more likely to value the importance of FAs than in a country in which it is weakly encoded, and accordingly more likely to engage in the PCB that will bring this FA about. In other words, individuals' engagement in PCB is seen as legitimate in their attempt to behave according to the norms encoded in their career mesostructure:

Hypothesis 2a. The career mesostructure importance of FAs positively relates to individuals' proactive career behaviour in a society.

Work is a major foundation for realising career-related human potential at the structural level, suggesting that there might be a direct link between CHP (macrostructure in Figure 1) and the PCB that people demonstrate at work (activity in Figure 1). However, we do not hypothesise an automatic link of this kind. High values in the CHPC do not automatically translate into a positive career development resulting from work, because there are many possible confounding factors that can interfere with this relationship, such as discrimination and uncertainty resulting from change. All these issues are becoming even more critical to address with the uncertainty resulting from economic and technological changes in the world of work that require people to be self-directed in managing their career, that is, to show PCB (UNDP, 2015). Therefore, we do not hypothesise a direct link between societal macrostructure and PCB. But because we have already (Hypothesis 1) suggested that societal context (macrostructure) relates to the importance of FAs (career mesostructure), it follows that we are proposing that the role of the importance of FAs is a mediator between societal macrostructure in terms of career-related human potential and PCB. Thus,

Hypothesis 2b. The career mesostructure importance of FAs mediates the relationship between societal macrostructure in terms of career-related human potential and individuals' proactive career behaviour in a society.

4 | METHODOLOGY

4.1 | Sample

The individual-level data come from a multicountry cross-cultural quantitative study of contemporary careers, which builds on preceding qualitative research (Shen et al., 2015). The questionnaire was translated and back-translated to the local languages of all participating countries following standard procedures (Brislin, 1970). The sample comprised 17,986 individuals from 27 countries (Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Colombia, Finland, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Malawi, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States). Data were collected during 2014–2015 by national representatives of the research group using predetermined screening criteria to achieve heterogeneous within-country samples with regard to respondents' work experience (of at least 2-year posteducation), occupation, age, and gender. Each national sample targeted at least 400 respondents with approximately equal tripartite age distribution—under 30 years, 30–50 years, and over 50 years—50/50 gender distribution, and quadripartite occupational distribution—managers, professionals, clerical/service workers, and skilled workers.

The sample consisted of 47% female participants, 27% managers, 34% professionals, 22% clerical/service and 17% skilled workers with average 40.2 years of age, and 16.25 years of work experience. About 10% of the participants had lower secondary education or below, 35% upper secondary, postsecondary or short-cycle tertiary

education, and 55% tertiary education; their hierarchical level was on average in the middle of their organisational hierarchy (5.34 on a 10-point scale).

4.2 | Measures

4.2.1 | Primary data

Career mesostructure

One subscale of a newly developed career-success scale (Briscoe et al., 2014) was used for measuring the *importance of FA* (three items, $\alpha = .71$, composite reliability [CR] = .801); the scale has been tested for its cross-cultural invariance across GLOBE clusters (Briscoe et al., 2014). Two sample items read 'Thinking about my career success, I consider this career aspect: a) steadily making more money, b) achieving wealth' (1 = *not important at all*, 7 = *very important*).

Proactive career behaviour

PCB was measured using five of the six items of Tharenou and Terry's (1998) scale for Enacted Managerial Aspirations (Parker & Collins, 2010; Smale et al., 2019). As expected, the reliability score of the shortened version was higher than the score of the original construct (shortened version: $\alpha = .86$, CR = .87; original version [Tharenou & Terry, 1998]: $\alpha = .81$). Two sample items read "I have discussed my career prospects with someone with more experience in the department/organization" and "I have engaged in career planning" (1 = *never*, 7 = *very frequently*).

Control variables

Based on the literature on the antecedents of career goals and success (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005), we used the following control variables: participants' gender (dummy variable: 1 = *female*), age, measured as continuous variable, educational level (1 = *primary education*, 7 = *doctorate*), and hierarchical level at workplace (1 = *lowest*, 10 = *highest*); we grand-mean centered educational and hierarchical level to give meaning to the value of zero.

4.2.2 | Secondary/macrolevel data

The country-level secondary data come from various international sources/data banks such as World Bank, UNDP, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and The Freedom House; for each of the constructs described below, the original sources have used rather complicated methodologies that space does not allow us to describe. All items used for the composite scales as well as the methodology can be found in the references provided.

Socio-economic component: Capability to lead a long and healthy life

We used two separate indicators, that is, the percentage of total *public health expenditures* in a country and *life expectancy at birth* indicating that the numbers of years a newborn infant would live if prevailing patterns of mortality at the time of its birth were to stay the same throughout its life (World Bank, 2011). The first represents an input to the system, and the second an output.

Socio-economic component: Capability to be knowledgeable

The *education index* is calculated from "mean years of schooling: Average number of years of education received by people aged 25 and older" and "expected years of schooling: Number of years of schooling that a child of school entrance age can expect to receive if prevailing patterns of age-specific enrolment rates persist throughout the child's life" (UNDP, 2014a: 163).

Socio-economic component: Capability to enjoy a decent standard of living

The *GNI per capita at purchasing power parity* measures the total earnings of the residents of an economy adjusted for the cost of living in each country. These earnings are defined as the sum of all value added by resident producers in the economy plus product taxes plus receipts of primary income from abroad (World Bank, 2015).

Institutional component: Opportunity to participate in the life of the community

We used two synthetic indicators, which assess countries on violations of *political rights* and *civil liberties* (Freedom House, 2012). The political rights index is composed of three subcategories: electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and functioning of government; the civil rights index is composed of four subcategories: freedom of expression and belief, associational and organisational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy without interference from the state. Because they are highly correlated ($r = .92$) we combined them in one index where higher scores indicate more repression; for the purpose of our analysis we reverse-coded the original index so that higher scores indicate more liberties.

We used the *gender inequality index*, a synthetic indicator that “reflects gender-based disadvantage in three dimensions—reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market.” (UNDP, 2014b: 5). A sample item is “the percent of seats in parliament held by women” (UNDP, 2014b: 4). The index ranges from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate higher inequality (UNDP, 2014a); for the purposes of our analysis we reverse-coded the index.

4.3 | Preliminary analysis

First, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess our individual level measurement model. The results indicate an adequate fit for a measurement model of the constructs FA, and PCB (root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .015, confirmatory fit index [CFI] = .999, and standardized root-mean-square residual [SRMR] = .005). To rule out the possibility of common method variance of our cross-sectional individual data, we performed a CFA in which all items were loading on a single latent factor. The results demonstrated a poor fit of the model (RMSEA = .216, CFI = .736, and SRMR = .142). Based on the first CFA, we calculated average variance extracted (AVE) values, which were above the 0.5 threshold for both constructs, that is, 0.573 for FA and 0.578 for PCB; the AVE values in combination with the above reported CRs indicate convergent validity of the measures we use (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Malhotra & Dash, 2011). To test for the divergence of our constructs, we calculated the square root of AVE for each construct (FA = .757; PCB = .762) and compared it with their correlation ($r = .218$, $n = 17,541$, $p < .01$); the square root of all AVEs were higher than the respective correlations, strongly indicating that our constructs are divergent from each other.

As the data for the latent constructs of FA and PCB are nested within countries we tested for independence of all items comprising the two constructs (Heck & Thomas, 2015); we constructed an intercept-only model (Geiser, 2013) and tested it using Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The intraclass correlations for the five items of PCB range between 0.057 and 0.112 and for the three items of FA between 0.142 and 0.174, and intraclass correlations for the composite scales are 0.192 for FA and 0.106 for PCB indicating that 19.2% of FA and 10.6% of PCB variances are attributed to country-level differences, and this allows us to model country-level effects in our research.

The preliminary analysis showed very strong and statistically significant—despite the small sample size ($n = 27$)—bivariate relationships among the six measurements of the societal context (Table 2) indicating that they compose one dimension of a country's structural context. Subsequent CFA confirmed it; in particular, all six measures loaded on one latent construct significantly with standardised loadings ranging from .705 to .940, and the reliability ($\alpha = .915$, CR = .943) and the fit of the model (CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.014, RMSEA = .00, and SRMR = .033) were very satisfactory; as noted above we named this construct CHPC and we used it in multilevel analysis as the macrolevel predictor of our model.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviations (SD), and correlations (Pearson/Kendall's Tau) among variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Level 1							
1 Gender ^a	0.47	0.50					
2 Age	40.45	11.41	-.03** ^b				
3 Educational level	4.48	1.39	.003 ^b	-.04** ^b			
4 Hierarchical level	5.70	2.49	-.09** ^b	.12** ^b	.17** ^b		
5 Importance of financial achievements	3.91	0.75	-.04** ^b	-.18**	-.03** ^b	-.02** ^b	
6 Proactive career behaviour	3.88	1.50	-.02** ^b	-.23**	.14** ^b	.07** ^b	.20**
Level 2							
1 Life expectancy	77.70	6.04					
2 Education index	0.79	0.13	.84*				
3 Gross national income	32513	16668	.75**	.85**			
4 Public health expenditures	66.82	12.60	.68**	.64**	.59**		
5 Gender equality	0.20	0.16	.86**	.85**	.77**	.61**	
6 Political/civil rights	2.15	1.45	.64**	.73**	.75**	.49**	.64**

Note.

^aMale = 0, Female = 1.

^bKendall's Tau; Level 1 ($n = 17,986$ to $16,157$); Level 2 ($n = 27$).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

4.4 | Analytic procedure

We use a multilevel mediation model in which the career mesostructure at the societal/country-level mediates the relationship between structural factors and the societal/country-level PCB, and at the same time, it looks at the extent to which individual-level career goals are related to individuals' PCB (LoPilato & Vandenberg, 2015; Tofighi & Thoemmes, 2014). In particular, to test our hypotheses, we used multilevel structural equation modelling (MSEM), as it calculates simultaneously all hypothesised paths and "dramatically reduces bias due to the conflation of between- and within-group effects and unreliable cluster means" (Preacher, Zhang, & Zyphur, 2011: 177; see Figure 2) in Mplus, version 8.

To test our hypotheses, we developed four models. First, we estimated the individual-level model (Model 1, Table 3) with the control variables only; then, in the second model, the individual-level predictor variable FA for the dependent variable PCB was included (path b_{w1}), and two control variables, female and hierarchical level, with no statistically significant effect on the dependent variables were excluded so that the model gains two extra degrees of freedom needed for the overidentification of the model in subsequent analysis (Model 2, Table 3). In the third model (Model 3, Table 4) the country-level hypothesised societal context predictor CHPC and the country-level mediator FA (mesostructure) were added in order to estimate the relationship between the CHPC and the mesostructure FA (path a_b) and the relationship between mesostructure FA and the outcome variable PCB (path b_b). Finally, in the fourth model (Model 4, Table 4) the direct path from societal context predictor CHPC to PCB was added (path c_b) in order to test if the hypothesised mediation of FA between CHPC and PCB is full or partial. The four multilevel models also provided estimates of the incremental individual (within level) and country (between level) residual variance explained by each step.

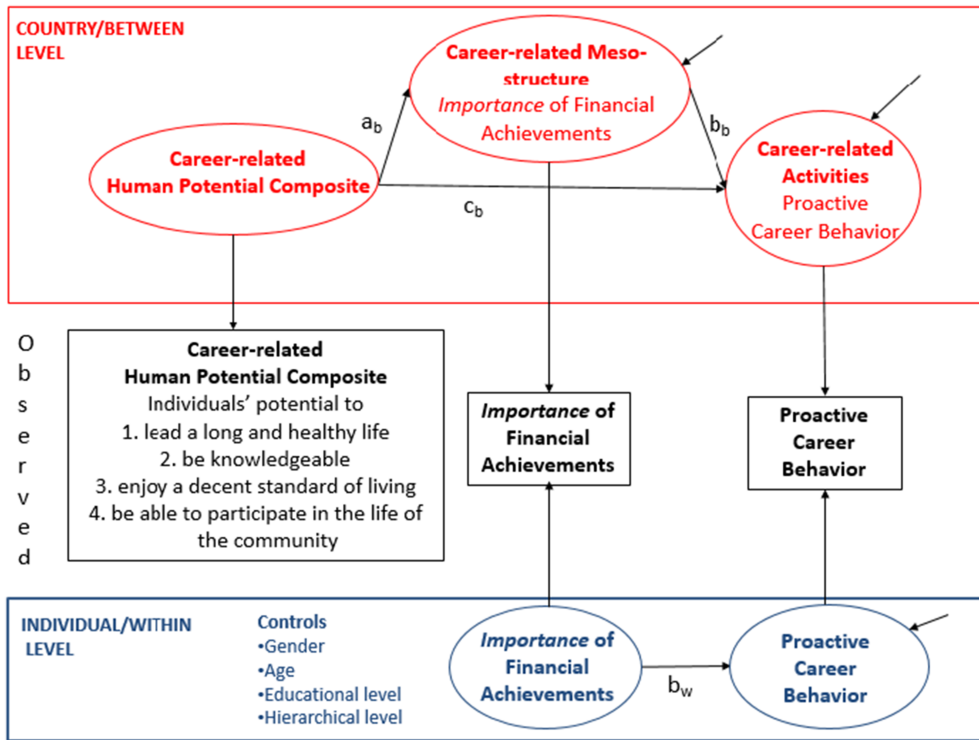


FIGURE 2 Conceptual model of Multilevel Mediation based on Preacher et al. (2011)

5 | FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics (sample size, means, and standard deviations) and the bivariate correlations within each set of variables (individual/within level and country/between level) are shown in Table 2.

The results from the first step of MSEM, where the within-level control variables (gender, age, educational level, and hierarchical level) are included, are reported in Model 1, Table 3. Despite the large sample size at the individual level ($n = 16,253$), hierarchical level is not related significantly to FA, and gender is not related to PCB; to gain two extra degrees of freedom, these two controls were excluded from the subsequent analyses. In the second step, the inclusion of individual level FA as a predictor of PCB yielded a significant relationship (Model 2, Table 3, path b_w , estimate = .288, $p < .000$) and reduced the within residual variance of PCB by about 11%. However, the remaining large variance for PCB (standardised estimate = .874) calls for further study of PCB at the individual level.

The country-level CHPC modelled in the third step of MSEM to test Hypothesis 1 (Model 3, Table 4) is substantially and statistically related to the mesostructure of FA at country level (path a_b ; estimate = -.185, $p < .000$, standardised estimate = -.610). Parenthetically, it should be mentioned that separate analyses with each one of the six indicators of the CHPC rendered very similar results so that the lower the education and income level, the less the gender equality and political and civil liberties, and the lower the public health expenditures and life expectancy in a country, the more importance career actors in this country on average assign to FAs.

In the same MSEM model (Model 3, Table 4) we tested Hypotheses 2a and 2b by introducing in the model the career mesostructure of FA at the country level; the findings supported H2a indicating that the career mesostructure

TABLE 3 Individual factors, importance of financial achievements, and proactive career behaviour

Dependent variables	Independent variables/controls	Model 1		Model 2	
		Estimate (SE [^])	[STD]	Estimate (SE)	[STD]
FA intercept		4.27 (.06)***	[14.40]	4.27 (.06)***	[14.40]
PCB intercept		5.28 (.12)***	[13.20]	5.25 (.12)***	[13.10]
<i>Level 1</i>					
FA	Gender	−0.03 (.01)*	[−.02]	−0.03 (.01) *	[−.02]
	Age	−0.01 (.001)***	[−.13]	−0.01 (.001)***	[−.13]
	Educational level	−0.04 (.01)***	[−.07]	−0.04 (.01)***	[−.07]
	Hierarchical level	−0.001 (.003)	[−.003]		
PCB	Gender Female	−0.07 (.05)	[−.02]		
	Age	−0.03 (.002)***	[−.26]	−0.03 (.002)***	[−.25]
	Educational level	0.17 (.02)***	[.17]	0.18 (.02)***	[.18]
	Hierarchical level	0.06 (.01)***	[.10]	0.06 (.01)***	[.10]
	FA (path bw)			0.29 (.02)***	[.13]
<i>Level 2</i>					
FA	CHPC				
PCB	FA				
	CHPC				
<i>Mediation effect</i>					
<i>(Residual) Variances</i>					
FA (within)		0.45 (.02)***	[.98]	0.45 (.02)***	[.98]
PCB (within)		1.86 (.07)***	[.98]	1.82 (.07)***	[.87]
FA (between)		0.09 (.02)***	[1.00]	0.09 (.02)***	[1.00]
PCB (between)		0.16 (.03)***	[1.00]	0.16 (.03)***	[1.00]
<i>Fit indices</i>					
RMSEA			.02		.01
SRMR (within)			.000		.004
SRMR (between)			.34		.34
AIC			88095		88099
Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi Square			441 (15 df)		2.20 (2 df)

Note. Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang (2010). Level 1 ($n = 17,986$ to $16,253$); Level 2 ($n = 27$).

Abbreviations: *df*: degrees of freedom; CHPC: career-related human potential composite; FA: importance of financial achievements; PCB: proactive career behaviour; RMSEA: root-mean-square error of approximation; SE[^]: standard error of the estimate; SRMR: standardized root-mean-square residual; STD^y: standardised estimate.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

of the importance of FAs in a society positively relates to individuals' PCB in a country (path b_b : estimate = .596, $p < .000$, standardised estimate = .442). Regarding 2b, the mediation test yielded a significant finding ([path a_b * path b_b]: estimate = −.110, $p < .05$; 90% confidence interval [−.186 to −.035]) thus indicating that the career mesostructure of FA in a society mediates the relationship between the CHPC and employees' PCB.

TABLE 4 Career-related human potential composite, importance of financial achievements, and proactive career behaviour

Dependent Variables	Independent variables/controls	Model 3		Model 4	
		Estimate (SE) [^]	[STD] [^]	Estimate (SE)	[STD] [^]
FA intercept		4.27 (.05)***	[14.38]	4.27 (.05)***	[14.38]
PCB intercept		2.70 (.94)***	[6.74]	3.16 (.96)**	[7.90]
<i>Level 1</i>					
FA	Gender	−0.03 (.01)***	[−.02]	−.03 (.01)*	[−.02]
	Age	−0.01 (.001)***	[−.13]	−.01 (.001)***	[−.13]
	Educational level	−0.04 (.01)***	[−.07]	−.04 (.01)***	[−.07]
	Hierarchical level				
PCB	Female				
	Age	−0.03 (.002)***	[−.24]	−.03 (.002)***	[−.24]
	Educational level	0.18 (.02)***	[.18]	.18 (.02)***	[.18]
	Hierarchical level	0.06 (.01)***	[.10]	.06 (.01)***	[.10]
	FA	0.30 (.02)***	[.13]	.23 (.02)***	[.13]
<i>Level 2</i>					
FA	CHPC (path a _b)	−0.18 (.04)***	[−.61]	−.18 (.04)***	[−.61]
PCB	FA (path b _b)	0.60 (.22)***	[.44]	.50 (.23)*	[.36]
	CHPC (path c _b)			−.05 (.10)	[−.13]
<i>Mediation effect</i>					
(path ab * path bb)		−0.11 (.05)*	[−.19 to −.03] ^a	.09 (.05)*	[−.17 to −.01] ^a
<i>Residual variances</i>					
FA (within)		0.45 (.02)***	[.98]	.45 (.02)***	[.98]
PCB (within)		1.82 (.07)***	[.87]	1.82 (.07)***	[.87]
FA (between)		0.05 (.02)***	[.63]	.05 (.02)***	[.63]
PCB (between)		0.13 (.03)***	[.80]	.13 (.04)***	[.79]
<i>Fit indices</i>					
RMSEA			.004	.002	
SRMR (within)			.004	.004	
SRMR (between)			.003	.003	
AIC			88005	88007	
Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi square			17.348 (2 df)	0.287 (1 df)	

Note. Preacher et al. (2010); Level 1 ($n = 16,242$); Level 2 ($n = 27$).

Abbreviations: *df*: degrees of freedom; FA: importance of financial achievements; CHPC: career-related human potential composite; PCB: proactive career behaviour; RMSEA: root-mean-square error of approximation; SE[^]: standard error of the estimate; SRMR: standardized root-mean-square residual; STD[^]: standardised estimate.

^a90% confidence interval.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The introduction of the level 2 CHPC in the model reduced the between residual variance of FA by 37.2%; similarly, the introduction of level 2 FA reduced the between residual variance of PCB by 19.6%; the Satorra-Bentler scaled Chi-square (17.384; $df = 2$) indicates a significantly worse fit of Model 2 as compared with Model 3. In Model

4 the direct path from CHPC to PCB was introduced (path c_0); the estimate of the path was not significant ($-.054$, $p > .05$) and the new model was not significantly different from Model 3 (Satorra-Bentler scaled Chi-square = $.280$, $df = 1$); also, the relationship between FA and PCB and the mediated effect continued to be significant after the introduction of the direct path from CHPC to PCB in Model 4. The findings of Model 4 suggest that there is no direct relationship between the societal context and PCB and that the career mesostructure of FA fully mediates the relationship between CHPC and PCB.

6 | DISCUSSION

With reference to Barley's career structuration model (Barley, 1989; Barley & Tolbert, 1997), our study examines the relationship between societal macrostructure, career mesostructure, and career behaviour. More specifically, in this paper we contribute to understanding the associations between societies' career-related human potential and individuals' career goals (the importance of FAs) and career activities (proactive career behaviour) in 27 countries. Doing this, we show that careers—more specifically career goals and behaviours—are embedded in context, as we discuss next.

First, we provide an example of career mesostructure by operationalising it in terms of the career goal importance of FAs. We were able to show that societal macrostructure operationalised as career-related human potential (comprising, e.g., gender inequality and GNI) increases the probability that PCB will take place in a society. Career-related human potential does not automatically translate into career success due to confounding factors that also require people to be self-directed in managing their career, as argued above (UNDP, 2015), as well as the large distance between societal macrostructure and individual action. The identification of intermediate mesostructures is one approach to bridge this gap (Dokko et al., 2019).

We argued that career goals can be thought of as forming part of such a career mesostructure. Shen et al. (2015) found that FAs represent a key category of career goals and can be conceptualised as a universal factor worldwide. The importance assigned to FAs in a society provides individuals with a means of understanding the activities of career actors in a society and allows them to communicate meaningfully about those activities. As such, FAs as a career goal is an interpretative scheme, which individuals use to make plans regarding their career, take actions, and interpret past career results (Barley, 1989; Dokko et al., 2019).

Second, we showed that the career goal importance of FAs (career mesostructure) is associated with CHPC and, thus, differs between societies. Although Shen et al. (2015) stress that individuals' definitions of career goals vary by the culture and the context to which they belong, they do not provide more detail about which context factors matter and how the importance assigned to different career goals varies between societies. Our results highlight that the broad transcending phenomena underlying societies' career-related human potential are associated with the way in which employees conduct their careers. We were able to show that the level of importance assigned to FAs is not universally the same. More specifically, the lower individuals' capabilities to lead a long and healthy life, to be knowledgeable, to enjoy a decent standard of living, and the lower their opportunities to participate in the life of the community, the more importance career actors in this society on average assign to FAs. Similarly, Harzing (2004) found that money was more important for business students from Eastern Europe compared with students in other European countries, suggesting that societal differences in material career goals do exist. However, few studies have explored differences between societies in employees' career goals.

Various societies create their own manifestation of career mesostructures (here in terms of the importance of FAs), which provide a kind of scaffolding (both ideological and material) that individuals negotiate with and use in enacting their careers (Duberley, Cohen, & Mallon, 2006).

Third, our results underline that the higher the importance assigned to FAs (career mesostructure) in a society is, the more proactive employees are in terms of managing their careers. Thus, career behaviour in terms of PCB differs between societies. Our structuration theoretical approach implies that collective agency, not individual human

activities, are the elements of careers as institutions. Methodologically, we calculated country averages, because it is individuals' continuous flow or pattern of career-related actions (including PCB) and the cumulative effect of individuals' working within the societal macrostructure that (re-)produces this career opportunity structure and is essential to the constitution of institutionalised forms of careers, not only a person's personality, motives or intention in doing things. We do not say that the individual level does not matter, as is reflected in the very high unexplained variance of PCB; rather, our findings show that PCB varies at the country level and part of this variance is explained by structural factors. This means that individuals' career behaviour is not exclusively dependent upon psychological mechanisms embedded within the personality of the individual. Our results suggest what has been argued from a theoretical perspective by many writers (e.g., Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007), namely, that context, here societal context, is associated with career behaviour.

Fourth, we find evidence that goal selection in terms of FAs (career mesostructure) fully mediates the relationship between CHP (societal context) and people's proactive career behaviour (activity). The extent to which career actors drew on mesostructures and how these career mesostructures affected their career behaviour varied in our sample, showing significant differences related to the career-related human potential of each society. This suggests that careers are associated with macrostructural conditions represented by the CHPC, such as educational level, gender inequality, political/civil repression, or life expectancy. Overall, variance in career mesostructures and behaviours is high enough between societies to indicate that career goals represent regularly reproduced and deeply rooted social practices (Giddens, 1979, 1984). Thus, we see the structuration model of careers as a most relevant framework to analyse careers, one which has been underutilised in the past as is clearly recognisable from recent critical studies on career theory and terminology (Baruch, Szücs, & Gunz, 2015; Lee et al., 2014).

A career's unfolding consists largely of a process of adult learning that is a prerequisite for justifying one's relative career position (Barley, 1989; Becker & Strauss, 1956). This implies that careers as institutions prefigure mesostructures (in our case the career goal). The line of thought that we follow in this paper stands in contrast to, but supplements, concepts such as person-job-fit, that are based on the converse assumption that career goals (i.e., motives and needs) prefigure an individual's career (cf. Holland, 1973; Super, 1957). Our findings suggest the former, that is, career goals (here the importance of FAs), are collectively shared social constructions that orient career actors to their societal context. However, this context should not be mistaken as a purely objective circumstance of people's careers (Barley, 1989).

6.1 | Implications for theory

Among the most interesting contributions of our study to the career structuration model is the focus on career mesostructures that serve to link societal macrostructure and action, because the important question of career mesostructures is given little attention in Barley's model (Barley, 1989). Taking the idea of institutions as multilevel structures (i.e., mesostructure and macrostructure) seriously (Barley, 2008), a mesostructural lens suggests that much action by employees can be oriented toward proximate targets, that is, here, FAs, but nevertheless depend on societal context. One significant contribution this paper makes to career theory is to begin the process of analysing and clarifying the nature of mesostructures as they apply to careers.

Barley's (1989) term for what we label mesostructure was career script. As we note earlier, the term "career script" has been associated with considerable ambiguity in the years because Barley (1989) proposed it as a mediator between societal and individual levels of analysis, perhaps because Barley's original formulation left so much room for confusion. This paper provides a path toward greater clarity by proposing career mesostructure as the overarching concept, within which more precisely defined constructs such as the career goals used in this paper, or career scripts as defined by Laudel et al. (2019; encoded sequences of stages), can be located. Both constructs fulfil the primary function of mesostructure by interposing between societal and individual levels of analysis, but they do it in different ways.

As our findings demonstrate, the greater clarity that emerges from analysing career mesostructure into various more precisely defined constructs allows for the mediating role of these differing elements of mesostructure to be examined properly. By analysing one specific construct empirically, the career goal associated with the importance of FAs, we show how it has the potential to resolve long-standing gaps in the discussion of agency and macrostructure. The concept of mesostructures also highlights that societal context consists of multiple layers (macrostructure and mesostructure), with diverse mesostructures operating within societies, providing an approach to clearing up the confusion associated with the term “career script” and leading the way to future research which can continue this work by identifying additional constructs within the overarching category of career mesostructures.

6.2 | Implications for human resource management

Understanding the relationship between societal macrostructure and career actors' behaviour is particularly important for organisational career management. Incorporating societal factors that introduce a career-opportunity structure into the analysis of societally patterned career goals and behaviours at the individual level provides an explanation for why career actors faced with different societal conditions behave in a particular way. Mesostructures, such as the importance of FAs, serve to create coherence in a society. These mesostructures also attract employees with congruent interests from other countries or “reproduce” employees with congruent interests internally who can interact. Knowing about relationships at both levels helps organisations to manage their human resources. What might be an effective HR practice in one societal context might be ineffective in another due to differences in societal macrostructure. For example, providing a company pension might have different motivational effects depending on differences in the capability to lead a long and healthy life. Although employees in countries with long life expectancy are likely to attribute a higher value to these future-oriented returns, individuals in countries with low general life expectancy will rather strive for immediate compensation to realise short-term goals (Carstensen, 2006; Griffin et al., 2012). The same individual again might adapt their economic behaviour and planning when moving to another society to be faced with different macrostructural conditions (e.g., a better health policy might increase subjective life expectancy and alter an individual's preferences). However, the extent to which internationally mobile employees adapt their career goals to local conditions is likely to depend on their long-term career planning, that is, how long they intend to stay abroad as well as their next career steps (see Borg, 1988), and thus their allegiance to either the parent firm (in case of a foreign assignment), to the local operation and/or another organisation (see Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992). Depending on the intended career path, expatriates should be either managed locally, centrally or by the home organisation to create a fit between HR practices and the person (see Andresen & Biemann, 2013, for a differentiation). Organisational and individual actors need to be able to relate competently to different societal macrostructures. Thus, understanding the relationships between a society's CHPC and HR system not only helps organisations to understand the sense of societal differences in HR practices but also to predict differences in career actors' goals and behaviour between societies. This knowledge becomes increasingly critical as organisations consider locations in other societies and build and manage a global workforce.

Our findings can also contribute to policy-makers' understanding of HR-related implications of their decisions, for example, in terms of health policy or political and civil rights. A better understanding of the relations between career-opportunity structure, country-level HR system, and career actors' behaviour can help focus policy makers' attention on the translation of intention to individual behaviour and, finally, structural change.

6.3 | Limitations and implications for future research

Some limitations need to be acknowledged. First, our multilevel analysis revealed differences between societies regarding the relationship between societal factors, career mesostructures, and individuals' career behaviours: The lower the CHPC, the more importance career actors in this society on average assign to FAs and the more proactively they manage their careers that represents a strategy to achieve their career goal. With our analysis of the

importance of FAs we focused on an important career goal, but only one out of a range of different career goals and, thus, on only one facet out of the much broader construct of careers. To understand the relationship between societies' career-related human potential and careers more comprehensively, additional studies are needed that consider, for example, additional career goals, career success, career paths, or career advancement, which would allow the identification and explanation of patterns in career mesostructures between societies.

Second, in our study, we asked career actors about the importance they ascribe to FAs; an alternative is to observe career behaviour directly and to infer career goals. Both approaches have their limitations. Regarding the first, *stated* career goals (mesostructure), our respondents were asked how important FAs are to them. But this indication might be based on many things and people often have a very poor understanding of what is really important to them. At the same time, *revealing* career mesostructures by studying the actual career decisions people make has its limits, because the actors may be unaware of the macrostructural conditions of their actions and of all the consequences which flow from them, so that the observer may misinterpret the nature of the career mesostructure the actors are following. Revealed and stated career mesostructures may, thus, be very different. In order to get a more solid estimation of individuals' career goals, a combination of techniques to estimate both stated and revealed career goals would be promising. These techniques are complementary in that the revealed career goal approach primarily allows us to measure the importance of "used" goals, and stated career goals approaches generally allow us to measure the importance of "nonuse" goals (goals that are not in use, but could be) (cf. Adamowicz, Louviere, & Williams, 1994). As career goals usually consist of a bundle of different goals and their respective importance is likely to differ not only between individuals, but also, probably, between societal macrostructures, a combination of both techniques is promising in future research in order to reveal patterns. This would require observations of many job changes or career planning reviews with supervisors, in addition to a survey.

Third, our analysis focuses on the relations between career-opportunity structure as created by a society's career-related career potential, career mesostructure (goal selection), and career behaviour (goal pursuit). The career structuration model holds that societal macrostructure is reproduced by individuals through their actions and interactions (Dokko et al., 2019). To analyse dynamics through time, we would need to observe time-lagged effects. Our *cross-sectional study* cannot identify evolutions. A longitudinal, cross-societal study would allow showing the dynamic process in which individuals' career actions are constrained by career-opportunity structures, which have salience for individuals and for collectives, while also having a transformative capacity, leading to changes in macrostructures in both intentional and unintentional ways. However, there are several reasons why we are forced to exclude this dynamic part of the career structuration process in this study. Our societal conditions are created by many different kinds of actions, of which career-related actions would just be one. Thus, it is unlikely that we would be able to show any significant effect on the CHPC by merely focusing on career behaviours. Moreover, the measurement of an effect of agency on societal macrostructure should involve at least two, ideally three waves of data collection in the social sciences (Kessler & Greenberg, 1981; Young, Savola, & Phelps, 1991). But we deliberately chose CHPC components that change slowly, so observations would need to take place over many decades. And during the time it takes to change something, our societal variables continue to exert a constraint on career actors, which cannot be assumed to be insignificant in its social consequences and it lasts (Archer, 2010). Lastly, over the short term, mesostructures rarely alter the existing societal context (Thomas, 1984), so that societies' career-related human potential as relevant for careers can be expected to have long-term relevance.

Finally, as our findings from multilevel mediation analysis suggest, despite the significant relationships, we identified at both levels, that is, individual and society, that there still is a significant proportion of unexplained variance within and across societies (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). This suggests that future research should identify and incorporate into the above models theoretically driven individual- and society-level factors that would further reduce the unexplained variance. Moreover, organisational-level factors play of course a major role. Our study only looks at *average* scores in each country involved and, thus, does not take into account the *distribution* of career-related human potential within a country's population. Reality is likely to show stark differences in the different dimensions of career-related human potential between the highest and lowest quintiles within a country. We also expect that

the intracountry variance in career-related human potential differs across societies. Therefore, we suggest taking cross-national variation into account in future research: this makes individual-level relations visible that are otherwise hidden by the nations' mass tendencies.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

With this study we provide an example of career mesostructures by operationalising it by the career goal importance of FAs. By analysing one type of mesostructure empirically, we show how this concept has the potential to resolve long-standing gaps in the discussion of career structuration. The concept of mesostructure highlights that societal context consists of multiple layers (macrostructure and mesostructure). We showed that the level of importance assigned to FAs (career mesostructure) differs between societies. Career goals serve as interpretive schemes that career actors in a society use to make sense of their careers. The lower a society's career-related human potential, the more importance career actors in this society on average assign to FAs, and the more important FAs are, the more proactive employees are. Thus, the way in which respondents drew on mesostructures and how these related to their career behaviour in terms of PCB varied between societies, showing distinctive differences related to societal context—over and above individual-level variance. The importance of FAs (career mesostructure) fully mediated the relationship between a society's career-related human potential and goal realisation by managing one's career proactively (career behaviours).

Thus, careers do not exist in a vacuum but in a societal context, which offers both challenges and opportunities for career actors in different societies. Hence, in order to understand careers better, it is essential to apprehend the societal context of careers, and how careers and career decisions are understood and related to the context (Inkson, Dries, & Arnold, 2015). Although individuals certainly make conscious career decisions, sometimes elements of these decisions are beyond their control. Society itself constitutes a career-opportunity structure that defines how individuals interpret careers (Savickas, 2000). To conclude, individual choices are partially determined (structure), but choices remain nonetheless (human freedom or agency) (Bratton, Callinan, Forshaw, & Sawchuk, 2007). In this way, our results support the fruitfulness of Barley's career structuration model and of the concept of mesostructures for understanding the processes underlying the drivers of differences in careers between societies and expand career theory's scope beyond occupation- and organisation-related factors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

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How to cite this article: Andresen M, Apospori E, Gunz H, et al. Careers in context: An international study of career goals as mesostructure between societies' career-related human potential and proactive career behaviour. *Hum Resour Manag J*. 2020;30:365–391. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12247>