

Building on job immobility concepts: a conceptual model and future research agenda on “locked at the job”

From job
immobility to
“locked at the
job”

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize job immobility concepts, e.g. staying in an unsatisfying job and perceiving limited opportunities to move and apply for another job. The existing literature on this situation of job immobility in which the employee is experiencing stuckness in the job is scattered across research domains, limited in scope and existing constructs are not clearly defined or operationalized.

Design/methodology/approach – In this conceptual paper, the authors propose the construct “locked at the job,” by reviewing and building on the job immobility literature and the theory of control and self-regulation.

Findings – This study defines the concept that consists of two dimensions as feeling dissatisfied in the current job and inactivity due to perceived limited job opportunities. This study proposes a conceptual model of antecedents and consequences of locked at the job, based on the person-environment fit theory.

Practical implications – This conceptual paper allows value to be added in practice by the conceptualization of locked at the job, in addition to providing a preview with respect to conceptual causes and consequences of this phenomenon.

Originality/value – Research on this job immobility phenomenon is scattered across different research domains, limited in scope and the concept has not been clearly defined or operationalized.

Keywords Locked at the job, Locked-in, Job immobility, Job-lock, Turnover

Paper type Conceptual paper

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Introduction

Over the past decades, a wide variety of studies has focused on the positive side of job mobility and employee turnover (e.g. Blau, 1989; Griffeth *et al.*, 2000; Hom *et al.*, 2012; Kondratuka, 2004; Porter and Steers, 1973; Van der Heijden, 2018). In the turnover literature (e.g. Hom *et al.*, 2012), these more positive concepts are referred to as enthusiastic leavers and enthusiastic stayers. However, little research has focused on the more negative side, that is employees who are non-mobile, experience a person-job misfit (Edwards, 2008; Hom *et al.*, 2012) and stay in their undesired work situations (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999; Stengård *et al.*, 2016), who can be typified as reluctant stayers (Hom *et al.*, 2012).

These employees are “locked at the job” with potentially severe negative consequences at the individual, organizational and societal levels. For the employee feeling locked at the job, health issues such as headaches, fatigue, stress and depressive symptoms can arise (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999; Muhonen, 2010; Stengård *et al.*, 2016). At the workplace, feeling locked at the job is related to fewer opportunities in terms of development and learning, and to lower perceived support from supervisors and colleagues (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999), which in turn is related to decreased commitment and performance (Fisher *et al.*, 2016; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Shore and Wayne, 1993). This will negatively affect the organization. Despite these negative consequences and the fact that a considerable number of employees feel locked at the job (Fisher *et al.*, 2016; Muhonen, 2010), research on this phenomenon is scattered across different research domains, limited in scope and the concept has not been clearly defined or operationalized.

Therefore, building on research on job immobility concepts, we introduce the concept of “locked at the job,” which consists of two dimensions, feeling dissatisfied in the current job and inactivity due to perceived limited job opportunities. Inactivity refers to the individual not taking steps to terminate the locked situation. We assume that individuals cannot achieve their desired situation, because they are not able to take control over their current situation, and we use the theory of control (Carver and Scheier, 1982) and the self-regulation theory (Baumeister *et al.*, 2007a, b) to explore the phenomenon of becoming and staying locked at the job. As a result, based on the motivation theory (Herzberg, 2003), these individuals currently lack motivation to take control of their situation.

Although several job immobility constructs are related to locked at the job, for example, locked-in (Stengård *et al.*, 2016), job-lock (Fisher *et al.*, 2016) and reluctant stayers (Hom *et al.*, 2012), there are a number of issues with this literature. First, hardly any of these constructs capture both dimensions of locked at the job, feeling dissatisfied in the job and experiencing limited job opportunities in their conceptualization and operationalization. As a result, these constructs inadequately measure locked at the job because only one dimension was measured. For instance, dissatisfied stayers (Mowday *et al.*, 1982) represent the dimension feeling dissatisfied, but not the dimension perceived limited job opportunities. Second, the existing literature on locked at the job lacks agreement on the concept, which results in inconsistencies and contradictions in conceptualizations and operationalizations (Furåker *et al.*, 2014; Fisher *et al.*, 2016). For example, Furåker *et al.* (2014) conceptualized lock-in as a “considerable difficulty in finding an equally good job with some other employer” (p. 435). In contrast, Fahlén *et al.* (2009) conceptualized locked-in as “stay in undesired work situations related to occupation or place of work or both of these conditions” (p. 192). Finally, research on the related constructs has taken place across different disciplines such as psychology (Allen *et al.*, 2016; Stengård *et al.*, 2016), environmental health (Fahlén *et al.*, 2009; Huisse-Gaytandjjeva *et al.*, 2013) and economics (Madrian, 1994), which has resulted in diverse research foci. For example, scholars within the environmental health discipline examine well-being outcomes of feeling locked at the job, whereas studies within psychology focus on personality traits as antecedents of locked at the job (Huisse-Gaytandjjeva *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Muhonen, 2010; Stengård *et al.*, 2017). In this article, we build on the existing studies of

different disciplines and integrate the insights into an overarching model specifying antecedents and consequences of locked at the job. Our goal for this paper is to bring together the existing job immobility literature and use these conceptualizations of related constructs and theoretical underpinnings to develop locked at the job.

We contribute to the literature on job immobility in three ways. First, by introducing and conceptualizing the construct locked at the job which builds on the conceptualizations of related constructs. We provide additional conceptual clarity on locked at the job which is needed, as the current related constructs have diverse theoretical conceptualizations and operationalizations. We also build on the theoretical reasoning of [Stengård et al. \(2016\)](#) who has introduced the theory of control ([Carver and Scheier, 1982](#)), self-regulation ([Baumeister et al., 2007a, b](#)) and the person-environment (PE) fit theory ([Edwards, 2008](#)). This is needed to bring the literature further and to have a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the concept of locked at the job. Second, we build on this literature by introducing a conceptual model outlining the antecedents and consequences of locked at the job based on previous studies on the related constructs and the PE fit theory ([Edwards, 2008](#)). This builds on previous work which has examined the antecedents and consequences of locked at the job-related constructs (e.g. [Stengård, 2018](#)). Finally, we contribute to this literature by providing a future research agenda on locked at the job that will help advance this literature.

Locked at the job

Based on an extensive literature review on nine related constructs, we introduce the construct locked at the job ([Feenstra-Verschure et al., 2023](#)), an experience that individuals potentially go through during their working life. As defined here, locked at the job is a two-dimensional construct that subjectively measures the individuals' perceptions and interpretations of their current experience. Similar to “perceived” employability, which also measures the individual perception of employment, however, does not measure the first dimension feeling dissatisfied in the current job ([Berntson and Marklund, 2007](#); [Vanhercke et al., 2014](#)). The construct of locked at the job consists of two dimensions (1) feeling *dissatisfied* in the current job and (2) inactivity due to perceived *limited job opportunities*. As such, an employee who is locked at the job experiences a misfit with the current job and with potential alternative jobs. The current job is insufficiently satisfying, while at the same time altering the job or changing jobs seems impossible. In contrast to some other conceptualizations of job immobility-related constructs ([Aronsson et al., 2000](#); [Fahlén et al., 2009](#); [Muhonen, 2010](#); [Stengård et al., 2017](#)), the individual experiences being locked at the *job*. The organization where the job is performed may be causing the dissatisfying feeling which causes the current *job* to be dissatisfying and at the same time leads to perceiving limited job opportunities at other organizations. In addition, this state of experiencing locked at the job involves a specific job where the individual develops a locked experience. Therefore, when an individual has multiple jobs, it is important to know which specific job is causing the locked experience which is not clear with the term career inaction ([Verbruggen and De Vos, 2020](#)).

For the first dimension, feeling dissatisfaction in the current job, we use the definition of job satisfaction defined as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” ([Locke, 1976](#), p. 1304). In contrast to the general use of a positive state of job satisfaction, the current focus is on the reverse: the negative state of dissatisfaction. A possible consequence of this dissatisfaction in the job is the so-called resigned job satisfaction ([Kovacs et al., 2018](#); [Bruggemann, 1974](#)) where individuals lower their individual aspirations to meet the current negative aspects of the job, keeping them in these dissatisfying circumstances. Contrary to the dimension used by [Stengård et al. \(2016\)](#), who focus on the workplace which “is not their preferred one for the future” (p. 154), we focus on the dissatisfaction about the *current* job of the individual. Being dissatisfied in the current job can have various psychological and behavioral outcomes ([Henne and Locke, 1985](#)).

The second dimension of being locked at the job is inactivity due to perceived limited job opportunities. An employee who experiences being locked at the job lacks perceived ease of movement and is not able to identify other job opportunities (Long and Perumal, 2014). The individual does not perceive other opportunities to be realistic opportunities. By looking at this particular dimension, more depth can be added to why the individual is inactive and not capable of altering the situation. It provides a certain direction of why the individual is not altering their situation. Griffeth *et al.* (2005) define perceived ease of movement as “a function of the number of extraorganizational alternatives perceived, which is, in turn, a function of the level of business activity, number of organizations visible, and personal characteristics of participants” (March and Simon, 1958, p. 335). These perceived alternatives need to be comparable (or better) in terms of employment conditions (Stengård *et al.*, 2017) and in line with the employee’s self-set career plans, both inside or outside the current organization (Huyghebaert *et al.*, 2019). As career plans are not fixed and can change over time, perceived job opportunities can also alter (Kraimer *et al.*, 2011). However, employees who are locked at the job perceive limited job opportunities and are thus in a freeze from changing their career plans (Weick and Quinn, 1999). Because these employees do not take on new career initiatives, they experience stagnation in their careers (Van de Water and Weggeman, 2017). Combining the two dimensions, employees can be in one of four situations.

As shown in Figure 1, employees who feel dissatisfied with the current job and perceive limited job opportunities feel locked at the job (3). In the opposite quadrant, employees feel non-locked (2) because they experience high levels of both *dimensions*, feeling satisfied in their current job and perceived many job opportunities. Employees in this quadrant represent the enthusiastic stayers who “remain because they want to stay and feel no external pressure to stay or leave” (Hom *et al.*, 2012, p. 835). The enthusiastic stayers will stay for as long as they feel embedded and engaged or do not wish to change the situation. The two quadrants 1 and 4 represent at risk of becoming locked at the job. Within these two quadrants, with one positive and one negative dimension, the employee either experiences low levels of job opportunities and high levels of job satisfaction (1) or high levels of job opportunities and low levels of job satisfaction (4). These employees are at risk of becoming locked at the job when they do not take action to change their situation. Furthermore, these employees can both consciously or unconsciously become locked at the job (Baumeister and Bargh, 2014). Unconsciously, for example, when the individual is not concerned with the number of job opportunities and that their job dissatisfaction creates a locked at job experience. The consciousness will arise when the perception of limited job opportunities is made in the emergence of job dissatisfaction.

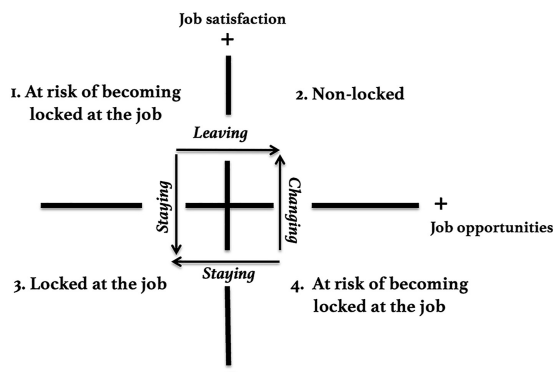


Figure 1.
Locked at the job
scenarios, from an
employee point of view

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

They will often stay in this situation, as some forces keep them in this partially misfitting situation. Some of the employees in quadrant 1, for example, will not mind their lack of opportunities because they are pleased with the salary they currently earn (Ng and Feldman, 2007). On the other hand, some of the employees in quadrant 4 might use their current dissatisfying position in a temporary job to eventually grow to another position (De Jong, De Cuyper, De Witte, Silla and Bernhard-Oettel, 2009).

Employees can move to another quadrant by either (I) *staying* resulting potentially in becoming locked at the job, (II) *changing* one's mindset or the job to improve the levels of job satisfaction, for instance, by crafting their job (Rudolph *et al.*, 2017) or following a training (Schmidt, 2007) or by (III) *leaving* the undesired situation. In this paper, the focus is on the first quadrant, locked at the job.

A characteristic of being locked at the job is that employees are passive and do not take control of their actions. To further understand the concept of locked at the job, we, therefore, build on the reasoning of Aronsson (1989), Aronsson and Göransson (1999), Stengård *et al.* (2018) and use the theory of control (Carver and Scheier, 1982). Based on the theory of control, it is assumed that individuals will always relate their current situation to their desired situation. In order to achieve this desired situation, the individual will continuously self-regulate by adjusting their attitude and behavior to avoid possible obstructions in achieving the desired situation. However, when (altering) one's behavior does not help to achieve the desired situation, it is likely that this desired situation will be adjusted or even relinquished (Carver and Scheier, 1982). Employees who feel locked at the job are not able to control their own behavior and perceptions and are thus incapable of changing their current and desired situation. As a result, they will remain in their undesired situation.

Similar to the theory of control (Carver and Scheier, 1982), the well-established theory of self-regulation (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister *et al.*, 2007a, b; Carver and Scheier, 2012; Duru *et al.*, 2014) argues that when employees are capable of self-regulating their behavior, they are able to alter their own inner perceptions and responses (Baumeister *et al.*, 2007a, b). Employees do not all of a sudden feel locked at the job; in many cases, this process will take place gradually (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997) making it less easy to adjust this mindset, once someone has ended up being locked at the job (Gollwitzer, 2012). When employees feel locked at the job, they are unable to self-regulate and take charge of their own career and hence fail to take action to improve their satisfaction or look for alternative jobs.

Finally, since locked at the job is characterized by inactivity, we use the transtheoretical model of behavior change (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997), to better understand this inactivity. According to the transtheoretical model of behavior change (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997), individuals go through six stages of behavioral change. In general, an employee who feels locked at the job, only reaches the first three stages of this behavioral change cycle. Employees will first experience the stage of “precontemplation”; not feeling ready to change. In this stage, employees do not have the intention to take action and change their undesired work situation. The second stage “contemplation” is only achieved by employees who recognize that they need to change either their dissatisfaction or the limited job opportunities. It is assumed that a smaller group will reach the third “preparation” stage in which the employee is ready to change and intends to take action. Employees who stay in the third stage failed to self-regulate by intending to alter their situation, but failing to take action (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996). Due to this failure to self-regulate, locked at the job employees will not reach the next and fourth stage “action,” in which the employee takes specific actions to make adjustments in the situation to alter their satisfaction level or create alternative opportunities. Verbruggen and De Vos (2020) define this state of being inactive in one's career as “the failure to act sufficiently over some period of time on a desired change in one's career” (p. 2). Employees who are career inactive will experience a lack of accomplishment in adjusting the work situation, causing locked at the job (Verbruggen and Vos, 2020).

Related constructs to locked at the job

In conceptualizing this concept of locked at the job, we build on nine related job immobility constructs. Here, we only used constructs that meet the following criteria: (1) they include one or both dimensions “job dissatisfaction” and “limited job opportunities” of locked at the job, thus leaving out perceived employability (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012), career inaction (Verbruggen and De Vos, 2020), job push (Barkowski, 2015) and psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989); (2) the related constructs incorporate a term in their definition that reflects one’s job immobility, such as the term “staying,” “remaining” or “unable to exit”; and (3) only related constructs that were either discussed conceptually and/or studied empirically are used. An intensive literature review leads us to the nine related constructs displayed in Table 1.

Locked-in

Locked-in, studied in the discipline of psychology and vocational behavior, has many different conceptualizations and operationalizations as shown in Table 2. Stengård *et al.* (2016) used two dimensions and defined locked-in as “being in a non-preferred or undesired work situation and perceiving low employability” (p. 152). In terms of conceptualizations, Table 2 also shows that not all researchers include two dimensions in their conceptualization of locked-in (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999; Furåker *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the concept of locked-in was conceptualized in several ways, since researchers made a distinction between feeling locked-in their occupation and locked-in their workplace, but also double locked-in, feeling locked-in both the workplace and the occupation was measured (Aronsson *et al.*, 2000; Bernhard-Oettel *et al.*, 2018; Fahlén *et al.*, 2009; Muhonen, 2010; Stengård *et al.*, 2017), making the conceptualization of locked-in quite confusing and inconsistent.

In terms of operationalizations, Table 2 shows that locked-in was measured in different ways, with scales using a single item (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999; Furåker *et al.*, 2014) or multiple items (Muhonen, 2010; Fahlén *et al.*, 2009; Stengård *et al.*, 2016, 2017). Stengård *et al.* (2016) used existing items to measure locked-in. In other words, the definition was not the basis of their measurement, which hinders construct validity (Hinkin, 1995). Fahlén *et al.* (2009) did design four new items (see Table 2) to measure feeling locked at the job, capturing both dimensions of locked at the job, however, without carrying out a construct validation and using a deviating definition by Aronsson *et al.* (2000). Thus, their operationalization is not in line with their definition. In conclusion, only the two-dimensional conceptualization by Stengård *et al.* (2016) and the operationalization of Fahlén *et al.* (2009), including both dissatisfaction and limited job opportunities, are useful in building the construct of locked at the job.

Job lock

The construct of job lock is mainly studied in the disciplines of industrial and labor relations and economics. Job lock focuses on a specific cause of feeling locked at the job, namely, “reluctance to change jobs for fear of losing employer-sponsored health insurance” (Bailey and Chorniy, 2016, p. 173). By being eligible for this kind of health insurance, it could be harder for employees to switch jobs due to a possible loss of health coverage (Kapoor, 1998). Others define it as “being dissatisfied with the job, but remaining in the same job” (Huyse-Gaytandjieva *et al.*, 2013, p. 2), focusing only on the dimension of feeling dissatisfied in the current job. In contrast to the other related constructs, job lock is mainly measured in an objective way (Huyse-Gaytandjieva *et al.*, 2013; Stroupe *et al.*, 2001). Although objective measures have some benefits (Muckler and Seven, 1992), they do not measure perception, which is needed to capture the feeling of being locked at the job. Therefore, we did not build on job lock to develop the construct locked at the job.

From job
immobility to
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Nr	Construct	Sub-construct	Definition
1	Locked-in		“Being in a <u>non-preferred</u> workplace while at the same time perceiving low employability” (Stengård <i>et al.</i> (2016, p. 152)
2	Job lock		“Being <u>dissatisfied with the job</u> but remaining in the same job” (Huysse-Gaytandjeva <i>et al.</i> (2013, p. 2)
3	Job Embeddedness in an adverse work environment		“Feeling ‘ <u>stuck</u> ’, yet unable to exit a negative situation” (Allen <i>et al.</i> , 2016, p. 1670)
4	Involuntary non-mobility		“ <u>Dissatisfaction with one’s current job</u> , particularly in combination with <u>perceiving that other job opportunities are lacking.</u> ” (Stengård <i>et al.</i> , 2016, p. 153)
5	Continuance commitment		“‘Feeling stuck’ and <u>staying</u> because it is too costly to leave” (Eslami and Gharakhani, 2012, p. 85) “The magnitude and/or number of investments individuals make and a perceived lack of alternatives” (Allen and Meyer, 1990, p. 4)
6	Career entrenchment		“ <u>Immobility</u> resulting from substantial economic and psychological investments in a career that make change difficult” (Carson <i>et al.</i> , 1996, p. 274)
7	Turnover	Reluctant stayers	“ <u>Feel they cannot leave</u> (although they would prefer to do so)” (Hom <i>et al.</i> , 2012, p. 835)
		Trapped stayers	“Foregoing extrinsic forces <u>keep employees from leaving</u> a job lacking affective, constituent, or calculative forces” (Hom <i>et al.</i> , 2012, p. 842)
		Contractual stayers	“Whose employment contract <u>keeps them in misfitting jobs</u> ” (Hom <i>et al.</i> , 2012, p. 842)
		Dissatisfied stayers	“Employees who are <u>dissatisfied with their job</u> but who, for a number of possible reasons, find it <u>impossible to leave</u> ” (Mowday <i>et al.</i> , 1982, p. 180)
8	Inability to leave	Detached stayers	“These individuals exhibit <u>no particularly strong reasons to stay</u> , but appear to be making no effort to leave (Woo and Allen, 2014, p. 290).”
			“The <u>absence of actual opportunities</u> to withdraw from a situation by changing the location of one’s work or residence” (Martin and Schermerhorn, 1983, p. 655)
9	Boundaryless and protean careers		Boundaryless careers: “a high physical and/or psychological mobility” (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006, p. 22) Protean careers “a developmental progression and self-fulfillment” (Briscoe and Hall, 2006, p. 4)

Note(s): The underlined parts of the definitions listed above were taken into consideration in terms of conceptualizing locked at the job

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Table 1.
Summary of related
constructs of locked
at the job

Job embeddedness in an adverse work environment

The third related construct is job embeddedness “in an adverse work environment” by Allen *et al.* (2016). Although the well-established construct of “job embeddedness” (e.g. Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) focuses on the forces to stay, Allen *et al.* (2016) tested the negative outcomes when employees feel embedded but are in an adverse work environment. Their results showed that it was unlikely for embedded employees to resign and change their adverse workplace. They define this “dark side” of job embeddedness as “feeling ‘stuck’, yet unable to exit a negative situation” (Allen *et al.*, 2016, p. 1670). This definition includes both job dissatisfaction and the

Study	Definition	Measure
Aronsson and Göransson (1999)	“Remain in their permanent jobs, and thereby with tasks and in occupations they do not regard as desirable.” (p. 152)	(1) “Is the company/workplace where you work today the place you wish to work at in the future?”
Aronsson <i>et al.</i> (2000)	“Individuals who are either not in a workplace/organization (workplace locked-in), or in an occupation (occupation locked-in), or in neither of them (double locked-in) that they preferred”	(1) “You are currently working in <workplace>. Is it your desired workplace in the future?” (<i>translated by a native Swedish speaker</i>)
Fahlén <i>et al.</i> (2009)	“Stay in undesired work situations related to occupation or place of work or both of these conditions” (From Arronson <i>et al.</i> , 2000) (p. 192)	(1) “How do you like your occupation?” (2) “How are your opportunities to find employment in another occupation?” (3) “How do you like your present place of work?” (4) “How are your opportunities to change your place of work?”
Furåker <i>et al.</i> (2014)	“Considerable difficulty in finding an equally good job with some other employer” (p. 435)	(1) “In general, what do you think of your chances at present of finding another job which is equal to or better than your current job?”
Muhonen (2010)	“Employees who have tenure, but who are not in their preferred occupation and/or workplace” (p. 200) Double locked-in: “Employees who feel that they are neither in their preferred occupation nor preferred workplace” (p. 200)	(1) “Is your current workplace the one you would prefer in the future?” (2) “Is your current occupation the one you would prefer in the future?” For those participants who were not in their preferred occupation: (3) “Do you know which occupation you would prefer?” (4) “Do you have the education required for that occupation?” (5) “Are you taking actions in order to attain your preferred occupation?” (6) “Would you rather have temporary employment in the preferred occupation over permanent employment in a non-preferred occupation?”
Stengård <i>et al.</i> (2016)	“Being in a non-preferred workplace while at the same time perceiving low employability” (p. 152)	(1) “Is the company/workplace where you work today the place you wish to work at in the future?” (2) “How easy would it be for you to get another, similar job without having to change residence?”

Table 2.
Conceptualization and operationalization: locked-in constructs

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

difficulty of leaving the current situation. However, this construct was not further empirically studied. Insights relevant to the conceptualization of locked at the job are included in our conceptual model.

Involuntary non-mobility

Many studies on mobility measure job mobility as a positive construct of being able to change jobs (Topel and Ward, 1992). However, when reversing the term job mobility to job non-mobility (Liljegren and Ekberg, 2009), immobility (Huyse-Gaytanjieva *et al.*, 2012, 2013) or “involuntary non-mobility” (Stengård *et al.*, 2016), a considerably smaller number of studies

have been carried out (Huyse-Gaytanjieva *et al.*, 2013; Stengård *et al.*, 2016). Involuntary non-mobility is defined as “dissatisfaction with one’s current job, particularly in combination with perceiving that other job opportunities are lacking” (Stengård *et al.*, 2016, p. 153). This definition is very similar to the locked at the job definition, as it both defines the dissatisfaction in the current job and the perceived limited job opportunities. However, this related construct was not further operationalized and can, therefore, only be used in the conceptualization of locked at the job.

Continuance commitment

Allen and Meyer (1990) introduced continuance commitment as part of the overarching construct organizational commitment which is developed based on two factors “the magnitude and/or number of investments (or side-bets) individuals make and a perceived lack of alternatives” (p. 4). Further, Eslami and Gharakhani (2012) use the definition “feeling stuck and staying because it is too costly to leave” (p. 85). In addition, Taing *et al.* (2011) introduce a new scale for continuance commitment, based on both economic exchange and few job opportunities. However, these definitions or operationalization do not specify whether the employee feels dissatisfied with the current job. In addition, perceived high costs to leave are not necessarily the same as perceived limited job opportunities, as there are more possible reasons for perceived limited job opportunities. Therefore, we will not use continuance commitment to conceptualize locked at the job. However, for the operationalization of locked at the job, some items might be taken into consideration, as one of the two factors of continuance commitment is based on the perceived lack of alternatives (Allen and Meyer, 1990).

Career entrenchment

Career entrenchment, which has gained a lot of attention lately (Zacher *et al.*, 2015) is defined as the “immobility resulting from substantial economic and psychological investments in a career that makes change difficult” (Carson *et al.*, 1996, p. 274). Career entrenchment is composed of two dimensions (1) accumulated costs and (2) limited alternatives (Blau, 2001). Many of the articles on this construct are focused on construct validation. Although limited alternatives is similar to experiencing limited job opportunities, the accumulated costs are different from perceived job dissatisfaction. In addition, the two dimensions of career entrenchment are measured separately and are not combined into one variable making it difficult to draw conclusions on career entrenchment as a construct. However, the dimension limited alternatives are useful for the operationalization of locked at the job.

Turnover – stayers

Turnover can be defined as “why employees quit or stay in employing institutions” (Hom *et al.*, 2012, p. 831). Hom *et al.* (2012) conceptualized two types of stayers: (1) enthusiastic stayers and (2) reluctant stayers. Reluctant stayers are defined as stayers who “feel they cannot leave (although they would prefer to do so)” (Hom *et al.*, 2012, p. 835). Reluctant stayers can be categorized into trapped stayers, for whom “foregoing extrinsic forces keep employees from leaving a job lacking affective, constituent, or calculative forces” (Hom *et al.*, 2012, p. 842) and contractual stayers “whose employment contract keeps them in misfitting jobs” (p. 842). In both cases, the individuals perceive little control over the current situation. In addition, Woo and Allen (2014) proposed “detached” stayers, described as “individuals who exhibit no particularly strong reasons to stay, but appear to be making no effort to leave” (p. 690). They suggested that detached stayers are deviant to the concept of reluctant stayers (Hom’s *et al.*, 2012), as detached stayers have various possibilities for experiencing this situation. Unfortunately, these definitions do not specify whether employees perceive limited job

opportunities. Sheridan *et al.* (2019) add that their concept has not been further elaborated. As emphasized by Hom *et al.* (2012), there is a need for empirical research on this phenomenon. Another construct that is closely related is “dissatisfied stayers” (Mowday *et al.*, 1982), defined as “employees who are dissatisfied with their job but who, for a number of possible reasons, find it impossible to leave” (Mowday *et al.*, 1982, p. 180). Within this definition, the dimension dissatisfaction was included. However, these five types of stayers (also shown in Table 2) were not further operationalized and therefore only used in the conceptualization of locked at the job.

Inability to leave

An early construct originating from stress-health research is the inability to leave, as studied by Martin and Schermerhorn (1983). The inability to leave is defined as “the absence of actual opportunities to withdraw from a situation by changing the location of one’s work or residence” (Martin and Schermerhorn, 1983, p. 655). In a later study, Martin (1984) redefined the inability to leave as “a situation in which the employee had little behavioral discretion or choice about leaving his or her job” (p. 974). As the term indicates, this is a construct about the inability of leaving a job situation. This construct is seen as a source of job stress by Martin (1984) and was found to be associated with acute and chronic mental health problems. Apart from this study, the construct of inability to leave has, however, not been further studied. In addition, the dissatisfaction dimension was not mentioned in the conceptualization or operationalization of the inability to leave. Nevertheless, as the first definition by Martin and Schermerborn (1983) mentioned the absence of opportunities, this construct was taken into consideration for the further development of locked at the job.

Boundaryless and protean career

A construct that approaches the opposite of locked at the job is the boundaryless and protean careers that focus on the career decisions individuals take (Briscoe and Hall, 2006; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). The boundaryless career is characterized as “a high physical and/or psychological mobility” (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006, p. 22) and the protean career is characterized as “a developmental progression and self-fulfillment” (Briscoe and Hall, 2006, p. 4). Briscoe *et al.* (2006) developed a scale based on both protean careers that consists of self-directed (1) and values-driven (2) items and boundaryless career that consists of boundaryless mindset (3) and mobility preference (4). Based on possible combinations of both high and low boundaryless and protean careers a career profile is composed of individuals who score low on all four dimensions, called “trapped” or “lost” individuals. It is assumed that these individuals lack direction and lack perspective on possible options, which restrict them to have control over their situation (Briscoe and Hall, 2006). These individuals are reactive (Seibert *et al.*, 1999) as they are unable to see beyond their boundaries (Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, 1999). This construct provides many insights into the lack of opportunity experienced and its theoretical underpinnings. However, this construct lacks the dimension that causes job dissatisfaction.

Conclusion-related constructs to locked at the job

Although the above-related constructs are similar to locked at the job, they differ from locked at the job in a number of ways. The nine related constructs contain one or two of the dimensions of locked at the job, however, none has included the *inactivity* part within their definition. The constructs job lock, contractual stayers and dissatisfied stayers contain only the dimension dissatisfaction in the current job in their conceptualization. On the other hand, job embeddedness in an adverse work environment, continuance commitment, career

From job
immobility to
“locked at the
job”

entrenchment, reluctant stayers, trapped stayers, inability to leave and boundaryless and protean careers only include perceived limited job opportunities to find other suitable work in their conceptualization. Only two related constructs contain both dimensions; locked-in and involuntary non-mobility. However, involuntary non-mobility was only discussed conceptually and not further empirically researched. The construct of locked-in was discussed conceptually and empirically researched and is, therefore, most suitable to use to conceptualize and operationalize locked at the job.

Based on the above, we build on the two-dimensional approach of locked-in (Stengård *et al.*, 2016). In addition, we build on the definition of involuntary non-mobility by Stengård *et al.* (2016; see Table 2), using both dissatisfaction and the lack of job opportunities.

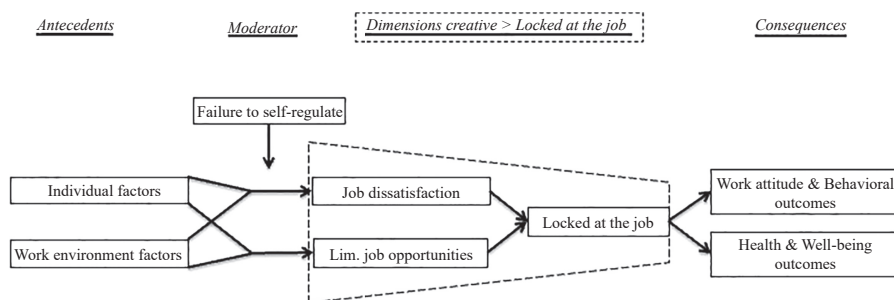
Conceptual framework of locked at the job

Based on a literature review of the nine related constructs and the theories of control (Carver and Scheier, 1982) and self-regulation (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996), we propose a conceptual model of feeling locked at the job as illustrated in Figure 2.

Proposed antecedents of locked at the job

An individual’s feeling of being locked at the job is often caused by multiple factors, leading to a misfit between one’s actual and one’s desired work situation. Affected by the failure to self-regulate (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996), these individuals will have problems accomplishing these desires. To propose antecedents of becoming locked at the job, we, therefore, build on the PE fit theory (Edwards, 2008). PE fit theory emphasizes the importance of an optimal fit between the employee’s current needs and abilities and the supplies and demands of their work environment (Edwards, 2008), also referred to as the compatibility of employees with their environment (Stengård *et al.*, 2017). In addition, Ryan and Deci (2000) propose that individuals are intrinsically motivated and capable of self-regulation when their needs for, autonomy, competences and the desire for building connections are fulfilled.

Process PE misfit. A feeling of locked at the job may arise when employees experience a PE-misfit between their (changing) individual factors and (changing) work environmental factors, because a misfit is likely to result in job dissatisfaction and/or perceived limited job opportunities (Wheeler *et al.*, 2005; Wheeler *et al.*, 2007). The fit literature distinguishes two types of PE fit; needs-supplies fit, which refers to the fit between an individual’s needs, values and preferences and the supplies the environment provides and demand-abilities fit, which refers to the fit between the demands an environment imposes and the abilities of the individual (Edwards and Shipp, 2007).



Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Figure 2.
Conceptual model
of locked

Building on the theoretical reasoning of the PE-fit theory in relation to locked-in of [Stengård \(2018\)](#), we propose that feeling locked at the job is caused by a minimum of two processes. In the first process, a PE-misfit between an individual factor and the work environment causes job dissatisfaction ([Edwards and Shipp, 2007](#); [Kristof-Brown et al., 2005](#)). For example, when an employee has high developmental needs (individual factor), which are not fulfilled by the organization (work environmental factor), this employee will experience a misfit and as a result job dissatisfaction. The second process of a misfit between an individual and the work environment leads to the perception of having limited job opportunities ([Jiang, 2017](#)). For example, when employees perceive that their skill level (individual factor) does not correspond to the required skill level of a desired job (work environmental factor), this experienced misfit leads to perceived limited job opportunities.

Individual factors. Relevant individual factors that should be considered according to PE fit theory are values, attitudes, interests, personality traits, knowledge, skills, abilities, preferences, demographic characteristics and goals ([Edwards and Shipp, 2007](#); [Edwards, 2008](#); [Oh et al., 2014](#)). For example, the individual factor age may cause a PE-misfit. Research by [Kooij et al. \(2011\)](#) showed that when individuals get older, their motives will change. When these changing motives are not fulfilled by the work environment, this will induce a PE-misfit. In addition, one's educational level can be an important individual factor, triggering a misfit with the work environment ([Stengård, 2018](#); [Stengård et al., 2019](#)). A highly educated employee is more likely to have the skill level required for a wider variety of jobs and hence generally has more favorable employment prospects resulting in a proper PE fit ([Furåker et al., 2014](#); [Stengård et al., 2019](#)). Thus, we propose the following.

PIa. Individual factors such as age and educational level may, if not matched with a work environmental factor, together cause locked at the job.

Work environment factors. Relevant work environmental factors that might lead to PE misfit include vocational norms, job demands and job control ([Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2018](#)), organizational culture and values and job characteristics ([Oh et al., 2014](#)). For instance, low organizational support for development ([Aronsson and Göransson, 1999](#)) can lead to a PE misfit if this means that employees' work-related growth needs are not fulfilled. In addition, when employees want to develop their skills but experience low support from one's supervisor or the organization to develop their skills and competences, they might feel stuck in their own development ([Muhonen, 2010](#)). Other work environment factors are high physical and mental demands of the job ([Stengård, 2018](#)) that exceed individual abilities, thus causing a PE-misfit.

PIb. work environmental factors such as organizational support for development or high physical and mental job demands may, if not matched with an individual factor, together cause locked at the job.

The role of failure to self-regulate. A PE misfit in itself does not necessarily have to lead to feeling locked at the job. Therefore, we argue that the failure to self-regulate influences the relationship between the locked at the job and its antecedents. When employees are not able to properly self-regulate, they are not able to prevent or combat a misfit ([Baumeister et al., 2007a, b](#)). The failure of self-regulation is defined by [Baumeister and Heatherton \(1996\)](#) as "problems that arise when one intentionally tries to initiate, alter, or inhibit a specific response or behavior and fails to do so because one does not put in sufficient effort (underregulation) or because one's active efforts are ineffective or counterproductive (misregulation)" (p. 92). In sum, locked at the job originates from two processes of PE misfit between the employee and the work environment combined with a failure to self-regulate. Due to this failure to self-regulate, one process of misfit leads to job dissatisfaction and the other process leads to the perception of limited job opportunities, which together form locked at the job.

Various factors can lead to failure to self-regulate. Individuals may lack discipline, be less optimistic or are not able to control their behaviors, thoughts or emotions as well as their time management (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996). In addition, these employees fail to manage power to achieve their goals (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister *et al.*, 2007a, b; Duru *et al.*, 2014; Furåker *et al.*, 2014). Baumeister and Heatherton (1996) describe two types of employees who fail to self-regulate, underregulators who lack effort and misregulators who are ineffective. Hence, employees who feel locked at the job either underregulate or misregulate.

- P2. The relationships of individual and work environment factors with locked at the job are moderated by the failure to self-regulate such that a misfit between individual and work environment factors will only lead to locked at the job when individuals fail to self-regulate.

Proposed consequences of becoming locked at the job

When an employee feels locked at the job, various consequences may occur. Based on PE fit theory (Edwards, 2008), we argue that feeling locked at the job will influence work attitudes and behavioral outcomes and health and well-being outcomes. We show empirical evidence of these potential consequences based on the literature review on the nine related constructs and on the literature of the PE fit theory (Edwards, 2008).

Work attitude and behavioral outcomes. Feeling locked at the job, caused by a misfit between one's needs and supplies offered by the environment (Edwards, 2008), will have an effect on one's behavior and work attitude toward the job. When individuals do not get what they want from their job, this ultimately will result in less positive attitudes to the job and its environment (Blau, 2001). Individuals will be less likely to achieve their goals and to be in charge of their attitudes and behaviors (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996), due to the lack of control over the current situation. Several consequences could emerge from this unfulfilling situation when experiencing a misfit and lacking resources to alter this situation. The lack of job resources may even create risks to well-being and performance (Van Veldhoven *et al.*, 2020). More particularly, when feeling locked at the job the individual's needs are not fulfilled and therefore negative work attitudes, such as lower levels of career satisfaction (Fisher *et al.*, 2016), less affective commitment, more continuance commitment to the job (Blau, 2001; Fisher *et al.*, 2016; Sharma, 2019) and less job involvement, are experienced (Blau, 2001; Sharma, 2019).

In addition to work attitudes that may be influenced by feeling locked at the job, locked at the job also influences behaviors. For example, employees who feel locked at the job will show less organizational citizenship behavior (Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Shore and Wayne, 1993) and lower levels of productivity on the job (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). In addition, Furåker *et al.* (2014) typify locked at the job as being the counterpart of job security (i.e. “granting the continuation of the same job” Gazier, 2007, p. 4). Hence, feeling locked at the job will trigger feelings of job insecurity.

- P3a. Locked at the job will affect work attitudes outcomes such as career satisfaction, affective commitment, continuance commitment and job involvement, as well as behavioral outcomes, such as organizational citizenship behavior, productivity and job insecurity.

Health and well-being outcomes. Other important outcomes of feeling locked at the job are health and well-being outcomes. A fit between individual needs and work environmental supplies is considered to be the most important predictor of well-being and work-related stress (Edwards and Shipp, 2007). It is expected that when feeling locked at the job the individual will experience more work-related stress and poorer well-being because the needs of the individual do not match the supplies of the work environment (Edwards and Shipp, 2007; Fisher *et al.*, 2016). When an individual does not get what is desired, it can be frustrating for the individual, which may also lead to a depletion of energy (Van der Elst *et al.*, 2012).

Hence, when needs are fulfilled, individuals will not only perform their roles more effectively, but it will also prevent them from being hindered in the job by the possible harmful effects of a stressful work environment (Edwards and Shipp, 2007; Feldman and Vogel, 2009).

A misfit may also originate from abilities and demands such that the ongoing load of work is too demanding for the individual and will ultimately lead to health and well-being related issues such as depletion of energy (Edwards and Cooper, 1990; Stengård *et al.*, 2016), emotional exhaustion (Allen *et al.*, 2016) and burnout (Tong *et al.*, 2015), because over time personal resources are depleted. Individuals going through such a situation will often suffer from job stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Muhonen, 2010) or other types of mental issues in terms of depressive symptoms (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999; Muhonen, 2010; Stengård *et al.*, 2016) and work-family conflict (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). For example, a misfit caused by a lack of abilities compared to requirements of demanding job tasks may lead to job stress when expectations of the job deviate from the available time to do the job.

Empirical research indeed demonstrates that physical effects of locked at the job that are likely to occur are emotional exhaustion and decreases of sleep quality/quantity (Allen *et al.*, 2016; Muhonen, 2010), headaches and fatigue (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999). Eventually feeling locked at the job may also lead to long-term sick leave (Fahlén *et al.*, 2009).

P3b. Locked at the job will affect health and well-being outcomes such as energy depletion, emotional exhaustion, burnout, job stress, depressive symptoms and work-family conflict.

Discussion

With this paper, we build on existing concepts on job immobility by proposing the concept of locked at the job that consists of two dimensions. Locked at the job is defined as: “feeling dissatisfied in the current job and inactivity due to perceived limited job opportunities.” In our literature review, limited studies were found that conceptualize and operationalize the two dimensions feeling dissatisfied and perceived limited job opportunities. However, no study included inactivity as part of the concept locked at the job which underlines the need to clearly define and operationalize locked at the job. Building on the theory of control (Carver and Scheier, 1982) and the associated theory of self-regulation (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996), PE fit theory (Edwards, 2008) and empirical studies on the nine related constructs, we propose a conceptual model of antecedents and consequences. More particularly, building on PE fit theory (Edwards, 2008), we identify individual and work environmental factors as the antecedents, causing a feeling of locked at the job. These factors are proposed to trigger two processes: a first process of PE misfit causing the first dimension of job dissatisfaction and a second process of PE misfit leading to a perception of limited job opportunities.

Furthermore, building on control and self-regulation theory, we propose that the effects of these antecedents are moderated by failure to self-regulate. Only when employees under- or misregulate will a misfit lead to feeling locked at the job. Finally, building on PE fit theory (Edwards, 2008), we propose that the negative consequences of feeling locked at the job involve work attitudes and behavioral outcomes and health and well-being outcomes. With these insights on the conceptualization of locked at the job, underlying theories and proposed antecedents and consequences, this conceptual paper enables researchers to further examine this important research area of job immobility.

Future research agenda

Future research on the construct of feeling locked at the job should focus on four important directions since existing available evidence comes from research on different related constructs of

locked at the job. First, the concept locked at the job needs to be further operationalized. The presented summary of the locked-in construct in [Table 2](#) can be used as a starting point for the operationalization of the locked at the job concept and specific items measuring the concept. The majority of the related constructs is tested in a subjective way, using multiple items, however, not always contain both dimensions of job dissatisfaction and perceived limited job opportunities. Currently, no suitable operationalization for locked-at-the-job is available, which measures the subjective state of an individual experiencing locked at the job which is remarkable, given the serious consequences. We propose three criteria to operationalize locked at the job: First, locked at the job represents an experience and a perception that should be operationalized with subjective items. Second, a construct that consists of two dimensions such as locked at the job must be operationalized by multiple items. Third, the items should reflect both dissatisfaction in the current job and perceived limited job opportunities. We argue that these two dimensions should be measured by separate items and can be brought together in the analyses.

The second avenue should focus on the two scenarios of becoming at risk of locked at the job. In this paper, we emphasized the phenomenon of locked at the job. Nevertheless, we recognize that the proposed scenarios in [Figure 1](#) need to be further conceptualized. The study of [Stengard \(2018\)](#) can be used in this to further conceptualize the at-risk of becoming locked at the job, with high levels of satisfaction and low levels of job opportunities and vice versa. These scenarios are important to be further explored and need adequate attention.

A third research avenue, building on the conceptualized construct and operationalization, is to acquire more scientific knowledge on antecedents and consequences of experiencing locked at the job. In our conceptual model ([Figure 2](#)), suggestions with regard to possible antecedents and consequences of experiencing locked at the job based on the literature review and the underlying theories were made which can be tested. For example, future research can focus on individual factors causing locked at the job. For example, age, educational level but also tenure may influence the level of becoming locked at the job ([Furaker et al., 2014](#); [Groot and Verberne, 1997](#); [Huyse-Gaytandjieva et al., 2013](#); [Stengård et al., 2019](#)) and hence should be examined. In addition, future research can also focus on the environmental factors that could cause employees to become locked at the job, such as organizational support, job demands or job characteristics ([Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2018](#); [Stengård et al., 2019](#)).

Conclusion

In this paper, we conceptualize the concept of locked at the job that consists of two dimensions, feeling dissatisfied in the current job and inactivity due to perceived limited job opportunities. Since related job immobility constructs have been studied by researchers from different research areas, using various definitions and techniques, this conceptual paper contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we provide an overview of the existing research on the nine related constructs and use it to clarify and refine the construct of locked at the job. Second, we introduce a theoretically underpinned model outlining antecedents and consequences of locked at the job building on the control, self-regulation and person-environment fit theory. Finally, we developed a research agenda for future research.

Apart from contributing to the scientific literature, this conceptual paper also contributes to practice. Locked at the job is a phenomenon that is often mentioned in practice, but hardly any scientific knowledge is available to guide practitioners dealing with this topic. Why do employees stick around when they are dissatisfied and what keeps them from moving? By advancing research on this phenomenon, practitioners will be provided with potential insights to deal with employees experiencing locked at the job.

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From job
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