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Career agility across cultural frameworks: A narrative review of individualistic versus collectivistic contexts

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Abstract. Career agility refers to the ability to successfully navigate changes within the workplace. It is an important skill in the context of the volatile nature of the world of work. However, most theories on careers and work are of a Western individualistic nature and do not address collectivistic notions of work and career. This review seeks to close this gap by summarizing the existing body of knowledge on the construct of career agility across varying cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism. Using Savickas' Career Construction Theory and Hofstede's Cultural Framework, this review identifies and describes various cultural variants of career agility. In individualistic cultures, career agility takes the form of free-choice and independence in career planning; however, it can potentially result in career-related anxiety and burnout. In collectivistic cultures, career agility encompasses adaptability in the choice of work roles and responsiveness to the needs of the work-family domain. This review provides evidence that in some cultures (e.g., Asia), members may remain in the same organization and adapt to various roles to ensure work-family integration. This review provides and discusses recommendations for practice in the field of psychology, management and policy.

Keywords: *Career agility, Career adaptability, Collectivism, Cross-cultural psychology, Individualism, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)*

1. Introduction

Profound structural transformations across global labor markets have intensified scholarly interest in the psychology of work (Coetzee, 2022). Central to this occupational discourse is career agility (Coetzee et al., 2021; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Career agility encompasses an individual's proactive capacity and willingness to continually update competencies, accommodate emergent organizational demands, and execute intentional vocational transitions (Coetzee et al., 2022). The capacity to manage multifunctional assignments and maintain high psychological engagement has gained substantial traction across recent decades (Haenggli & Hirschi, 2020; Hall, 2004). Within modern vocational literature, workers are increasingly expected to self-regulate vocational development and steer career progression autonomously. While career adaptability captures an individual's self-regulatory psychosocial readiness and temporal resources to cope with developmental career tasks (Savickas, 2005), career agility reflects the operational execution speed, functional iteration, and behavioral flexibility deployed during acute environmental disruption.

Although career adaptability and career agility are more widely researched, the fundamental theories that inform these concepts remain rooted in WEIRD (Henrich et al., 2010; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). These theories advocate for self and other (e.g., job-hopping) flexibility as the main components of career agility (Bandura, 2001; Coetzee et al., 2021). While these theories may be generally accepted, there are factors that make them impractical and untested outside of the Western world (Leong & Gupta, 2007). In collectivistic cultures, such as those across Southeast Asia and the Middle East, vocational decision-making is deeply embedded within relational networks, social capital, and family obligations (Hwang, 2012). For the purposes of this research, Agility was operationalized as the capacity for independent, successive changes of job. Loyalty and flexibility in adjusting to different organizational roles were interpreted as rigidity and stagnation in one's career.

To address this conceptual gap, this study synthesizes existing literature using a narrative review design to examine how career agility is operationalized across contrasting cultural dimensions. By integrating Savickas's (2005) Career Construction Theory and Hofstede's (2011) Cultural Dimensions framework, this paper systematically compares individualistic and collectivistic paradigms regarding their core drivers, behavioral expressions, skill enhancement motivations, and primary decision-making boundaries. Specifically, this review aims to: (1) analyze the manifestation of career agility in individualistic societies; (2) examine how relational and family dynamics shape career agility in collectivistic cultures; (3) provide a cross-cultural comparative synthesis to challenge Western-centric biases; and (4) outline actionable practical implications for cross-cultural career counseling and global talent management.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This research used a narrative literature review approach to integrate and critically analyze research publications on career agility in individualistic and collectivistic cultural frameworks. The narrative review approach was justified by the argument that the goal of this research was not to calculate an overall effect size. Instead, it aimed to explore and integrate a varying body of knowledge to determine the possible ways through which career agility is conceptually and empirically delineated. The review adopted a qualitative synthesis

approach to determine recurring themes and conceptual and contextual edges of the reviewed literature. The reviewed literature was analyzed using Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005, 2013) and culturally aligned theories to conceptualize career autonomy, career relational embeddedness, and career constraints.

2.2 Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, covering publications published from January 2000 up to September 2026. The search strategy utilized targeted Boolean query strings combining core concepts: ("career agility" OR "career adaptability") AND (cultur* OR "cultural orientation") AND (individualism OR collectivism OR individualistic OR collectivistic). Initial database searches and supplementary Google Scholar exploration yielded a broad pool of records, which were subsequently screened based on relevance. Following a rigorous evaluation of titles, abstracts, and full texts, a final total of 13 core articles met all inclusion criteria and were selected for qualitative synthesis in this review. Additionally, backward and forward citation tracking of these seminal papers was performed to ensure comprehensive theoretical saturation.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following are the main features of the 13 articles included in the current narrative review:

a) Articles were limited to scholarly books, journal articles, and papers, and were to include data pertaining to career agility and/or adaptability, cultural and/or vocational behavior, and were to be published in English.
b) Articles were limited to peer-reviewed publications. Others, including grey literature, dissertations, and abstracts that have no theoretical basis pertaining to cultural or autonomy dimensions, were excluded. Articles containing duplicative data were also excluded.

2.4 Data Analysis and Synthesis

The literature selection process consisted of identifying relevant resources, assessing their eligibility, and including them in the review. Records retrieved from Scopus, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect were screened for relevance to the research objectives, while duplicate records and publications that did not meet the predefined eligibility criteria were excluded. Relevant publications identified through backward and forward citation tracking were assessed using the same eligibility criteria.

The final body of literature consisted of publications that provided substantive conceptual or empirical contributions to understanding career agility, career adaptability, cultural orientation, autonomy, relational embeddedness, family influences, or organizational mobility. The selected literature was extracted and organized according to several analytical dimensions, including the conceptualization of career agility, cultural orientation, core career drivers, behavioral manifestations of agility, skill development, locus of career decision-making, family and social influences, organizational mobility, and psychosocial challenges.

The extracted literature was subsequently synthesized qualitatively following the thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical process identified recurring patterns, theoretical intersections, and contextual variations in the operationalization and behavioral manifestation of career agility across individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts.

3. Results and Discussion

Qualitative thematic synthesis across the 13 included literature sources—encompassing systematic reviews, meta-analyses, scoping reviews, and cross-cultural empirical investigations—revealed how career agility, career adaptability, learning agility, and vocational resilience are conceptualized, operationalized, and manifested across contrasting cultural frameworks (Asok Kumar et al., 2023; Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2023; Vinesian et al., 2022). The extraction and synthesis process yielded three primary thematic clusters: (1) the operationalization of career agility and individual self-agency in individualistic cultures; (2) the manifestation of career agility within collectivistic ecosystems, family support networks, and relational structures; and (3) a cross-cultural comparative synthesis highlighting the boundary conditions of autonomy, cultural values, and measurement invariance (Asma et al., 2024; Jogulu & Franken, 2023; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Zhang et al., 2026).

3.1 Career Agility in Individualistic Cultures

High degrees of personal sovereignty and individual autonomy enable employees in individualistic cultures to exhibit distinct forms of career agility (Jogulu & Franken, 2023). Within these societies, agility entails self-directed navigation of professional pathways unencumbered by rigid organizational boundaries (the boundaryless career), demanding personal accountability for self-development without the requirement of collective consensus (Pilkington-Williams, 2025; Tamontseva et al., 2025). Vocational decisions are primarily governed by internal value structures and subjective benchmarks of psychological success (Hall, 2004; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Confronted with labor market volatility, individualistic workers view personal autonomy as the foundational resource for sustaining ongoing adaptability (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Individualistic social structures routinely emphasize personal mastery and independence over collective alignment (Choi, 2025). Driven by horizontal individualism, employees pursue self-congruent work roles rather than subordinating personal vocational aspirations to overarching group requirements (Choi, 2025).

For people who work in individualistic cultures, career agility means being proactive about improving employability and increasing one’s marketability by actively and continually learning and developing new skills. In these cultures, it is no longer frowned upon to leave a job to find better compensation or a more ideal work alignment (Vinesian et al. 2022). While people may leave a job to move to a new, better-aligned job, this does not mean they are no longer employed. As observed among senior professionals in individualistic settings, individuals actively advance their careers by "making moves," leveraging external networks, and taking agentic risks to break out of organizational constraints (Jogulu & Franken, 2023).

There are negative consequences to this career model. For example, the emotional exhaustion of burnout is commonly reported among high achievers (Tamontseva et al., 2025). The uncertainty and risk of career choices create anxiety and lead to a sense of disequilibrium and identity distress (Tamontseva et al., 2025). Since the employee is solely responsible for determining and assessing the success of their career, anxiety and other psychological

disorders are heightened (Jogulu and Franken, 2023). Thus, the negative consequences of career agility are primarily psychological, and to some extent, physical.

3.2 Career Agility in Collectivistic Cultures

In contrast to individualistic paradigms centered on self-agency, career agility in collectivistic cultural contexts—such as Southeast Asia, China, and East Asia—is operationalized through relational adaptation, social embeddedness, and contextual alignment (Asok Kumar et al., 2023; Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2023). In these environments, career agility is not measured by how freely or frequently an individual independently transitions between jobs across organizational boundaries (Shinde, 2025). Rather, agility is demonstrated by an individual's capacity to adaptively navigate and adjust their career paths while preserving family harmony, fulfilling filial duties, and maintaining relational stability (Asma et al., 2024). Systematic review and meta-analytic evidence demonstrate that parental role modeling, kinship expectations, and family support function as vital environmental resources that directly predict career adaptability and decision-making self-efficacy across Asian populations (Asma et al., 2024; Asok Kumar et al., 2023; Sawitri et al., 2015; Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2023).

In collectivist cultures, career agility is expressed as flexibility, adaptability, and openness to learn and develop within the confines of a single organization (Pilkington-Williams, 2025; Vinesian et al., 2022). Employees regard the commitment to an organization as a commitment to a relationship. As such, they do not view the commitment negatively as stagnation. Long-term commitment to an organization is positive as it strengthens the relationship. Members of collectivist cultures are reluctant to adopt new ways of working or to develop new skills for employment outside the organization. Rather, they adapt and change to be able to serve the organization better (Asma et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2026; Pilkington-Williams, 2025).

There are, however, collective expectations and individual limitations. In several collectivist communities, there is a strong belief that the decisions made by adult members of the family should be in line with the expectations of the community (Mulyana et al., 2024). Employees working in collectivist cultures believe that work has a higher calling and that fulfilling work enhances their lives (Mulyana et al., 2024; Choi, 2025). Members of collectivist communities, particularly women in management positions, develop and cultivate relationships as a means of advancement (Mulyana et al., 2024). Women managers in collectivistic settings navigate career resilience by discreetly developing skills within institutional constraints, leveraging developmental mentor networks, and preserving group harmony (Jogulu & Franken, 2023).

3.3 Synthesis and Cross-Cultural Comparison

The science and understanding of career agility, learning agility, and other similar concepts are culture-bound (Jogulu and Franken, 2023; Pilkington-Williams, 2025; Vinesian et al., 2022). This is also evident in the determinants of career choices. Agility in an individualistic culture is attributable to the pursuit of self, while in a collectivistic culture, it is attributable to the pursuit of family, social, and other group concerns. Learning agility is the capability of an individual to respond to and adapt to varying work conditions and situations (Vinesian et al., 2022).

Table 1. Comparative Synthesis of Career Agility Dimensions Across Cultures

Analytical Dimension	Individualistic Culture	Collectivistic Culture
Core Drivers	Internal/Self-Fulfillment: Personal autonomy, individual ambition, self-directed career guidance, and self-actualization (Choi, 2025; Hall, 2004; Jogulu & Franken, 2023; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).	External/Relational Duty: Family harmony, social responsibility, filial piety, and communal obligations (Asma et al., 2024; Choi, 2025; Sawitri et al., 2015).
Manifestation of Agility	Boundaryless Career: Inter-organizational mobility (job hopping), external opportunity exploration, and agentic risk-taking self-management (Coetzee et al., 2021; Hall, 2004; Jogulu & Franken, 2023; Tamontseva et al., 2025).	Intra-Organizational Flexibility: Internal role adaptation, lateral task reassignments, organizational loyalty, and team alignment (Dhanpat, 2025; Jogulu & Franken, 2023; Marjerison et al., 2022; Shinde, 2025).
Goal of Skill Enhancement (Upskilling)	Enhancing external employability, individual market bargaining power, and personal marketability (Coetzee et al., 2021; Vinesian et al., 2022).	Fulfilling organizational task demands, supporting team efficiency, and achieving collective operational goals (Pilkington-Williams, 2025; Vinesian et al., 2022).
Locus of Decision-Making	Independent and self-agentic, operating without the requirement of group approval or social consensus (Hall, 2004; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).	Consultative and interdependent, incorporating parental approval, family endorsement, and community norms (Asma et al., 2024; Asok Kumar et al., 2023; Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2026).
Primary Psychosocial Challenges	Career anxiety, emotional exhaustion (burnout), identity distress during career transitions, and solitary risk burdens (Bandura, 2001; Hall, 2004; Tamontseva et al., 2025).	Moral dilemmas, relational reluctance (*sungkan*), intra-generational goal discrepancy distress, and parental expectation pressures (Asma et al., 2024; Choi, 2025; Mulyana et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2026).
Psychometric & Evaluative Benchmarks	Evaluated via individualized benchmarks and external mobility metrics; assumes Western-centric (WEIRD) autonomy paradigms (Henrich et al., 2010; Mulyana et al., 2024).	Evaluated via communal endorsement (e.g., Positive Career Goal Discrepancy) and requires cross-cultural measurement invariance testing (Mulyana et al., 2024; Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2023).

This comparative synthesis directly challenges the Western-centric (WEIRD) bias pervasive in conventional career literature, which assumes that genuine agility requires external job hopping and detachment from organizational structures (Henrich et al., 2010; Mulyana et al., 2024). Conventional paradigms overlook the psychosocial reality of non-Western societies, where remaining within an organization, flexibly adapting to internal role shifts, and developing diverse internal competencies to preserve family economic and emotional stability constitutes a fully legitimate, highly adaptive form of career agility (Asok Kumar et al., 2023; Jogulu & Franken, 2023; Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2023). Furthermore, cross-cultural evidence underscores that Western-developed measurement scales (such as career goal discrepancy or career adaptability inventories) cannot be applied uncritically without

conceptual adaptation and measurement invariance testing to avoid interpretive bias in non-Western populations (Mulyana et al., 2024; Pilkington-Williams, 2025; Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2023). Therefore, career agility cannot be evaluated solely by external job mobility; it must be assessed by an individual's adaptive capacity to align professional growth with the structural and cultural demands of their environment.

4. Practical and Theoretical Implications

The synthesis findings on the cross-cultural conceptualization of career agility carry significant implications for both career psychology intervention practices and human resource management at the global level.

4.1 Implications for Career Counseling

Western models of career counseling and guidance that assume individual independence as the sole marker of psychological growth must be reconsidered. When working with clients from collectivistic cultures, counselors should not promote individualism or encourage clients to establish independent, career-relevant identities that create destructive friction with their families. Rather, culturally relevant and systemic counseling approaches are necessary (Leong & Gupta, 2007; Savickas, 2005). The focus of counseling should be on the client's ability to utilize social capital to harmonize the vocational demands of their career with the legitimate relational expectations of their family system (Hwang, 2012).

4.2 Implications for Global HR Management

These research findings challenge HRM policies of multinational firms that seek to standardize talent management across diverse markets. In collectivistic cultures, firms should adopt a talent retention approach that fosters employee progression through lateral task reconfiguration and internal role transitions within the enterprise. The cultivation of positive work relationships, supported by psychologically safe, cooperative, and trusting work environments, must be prioritized (Hofstede, 2011). Conversely, in individualistic cultures, firms should structure talent development systems that reward individual competency mastery (Hall, 2004) and sponsor self-directed continuing professional development (Coetzee et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion

This narrative review synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical literature on career agility to demonstrate that the construct is fundamentally context-bound and cannot be evaluated through a culturally neutral lens. In individualistic societies, career agility is predominantly characterized by self-directed agency, psychological resilience, and unconstrained inter-organizational mobility. Conversely, within collectivistic contexts, career agility manifests as the adaptive capacity to functionally harmonize personal vocational aspirations with familial duties, social norms, and internal organizational needs. Recognizing these cultural expressions challenges the conventional WEIRD bias, establishing that remaining within an organization and proactively engaging in intra-organizational role adaptation to preserve family stability constitutes an authentic, sophisticated manifestation of career agility.

To further advance scholarship in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, future empirical inquiries should examine workforce behaviors across diverse cultural settings to capture how core values, such as filial piety, guide role adaptability. Researchers are encouraged to conduct qualitative investigations that capture the nuanced lived experiences of relational career negotiation. Concurrently, quantitative investigations should apply conditional process modeling to examine the boundary conditions and moderating mechanisms through which cultural orientation influences the relationship between relational resources, intra-organizational flexibility, and career sustainability. Finally, addressing the documented psychometric limitations across non-Western cohorts underscores the necessity of establishing cross-cultural measurement invariance before deploying standard career agility instruments internationally.

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Authors' Contributions Statement: OPM conceptualized the study, formulated the research methodology, and performed critical manuscript revisions. UAI and IKP conducted the literature search, performed data extraction, and drafted the initial thematic analysis. FA, PAM, and AHH developed the comparative synthesis framework, evaluated the socio-economic and global HR management implications, and structured the manuscript draft. ATP and AZN validated citations, verified eligibility criteria, and formatted the reference list according to publication standards. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript for publication.

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