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Title: Trapped by Poverty: Unraveling the Career Consequences of the Working Poor

There is abundant evidence showing that poverty can have a profound influence on individual perceptions, behaviors, and relationships. Yet in organizational studies, there is little attention focused on poverty, particularly the working poor. In developing theory and drawing conclusions about how people behave at work, organizational researchers have tended to study samples of industrial workers, knowledge workers, managers, and high-status professionals at the expense of studying low-wage worker and employees with a background of poverty—both of which are defining characteristics of the working poor (Leana, Mittal, & Stiehl, 2012).

This project investigates the relationship between poverty and career attainment. Compared to textbook workers, the working poor may have more difficulties realizing career success. There are various reasons as why this may be the case. For example, individuals in poverty may feel inefficacious to self-manage their career, perhaps because over time they have developed the belief that it is hopeless to try to change their circumstances (Olson & Schober, 1993), have grown more pessimistic and fearful about the future and have become risk-averse (Dooley, Prause, & Ham-Rowbottom, 2000), have skills deficiencies that restrict their ability to transfer across different jobs (Mittal, Rosen, & Leana, 2009), and/or have more impoverished social networks than their wealthier counterparts (Lin, 2000). In this project, these (and other) explanatory mechanisms will be compared against each other in a series of field studies using longitudinal data.

The second objective is to identify approaches that could break the vicious cycle between poverty and career inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). Using a dyadic research design, we investigate two sources of social support, supervisor and mentor, that are particularly potent in influencing workers' cognitions, emotions and social relationships, and as such may help poor workers to escape from entrapment. In addition, we investigate whether the working poor may benefit from changing structural aspects of their work (e.g., job design). Finally, we develop a career management intervention which aims to promote career self-management and the well-being of the working poor. Its effectiveness will be tested in a (quasi-)randomized control trial.

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Research Group: <https://research.vub.ac.be/business/mast-management-and-strategy>

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