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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Emotions careers: The interplay between careers and emotions in professional organisations

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Email: S.Gustafsson@bath.ac.uk**Abstract**

Despite recognising the importance of emotions for careers, researchers rarely explore how career-related practices invoke emotions and the implications for professionals' career aspirations and behaviours. Drawing on 50 interviews with lawyers on the partner track and human resource (HR) professionals, we develop the concept of an *emotions career*. The emotions career consists of four stages, each characterised by different primary emotions and socio-emotional dynamics. We find that career practices and social interactions elicit emotions that regulate professionals' career aspirations and trajectories. Thus, professionals become emotionally invested in their careers, which in turn contributes to the maintenance of existing career systems. To better support professionals, we suggest that HR practitioners develop greater awareness of the emotional dynamics associated with careers and engage in career conversations, while organisational leaders should, collectively, consider ways to challenge negative perceptions of alternative career paths, generating more diverse thinking about careers.

KEYWORDS

career, emotion, law, partnership, profession

Abbreviation: HR, Human Resource.

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Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- Emotions play an important role in professionals' careers.
- Professionals experience discrete emotions in their careers and respond emotionally to critical career events such as unemployment.
- Little is known about the role of career-related practices in shaping emotions, how such emotions evolve or their role in reproducing professionals' career models.

What this paper adds?

- Empirically informed analysis of the interplay between emotions and career practices, drawing on interviews with lawyers and human resource professionals.
- Proposal for the concept of the emotions career to capture this interplay by illustrating how career-related practices and interactions with supervising law firm partners shape and transform emotions.
- Demonstration that career practices elicit emotions that regulate careers and contribute to the reproduction of professional career trajectories.

The implications for practitioners

- Practitioners need greater awareness of the emotional dynamics associated with careers, and should support employees in their emotional journeys, for example, through career conversations.
- Career conversations could focus on creating a space for talking about emotions and developing resilience, particularly when employees experience negative emotions.
- Organisational leaders could usefully consider ways of challenging negative perceptions around alternative career paths, and could embrace positive cultural change to create more diverse thinking about careers.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The partners are being very sensitive about it. From the partner's point of view, these candidates are their precious succession plan. It's very emotionally charged.

(HR5)

Scholars have long suggested that careers are infused with emotions. For example, Fineman (2003, p. 11) noted that people's careers 'blossom or crash through feelings', highlighting the role of emotions in shaping careers, and how careers shape people's emotions. Similarly, Kidd (1998, 2004) proposed a conscious shift from the cognitive aspects of career-making and rationality in career decisions to acknowledging the emotionality of careers. Research suggests emotions evolve over the course of one's career (Super, 1980) and are embedded in career activities, such as job search (Bonaccio et al., 2014) and career choice (Jung et al., 2015). Concepts such as emotional intelligence and career resilience have also been emphasised by scholars (Jiang et al., 2021).

While emotions are important across almost all career settings, elite professional roles can carry a particularly large emotional charge because of the high demands placed on them. For instance, scholars have investigated emotions experienced by human resource (HR) managers (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Tlaiss, 2022), architects (Ahujua et al., 2019), and lawyers (Allan et al., 2019). In professional careers, significant events and career shocks frequently

foreground emotions (Akkermans et al., 2018), and coping with such events requires active narrative work (Gabriel et al., 2010).

However, as research has focused on professionals' experience of discrete emotions in careers, or emotional responses to critical career events, two areas have been neglected. First, research has paid insufficient attention to how career practices shape the emotions of career actors, which is important to address if we want to engage purposefully with the role of emotions in career contexts (Kidd, 2004; Super, 1980). Second, understanding of how emotions shape career aspirations and trajectories more broadly is still underdeveloped, which is surprising given the definition of a career as an 'evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 8). Thus, our study aims to further develop the theoretical and empirical understandings of the role of emotions in careers, asking: *How are emotions implicated in career-related practices, and how do they influence professionals' career aspirations and trajectories?*

Our empirical focus is law firms. Drawing on 50 interviews with lawyers on the partner track and HR professionals, we analyse interviewees' talk about emotions in law careers. In the main, our resulting contributions are twofold: first, we account for the dynamics among emotions through the construct of an *emotions career*, which involves the infusion of specific emotions into a sequence of professional career stages that shape professionals' career aspirations and behaviours, regulated by career practices and social interactions. We argue that professional careers are not only suffused with discrete emotions but that these evolve sequentially, shaped by professional and organisational career practices. Second, we show how the dynamics that underpin these emotions careers also serve to regulate professionals' career aspirations. We argue that career-related practices elicit career-regulating emotions and thereby repeatedly reproduce established career trajectories as the professionals concerned become emotionally invested in them.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Emotions and professional careers

Stryker (2004) asserts that scholars understand emotions as evolutionary and physiological reactions experienced in the gut and on display in the face; others view them as constructions created, maintained and handed down to individuals by a particular group, culture or society. Most emotion researchers take 'an eclectic view, regarding emotions as a conjoint of social and more general environmental conditions, physiological reactions, social definitions, and experiential responses' (Stryker, 2004, p. 3). We conceptualise emotions as multidimensional, extending beyond inner states and processes, and being shaped through interactions, language and social practice (Sieben & Wettergren, 2010). Thus, emotions are sociorelational concepts, formed and expressed within social contexts (Fineman, 2003).

The career is part of the psychological contract between employer and employee (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1989, 1990); that is, the beliefs around obligations and promises that regulate the relationship between the employer and employee (Rousseau, 1990). Rousseau (1989) distinguishes between relational and transactional psychological contracts, where relational contracts cover long-term socio-emotional exchanges and transactional contracts denote short-term economic exchange. From this perspective, our focus is on the relational aspects of the web of exchanges occurring in professional careers.

Super (1980) was one of the first career scholars to explicitly acknowledge the role of emotions in shaping careers. His Life Career Rainbow model describes the multidimensionality of roles throughout a person's life span, and recognises an individual's emotional commitments to these roles. He contends that the importance of each role during the course of a career is defined by time and emotion, and that individuals' emotional involvements in their roles depend on their life stage. Since Super (1980), scholars have been concerned with professionals' emotional struggles and the implications of these for identity construction and career behaviours. For example, Allan et al. (2019) show how anxi-

ety experienced by law firm partners leads to continual career protection instead of reflexive career development. Positive emotions play an important role too; for example, Fraher and Gabriel (2014) show how love of flying infuses and sustains pilots' career identities. Others focus on professionals' emotional responses to critical career events, or career shocks (Akkermans et al., 2018), such as unemployment and redundancy. While the greatest focus has been on negative emotions, Akkermans et al. (2018) also recognise positive career shocks, such as promotions.

More specifically, the literature on promotions emphasises emotions as an individual outcome of promotion systems and practices (Allen, 1997; Ferris et al., 1992). For example, the model of promotion systems of Ferris et al. (1992) includes emotions in the employee attitudes and behaviours that result from promotion-system characteristics. Workers' perceptions of fairness in promotions are of particular interest because these are positively related to job satisfaction (Kaplan & Ferris, 2001). Similarly, the careers literature associates promotions with positive career outcomes such as feelings of career success (Arthur et al., 1989).

Thus, research shows professionals' careers are suffused with emotions. Yet, while researchers have studied discrete emotions and emotional responses to critical career events, a full understanding of how organisational and professional career practices shape emotions and the implications for professional careers is lacking. Thus, although there is evidence to suggest that organisations and professions manage and regulate their members' emotions with distinct behavioural outcomes, career theory has not extensively addressed this issue. With this in mind, we start with a review of existing knowledge about the regulatory power of emotions.

2.2 | The regulatory power of emotions in professional careers

The complexity of professional work, characterised by esoteric expertise, autonomy and non-routinised problem-solving, renders direct or bureaucratic management of such work inefficient (Alvehus, 2018). Instead, professional organisations seek to influence employee behaviour through the regulation of norms, beliefs, values and emotions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004).

Literature that concerns itself with the sociology of emotions emphasises their regulatory power (Kemper, 1990; Scheff, 1988; Thoits, 1989; Turner, 2009), arguing that emotions act as motivators and mediators of social control. For example, Scheff's (1988) deference-emotion system suggests that members who conform to social norms are rewarded with respect and pride, while non-conformance creates shame. Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labour is prominent in this field: linking emotions and behaviour regulation, she argues that socially shared norms, logics and ideologies define the feelings and expressions appropriate to professional interactions. While Hochschild focuses on the strategic management of emotions, her general argument is conceptualised as one of emotional regulation (Côté, 2005; Troth et al., 2018), referring to the strategies to modify, alter, enhance or suppress the emotional expression of an organisation's members (Grandey, 2000). Thus, social contexts delineate norms and manifest rules that define how workers are expected to manage and present feelings. Scholars have extended the empirical focus from front-of-house consumer-facing workers to professionals (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014), showing, for example, how professional socialisation practices and professional bodies govern barristers' emotional labour (Harris, 2002).

Our research furthers the exploration of the relationship between career practices and emotions, focusing on the path to partnership in professional organisations. The concepts of profession and status go hand in hand. In most professional organisations, partnership represents the pinnacle of career achievement and status (Empson, 2007; Gustafsson et al., 2018). Abbott (1988) noted that status defines professionals' work, their social standing and the profession's ability to retain jurisdiction and hence long-term survival. Studies by Collins (1990), Hammond (1990) and Kemper (1978) link emotions and improvements in career status, highlighting how emotional experiences related to status changes induce social conformity. They argue that people have emotional reactions to their position in the status hierarchy; moving up the hierarchy brings emotional gain, while those at the bottom of such structures experience a loss of emotional energy. These experiences are durable: people achieve long-term gratification when their

status increases, something experienced across social groups. Thus, individual achievement has implications at the collective professional level.

Given that emotions play an important part in professionals' careers, and professional organisations use practices that shape professionals' behaviour by regulating their emotions, it is pertinent to investigate the interplay between career-related practices and emotions in much more depth. To this end, we conducted a qualitative, inductive study capturing the experiences of lawyers on the partner track as they reflected on their careers over time.

3 | METHODOLOGY

As per other studies on emotions and work, we adopt an in-depth, interview-based approach (Gabriel et al., 2010; Tlaiss, 2022). Three considerations informed our decision to focus on law firms. First, in law firms, careers provide the core organising principle, structuring professionals' working lives and fuelling their everyday interactions, and thereby offering a rich empirical setting (Morris & Pinnington, 1998). Second, emotions in law firms are prevalent and complex; partners have strong bonds with each other and their junior protégés, and great significance is attributed to partnership as the pinnacle of career success. Third, careers in law firms have similarities to those of other elite professions, such as accountancy and consultancy, suggesting that our findings should be of wider interest and relevance.

3.1 | Data collection

We conducted 50 interviews with 31 lawyers and seven HR professionals (a total of 15 interviewees identified as female; 40%) from seven UK law firms. We purposely selected firms to provide a range of sizes and practice areas (Table 1). The firms differed in location (London and south-west UK) and size (from fewer than 50 to more than 500 partners), and all were partnerships with shared ownership and collective decision-making. The authors recruited participants through professional networks and by contacting HR professionals of law firms directly. Given the homogeneous context and heterogeneous population (lawyers and HR managers), the sample size is suitable (Creswell, 2007). Interviews of lawyers lasted between one and two hours, and those of HR managers 30–45 min. The interviews took place in the firms' own offices. To ensure consistency, the first author conducted all of the interviews.

TABLE 1 Summary of interviews.

	Lawyer interviews	HR interviews	Size of firm (number of partners)	Example practice areas	Total interviews
Firm 1	4 + 2 follow-up (L1-L4)	1 (HR1)	>150	Financial services, real estate, litigation	7
Firm 2	5 + 3 follow-up (L5-L9)	1 (HR2)	<50	Financial services, personal injury, corporate	9
Firm 3	4 + 2 follow-up (L10-L13)	1 (HR3)	>50	Employment law, family, corporate	7
Firm 4	4 (L14-L17)	1 (HR4)	>80	Commercial litigation, employment law, personal injury	5
Firm 5	6 + 5 follow-up (L18-L22)	1 (HR5)	>500	Finance, intellectual property, litigation	12
Firm 6	4 (L23-L26)	1 (HR6)	>250	Corporate, intellectual property, real estate	5
Firm 7	4 (L27-L31)	1 (HR7)	>100	Corporate, intellectual property, tax	6
Total	43	7			50

Interviewing people in later career stages was important to capture a range of career experiences and emotional episodes. According to Kidd (1998, p. 280), career transitions 'contain more scope for an analysis of the role of emotion in careers'. Hence, we focused our questions on the experience of becoming a law firm partner. Twelve interviewees were actively undergoing the promotion process, allowing a level of real-time observation of the emotions involved. Uncertainty and anxiety about the outcome of the process were cited by most of our participants, but were particularly prevalent within this group, given the stage of their application. We scheduled follow-up interviews with this group to capture their experiences post-promotion (Table 2).

We adopted different interview schedules for lawyers and HR professionals. In our interviews with HR professionals, we focused on professional and organisational career practices and the interactions between HR and lawyers. In our interviews with lawyers, we emphasised career experiences, sense-making and interpretations, recognising the socially situated nature of career-making (Afiouni et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2004).

We also asked lawyers to draw timelines of critical events. These served as reference points during interviews and elicited specific experiences as opposed to more generalised reflections. Based on a qualitative adaptation of critical incident interviewing (Chell, 2004), we asked lawyers to share details of specific career events, the emotions they experienced and the outcome in career terms. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' prior consent, audio-transcribed and anonymised.

3.2 | Data analysis

Our analysis aimed to understand participants' lived experiences (Schwandt, 1998) by prioritising their sense-making and interpretations. It involved iterative processes of interpretation and reinterpretation (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017), using a logic of abduction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) that incorporated prior theoretical knowledge while remaining open to emergent empirical phenomena. Capturing emotions involved more than simply identifying emotion-associated words; rather, it encompassed exploring and comprehending word relationships and metaphors (Fineman, 2004, p. 733).

Initially, we conducted in-depth readings of interview transcripts and used NVivo software to develop descriptive codes. Our analysis revealed the typical steps of the law partner promotion process, including: initial conversations with more senior lawyers about promotion; the preparation of a business case document outlining the candidate's past and future contributions to the firm's financial performance and strategy; an assessment or development centre, particularly in larger firms; the appointment of a promotion committee tasked with collecting partner feedback on the proposed candidates and conducting candidate interviews; the final partner vote where, following the principles of collective ownership, all partners voted on the proposed candidates. Guided by Fineman (2004), we looked for explicit words such as 'pride' and indirect accounts or metaphors such as 'partnership as a badge' and 'partnership as the glittering prize'. Our analysis revealed the influence of organisational, professional and social dynamics on emotions. We refined our interpretations by revisiting the literature on professions and emotions and reanalysing the data.

Next, we identified patterns across participants' accounts and were able to categorise the career journey into stages that were each characterised by shared primary emotions. For example, participants described the anticipation and excitement they felt during their initial career stages. Through further iterations informed by literature and discussions, we defined the boundaries and characteristics of these stages, resulting in a four-stage emotions career: wearing rose-coloured glasses; being on tenterhooks; winning the glittering prize; everything stays the same.

In the third phase of our analysis, we probed these stages more deeply, exploring their underlying dynamics in relation to professional and organisational career practices such as promotion and performance management, as well as socio-emotional interactions, and identifying the career implications associated with each stage (see Table 3).

TABLE 2 Demographic details of lawyers.

Identifier	Firm	Gender	Age	Professional tenure	Promotion status (at time of first interview)	Follow-up interview (following promotion)
L1	1	Female	31	9 years	In process	x
L2	1	Female	32	10 years	In process	x
L3	1	Male	41	10 years	Promoted	-
L4	1	Male	50	27 years	Promoted	-
L5	2	Female	42	20 years	In process	x
L6	2	Male	44	22 years	Promoted	-
L7	2	Female	49	26 years	Promoted	-
L8	2	Male	35	12 years	In process	x
L9	2	Female	33	11 years	In process	x
L10	3	Male	40	18 years	Promoted	-
L11	3	Male	38	17 years	Promoted	-
L12	3	Female	34	12 years	In process	x
L13	3	Male	32	9 years	In process	x
L14	4	Male	38	15 years	Promoted	-
L15	4	Male	33	10 years	Promoted	-
L16	4	Male	34	11 years	Promoted	-
L17	4	Male	52	30 years	Promoted	-
L18	5	Male	35	12 years	In process	x
L19	5	Female	44	21 years	In process	x
L20	5	Male	34	11 years	In process	x
L21	5	Male	32	10 years	In process	x
L22	5	Male	32	9 years	In process	x
L23	5	Male	53	30 years	Promoted	-
L24	6	Female	38	11 years	Promoted	-
L25	6	Male	35	13 years	Promoted	-
L26	6	Male	39	16 years	Promoted	-
L27	6	Male	45	22 years	Promoted	-
L28	7	Male	34	12 years	Promoted	-
L29	7	Female	38	15 years	Promoted	-
L30	7	Female	37	13 years	Promoted	-
L31	7	Male	39	17 years	Promoted	-

4 | FINDINGS

The four stages of an emotions career identified are presented below, with their underlying components highlighted.

4.1 | 'Wearing rose-coloured glasses'

The first stage of the emotions career is characterised by positive emotions, including anticipation, aspiration and excitement, as young professionals begin their career journeys. Close relationships with partners in supervisory

TABLE 3 Stages and dynamics of the emotions career.

Emotions career stage	Primary emotions/ feelings	Career practices	Social interactions	Career implications
Wearing rose-coloured glasses	Anticipation; excitement; trust; emerging fear of negative evaluation	Career progression framework; regular performance evaluations; partner mentorship; continuous partner observation	Junior professionals and partners develop emotional bond; partners provide emotional support instead of/alongside personal social network	Alignment of individual career goals and aspirations with partnership, 'writing out' private lives as work and career prioritised
Being on tenterhooks	Anxiety; uncertainty; loneliness; projective shame in anticipation of failure	Rigorous application process; in-depth candidate vetting process; internal partner vote	Partner emotional investment in promotion candidates; partners shift from mentor to gatekeeper and political actors	Constructing strategic and financial fit with organisation; avoidance of behavioural digressions and misfit
Winning the glittering prize	Pride; joy; love	Internal and external celebration of success; professional recognition of partner 'badge'	Emotional bond with partnership deepens; strong sense of belonging; partners become peers/equals	Private lives written back in career narrative; collective interests of partnership emphasised
Everything stays the same	Disillusionment; disappointment; continued pride	Regular performance evaluations; shared norm around high achievement; scrutiny by fellow partners	More neutral accounts of partnership; shortcomings in relationships revealed; focus shifts to junior professionals	Partnership as aspirational career ideal sustained and reproduced

roles shape lawyers' career aspirations as the value of partnership is communicated. Law graduates are first introduced to a legal career during university studies, wherein teachers and law firm representatives present becoming a partner as aspirational. This continues as the graduates become law firm trainees: 'When you start off as a junior lawyer, you think that you will become a partner. That is very much the track, the main track. That's what you are aspiring to be' (L2); 'If you asked any newly qualified solicitor what they aspire to be, it would be ... a partner' (HR2).

These positive associations are amplified once junior lawyers begin interacting with partners. They describe partners' roles positively: partners are advisers, sponsors and mentors, who 'helped me to progress' (L4) and 'gave me opportunities' (L15). Through close and frequent interactions, junior lawyers attach value to the status of partnership and develop an emotional connection, preparing the ground for deeper emotions to develop as their careers unfold.

Formal HR processes and practices accompany informal interactions. Official performance evaluations occur annually against competency frameworks that describe the skills and attributes required for each career stage and are common tools in professional evaluation. One lawyer reflected:

In a law firm you're constantly assessed. Every piece of work you do will be assessed by a partner. At this firm, a piece of work won't go out unless a partner has seen it. [...] So basically you are being

assessed the entire time and you will have a very clear idea of how you're doing based on that [...]. And then if there are particular issues, they'll raise them.

(L22)

In combination, formal and informal evaluations create an environment in which junior lawyers become attuned to how others, particularly partners, view them, and they attach meaning to being viewed positively (Lewis, 1999). Whether one is a competent professional depends on partners' judgements. With the potential for failure in each encounter, many junior lawyers are continually anxious about 'not being quite good enough' (L18). While partners can contribute to this feeling by providing negative feedback, they also play an important role in helping young professionals transform feelings of uncertainty into confidence:

If we think someone is really good and has potential, we'll tell them that. Because I'm very keen that we look after our star people, and part of that is making sure that they know that they are star people because they tend to be the most paranoid [...]. It's important that they know that they're progressing, [...] that they're valued, and what they need to do to keep moving towards the place we want them to get to.

(L29)

Yet, partners do not confer their trust easily; they demand commitment, loyalty and hard work: 'They made me fight for it'. (L15). This happens at the expense of non-work aspects. Being surrounded by people who prioritise work and career, young professionals associate careers with sacrifice, spending time away from home and dedication to the firm:

Whenever I see my family and friends, the first thing they ask me is, how is it you're working [these] really long hours because they are just so used to me cancelling things or arriving late, being exhausted. [...] There is no doubt that it's physically exhausting and incredibly destructive of your personal and family life.

(L2)

The prioritisation of work becomes a key characteristic of how young lawyers make meaning of their careers. The 'writing out' of private lives (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000) happens mostly at earlier career stages, when raising a family might not yet be a priority. Hence firms and partners become even more important reference points and often provide the emotional support usually afforded by spouses and family members. This is accompanied by an extensive long-term grooming process through which lawyers develop 'fit' with the existing partnership: 'partners groom them and make them into a model of themselves' (HR3). Lawyers learn what it means to 'look, and feel, and smell like a partner' (L26). They experience and appreciate the embodied and felt aspects of partnership.

Thus, through close interactions with partners, early career aspirations intensify as lawyers develop emotional bonds with partners and attach deep meaning to the role. Through the course of frequent evaluations, lawyers learn to express their desire for promotion. Being promoted to partnership is valuable and worth striving towards, as two lawyers remarked: 'It's just what we're in it for' (L1), and 'It's always been a target for me and a driving factor' (L8).

4.2 | 'Being on tenterhooks'

The second stage of the emotions career reflects a shift towards primarily negative emotions as lawyers are considered for promotion to partnership. Formal HR practices and processes come to the foreground and partners take on the role of gatekeepers. Constructing themselves to fit with the partnership becomes a priority in lawyers' career

narratives. While the grooming and preparation of potential partners extends over years, lawyers only become official candidates for promotion once their names are entered into the candidate pool. Partners then decide collectively which lawyers will be asked to prepare an official promotion case. After this, a lengthy process involving formal steps begins, including partnership assessment and development centres, formal feedback from partners, an interview/presentation, and the final partner vote. HR professionals support and facilitate these activities.

For most professionals, the promotion process represents a critical emotional shift. Having felt valued and excited, they become anxious and uncertain about the likelihood of being promoted, not least because any of these procedural steps might end candidature. One lawyer described it as 'nerve-racking' (L1), and another reported: 'It's a lot of stress. I found it an incredibly stressful and uncertain process' (L22). There are several reasons for this. A candidate's business case must provide evidence such as their number of billable hours, as well as client testimonials and evidence of market trends. This means that lawyers who have focused on technical ability now need to demonstrate financial acumen and present a business version of themselves. This creates considerable uncertainty:

The whole process is a challenge because it's hard work. The business case is hard work because it's something that you don't do day-to-day. I don't normally sit down and think 'OK. Where am I going to get all these new clients from and what's my specialty?' [...] It's 'How are you going to bring in a million pounds?' and 'How are YOU different and why on earth would somebody give you work?'

(L22)

A further unsettling aspect is that partners now reveal a different side: they change from being mentors and supporters to gatekeepers and political actors. The involvement of all partners in the voting process means that lawyers need to avoid any discrepant behaviour, such as 'saying something stupid' or 'showing a lack of judgement', to avoid raising concerns that might lead a partner to query their candidature:

You felt like you were on tenterhooks for that whole time because you had different stages that you needed to deal with and you felt that you had to be on your best behaviour because, actually, if you inadvertently upset someone then it might be a black mark against you. [...] I did feel that for a long period of that year, I couldn't relax properly.

(L27)

This collective involvement of partners obliges lawyers to act in close alignment with the firms' expectations, conforming to and reproducing them at the same time. Promotion candidates reported feeling exposed, having previously felt protected, moving from a sense of social cohesion and belonging to feeling alone and experiencing a loss of trust: 'It's a horrible process actually. [...] it's also a very easy process to destroy trust' (L20). While there was a shift in how lawyers described the role of other partners, some emphasised how their supervising partners had helped them with drafting supporting documentation, reassuring them and making them feel more confident during this stage.

Within these firms, HR professionals attempt to design and conduct a promotion process that is diligent in selecting the 'right' candidates while 'weeding out' those deemed unsuitable. For instance, several firms had introduced an official partner assessment centre to test applicants but lawyers expressed discontent about having to prove themselves in such settings. There was a shared feeling that the standardisation and formalisation of the process excluded social and personal elements, ignoring candidates' previous contributions and long-term commitments to their firms.

Many described feeling shame, regarding a lack of success in the promotion process as humiliating. One candidate described it as having 'egg on my face' (L1), another as being 'awful' (L27), and a third said, 'If you fail, you fail big' (L11). Most lawyers suggested that unsuccessful promotion meant having to leave the firm, 'a sign that it's time to [go] somewhere else' (L9):

It leaves you with very little option. If you were to fail, you couldn't really stay. You'd have to go. I couldn't stay because they've told you that, essentially, we don't want you to be a partner. Now if they don't want me to be a partner, then what am I doing here? Why am I shedding blood, sweat and tears for you?

(L11)

The accounts show that the promotion process is an emotionally charged ritual, intensifying emotions and, in contrast to first phase, bringing negative emotions to the forefront. While this experience was common, some reported feeling confident about their promotion prospects; typically, these were candidates with strong business cases who had established their promotion mandates in financial terms.

4.3 | 'Winning the glittering prize'

The third stage of the emotions career reflects the pride and joy associated with personal achievement and professional recognition. There is a strong sense of belonging with the partnership, and a relational shift from experiencing partners as gatekeepers to viewing them as peers. One interviewee reported: 'I feel very proud to have got to where I have [...] it's a privilege; it's not an entitlement, it's a real privilege' (L14). Similarly, another said, 'I am very proud to have become an equity partner here' (L13). For these lawyers, partnership denoted a sense of arrival in their careers, a 'feeling of you've made it' (L14). Attaining partnership meant that all the hard work and sacrifices had finally paid off:

We have all slogged our guts out at university, higher education and then postgrad, law school and then training, working there at the really late nights, working the weekends. [Partnership] is the glittering prize.

(L1)

Partnership was also meaningful in the context of 'survivor's pride'. The promotion process was exhausting, and lawyers had to cope with the fear of not achieving it. Finally achieving promotion had a self-confirming effect:

My attitude has helped me because if I had thrown my toys out of the cot every time things hadn't gone my way, or if I'd had that approach, I wouldn't have progressed as well as I have.

(L4)

Promotions are celebratory events, within firms and without, shared with clients and the wider public. Internally, promotions are announced via official communication channels. They become social events involving the entire organisation as well as external clients, as one lawyer described:

I was really touched by how much it seemed to mean to all sorts of people that I had been promoted. I had messages from people all over the firm. And also what was really lovely was that my team seemed to feel like it was a promotion for the team. They really were excited and celebrated my success, which I thought was really, really touching. And the other thing I really didn't expect was the warmth of feeling from outside the firm in terms of clients, contacts, lawyers on the other sides of cases; people e-mailing me and saying 'Congratulations'. People sent me champagne and flowers and stuff.

(L1)

Importantly, following the near exclusion of family and friends in the years leading up to partnership, private aspects were 'written back in' as lawyers shared their achievements with those outside work. For example, one lawyer

reported: 'I feel very proud; I feel very proud talking to my family about it' (L14). Another commented: 'It's nice to tell my folks that I've done it and they are very proud of me' (L1). Partnership denotes an important change whereby aspects of identity need not be hidden any longer, and a more holistic version of the self is formed.

As already highlighted, close interactions lead lawyers to value the partner status and develop emotional attachments to the partnership. Promotion deepens these emotions. One lawyer said: 'I love, I really genuinely love the partnership' (L26). Likewise, another commented: 'I've always considered this place to be very personal to me, so I care about it, I care about the partners, I care about it doing well, and I feel a part of it' (L11). Having an official 'stake' in the business meant that lawyers continued to enact the behaviours expected of them. They became more interested in the overall business of their firms and involved in their firms' decision-making, describing how they felt responsible for the partnership and started acting in accordance with its collective interests.

4.4 | 'Everything stays the same'

The fourth stage of the emotions career describes the longer-term experiences of lawyers after promotion to partnership. Many talked about feeling disillusioned and disappointed because of the lack of change. Their work took on a relatively static hue: operating a law firm, leading teams, advising and interacting with clients. One interviewee expressed a sense of disillusionment in consequence:

It's like wading through treacle to get to the promised land and finding that in the promised land there is just more treacle. In advance, I didn't seriously think this by the time I got there, but when I was much younger, when I was first [employed], I was expecting a huge change but actually when you get there, it's much of a muchness and I'm paid more money, but nothing has changed.

(L13)

Following the euphoria of promotion, pressure to perform continued as a result of formal assessment practices and professional norms around high performance. Most firms have regular performance evaluations for partners in which their financial contribution matters considerably. Because partnerships involve shared ownership, there is an expectation that all partners contribute to a firm's financial success. In this context, several interviewees highlighted the continued scrutiny they experienced: 'In fact, if anything, it's harder, I think, because you're under more scrutiny because you're being paid more, so you have to justify your position' (L8).

In terms of their relationships with other partners, interviewees seemed to become more matter-of-fact. One lawyer recounted his experience of partnership meetings as self-indulgent encounters that kept him away from the aspects of his work that were meaningful to him—his team and his clients—leaving disappointment after the initial excitement at being promoted:

The partnership meetings are a gathering of men and women who have large egos and spend their time talking about themselves. And that can be irritating. You want the meeting to finish. Because ultimately, I am focused on the team that I work with and the clients that I work for and that is what excites me more than anything else. Yeah, so yes, I was excited, but I was disappointed quite quickly because everyone is having their say over issues.

(L13)

Others have similar experiences. For instance, one interviewee commented on how their individual partner vote does not make much difference: 'Although I have a vote, even if I exercise it, it doesn't make a difference. I could vote but, of course, unless 10 per cent of the partners vote (that is, meeting the standard of principal stakeholder), my vote is nothing' (L22).

In this context, several interviewees talked about how their focus shifted towards their own team of junior lawyers. One lawyer described how, as a partner, he is building a team of people who are very similar to him in terms of their behaviour and their thinking: 'The team that I'm building now is people who I think are very similar to me; they're confident, they enjoy going out speaking to people, they enjoy talking to the clients' (L14). This account vividly illustrates how being a partner involves reproducing the relationships of earlier career phases, with junior lawyers groomed and encouraged to behave just like their seniors. The interviewee's behaviours as a partner draw on his own prior career experiences, in turn shaped significantly by a partner in the firm. Re-enacting these behaviours and mobilising them to create a new generation of future partners gives him a sense of meaning.

Importantly, despite the realities of partnership frequently not matching up to expectations, our interviewees rarely questioned partnership as an aspirational career ideal. Instead, they talked about it being the right career choice and devalued alternative career roles (Malhotra et al., 2010; Noury et al., 2017), viewing them as inferior and not legitimate:

Alternative career structures are still not the ideal, which is partnership. [An alternative career] is something else. It is not quite performing, it's differentiated, it's still undervalued in a way; certainly [it] is in terms of it's not seen as you're as important.

(L1)

This confirms the partner role as the aspirational career ideal, contributing to the maintenance of the partner ethos inasmuch that alternative career roles lack meaning and are situated outside the established professional career structure.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To explore the interplay between careers and emotions in professional organisations, we propose the concept of an emotions career. Specifically, we suggest that the emotions career involves the infusion of specific emotions into a sequence of career stages that shape professionals' career aspirations and behaviours, regulated by career practices and social interactions. Our contribution to the existing literature on the importance of emotions in careers and career development (Kidd, 1998, 2004; Super, 1980) is described below.

Our findings offer an alternative conceptualisation that highlights how emotions unfold in careers over time rather than being experienced in response to distinct career events in the moment (Akkermans, et al., 2018; Gabriel et al., 2010). We identify four stages in the emotions career of professionals/career actors. The initial stage is characterised by anticipation and excitement, followed by a stage in which fear and anxiety come to the fore as lawyers actively pursue promotion to partnership. Assuming successful promotion, positive emotions such as pride and joy emerge in a third stage, along with a sense of love for their newly granted partnership. While pride continues in the final stage, lawyers also express feelings of disillusionment and disappointment owing to a lack of further career change. These stages evolve sequentially, informing one another.

Our study also reveals the significant role of organisational and professional career practices in shaping emotions throughout a career. This builds on Super's (1980) proposition that emotional involvement in a role varies with life stage, as well as on previous studies that have focused on discrete emotional responses to promotion practices (Allen, 1997; Ferris et al., 1992). Our contribution presents a more dynamic perspective, illustrating how career practices and social interactions can intensify, transform or diminish emotions. Elaborate performance assessment practices oblige lawyers to seek positive evaluations, with regular reviews of performance instilling fear of negative reports. Career practices may also support professionals' emotional transformation, converting negative emotions into positive ones; preparing a business case or awaiting the outcome of a partnership vote, which could potentially lead to rejection, become opportunities for positive self-conceptions and exhilaration. Publicly sharing promotion

success strengthens positive emotions, helping to sustain existing career pathways. However, perpetual performance evaluations can also contribute to feelings of disillusionment and disappointment. Thus, our findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how organisational and professional career practices shape the evolution of emotions and thereby 'emotionalize' careers.

We also demonstrate how the emotions career, at least where lawyers are concerned, is heavily influenced by professionals' social interactions and relationships, particularly with partners. Rather than focusing solely on individualised emotional experiences, an emotions career emphasises socially embedded emotions (Fineman, 2000). The social interactions between early-career lawyers and partners play a crucial role in generating emotional bonds and fostering emotional attachment to career symbols like partnership. These interactions evolve over time, with early relationships resembling parent-child dyads, and personal connections deepening emotional bonds. Partners also become emotionally invested in their protégés, reciprocating emotions. Through social interactions and career practices, professionals internalise the expectation of experiencing strong emotions in their careers, rendering them habitual and taken-for-granted. Thus, by viewing emotions as socially embedded, we develop a more comprehensive understanding of their role in careers and emphasise how emotions in careers are formed by the social context giving rise to them.

Our second contribution relates to how socio-emotional dynamics shape professionals' careers by regulating career aspirations and perceptions of legitimate career paths. Specifically, our work considers the role of emotions in shaping professionals' career trajectories (Kidd, 1998). We found that emotions infused all aspects of professionals' careers, rendering the career all-encompassing and shaping career behaviours. To sustain positive emotions and avoid negative ones, lawyers aligned themselves with partners and prioritised the firm. Early in their careers, this meant 'writing out' their private lives from their career narratives (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000). Although we did not set out to examine this specifically, our findings suggest that lawyers who cannot easily neglect personal aspects owing, for example, to caring responsibilities may struggle to prioritise the firm emotionally, with potentially negative implications for their career development. We show that in later career stages a 'writing back in' of the family happens in which positive emotions in relation to lawyers' private lives become important once more. On a speculative note, the emergence of dual-career family lifestyles is likely to put more stress on emotions careers, with the space for 'writing life out' becoming more contested and tension-ridden. Increasingly, practitioners must deal with the emotional dynamics around the interface of emotions careers and work-life balance issues.

Our findings also emphasise the significance of pride as a powerful regulatory emotion (Scheff, 1988). Key to understanding the role of pride here is the acknowledgement of its deferred nature. Lawyers aspire to becoming a partner from the very beginning of their careers; it is made clear by those who have already achieved it what the ultimate prize of career achievement is. The stage-based emotions career of professionals emphasises that the fruits of success—including pride—cannot be consumed until they are earned. However, our interviewees did not just experience pride, there was also a social expectation that they should feel pride. In its way, shame was just as powerful: while many did not experience shame as an actual emotional state, it was perceived as something to be avoided, forcing engagement in behaviours perceived as desirable and eliminating behavioural digressions for fear of it.

Our findings also have implications for professional careers more broadly. Partnership is an elite career track that is upheld by the partnership ethos (Empson, 2007), and follows a logic of competition wherein high-performing professionals compete with each other in a race to the top. Specifically, our study suggests that professionals' emotional investment in their careers sustains the career as a core organising principle, and reinforces and reproduces dominant career paths. We provide evidence of a self-perpetuating cycle, fuelled by a mix of anticipation, anxiety and pride, and propped up by a shared sense of conformity and respect among the professional partnership that promotes further conformity. According to Scheff (1988), this creates 'a system that is virtually automatic' (p. 397).

The ways in which emotions are induced, accumulated and transformed during a career intensifies and deepens their regulatory power. To sustain positive emotions, lawyers need to uphold the ideal of partnership and conform to the behaviours expected of partners as they strive to become partners themselves. When, in the last stage of the emotions career, emotions become more neutral, strong emotions are elicited in junior professionals instead, and become an essential ingredient of their developing careers, causing the cycle to repeat. Importantly, because of this collective

emotional investment, there is little space for individual career agency and reflexivity beyond the professional career context. Not adhering to the established career path comes at significant career cost and professional risk, while those who diverge onto alternative career paths are denied legitimacy by their professional peers, being viewed as inferior.

Our study has limitations, most of which nevertheless also suggest avenues for future research. First, like many other studies in this field, our research approach focused on subjective meaning-making and career reflection. Future research could employ process-based or longitudinal approaches to examine the temporal aspects of emotions and careers in real time. In addition, although our focus has been on the promotion to partnership, other stages of the career ladder are likely to evoke similar emotions, and further research is needed to explore these experiences in more detail. Even though our participants described the challenges they had experienced across their entire career journeys, our sample consisted mainly of lawyers who had opted for the partner track. Future research needs to investigate the experiences of lawyers on alternative career routes and those who don't achieve partnership. Finally, we did not collect data on participant characteristics beyond that of their age, gender and professional tenure, meaning that any intersectional positioning that might shape the emotions experienced could not be considered. We therefore recommend that future studies adopt an intersectionality lens that enables the inclusion of additional characteristics such as ethnicity and parental status in the analysis of how emotions careers develop and play out.

6 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

We show that HR practitioners need awareness of the emotional dynamics associated with careers and could develop coping tools for employees; for example, by engaging in supportive career conversations in which our findings suggest it is important to create a space for reflection and the development of resilience. This is particularly valuable when employees suffer career setbacks. Further, career coaches need to assist professionals not only with the development of relevant skills and knowledge but the emotional aspects of career trajectories, including promotions. At a collective level, organisational leaders could usefully consider ways to challenge the negative perceptions around alternative career paths, and engage in positive cultural change to create more diverse thinking about careers.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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