

THERE'S MORE TO LIFE THAN (MEANINGFUL) WORK

HOW DESIRE FOR MEANINGFUL PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS
INFORMS CAREER MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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“[A person’s] main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather **to see a meaning in his [or her] life.**”

- Frankl (1946)

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Meaningful Work

Individual Benefits

- personal fulfilment (Kahn 2007)
- improved wellbeing (Ryan and Deci 2001)
- reduced stress (Elangovan, Pinder, and McLean 2010)
- avoiding burnout (Lips-Wiersma and Wright 2012)

Organizational Benefits

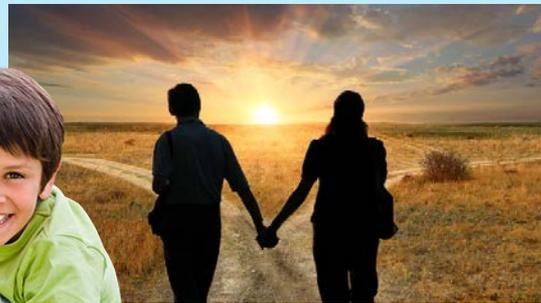
- increased engagement (May, Gilson, and Harter 2004)
- improved job performance (Saks 2006; Grant 2008)

But, it is also a “double edged sword” (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Lips-Wiersma et al 2009)

Research Question

In the context of deeply meaningful work,
how does the desire for a
meaningful intimate relationship
inform career management strategies?

Current relationships



Desired relationships



Sociology of Work-Family

- **Domain perspective:** First emanating from the study of working mothers, scholarship in this realm highlights that people have multiple, often conflicting, social identities that are negotiated across diverse domains (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Schieman, Milkie, and Glavin 2009).
- **Temporal perspective:** The search for meaning varies across domains over time, with interacting influences from career stage, social identities, and gendered life course patterns (Elder 1994; Moen 2011).

Methods

Boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau 1996) offer ongoing opportunities for people to steer their own course of meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma and Mcmorland 2006)

Context: International Aid Work

- Average: 18-month contract
- Self-transcendently meaningful, through both international development & humanitarian relief
- \$180 billion (Brookings 2011)

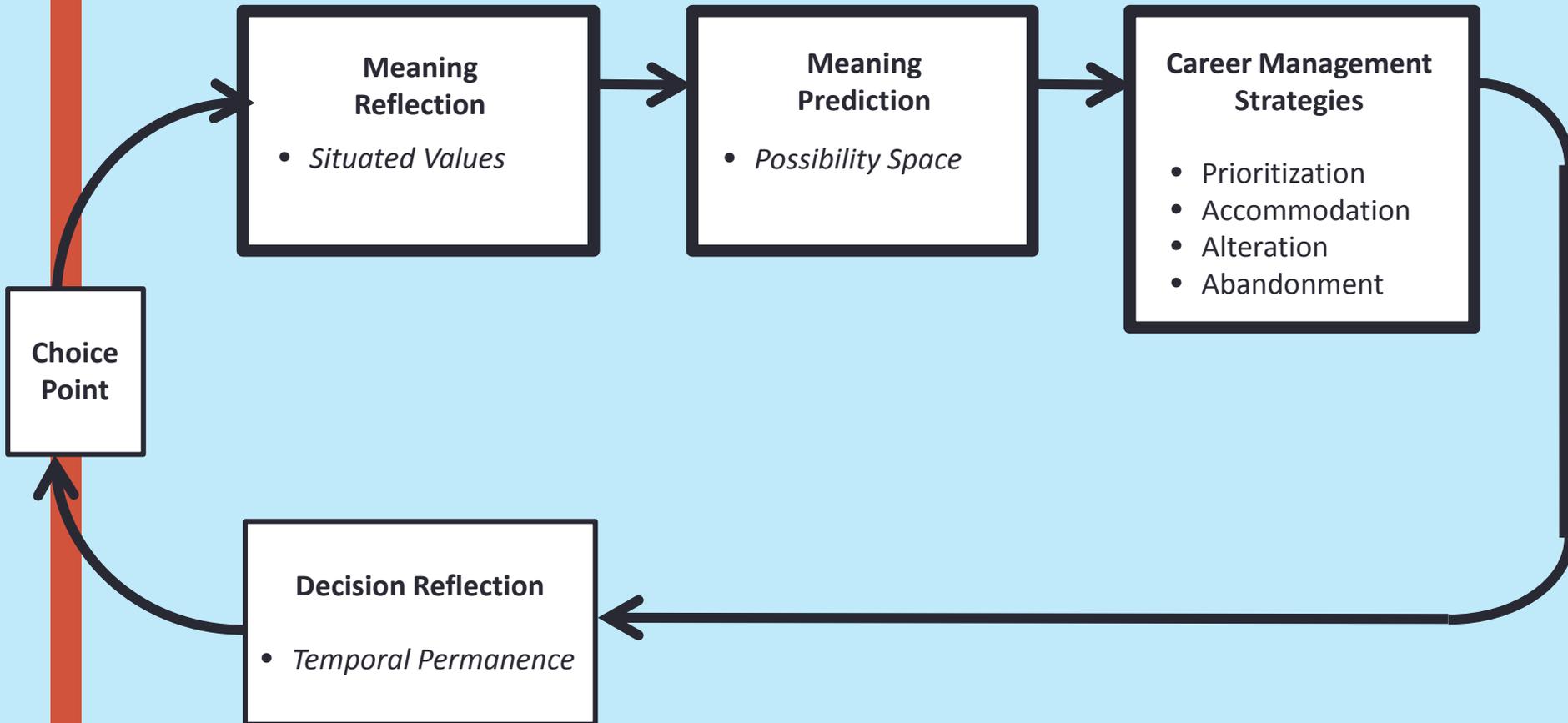
Data

- Survey with ongoing turnover and biographical data for five years (2012-2016). (n=150*5 years)
- In-depth interviews with narrative inquiry, CV to guide reflections on career path and personal biography (2012) (n=75)

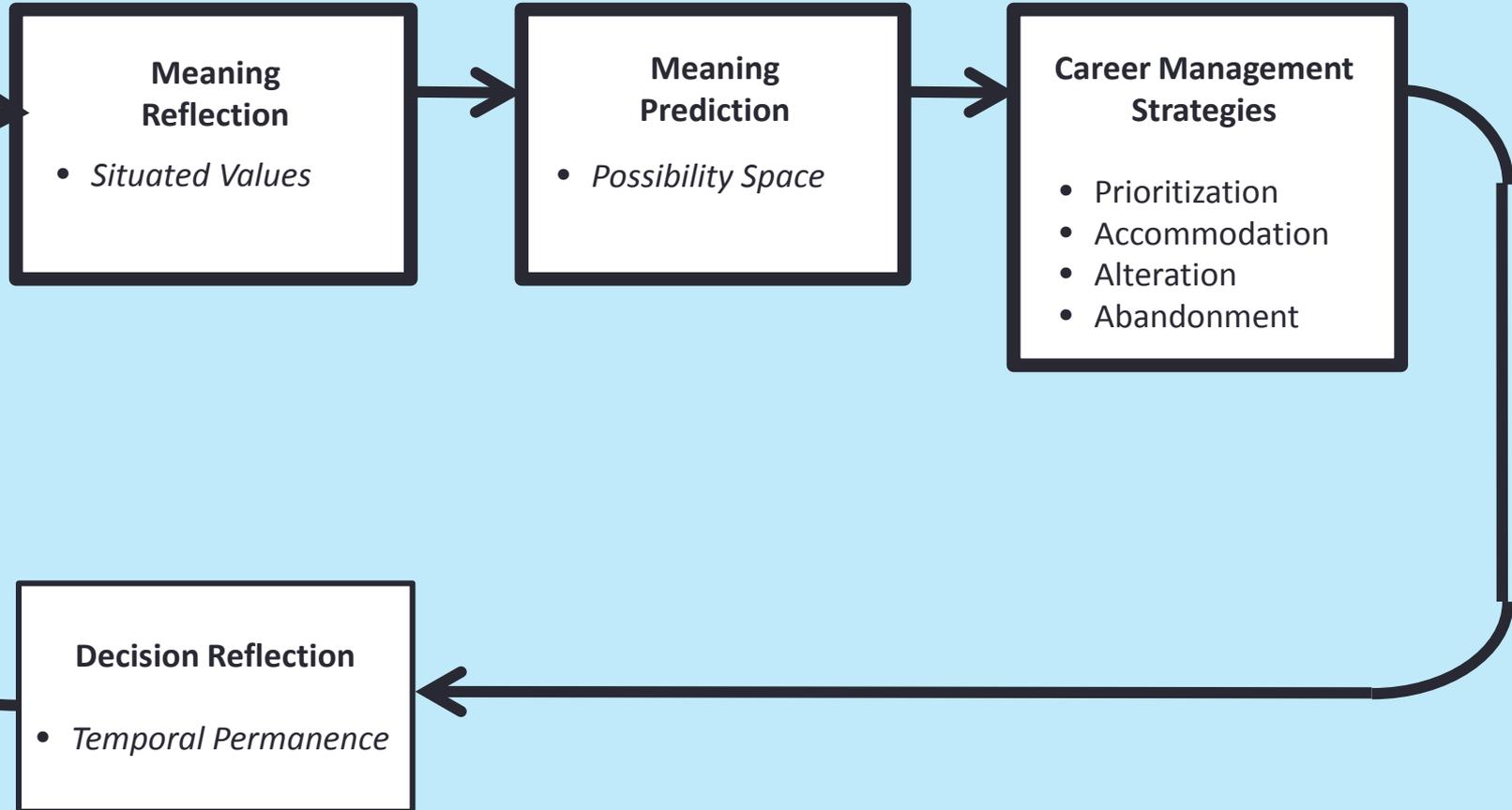
Descriptive Statistics

- **Age:** Mean = 42 (Range: 23-70)
- **Salary:** Mean = \$80,000 (Range: \$8,700 - \$185,400)
- **Gender:** 58% Female; 42% Male

Meaning Analysis Model



Choice Point



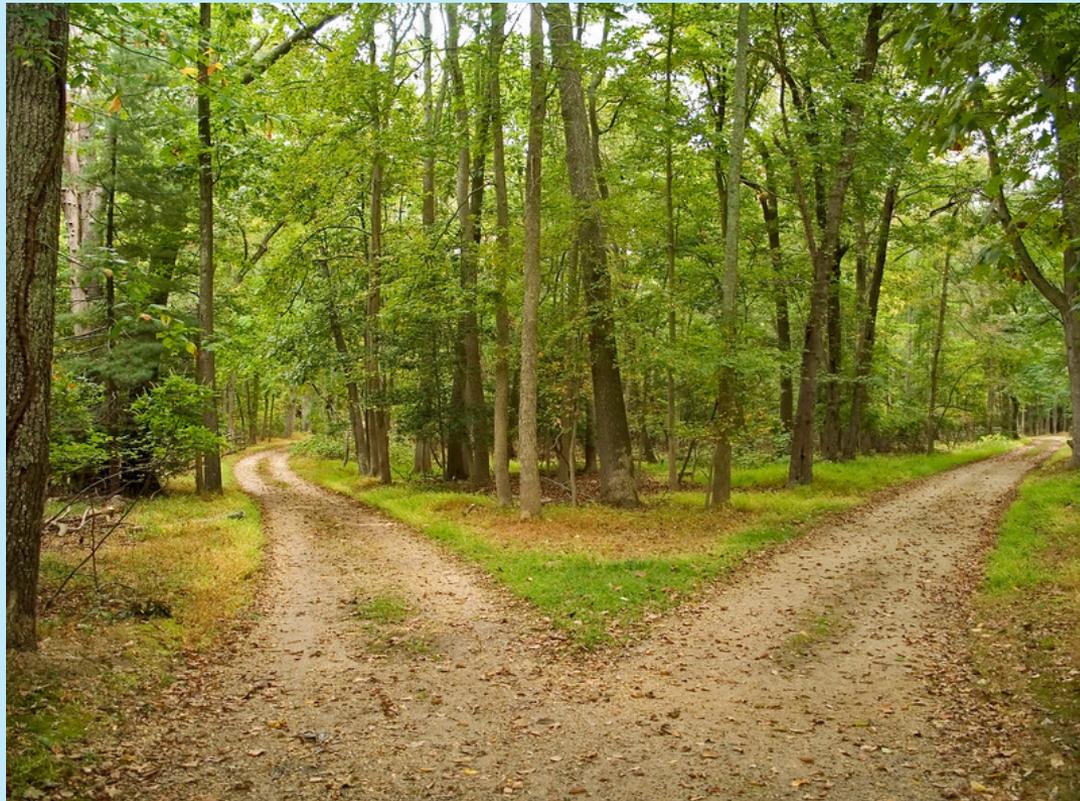
Choice Point

concrete moments of crisis in which people search for meaning and the realization of deeply held personal values

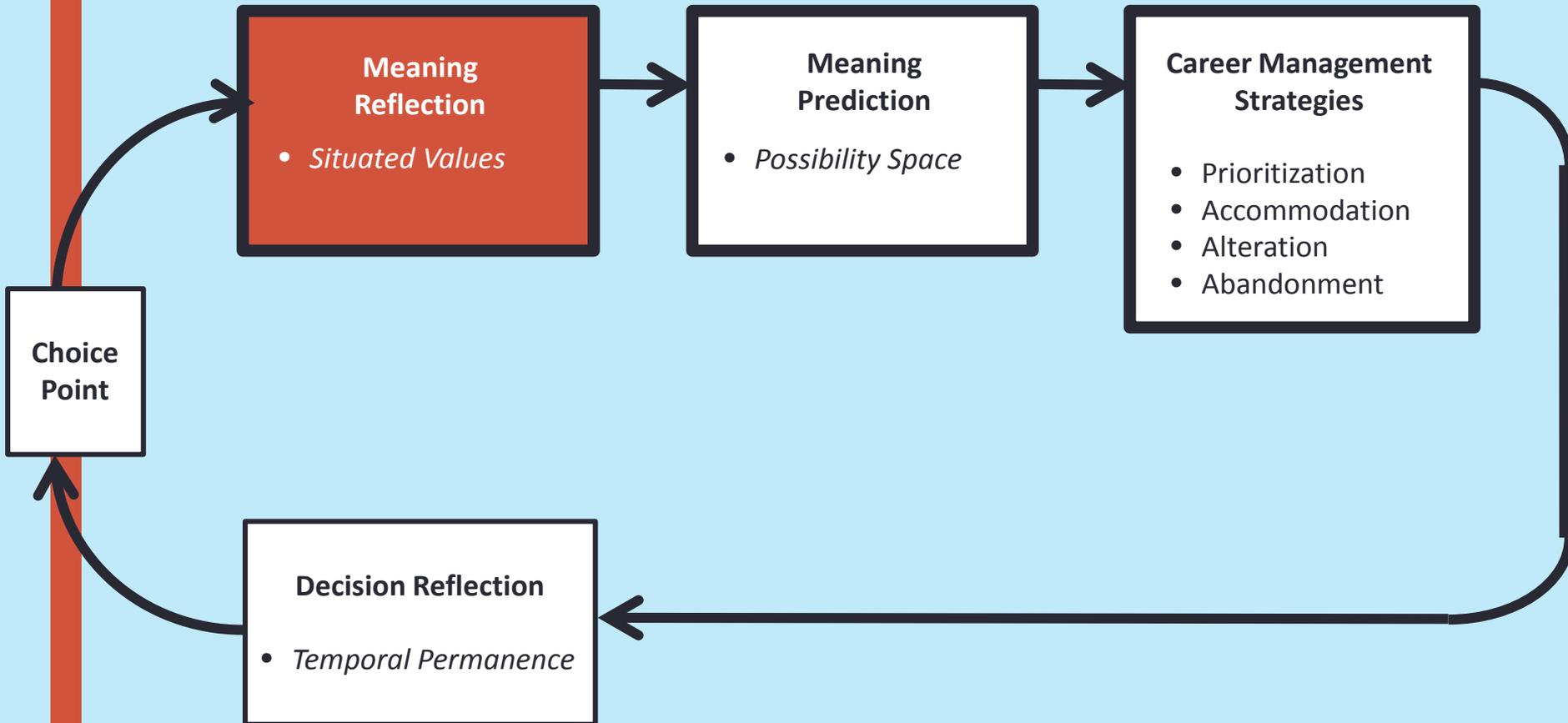
- initiated by the necessity to make a job decision and/or navigate a potential relationship transition
- involve tremendous uncertainty which increases as a relationship or work situation moves from the concrete (ie. one they are currently in) to the abstract (ie. one that is desired or hypothetical, in the future)

Choice Point

concrete moments of crisis in which people search for meaning and the realization of deeply held personal values



Meaning Reflection



Meaning Reflection

As people are confronted with choice points, I find that they reflect upon where they desire meaning at that situated moment in time

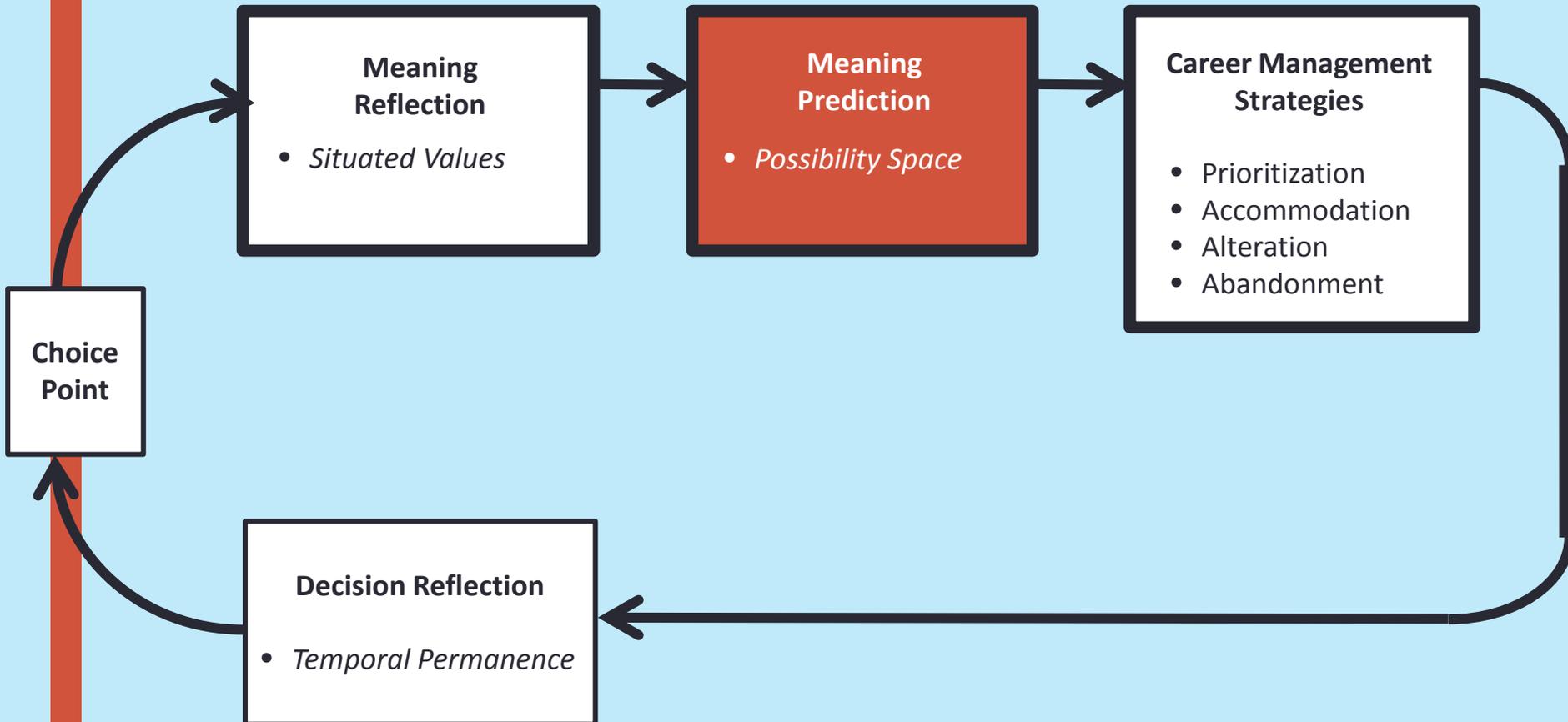
- ***situated values***: sense of what is important to the person at that situated moment in time
 - *intra-individual variation in response to life stage, relationships, jobs, and other contextual changes*

Meaning Reflection

Situated Values: Sense of what is important to a person at that situated moment in time



Meaning Prediction



Meaning Prediction

Predict the *likelihood of attaining* a meaningful relationship and forecasting the *risk of losing* a potentially meaningful relationship.

- **possibility space**: people's perception of potential options for meaning in the areas that are important to them
 - **context variant**: the size of the space varies across contexts, creating new options and eliminating other choices
 - **temporal stability**: some options may only be available for a particular moment in time or for a limited period of time
- possibility space is conveyed through multiple levels:
 - **institutional**: broad industry patterns and social norms (colleagues act as salient models conveying possibility space)
 - **individual**: individual's particular employment context, relationship roles, and personal identity

Meaning Prediction

Possibility Space: Perception of potential options for meaning in the areas that are important to a person.

Context
Variant



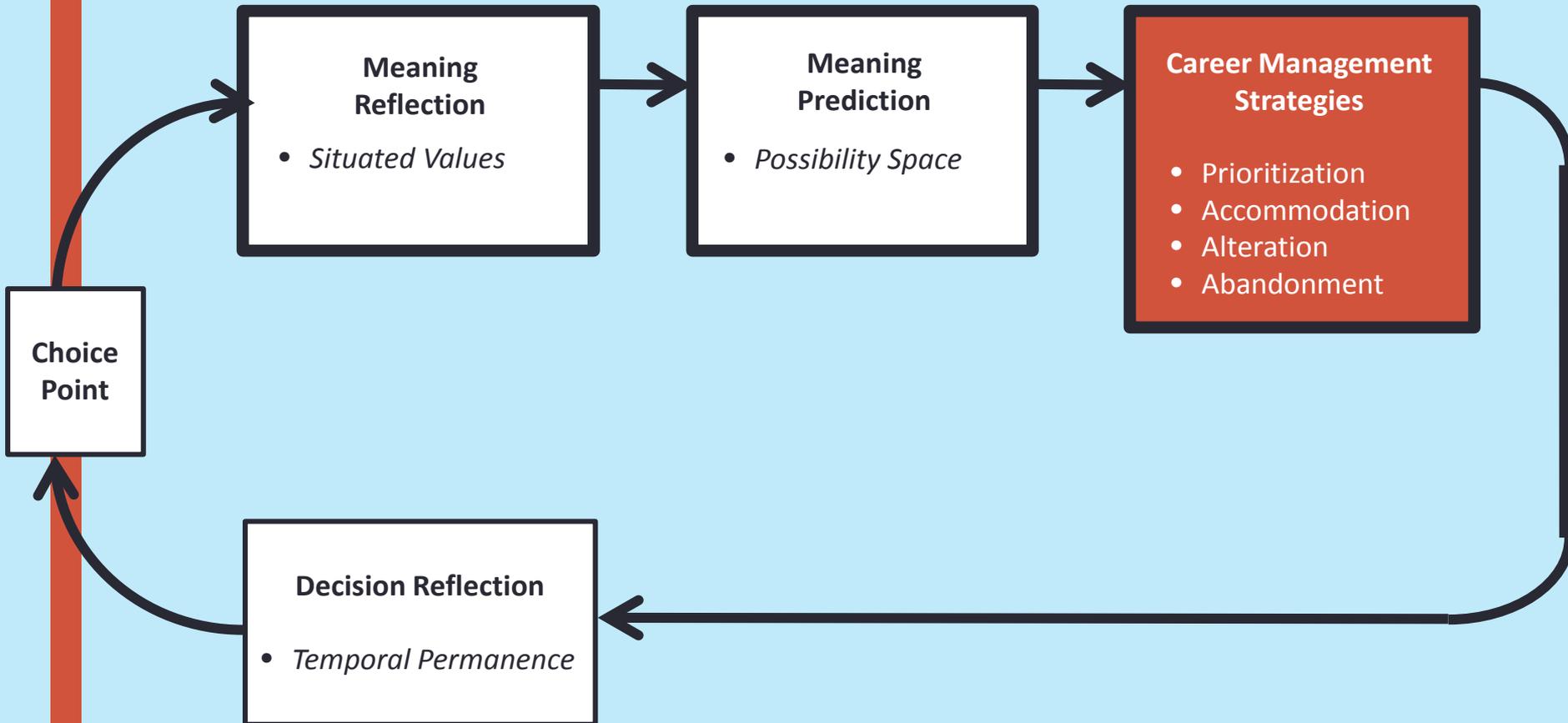
Meaning Prediction

Possibility Space: Perception of potential options for meaning in the areas that are important to a person.

Temporal
Stability



Career Management Strategies



Career Management Strategies

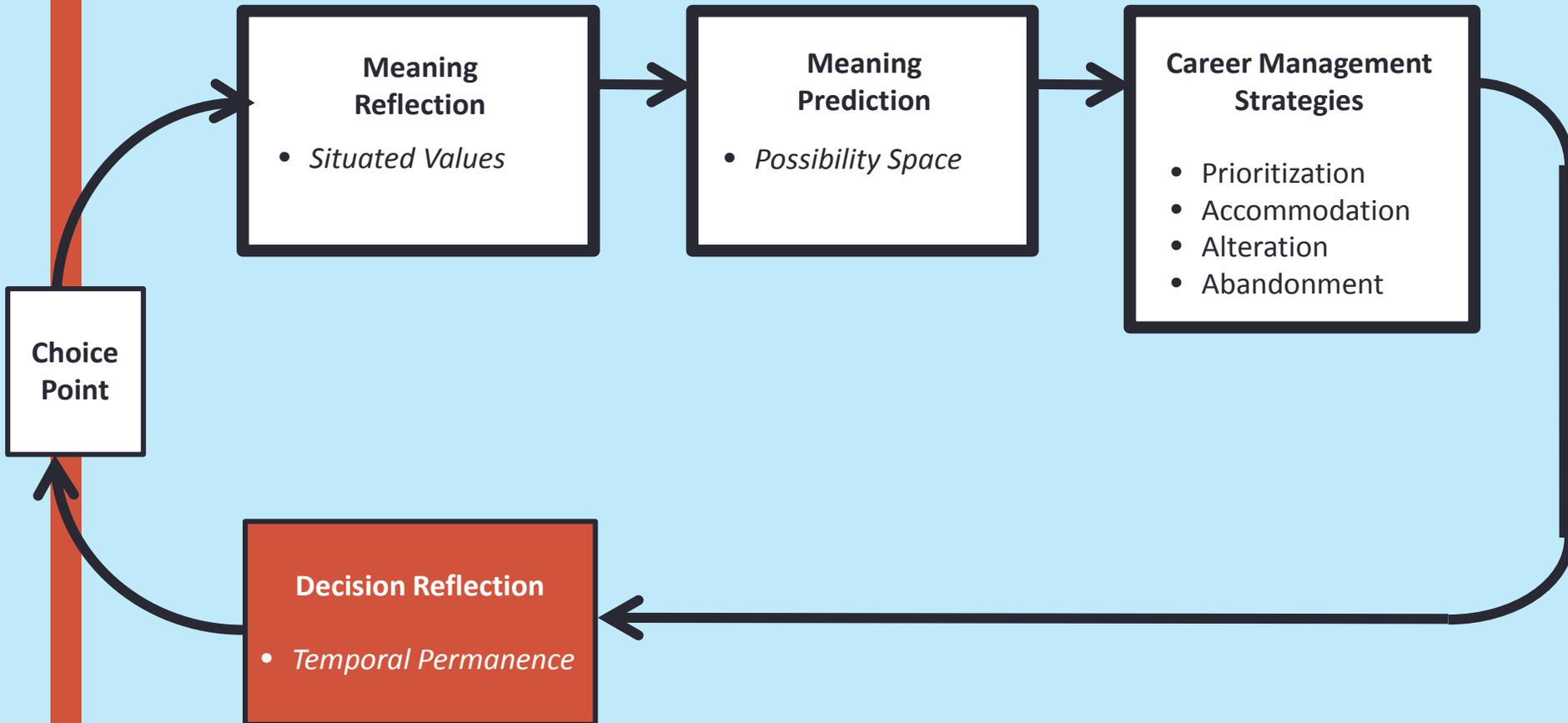
Prioritizing Meaningful Work

- **Work Prioritization**

Prioritizing Meaningful Personal Relationships

- **Work Accommodation:** Micro-level, within job.
 - *Control over their work*
- **Work Alteration:** Meso-level, across jobs or organizations
 - *Commitment to their work*
- **Work Abandonment:** Macro-level, changing occupations

Decision Reflection



Decision Reflection

Reflection upon career management strategies is strongly influenced by the perceived temporal permanence of those decisions, more than situated values, the possibility space, or the actual decision.

- When individuals were able to view adaptive career decisions as **temporary**, retaining the freedom to make different decisions at other points in the future, they presented their career path with self-assurance and reflected upon their decisions with **confidence**.
- When individuals view their career decisions as more **permanent**, constraining their freedom to make different decisions in the future, they presented their career path with hesitation and reflected upon their decisions with tones of **regret**.

Conceptual Contributions

Meaningful Work Literature

- Extend analysis of **meaning-seeking outside the workplace**, to more holistically examine the domain(s) through which people seek meaning in their lives.
- I illuminate the **potential tension** that may exist between features that enable meaningful work and meaningful personal relationships.
- I explicitly analyze the role that time plays in meaningful work, highlighting **intra-individual variation in work orientation**.

Work-Family Literature

- Examine the role that a **search for meaning** plays within negotiation across work and family domains.
- Highlight the role that **future relationship desires** play in informing current work decisions.

Other Contributions

Methodologically

- By focusing on concrete moments of crisis, I ground this process story around choice points that aggregate to create patterned career pathways. This is a useful methodological strategy in the “new economy” with increasing career mobility.

Practice

- Though examined within an industry with the encouragement of workers to apply their full selves, these findings transfer to workers within a range of work settings where workers desire meaning from their work.



THANK YOU!

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