



Career adaptability, calling and the professional competence of social work students in China: A career construction perspective



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ABSTRACT

Based on career construction theory, the current research examined individual and contextual predictors for the professional competence of Chinese undergraduates majoring in social work ($N = 270$). Results showed that career concern and career curiosity predicted social work students' professional competence, with these relations mediated by the calling in social work. It was also found that the positive effect of calling on professional competence was stronger among students who perceived a lower level of career-oriented learning environment. The corresponding moderated mediation model was supported such that the indirect effects of career concern and career curiosity on professional competence were stronger among students who perceived a lower level of career-oriented learning environment. These findings carry implications for research on career construction theory, as well as career education and career counseling practices.

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1. Introduction

The profession of social work seeks to improve the subjective well-being of individuals affected by social disadvantages (e.g., poverty, mental and physical illness or disability, social injustice) through research, policy making, intervention practices, and teaching activities (Reid & Edwards, 2006). Although the professional education system for social workers is well-established in many Western countries, this is not the case in China. The social work profession was suspended by the Chinese government from 1949 to late 1980s based on the assumption that no social problems would exist within a socialist system (Li, Han, & Huang, 2012). Since the 1990s, with the overarching aim of creating a harmonious society, the central government started to realize the important role of social workers in delivering social services and sought to develop social work educational programs in China (Li et al., 2012).

Following two decades of rapid development, China currently has 266 Bachelor's Degree programs and 61 Master's Degree programs in social work (Xinhua Net, 2013). However, social work education in China is still developing and there exist concerns among social work students that what they have learned in colleges and universities may not enable them to address complicated professional problems and to cope with the unpredictable challenges during their careers (Liu, Sun, & Anderson, 2013). In addition, limited job opportunities and uncertain career prospects in the social work profession present additional career development

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difficulties for social work students in China (Sha, Wong, Lou, Person, & Gu, 2012). Given this background, research on the predictors of professional competence carries important implications in facilitating social workers' career development in the Chinese context.

Accordingly, the current research examined the individual and environmental predictors of professional competence among social work students in China. Based on career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009), we selected career adaptability as a major individual predictor of professional competence. Career adaptability refers to the “readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions” (Savickas, 1997, p. 254). We propose that career adaptability will positively predict professional competence of social work students. To further examine the underlying mechanisms of this relationship, we argue that students' calling (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), which reflects individuals' passion to implement their life meanings in the pursuit of social work profession, will serve as an important mediator in this process.

Specifically, we argue that two dimensions of career adaptability, namely career concern and career curiosity, enable individuals to develop a more accurate understanding of themselves and the social work occupation, and to better prepare themselves for the profession. As a result, for students with a high level of career concern or career curiosity, their choices of the social work profession are likely to be based on the match between life meanings and occupational characteristics. Consequently, these students will achieve a high level of calling toward the profession of social work. A high level of calling will further drive individuals' efforts of developing professional competence. To comprehensively examine how individual and contextual factors collectively affect professional competence, the current research also incorporated the career-orientated learning environment (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011) as a contextual predictor for students' professional competence.

We propose that due to the positive effects elicited by practice-based learning experiences and interactive dialogs (Kuijpers et al., 2011), a career-oriented learning environment will have a unique contribution in predicting professional competence, above and beyond the prediction of career adaptability and calling. Moreover, from a person–environment interaction perspective, we further propose that there may exist interactions between calling and learning environment in predicting career competence, such that individuals' calling to pursue a career in social work will play a more important role in sustaining their professional competence development when they perceive their environment as providing a lower level of career-oriented learning opportunities. The above discussion suggests that there exists a moderated mediation model for the relations among these variables, as shown in Fig. 1.

1.1. Career adaptability, calling and professional competence

Nowadays individuals' career paths are becoming less predictable and job transitions are becoming more frequent. This means that individuals' self-regulatory resources play important roles in sustaining their long-term career development (Savickas, 1997, 2005, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009). According to the career construction theory, there exist four types of psychological resources that help individuals to cope with the challenges of career development (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), namely career concern (the ability of seriously considering future career possibilities and preparing for these possibilities), career control (the strength of making deliberate decisions and taking conscientious action), career curiosity (the ability in exploring various situations and potential roles) and career confidence (the positive perceptions of one's problem-solving skills). The positive effects of career adaptability on individuals' career-related outcomes have been established in recent research (e.g., Guan et al., 2013, 2014; Johnston, Luciano, Maggiori, Ruch, & Rossier, 2013; Tolentino, Garcia, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2013).

As career concern enables individuals to imagine their future career possibilities and prepare themselves for these possibilities, and career curiosity enables individuals to effectively explore personal characteristics and occupational opportunities, we argue that these two types of adaptive-abilities are likely to facilitate the formation of calling toward a profession. Calling is usually defined as the

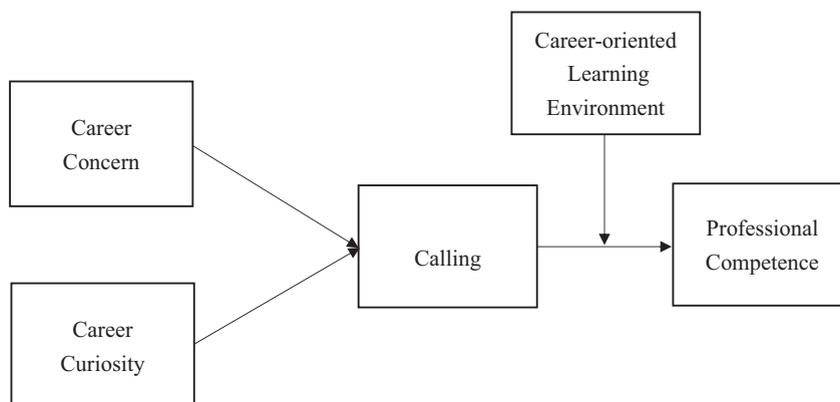


Fig. 1. The proposed moderated mediation model.

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