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Career adaptability development in adolescence: Multiple predictors and effect on sense of power and life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal panel study investigated predictors of career adaptability development and its effect on development of sense of power and experience of life satisfaction among 330 Swiss eighth graders. A multivariate measure of career adaptability consisting of career choice readiness, planning, exploration, and confidence was applied. Based on Motivational Systems Theory four groups of predictors were assessed: positive emotional disposition, goal decidedness, capability beliefs and social context beliefs. Influence of gender, age, immigration background, parental educational level, and college-bound or vocational education plans were also assessed. Perceived social support and positive emotional disposition, non-immigration background, and continuing to vocational education were single significant predictors of more career adaptability development over the school year. Supporting the connection of career adaptability and positive youth development, increase in career adaptability over time predicted increase in sense of power and experience of life satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Preparing for one's vocational future is generally considered one of the core developmental tasks in adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Super, 1990) and countries throughout the world have recognized the importance of assisting adolescents in successful career preparation (OECD/European Communities, 2004). A central construct in adolescent career preparation and development is career adaptability which can be defined as "...the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by the changes in work and work conditions" (Savickas, 1997, p. 254). A number of prospective longitudinal studies showed that adolescents higher in career adaptability in terms of decision making, planning, exploration, or confidence beliefs are more successful in mastering vocational transitions (Creed, Muller, & Patton, 2003; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Neuenschwander & Garrett, 2008; Patton, Creed, & Muller, 2002).

Recently, there has been an interest in linking adolescent career development with positive youth development, the emerging interdisciplinary study of antecedents and consequences of well-being and thriving. Existing research has indicated that career adaptability is a sign of thriving in adolescence which directly relates to positive youth development. Specifically, in studies with US high-school students (Gore, Kadish, & Aseltine, 2003; Skorikov, 2007b; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007), positive career orientation and better career preparation was shown to prevent problem behavior and promoted well-being and decreased distress (see Skorikov, 2007a, for a review).

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Given the potentially important effects of career adaptability on positive youth development and the international attention on promoting positive adolescent career preparation, more research regarding predictors of career adaptability development is important. Numerous studies investigated correlates of career adaptability in college and high-school students and showed that aspects of career adaptability relate to gender, age, or work experience (see Patton & Creed, 2001, for a review). Other studies showed that predictors of more career adaptability include career decision making self-efficacy beliefs, personality traits, or parental behavior and attachment (e.g., Bartley & Robitschek, 2000; Betz & Klein Voyten, 1997; Kracke, 2002). However, very little empirical work was done with students in middle adolescence and most studies relied on cross-sectional data. Also, career adaptability was mostly examined by single aspects such as decisions-making or exploration and few studies are available which applied a more comprehensive multidimensional measure of career adaptability. Finally, most studies investigated only a very specific set of predictors and/or more or less arbitrarily combined several different variables. There seems to be a need for empirical research to investigate career adaptability in a more comprehensive manner and to apply a clearer theoretical rationale of what predictor variables would be important to study and in which combination. For example, only a few studies investigated both contextual and personal variables as possible predictors of career adaptability development.

1.1. Present study and hypotheses

The present study applied a multidimensional measure of career adaptability which is based on Savickas' (1997, 2002) model which states that career adaptability consists of the four dimensions career decision making, planning, exploration, and confidence (see Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2008, for a review). One challenge when applying a multidimensional model is that the nature of the relationships between the single dimensions has to be explicit. Unfortunately, not much attention to this issue regarding career adaptability can be found in the literature since most studies investigated single dimensions separately (Creed & Patton, 2003; Rogers, Creed, & Ian Glendon, 2008). As one notable exception Skorikov (2007b) used measures for career decidedness, career planning, and career confidence combined to represent a latent construct of career preparation. In contrast to this approach, I decided to represent career adaptability not as a latent but as an aggregate construct. The distinction has important theoretical and methodological implications. In a latent construct the theoretical notion is that the construct exists on a higher-order level underlying the single measure indicators. Conversely, an aggregate model is based on the assumption that the construct is formed by the combination of its single measure indicators (Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998). For example, general intelligence is a latent construct which is expressed by scores of different verbal, numerical, and symbolic intelligence measures. On the other hand, job satisfaction is an aggregate construct which represents the combined levels of satisfaction with, for example, supervisors, co-workers, working conditions, or pay (cf. Law et al.). Methodologically, a latent construct represents the shared variance among different measures while an aggregate construct represents the unique and shared variance of the measures. Regarding career adaptability, it seems to make more sense to argue that high levels on the dimensions of decision making, planning, exploration, and confidence lead to higher career adaptability than to assume that higher career adaptability leads to higher levels in decision making, planning, exploration, and confidence. Therefore, the combined level of the four career adaptability dimensions and not their shared variance seems to be the appropriate way to conceptualize and measure a multidimensional construct of career adaptability. The same argument was also made for the related construct of employability by Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth (2004).

The first goal of the present study was to investigate factors which foster development of career adaptability over time in adolescence. A systematic and comprehensive set of multiple predictors of career adaptability based on Ford's Motivational System Theory (MST; Ford, 1992) was applied. MST builds upon the theory of persons as self-constructing living systems (Ford, 1987) and is based on an integrative review of motivational theories. MST proposed that thriving and achievement is facilitated by the interaction of emotions, agency beliefs (capability and context beliefs), and goals (Ford & Smith, 2007). One advantage of investigating predictors of career adaptability based on MST is that this model incorporates the theoretical and empirical knowledge of several motivational theories into a common framework (cf. Ford, 1992). It also accounts for the fact that persons are complex, self-constructing living systems where emotions and cognitions interact to produce achievements and it takes into account both personal and environmental factors which can be considered a cornerstone in current developmental theory and research (e.g., Ford & Lerner, 1992). As such, it provides a more complete picture of possible predictors than if just single components (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs) were examined. Another advantage of MST is that it offers several principles and applications of how to motivate people in order to increase their achievement (cf. Ford, 1992).

Based on MST four sets of predictors were investigated: (1) *Emotions* were accounted for by investigating the influence of a positive emotional disposition that encompasses emotional stability, high energy level, and positive affect. These traits are commonly associated with two of the Big-Five personality traits, namely emotional stability and extraversion (Costa & McCrae, 1997). Research implies that a more favorable emotional disposition in terms of emotional stability and extraversion is related to more career planning and exploration among adolescents (Rogers et al., 2008). *Agency beliefs* were investigated in terms of (2) *capability beliefs* which were analyzed in the presents study in terms of generalized self-efficacy beliefs. It was assumed that higher capability beliefs promote the development of adolescent career adaptability (e.g., Creed, Patton, & Prideaux, 2007); and (3) *context beliefs*, that is how supportive one's environment is perceived to be in terms of available social support and opportunities. This aspect was accounted for by perceived social support in the present study. Research showed that perceived support from the social environment is crucial for successful adolescent vocational preparation

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