



# Subjective social status, work volition, and career adaptability: A longitudinal study

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## ABSTRACT

Building from the Psychology of Working Theory, we explore relations between subjective social status, work volition, and career adaptability over time in a sample of 267 undergraduate students. Participants completed a questionnaire assessing study variables in three waves over a period of six months. Structural equation modeling was used to examine cross-lagged relations between all three variables as well as examine the mediating effect of work volition in the link from social status to career adaptability. Results showed Time 1 and Time 2 social status to predict Time 2 and Time 3 work volition respectively. Likewise, Time 1 and Time 2 work volition significantly predicted Time 2 and Time 3 career adaptability. Finally, we found work volition to significantly mediate the relation between social status and career adaptability. Results provide preliminary support for the Psychology of Working Theory hypotheses regarding the relations from financial constraints and marginalization to work volition and career adaptability. Practical implications and future directions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades, career adaptability has emerged as a pivotal variable in the prediction of positive career outcomes. First introduced as a component of Career Construction Theory (CCT; Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005), career adaptability has been conceptualized as the ability to use resources to cope with current and anticipated vocational tasks (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). These resources include self-regulatory strengths that allow for flexible responses to the person, environment, and their interaction (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Thus, career adaptability is a dynamic construct, and a person who is highly adaptable at work has the ability to adjust in order to meet work demands.

Despite a surge in research on career adaptability since its introduction into the literature, the role of contextual variables in the development of career adaptability has received little attention from researchers. In the current study, we attend to some of these contextual factors; specifically, we examine two indicators of vocational privilege—subjective social status (SSS) and work volition—in relation to career adaptability. We assess these variables at three time points over a six month period, examining direct and indirect relations between SSS, work volition, and career adaptability. We build from the recently developed Psychology of Working Theory (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016), which places contextual variables related to social and economic privilege as critical predictors of vocational and overall well-being outcomes.

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## 2. Theoretical framework

In introducing the Psychology of Working Framework (PWF; Blustein, 2006), Blustein observed that an assumption of personal freedom of work choice is pervasive in previous vocational theories. He challenged this assumption by bringing to light a different assumption that, on the contrary, most people in the world face considerable constraints in choosing their occupations. The PWF asserted that constructs like person-environment fit and personal values only partially explain how people find their way to various job paths (Blustein, 2006, 2008; Blustein, Kenna, Gill, & DeVoy, 2008). Further, the PWF highlights constraints caused by oppressive social and economic structures. Thus, from the PWF lens, marginalization based on race, gender, disability status, sexual orientation, social status, and other minority identities serves as a pivotal predictor of work outcomes. A key tenet of the PWF (Blustein, 2006, 2008) is the idea that work has the ability to fulfill needs for survival, relatedness, and self-determination. Although working has the capacity to fulfill these needs, limited freedom of work choice resulting from oppression and marginalization may prevent a person from engaging in work that fulfills these needs.

Recently, PWF researchers have proposed a theoretical model to make the original tenets of the PWF testable (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). This new theoretical framework, the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), proposed that economic constraints and experiences with marginalization are key predictors that, over time, impact the unfolding of people's work lives. Specifically, economic constraints and marginalization experiences are hypothesized to predict both work volition and career adaptability. Within the model these variables are hypothesized to be correlated, but no directional link is offered given a lack of available research to substantiate the temporal relations of these constructs. However, regardless of the directionality between the constructs, it is proposed that volition and adaptability each promote access to decent work that fulfills survival and basic psychological needs. According to the theory, need satisfaction ultimately leads to work fulfillment and overall well-being (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016). Given the recency of the PWT model, no known empirical studies have tested its propositions. In the current study, we begin to test pieces of the model, particularly focusing on the relation of economic constraints to work volition and career adaptability over time.

## 3. Career adaptability

As previously mentioned, career adaptability is a multifaceted and dynamic variable that allows an individual to have flexible coping responses to work demands (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). It is comprised of four separate components: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas, 1997). Concern reflects levels of preparation for future vocational tasks. Control is the level of responsibility a person takes for shaping their vocational future. Curiosity is indicative of a person's exploration of potential vocational opportunities. Finally, confidence pertains to the degree to which a person feels able to overcome potential barriers related to vocational aspirations (Savickas, 2002).

Among college students and adults, career adaptability has been linked with positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, career success, and career decision self-efficacy (Douglass & Duffy, 2015; Guo et al., 2014; Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2013; Zacher, 2014). Given these benefits, predictors of career adaptability have been a primary question in recent research. Results of empirical studies have found variables such as future temporal focus, education, core self-evaluations, emotional intelligence, various personality constructs (e.g., proactive personality, extraversion), and extrinsic work values (e.g., high income) to predict career adaptability (Cai et al., 2015; Coetzee & Harry, 2014; Hou, Wu, & Liu, 2014; Ye, 2015; Zacher, 2014). Although these findings have been important in teasing out factors that lead to being more adaptable at work, they primarily focus on within-person factors, largely neglecting contextual variables. Thus, in the current study, we attempt to fill this gap in the literature by examining SSS and its direct and indirect effects- via work volition- on career adaptability.

### 3.1. Predictors of career adaptability

#### 3.1.1. Subjective social status

Subjective social status is one of two components of social class. Social class refers to a person's relative position in a society's cultural and economic hierarchy and reflects the control, influence, and power that result from this position (Diemer, Mistry, Wadsworth, López, & Reimers, 2013). It is a multifaceted construct with both objective and subjective components. Objective measures of social class (often termed *socioeconomic status* [SES]) include income, education level, and occupational prestige. Subjective social status is a person's subjective sense of where they stand in society and has implications for the psychological experience of being a part of a particular class background. Although it is necessary to study both components of social class, in the current study, our focus is on the latter. Because we are interested in *perceived* work choice and *perceived* status, our measures will reflect that of SSS.

A focus on SSS allows for a person's subjective appraisal of their experienced social class along with resulting classism or social class expectations (Liu, Ali, Soleck, Hopps, & Pickett, 2004). Liu et al. (2004) outlined several reasons why SSS may be more useful in understanding behavior in the context of social class. In addition to objective social class indices being poor predictors of factors such as prejudicial attitudes (Liu et al., 2004; Seeman, 1992), SES measures tend to be limited in capturing a full understanding of a person's social standing. For instance, measuring income does not necessarily account for family wealth, nor does it factor in credit and borrowing (Liu et al., 2004). Similarly, the authors note that simply indicating one's education level leaves out information about social benefits gained and cultural norms learned in specific educational settings.

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