



Career adaptivity, adaptability, and adapting: A conceptual and empirical investigation



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ABSTRACT

The literature on career adaptation is vast and based on a range of different measurement approaches. The present paper aims to explore how different operationalizations of career adaptability in terms of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence are related from a conceptual and empirical standpoint. Based on a cross-sectional analysis with 1260 German university students, we established that the adaptability resources of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence are significantly related to, but empirically distinct from, measures representing adapting in terms of career planning, career decision-making difficulties, career exploration, and occupational self-efficacy. In a follow-up survey six months later, we found that the career adaptability dimensions partially mediated the effects of adaptivity (i.e., core self-evaluations and proactivity) on planning, decision-making difficulties, exploration, and self-efficacy. Interestingly, in both analyses, there was no clear match between adaptability resources and theoretically corresponding aspects of career adapting in terms of behaviors, beliefs, and barriers. The results suggest that psychological career resources in terms of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence partially mediate the effects of more context-general, trait-like adaptivity on different career-specific behavioral forms of adapting.

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1. Introduction

A major interest in the career literature over the past years has been to address the notion of *new careers*, which are characterized by increased flexibility and self-directedness on the part of individuals (Sullivan, 1999). One of the most prominent notions in this regard is career adaptability, which is proposed to be a key factor for career success (Morrison & Hall, 2002) and for current career counseling practice (van Vianen et al., 2009).

Not surprisingly, career adaptation has been explored in many empirical studies and its measurement, emergence, and predictive utility are of core interest in current career research.

However, career adaptation has been defined and measured in many different ways. Most likely, the most influential theorization stems from Savickas (1997, 2002); researchers have frequently used his model of the four C's (concern, control, curiosity, confidence) as a guiding framework when conceptualizing and assessing career adaptability (e.g., Hirschi, 2009; Klehe et al., 2011). Typically, the four C's were assessed with attitudinal or behavioral scales (e.g., career planning, career exploration). More recently, the notion of career adaptability has been refined and redefined as a set of psychosocial resources that condition adapting behaviors. Subsequently, a new measure, the career adapt-ability scale (CAAS), assessing this definition of career adaptability has been introduced in 10 languages (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This raises the important question of how this new conceptualization and operationalization of career

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adaptability as a set of resources relates to the existing measurement approaches to adaptation in the literature, which operationalized career development or maturity in terms of career behaviors and attitudes, but also in regard to the same four dimensions of adaptability. Such knowledge is critical to compare and integrate the literatures on career adaptation and development.

The aim of the present study is to empirically evaluate a theoretical model of the relationships among important career adaptation and development variables. As such, the study makes several key contributions. On a general level, it reconsiders for the first time in 30 years (cf., Savickas, 1984) the unfortunate lack of coherence in the career literature where the same or similar terms are used to denote variables that are theoretically and empirically quite different. Specifically, the present study contributes towards a theoretical and empirical integration of the dispersed literature regarding career adaptation. Furthermore, it provides new insights into the concurrent, discriminant, and predictive validity of the newly developed career adapt-abilities scale (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

1.1. Defining and measuring career adaptability

Since its emergence, career adaptability has been conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct, consisting of different dimensions that reflect a set of diverse aspects in terms of personality, motivation, readiness, strengths, behaviors, and attitudes (Goodman, 1994; Hartung et al., 2008). Within his career construction theory, Savickas (2002) conceptualized career adaptability as attitudes, behaviors, and competencies that individuals use in fitting themselves to work that suits them, consisting of the four dimensions of concern (planning, being planful), control (decision making, being decisive), curiosity (exploring, being inquisitive), and confidence (problem solving, being efficacious).

When investigating career adaptability using Savickas' (2013) model as a guiding framework, researchers usually assessed the proposed dimensions with different attitudinal or behavioral scales, measuring career planning (concern), career decidedness (control), career exploration (curiosity), and career self-efficacy beliefs (confidence) (Balin & Hirschi, 2010; Creed et al., 2009; Creed et al., 2011; Hirschi, 2009; Koen et al., 2010). Other times, researchers just used a subset of such measures to represent the construct of adaptability: for example, career decision self-efficacy and career commitment (Duffy & Blustein, 2005), or career exploration and career planning (Hirschi, 2010b; Klehe et al., 2011; Zikic & Klehe, 2006). These measurement approaches implement traditional notions of psychological career maturity (Crites, 1961; Super et al., 1981) yet also coincide with the more modern definition of psychosocial adaptability as a set of behaviors and attitudes (Savickas, 2002). Nevertheless, psychological career maturity is conceptually distinct from the most recent refinement and redefinition of career adaptability as "a psychosocial construct that denotes an individual's resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, traumas in their occupational roles" (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, p. 662). According to this definition, career adaptability is a strength or psychosocial resource that connects the person to the environment, in much the same fashion that identity connects the self-concept to a social role. In the present paper, we empirically address how this new conceptualization and assessment of career adaptability relates to similarly-named attitudinal and behavioral measurement approaches found in the career maturity literature. First, however, we attempt a theoretical clarification of their relationship, building upon the elaborations provided by Savickas (2013).

1.2. Theoretical integration of different measurement approaches

According to Savickas (2013), we must firstly distinguish between adaptive readiness, adaptability resources, adapting responses, and adaptation results. *Adaptivity*, or adaptive readiness, is the psychological trait of willingness to meet the unfamiliar, complex, and ill-defined problems presented by vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas with fitting responses, often operationalized as proactivity or flexibility. *Adaptability resources* refers to the psychosocial strengths that condition self-regulation in coping with the tasks, transitions, and traumas. *Adaptability* is usually measured in terms of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). *Adapting*, or adapting responses, denotes performing adaptive behaviors that address changing conditions. We would argue that behaviors such as career planning and career exploration represent instances of *adapting* because people use these behaviors to address career development tasks and changing work and career conditions. Moreover, it could be argued that in addition to behaviors, beliefs and barriers also represent instances of adaptive reactions to career challenges and changes. Career beliefs include assumptions and generalizations about themselves and the world of work, such as self-efficacy beliefs that show confidence in one's ability to address the challenges in one's career. Barriers to career choice and adjustment are measured by scales that indicate career decision-making difficulties. And finally, *adaptation* results refer to the outcomes of adapting behaviors, often measured in terms of career decidedness, career commitment, job satisfaction, and work success.

In sum, operationalizations of career behaviors, beliefs, and barriers in terms of planning, deciding, exploring, and self-efficacy should be regarded as indicators of adapting and hence as responses in a more modern notion of adaptability resources and adaptation results (Fig. 1). In line with this assumption, Urbanaviciute et al. (2014) found significant correlations between the CAAS dimensions and measures of career exploration and career decidedness.

We propose:

Hypothesis 1. Career adaptability (i.e., concern, control, curiosity, confidence) is related to, but is empirically distinct from, adapting (i.e., career planning, career decision-making difficulties, career exploration, and occupational self-efficacy beliefs).

Second, adaptability needs to be distinguished from *adaptivity*, the "personality trait of flexibility or willingness to change" (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, p. 662). Adaptivity should be regarded as an antecedent of the more malleable career adaptability strengths

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