



Antecedents and consequences to perceived career goal–progress discrepancies



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ABSTRACT

Informed by a goal setting and self-regulation perspective, we tested a model of perceived career goal–progress discrepancies (i.e., perception of progress made towards achieving career goals relative to where one should be if the goals were to be attained), which proposed that negative feedback from significant others predicts career goal–progress discrepancies, which, in turn, predicts levels of career-related distress. The model also proposes that active feedback seeking strengthens the relationship between feedback from significant others and goal–progress discrepancies, and that career self-regulatory behaviours (career exploration and planning) weaken the relationship between career goal–progress discrepancies and career distress. Using a sample of 420 young adults (mean age = 20.3 years, 73% female), we found that feedback from significant others was related to both career goal–progress discrepancies and career distress, career goal–progress discrepancies were related to career distress, and goal–progress discrepancies partially mediated between feedback from significant others and career distress. Supporting the moderated effects, goal–progress discrepancies were higher at higher levels of negative feedback for those more actively seeking feedback, and career distress was lower at lower levels of discrepancy for those more engaged in exploration and planning.

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1. Antecedents and consequences to perceived career goal–progress discrepancies

Young adults face a great many challenges during the transition from formal schooling to becoming full-time participants in the labour market (Evans, 2002; Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2010). How well they meet these challenges and attain the goals they set for themselves has a large impact on their current and future well-being and success (Seiffge-Krenke & Gelhaar, 2008). Deciding on a career direction and engaging in goal-directed career activities, such as participating in post-secondary training and education and managing work experiences, are important age-appropriate life tasks for young adults (Dietrich, Parker, & Salmela-Aro, 2012). In this career developmental process, young adults face many setbacks and many find that they struggle to meet the goals and tasks required to progress movement towards their career aspirations (Uno, Mortimer, Kim, & Vuolo, 2010). Confronted with discrepancies between how well they are progressing, compared to well they should be, or are expected to be progressing, young adults are faced with decisions about adjusting their goals, and are faced with the disappointment of managing these compromises (Anderson & Mounds, 2012). Despite the pervasive nature of these setbacks (Creed & Blume, 2013), there has been little research examining the correlates of perceived career goal–progress discrepancy.

We tested a control theory model of career development (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997) based on perceptions of discrepancies between career aspirations and the progress that is being made towards these aspirations. In this model, negative feedback from significant others is considered an antecedent to perceived goal–progress discrepancies, and career-related

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distress is considered as an outcome. We also tested under what circumstances the relationship between feedback from significant others and perceived goal–progress discrepancy might be strengthened, and under what circumstances the relationship between perceived goal–progress discrepancy and career distress might be ameliorated. We tested if feedback seeking orientation moderated the relationship between feedback from significant others and perceived goal–progress discrepancy, and tested if career-related self-regulatory strategies (operationalised as career exploration and planning) moderate the relationship between perceived career goal–progress discrepancy and career distress. See Fig. 1.

2. Perceived career goal–progress discrepancy

Goals refer to “internally represented desired states”, which are constructed hierarchically, with broad, higher-order goals informing middle- and lower-order goals and behavioural sequences (Vancouver & Day, 2005, p. 158). In the career domain, higher-order goals can refer to values related to helping others; middle order goals might include specific career aspirations or choices; lower order goals include undertaking specific career-related training; whereas, behavioural sequences include such activities as completing a college assignment (Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2013; Rojewski, 2007). Goals serve as reference values or “self-guides”, which form the basis for comparison when reflecting on achievements and progress (Higgins, 1987). All goal setting models (e.g., Bandura's (1989) self-regulation model; Carver and Scheier's (1982) control model) are based on the proposition that people set goals (consciously or unconsciously, by themselves or set by others), evaluate the progress they are making towards their goals, and adjust behaviours and/or goals when there is a discrepancy between the goal set and progress achieved. Goal-appraisal can also result in individuals also deciding that they are ahead of where they should be, or on track, to meet the goal. In these circumstances, individuals might raise their goals or reduce or maintain the effort being expended (Bandura, 1991). These discrepancy reduction and production mechanisms, which are based on Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, suggest that when goal progress is appraised as discrepant with what is required to attain the goal, the person will modify the energy and resources allocated to achieving it, adjust the goal itself, or do both (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010). In this context, perceived goal–progress discrepancy is the individual's perception of the progress they are making towards achieving their goals relative to where they should be if they were going to be attained (Higgins, 1987). Perceived goal–progress discrepancies are central to goal appraisal processes, which reflect the ways by which people think and feel about, and regulate, their goals and behaviours (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Little is known about the mechanisms of this component of goal appraisal for deciding upon, regulating, and managing goals within the career domain.

3. Consequences of perceived career goal–progress discrepancy

Discrepancies between where one is and where one wants to be elicit feelings of failure and dissatisfaction, which can motivate withdrawing effort and lowering expectations (Higgins, 1987; Lord et al., 2010). Large negative discrepancies can create severe disturbances, which can result in more serious declines in well-being and mental health (Fejfar & Hoyle, 2000). There is considerable empirical support for the notion that discrepancies between the current and the ideal states induce dejection-related emotions due to falling short of one's goals. Discrepancies between career aspirations and attained careers are associated with job dissatisfaction and negative affect in employees (Carr, 1997; Hesketh & McLachlan, 1991); discrepancies between career aspirations and expectations are related to more career indecision, less career-related confidence, and reduced career maturity in high school students (Patton & Creed, 2007); and discrepancies between one's ideal and actual academic achievement are related to poorer self-esteem and more depressive symptoms in adolescents (Ferguson, Hafen, & Laursen, 2010). An example from outside of the career domain is that body image discrepancies predict body dissatisfaction and bulimic eating (Sanderson, Wallier, Stockdale, & Yopyk, 2008). Although the consequences of perceived discrepancies are well established in the general psychological literature (e.g., Lord et al., 2010), and intervention strategies have been outlined (e.g., Hardin & Leong, 2005), little research has examined this relationship directly in the career domain. Thus, our first hypothesis is that perceived career goal–progress discrepancy will be associated with poorer career-related well-being.

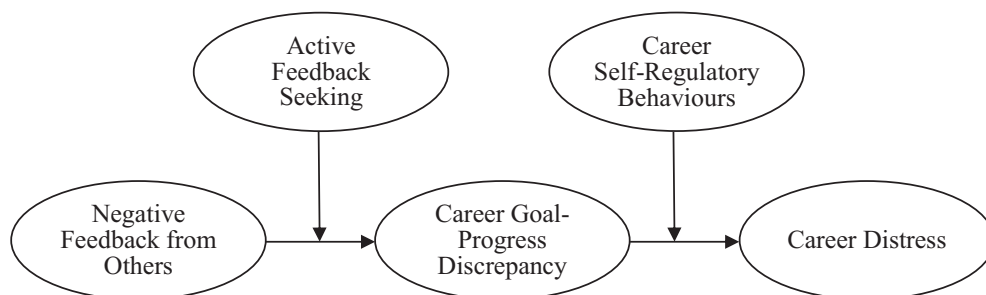


Fig. 1. (a) Feedback from significant others predicts career goal–progress discrepancy, which in turn predicts career distress; (b) active feedback seeking strengthens relationship between feedback from significant others and career goal–progress discrepancy, and career self-regulatory behaviours (career exploration and planning) weakened relationship between career goal–progress discrepancy and career distress.

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