Negative career feedback and career goal disengagement in young adults: The moderating role of mind-set about work

Shi Hu*, Michelle Hood, Peter A. Creed

School of Applied Psychology and Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Based on self-regulatory theories, this study examined the cross-sectional relationship between negative career feedback and the likelihood of career goal disengagement, and tested whether implicit theories about work moderated this relationship, using a sample of 184 young adults (M_{AGE} = 19.44 years). We found that negative feedback was associated positively with goal disengagement, and consistent with our hypotheses, also found that this relationship was weaker for those with stronger growth beliefs and stronger for those with stronger destiny beliefs. These findings highlight important roles for career feedback and implicit theories of work in young peoples' career goal pursuit.

1. Introduction

For young people who are attempting to establish a satisfying career, career goal pursuit is a dynamic, self-regulated process (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002). Although persisting with an existing career goal is often advocated, giving up on a goal or modifying it is a common and sometimes inevitable step (Creed & Hood, 2014). Disengaging effort and commitment from a previously held goal (i.e., goal disengagement) can occur when, for example, the goal is perceived to be unattainable or becomes less desirable (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003).

From a general self-regulatory perspective (e.g., goal theory, Latham & Locke, 1991; control theory, Carver & Scheier, 1990; social cognitive theory, Bandura, 1991), negative feedback can trigger goal disengagement by facilitating self-appraisal processes. Consistent with these general theories, the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) self-management model (Lent & Brown, 2013) explicitly proposes that feedback (e.g., information elicited or provided on individual career-related accomplishments) is an important factor that influences career goal setting and career-related behaviours. However, the role of feedback in career goal setting processes is much underexplored (Hu, Creed, & Hood, 2017).

To date, only a handful of studies has directly investigated the link between negative career feedback and career goal disengagement (e.g., Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Hu et al., 2017). When young people perceive negative feedback about their career goals (e.g., feedback on goal progress or goal suitability), they are more likely to withdraw their effort and commitment to them (Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Hu et al., 2017). Relevant theories (e.g., SCCT) and previous studies also suggest that young people might employ other adaptive behavioural strategies (e.g., goal persistence, career exploration; Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Lent & Brown, 2013) rather than disengagement. However, only two studies have contributed to an understanding of the types of individuals who are more/less likely to give up on their career goals in response to negative feedback (Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). Identifying and understanding the individual boundary conditions that moderate the relationships between different types of career feedback and goal disengagement strategies is important as this provides

* Corresponding author at: School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Gold Coast 4222, Australia.
  E-mail addresses: shi.hu2@griffithuni.edu.au (S. Hu), michelle.hood@griffith.edu.au (M. Hood), p.creed@griffith.edu.au (P.A. Creed).

insight into how and why young people compromise on their career goals.

In the current study, we contribute to a better understanding of the career goal disengagement process by testing a model that integrates an implicit theory perspective (Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013) with SCCT. Based on this integrative framework, we expected that (a) negative career feedback (i.e., negative feedback on progress, on goal suitability, and on improvements needed) and mind-set about work (i.e., individuals' meaning system about work; Burnette & Pollack, 2013) would be associated with career goal disengagement, and (b) mind-set about work would moderate the feedback-disengagement link.

1.1. Career feedback and career goal disengagement

According to the SCCT career self-management model, learning experiences convey information that influences young peoples' career-related self-efficacy and outcome expectations, direct a range of self-regulatory mechanisms (e.g., cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes), and are essential requirements for goal setting, career-related actions, and outcomes (e.g., goal attainment, well-being; Lent & Brown, 2013). Career feedback, defined as information regarding goal-directed career activities (Hu et al., 2017), is an important type of learning experience. Specifically, during career goal pursuit, young people integrate and review feedback from multiple sources (e.g., external sources such as important people around them; internal sources such as self-monitoring and self-reflection). This allows them to assess their current position relative to the career goals they have set (i.e., identify goal-performance discrepancies; Bandura, 1989; Creed & Hood, 2014).

These goal-performance discrepancies stimulate changes in cognitive (e.g., lowering or raising career-related outcome expectations and self-efficacy in response to negative/positive feedback; Lent & Brown, 2013), affective (e.g., feeling disappointed/happy in response to negative/positive feedback; Elicker et al., 2010; Ilies, Judge, & Wagner, 2010), and behavioural processes (e.g., engaging in career planning and persistence or disengaging from a goal in response to negative feedback; reducing effort or pursuing a more prestigious career in response to positive feedback; Ilies et al., 2010; Lent & Brown, 2013; Wang & Mukhopadhyay, 2012), all of which are aimed at addressing discrepancies and improving progress towards the career goal. In line with this, studies in the career domain indicate that negative career feedback is related to greater progress-goal distance, discrepancies between self-identities and goal requirements (e.g., perceptions of being ill-suited to the career goal), goal revision (e.g., goal disengagement and reengagement), and lower well-being (Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Creed, Wamelink, & Hu, 2015; Hu, Creed, & Hood, 2016).

In the present study, we investigated the relationship between negative career feedback and the likelihood of career goal disengagement. Goal disengagement is defined as the process of withdrawing effort and commitment to a previously held goal (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003). For young adults confronted with barriers such as having goals that are perceived as too demanding, unable to be attained in the desired time, or unrealistic when unexpected events happen (e.g., losing confidence to achieve the goals or changing expectations), career goal disengagement is a common, self-protective strategy that prevents future failure and disappointment (Creed & Hood, 2014; Lent & Brown, 2013; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al., 2003).

Previous research has demonstrated a positive relationship between negative feedback and goal disengagement. For example, in a cross-lagged study with a sample of Chinese university students, Hu et al. (2017) found that students who perceived that they received more negative career feedback at Time 1 showed greater disengagement likelihood from their career goals six months later. Similar relationships have been found in organizational behaviour and academic domains: negative feedback on job performance is associated with lower affective commitment and higher turnover intentions (i.e., goal disengagement; Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009), and negative feedback on academic performance is related to mental disengagement in university students (Elicker et al., 2010).

Building on these theoretical links and empirical evidence, our first hypothesis was that negative career-related feedback would be associated positively with a greater likelihood of career goal disengagement (Hypothesis 1). We assessed three aspects of negative career feedback: feedback on progress being made towards the goal, goal suitability, and improvements needed in order to achieve the goal (Hu et al., 2016).

1.2. Moderator variables in the career feedback-disengagement link

Meta-analytic studies have shown that the effect of feedback on self-regulatory processes is inconsistent (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005), which suggests that moderators might influence these relationships. Thus, examining potential moderator variables is important, for they might help explain these heterogeneous effects (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Smither et al., 2005) as well as suggest strategies that might facilitate the career development of young adults when they encounter unfavourable feedback on their career direction and progress. Lent and Brown (2013) suggested some contextual and personality moderators in their SCCT career self-management model. For example, people with higher levels of extraversion or conscientiousness, or with more social supports, might be more resilient to setbacks (e.g., negative feedback), be more likely to maintain positive career-related beliefs, and, consequently, persist with their career goals.

However, only a few studies in the career domain have tested possible moderating influences on this relationship. Anderson and Mounts (2012) found that the relationship between negative career feedback and goal adjustment was moderated by both goal importance (i.e., emotional and motivational investment in the goal) and goal certainty (i.e., how certain the young person was about the goal). In a longitudinal study, Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2012) found that amateur musicians with a stronger career calling were more likely to ignore discouraging career-related feedback and less likely to adjust their goals. In the present study, we extend the limited current literature by examining whether implicit theories held about work moderate the relationship between negative career feedback and career goal disengagement.

Implicit theories hold that people have different, implicit beliefs about their personal attributes (e.g., intelligence). These