



## Two sides of the career resources coin: Career adaptability resources and the impostor phenomenon

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 4 March 2016

Received in revised form 24 September 2016

Accepted 10 October 2016

Available online 12 October 2016

#### Keywords:

Impostor phenomenon

Career construction theory

Career construction model of adaptation

Career adaptability

Career adapting responses

### ABSTRACT

Considering the impostor phenomenon (IP) as an important psychological construct in the context of career development requires a theoretical grounding. Using the career construction model of adaptation as a guiding framework, we investigated how the IP is related to adaptive readiness (represented by core self-evaluations), career adaptability resources, and adapting responses, namely, career planning, career decision-making difficulties, career exploration, and occupational self-efficacy. We used parallel multiple mediation modeling to investigate specific indirect effects through concern, control, curiosity, confidence, and the IP. We conducted an online study with 289 university students. Results indicated a positive effect of core self-evaluations on career planning, career exploration, and occupational self-efficacy and a negative effect on career decision-making difficulties through adaptability resources. The IP emerged as a “maladaptability” resource: That is, it might be a hindrance to adaptive coping and behavior and consequently promote maladaptive coping and behavior by decreasing career planning and occupational self-efficacy and increasing career decision-making difficulties. Supplementary negative effects of the IP on adaptability resources are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

More than 35 years of research on the impostor phenomenon (IP) has provided many insights into its antecedents (e.g., family background, personality traits) and consequences (e.g., depression, general mental health; for an overview see Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). The IP was originally described as the perception of intellectual or professional fraudulence experienced by high-achieving individuals (Clance & Imes, 1978). Despite various achievements suggesting the contrary, such as a high cumulative grade point average, sufferers seem unable to acknowledge and internalize their successful experiences (Clance & Imes, 1978; King & Cooley, 1995). In the last 5 years, researchers have begun to focus on the IP in the context of work and career development (Bechtoldt, 2015; Grubb & McDowell, 2012; Jöstl, Bergsmann, Lüftenegger, Schober, & Spiel, 2012; McDowell, Grubb, & Geho, 2015; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016a; Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, & Anseel, 2015). In the world of work, the IP was found to be negatively related to several career-relevant variables such as self-efficacy beliefs (Jöstl et al., 2012; McDowell et al., 2015), organizational citizenship behavior, and affective commitment, as well as job satisfaction and perceived organizational support in working professionals (Grubb & McDowell, 2012; McDowell et al., 2015; Vergauwe et al., 2015). Moreover, an investigation of the IP in managers showed that having negative views of their own abilities and perceiving themselves as impostors in their jobs biased the managers' task-delegation decisions (Bechtoldt, 2015). In addition, the IP was shown to reduce

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career planning, career striving, and the motivation to lead in students as well as in working people (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016a). Given this preliminary evidence of the IP's negative effects in the context of career development, a theoretical grounding is needed to fully understand its impact. Therefore, we aimed to design a general framework model of the IP in the context of career development that could incorporate both the consequences already identified and those yet to be explored.

Career construction theory is widely used in the field of career development (Savickas, 2002; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This theory functions well as a guiding framework because “instead of measuring personality traits as realist concepts and trying to prove construct validity, the theory focuses on how individuals use what they have” to construct their careers (Savickas, 2005a, p. 2). Impostors may construct their careers on the basis of false beliefs about their abilities and competences. Savickas (2005a) emphasized looking at the interplay of personality and the process of adaptation to capture “the dynamics that integrate personality and adaptability into a self-defined whole” (p. 3), which would be missed if the variables were investigated independently. Therefore, we looked at the IP as a career or life theme that guides expressions of personality and adaptation. In this context, adaptation follows a sequence ranging from adaptive readiness to so-called adaptability resources and adapting responses that lead to goodness of fit or adaptation results<sup>1</sup> (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; see Fig. 1). As shown in Fig. 1, these adaptation variables can be measured using multiple operational indicators. *Adaptive readiness* refers to a psychological trait of flexibility or willingness to meet unfamiliar, complex problems that arise as part of vocational development tasks and change processes. Adaptive readiness can be evaluated by measures of proactivity and cognitive flexibility or the Big Five personality items (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Empirical research has suggested that extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are indicators of high adaptive readiness as they are positively related to career adaptability; neuroticism may be an indicator of low adaptive readiness as it is negatively related (Rossier, Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori, & Dauwalder, 2012; Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005; Teixeira, Bardagi, Lassance, Magalhães, & Duarte, 2012; van Vianen, Klehe, Koen, & Dries, 2012; Zacher, 2014). Recent research used two personal characteristics—high core self-evaluations and proactivity—as indicator of high adaptive readiness (Hirschi, Herrmann, & Keller, 2015; Hirschi & Valero, 2015). *Core self-evaluations* (CSEs) represent the “basic, fundamental appraisal of one's worthiness, effectiveness, and capability as a person” (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 304). CSEs seem to be especially appropriate as an indicator because they have been assumed to be important for coping with organizational change and managing boundaryless careers (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011).

Regarding the thoughts and behaviors that are used to address career development tasks and changing work and career conditions, the *adapting responses*, we focused on those proposed and investigated in recent research (Hirschi & Valero, 2015; Hirschi et al., 2015): career planning, career decision-making difficulties, career exploration, and occupational self-efficacy. Adapting responses are in general conceptualized as adaptive behaviors that address changing conditions, such as career exploration, career planning, or career decision making. *Career planning* is the ability to actively think about future career developments and formulate steps and plans to achieve one's own career goals; it has been shown to be an influential aspect of successful career development (Gould, 1979; May, 2005; Orpen, 1994). *Career decision making* applies to decisions regarding career opportunities and goals. *Career exploration* concerns the extent to which an individual explores opportunities and different career options. *Self-efficacy* beliefs are defined as people's judgments of their abilities to organize, plan, and perform the actions necessary to achieve their individual goals or to succeed and attain a given level of performance (e.g., Bandura, 1977). We investigated these variables because we support the assumption that they are adapting behaviors that are useful for mastering vocational development tasks, transitions, and traumas (Hirschi et al., 2015). We would argue that these behaviors have adaptive functions needed for orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. For instance, people investigate in career planning for orientation or in career exploration when they explore requirements, routines, and rewards of a work role. People need occupational self-efficacy to become established in their role and manage it properly. In times of disengagement people may have career decision-making difficulties if they have to decide whether to stay in their current position or change jobs (cf., Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

As adaptive readiness alone is insufficient to support adaptive responses, self-regulatory *career adaptability resources* are needed to cope with changing situations. Career adaptability resources refer to psychological strengths that influence self-regulation in coping with tasks, transitions, and traumas (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In the context of career development, these resources have been shown to be particularly important for the transition from school to work, as they have a positive effect on various career-related outcomes such as job search self-efficacy, employment status, and person–environment fit perceptions (Guan et al., 2013, 2014; Johnston, Luciano, Maggiori, Ruch, & Rossier, 2013; Pouyaud, Vignoli, Dosnon, & Lallemand, 2012; Rossier et al., 2012; Zacher, 2015). Moreover, an increase in career adaptability resources has been found to raise the chances of finding a qualitatively good job (Koen, Klehe, & van Vianen, 2012), improve positive job performance ratings (Ohme & Zacher, 2015), and increase a sense of power as well as life satisfaction (Hirschi, 2009).

The higher order construct of career adaptability resources can be further subdivided into the “four Cs”: *concern*, *control*, *curiosity*, and *confidence* (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). These four dimensions are not interchangeable, as they have been shown to differ in relation to predictors as well as outcomes (e.g., Guan et al., 2013; Hirschi & Valero, 2015; Hirschi et al., 2015; Rossier et al., 2012). Consequently, researchers have called for exploring both the higher order construct and its dimensions (e.g., Hirschi & Valero, 2015). To increase our understanding of what drives the relationship between adaptive readiness, the IP, career adaptability resources, and adapting responses, we investigated the impact of the dimensions one at a time.

<sup>1</sup> As we are interested in the IP as factor in career development, we investigated our hypothesis in a student sample. As they had not yet fully entered the working world, adaptation results such as career success or satisfaction could not be assessed within this group.

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