



Top-down or bottom-up? Prospective relations between general and domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs during a work-family transition[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In the present studies, we examined the prospective relations between general self-efficacy beliefs and different types of domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs, namely occupational and academic self-efficacy beliefs as well as self-efficacy beliefs regarding the compatibility of work and family life. Data stem from two longitudinal data sets of 297 and 107 women during their transition into the workforce after maternity leave; in addition, 196 university students served as a non-transitional control sample. In both studies of mothers, we observed top-down effects: General self-efficacy beliefs predicted domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs. Bottom-up effects seem to be restricted to non-transitional settings and situations when demands have become more familiar. Results speak in favor of conceptualizing general and specific self-efficacy beliefs as separate constructs; implications for self-efficacy theory are discussed.

1. Introduction

Self-efficacy beliefs play a central role in human functioning. They influence whether individuals set ambitious goals, how much effort they invest and how long they persist in face of difficulties and failures (Bandura, 1977). A great body of research has shown positive associations between self-efficacy beliefs and a broad range of domain-specific and general psychological adjustment criteria, among them job and life satisfaction (see meta-analyses by Graves, 2003; Judge & Bono, 2001; Luszczynska, Scholz, & Schwarzer, 2005).

With respect to the formation of self-efficacy beliefs, Bandura (1977) has proposed several sources of information that nurture individuals' self-efficacy in situations they are not familiar with (e.g., vicarious experiences by models). However, the development and mechanisms of self-efficacy beliefs have been widely neglected in empirical research (see Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Schunk & Pajares, 2005). The present article seeks to close this research gap by analyzing the interplay between general and domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs during a common work-family transition in young and middle adulthood, i.e., women's transition back to work after maternity leave. Transitions are generally characterized by experiences of novelty, ambiguity, and insecurity (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993; Perrig-Chiello & Perren, 2005), and self-efficacy beliefs have been shown to be essential in successfully mastering the associated challenges (see e.g., Chemers,

Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Pinquart, Juang, & Silbereisen, 2003; Rigotti, Schyns, & Mohr, 2008). Furthermore, the chosen transitional setting enables us to investigate whether the prospective relations between general and domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs depend on the phase of the transition. Using data from two longitudinal studies of mothers during their return to work, firstly, we investigate whether general self-efficacy beliefs predict domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs while participants are still unexperienced with their new role as a working mother. Secondly, we test whether domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs have a stronger impact on general beliefs once mothers have become acquainted with their work-family situation and have developed domain-specific competence beliefs. To explore the specificity of the effects, we investigate prospective relations between general and domain-specific beliefs in an additional third sample, i.e., university students who are not undergoing a transition.

1.1. Task-specific, domain-specific and general self-efficacy beliefs

In the literature, three forms of self-efficacy beliefs are described: Task-specific, domain-specific and general self-efficacy beliefs. They differ with respect to the extent to which individuals regard themselves to be efficacious, i.e., across activities, situations or domains of functioning.

Bandura's (1997) focus is on task- and situation-specific self-efficacy

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beliefs, which represent “beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Although Bandura (1986) regards self-efficacy to be contextualized, he concedes that, once established, self-efficacy beliefs may generalize beyond a certain situation. However, in his view this generalization is restricted to situations and activities very similar to those in which self-efficacy beliefs had originally been developed.

In contrast, other authors put a general form of self-efficacy beliefs at the fore (e.g., Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001; Scherbaum, Cohen-Charash, & Kern, 2006; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; Shelton, 1990; Sherer et al., 1982). These general self-efficacy beliefs are conceptualized as “individuals' perception of their ability to perform across a variety of situations” (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998, p. 170) and are regarded as relatively stable competence beliefs that are independent of the situation (e.g., Chen et al., 2001; Scherbaum et al., 2006; Schyns & v. Collani, 2002; Shelton, 1990).

With respect to the extent of generality, domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs are located between task-specific and general self-efficacy beliefs. They denote confidence in one's coping ability within a specific setting, such as at home or at work. For example, occupational self-efficacy refers to a person's confidence to successfully perform at work; it is positively associated with job performance and positive attitudes toward the job and the organization (e.g., Del Libano, Llorens, Salanova, & Schaufeli, 2012; Rigotti et al., 2008).

1.2. Development of self-efficacy beliefs

In spite of extensive research on the outcomes of self-efficacy beliefs, it is widely unclear, on which self-efficacy beliefs people draw in stressful situations they are not familiar with and have therefore not yet had the possibility to develop a sense of self-efficacy (see Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Muretta, 2004). This, however, is a crucial question if we want to understand the unfolding of self-efficacy beliefs.

In other fields and with respect to other psychological constructs such as motivation (e.g., Blanchard, Mask, Vallerand, de la Sablonniere, & Provencher, 2007; Guay, Mageau, & Vallerand, 2003; Vallerand, 1997), attachment (Fraley, Vicary, Brumbaugh, & Roisman, 2011; Klohnen, Weller, Luo, & Choe, 2005; Pierce & Lydon, 2001), well-being (David, Green, Martin, & Suls, 1997; Dyrdal, Røysamb, Nes, & Vittersø, 2011; Feist, Bodner, Jacobs, Miles, & Tan, 1995; Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Lucas, 2004), or self-concept (Marsh & Yeung, 1998; Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2006), there are ongoing debates on the interplay between specific and global emotions, behavior or cognitions. In general, top-down approaches assume that higher-order factors influence lower-order factors, whereas in bottom-up models the direction of the causal flow is from lower-order to higher-order factors. However, both approaches are not mutually exclusive—a bidirectional or reciprocal process is also possible.

For example, within self-concept research, Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976) argued for a bottom-up model in which many situation-specific experiences are required to lead to changes on higher levels in the self-concept hierarchy. Contrary to this view, Brown (1993) assumed that global self-concept influences people's feelings and behavior in specific situations. Similarly, in his seminal article on subjective well-being, Diener (1984) distinguished bottom-up from top-down theories. According to bottom-up theories, experiences of satisfaction and happiness in separate areas of life (e.g., work and family) sum up to a general sense of subjective well-being. Alternatively, in a top-down perspective, it is assumed that individuals have a predisposition to perceive specific situations either more positively or more negatively.

According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy beliefs develop throughout one's life course by information gained from four central sources: vicarious experiences by models in comparable situations, verbal persuasion, physiological and affective states and most importantly, mastery experiences. With respect to the latter, (repeatedly) accomplishing a task successfully strengthens people's sense of self-

efficacy, whereas failure can undermine and weaken it. In new situations, a person would not be able to rely on such mastery experiences but would have to draw on information of one of the other sources. We argue, however, that another “source” individuals may draw on are self-efficacy beliefs. Hence, we suggest that when facing unknown challenges general self-efficacy beliefs might be most relevant. Similarly, Shelton (1990) proposes that general self-efficacy beliefs form specific self-efficacy beliefs. Only after they are established they direct behavior in a specific task or situation and the associated experience provides feedback to the individual's general self-efficacy beliefs. Taken together, Shelton regards the relation between general and specific self-efficacy to be reciprocal, though lagged, with general self-efficacy beliefs dominating as long as specific self-efficacy beliefs have not been established. In other words, mastery experiences in diverse life domains and situations are expected to fuel a generalized sense of self-efficacy.

Concurrent positive relations between general and domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs have been shown repeatedly (e.g., Chen et al., 2001; Coleman & Karraker, 2000; Luszczynska et al., 2005; Schwoerer, May, Hollensbe, & Mencl, 2005; Schyns & v. Collani, 2002). However, to our knowledge there is only one article that addresses the cross-lagged pattern of this relation. In a sample of 237 university students, Miyoshi (2012) investigated the prospective relations between general and different forms of task-specific self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., referring to study, sport, companionship) within a time interval of two months. Bottom-up effects were found for two forms of task-specific self-efficacy beliefs and reciprocal effects for two other forms (for one form neither a significant bottom-up nor a top-down effect was found). In a second study, Miyoshi (2012) reported a top-down effect between general and task-specific self-efficacy beliefs. Here, specific care-work self-efficacy beliefs were assessed before and after students' first two-week care-work internship. As it was students' first internship, they had not yet had the opportunity to build a sense of care-work self-efficacy. Hence, the top-down effect supports our line of reasoning. However, as this sample consisted of only 49 individuals, more research is needed to replicate this result and cross-validate top-down effects with respect to other self-efficacy domains.

The main aim of the current research is to shed light on the unfolding and dynamics of general and domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs by investigating their prospective relations during a common employment transition.

1.3. Self-efficacy beliefs during transitions

Within one's career lifecycle, graduating from high school, starting one's first job or returning to paid work after a family-related leave are possible transitions. Transitions involve experiences of novelty, ambiguity, and insecurity and usually require the adoption of new roles including the acquisition of new behaviors (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993; Perrig-Chiello & Perren, 2005). With respect to mother's re-entry, typical demands are the reorganization of family life (e.g., childcare, household, leisure activities), catching up with organizational developments, adapting to the new situation in the workplace, and, if it was the first maternity leave, adapting to the new role of being an employed mother. Self-efficacy beliefs have been shown to play a central role in successfully mastering such challenging life and employment transitions (e.g., Chemers et al., 2001; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Rigotti et al., 2008; Wiese & Heidemeier, 2012).

Investigating the interplay between general and domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs during a transition has two major advantages. First, both general and domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs can be regarded as rather stable personality constructs. Tram and Cole (2006) argue that “it is very difficult for even the best of predictors to explain change in a variable on which individual differences are highly stable” (p. 675). For this reason, they suggest investigating causal processes in “naturally occurring periods of instability” (p. 675), i.e., transitions. Second, transitions enable to unravel possible patterns in the dynamics of

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