



# Perceived career barriers and vocational outcomes among university undergraduates: Exploring mediation and moderation effects



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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of perceived internal and external career barriers on undergraduates' vocational outcomes, such as academic major satisfaction and vocational identity commitment. Moreover, it tests career adaptability as a moderator in the barriers-vocational outcomes link. The study was carried out in three public universities in Lithuania. In total, 288 first and second year undergraduate students took part in it. Results demonstrated internal but not external barriers to be negatively associated with undergraduates' vocational outcomes.

Furthermore, academic major satisfaction was found to be a partial mediator in the perceived career barriers-vocational identity commitment link. Finally, introducing career adaptability as a moderator revealed significant moderated mediation effects. In this case, both internal and external career barriers were found to negatively relate to vocational identity commitment through academic major satisfaction, the effect being particularly salient at the low values of career adaptability.

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## 1. Introduction

Perceived career barriers are generally defined as perceived difficulties in achieving career goals. Specifically, these can be "events or conditions, within the person or in his or her environment, that make career progress difficult" (Swanson & Woitke, 1997, p. 434). In the context of this study, perceived barriers refer to perceived difficulties in attaining the chosen academic major.

As research shows, there may be quite many barriers that people encounter in their careers (Swanson & Tokar, 1991). Although there is no one agreed upon classification, previous studies provide enough empirical basis for distinguishing between the internal and external barriers (see Creed, Patton, & Bartrum, 2004; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000; McWhirter, Torres, Salgado, & Valdez, 2007). Internal barriers are person-focused and refer to such factors as perceived lack of ability, motivation or interest in pursuing career goals. External barriers are environment-focused and refer to various contextual factors, such as financial problems, family demands, employment restrictions, and the like.

Although some findings on perceived career barriers reveal their unexpectedly positive effects (e.g. Hirschi, Lee, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2013; Lindley, 2005) implying that barriers can possibly serve not only as hindrance, but also as challenge factors in career development (Hirschi et al., 2013), they are usually explored as a negative precondition impeding career development. In line with this, they have been linked to career indecision (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Constantine, Wallace, & Kindaichi, 2005; Creed et al., 2004), less career planning (Cardoso & Moreira, 2009) and readiness (Hirschi, 2011), lower or less adequate aspirations

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(Creed, Wong, & Hood, 2009; Jackson, Kacanski, Rust, & Beck, 2006; Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003), and have been reported to have an effect upon post-secondary career plans (McWhirter et al., 2007) and career expectations in children (Creed, Conlon, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

However, despite an increased interest in this topic, the findings fail to provide a comprehensive picture of the role that perceived barriers play in career choice. On one hand, this is because perceptions of barriers are often analyzed in specific contexts (i.e. in female samples or minority populations). On the other hand, the effect of perceived career barriers is largely bound to respondents' career stage and can hardly be generalized across all age groups. For instance, the outcomes of high school students' perceived future-related barriers do not necessarily compare to those experienced by their older counterparts.

This study focuses specifically on first and second year university undergraduates' perceptions of career barriers. At the beginning of university studies this issue is of high importance, for it is the time when students have just undergone the transition from school to higher education and are likely to do a "reality check" about their chosen academic major or vocational choice in general. The topic is also relevant in the context of the current situation in the labor market. Similarly to the rest of the European Union, an increase in youth unemployment has been observed in Lithuania, reaching approximately 19% in the recent years (Statistics Lithuania, 2015). While for the large part this is an economic issue, it also raises a psychological question: How do career choice and vocational track look like in the minds of the future labor market entrants? Given the uncertainty of occupational future, exploration of undergraduates' perceived career barriers and their psychological outcomes is a matter of particular interest.

Based on previous studies, perceptions of barriers may negatively affect career attitudes and behaviors (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Leal-Muniz & Constantine, 2005), and thus imply a potential threat to successful career development at this career stage. Nevertheless, it is argued that the effect of actual or perceived difficulties could be mitigated by certain adaptive behaviors (Konstam, Celen-Demirtas, Tomek, & Sweeney, 2015) or efficacy beliefs (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Betz, 2001). These implications suggest the following research prospects that will be further addressed in this study: a) linking perceived career barriers to specific vocational outcomes that indicate undergraduates' (un)successful career choice; b) testing their negative effects upon these outcomes; c) exploring potential moderators that mitigate the negative perceived barriers effect.

### 1.1. Career barriers and vocational outcomes

To address the first question of interest, research literature suggests a number of variables that reflect a successful career choice. In this study, academic major satisfaction and vocational identity commitment are defined as positive vocational outcomes of the transition from school to higher education and explored in relation to perceived career barriers.

The satisfaction measure was included in this study, because job or career satisfaction is often considered as the most salient psychological indicator of career success (Heslin, 2005; Zacher, 2014). Given the sample of the study (i.e. undergraduate level students), academic major satisfaction was taken into account, as this type of satisfaction is the most relevant during the undergraduate studies. Based on classical conceptualizations (i.e. job satisfaction; see Locke, 1969), academic major satisfaction may be defined as an evaluative response to academic choice, which manifests in a pleasurable emotional state. According to Locke (1969), satisfaction is a function of the perceived relationship between what one wants from one's job and what one perceives it as entailing. In a similar vein, academic major satisfaction is understood here as the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the congruence between what one wants and what one actually receives from his or her academic major.

The second positive vocational outcome is vocational identity commitment. Its inclusion in this study is based on a number of findings, which equally emphasize the sense of commitment as a positive aspect of career development (Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Koslowsky, 1987; Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, & Weigold, 2011; Weiss, 1999). Vocational identity commitment reflects consigning oneself to particular choices (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Porfeli et al., 2011). It is thus an important component in undergraduates' career development. When analyzed in the context of perceived barriers, it might provide an additional insight on what factors determine committing oneself to certain careers.

### 1.2. Theoretical background for linking barriers to vocational outcomes

Despite its relevance in career choice, the topic of barriers has often been a secondary issue in most of the theoretical models and has been argued to lack a comprehensive theoretical framework (Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996). However, as barriers constitute part of vocational environments, the person-environment (P-E) fit approach (e.g. Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) may offer an interesting analytic perspective for linking perceptions of barriers to their outcomes. Within this study, perceived career barriers are argued to reflect a certain vocational misfit, which further leads to the hypothesis about its negative effect upon academic major satisfaction and commitment.

Based on the P-E fit approach, the fit is defined as the congruence or correspondence between the person and the environment (Edwards & Shipp, 2007). Numerous studies have shown its positive outcomes, such as satisfaction, identification, and commitment, whereas a lack of fit has well documented negative effects (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009; Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Notably, P-E fit is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing various types of fit (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Vocational fit is considered to be the broadest type of P-E congruence (Kristof, 1996). Building on previous works (e.g. Feij, van der Velde, Taris, & Taris, 1999; Schmitt, Oswald, Friede, Imus, & Merritt, 2008), it results from the assessment of what one possesses (in terms of skills) or desires (in terms of needs, interests, or values) and what one receives from his or her vocation (in terms of requirements and benefits). Although perceptions of career barriers do not directly indicate a vocational misfit, they imply a

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