

Career optimism: The roles of contextual support and career decision-making self-efficacy[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), we examined the role of parental support, teacher support, and career decision-making self-efficacy as sources of career optimism. We tested our proposed model using 235 computer science majors from a large university in the Philippines. Surveys were conducted over two measurement periods (1 year apart). Results revealed that Time 1 parental and teacher support were positively associated with Time 2 career optimism. Furthermore, we found that these direct relationships were fully mediated by Time 1 career decision-making self-efficacy. These results remained significant even after controlling for neuroticism and past performance. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

“The organizational career is dead, while the protean career is alive and flourishing” (Hall, 1996, p. 8). This quotation accurately captures the importance of career self-management in today’s turbulent career landscape. Technological advancements, job restructuring, and an increasing globalized workforce are just some of the reasons why careers have become less structured and predictable, increasing the need for individuals to be more flexible and adaptable (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2009). As a response, career development research has shifted its focus from aligning individual’s interests, needs, and values with organizational demands, towards advocating the development of career competencies essential for career and work adjustment (Savickas, 2005). These competencies comprise more than just the acquisition of technical and conceptual skills necessary for successful performance in one’s chosen career. They also include transferable non-intellective capabilities (e.g., self-efficacy, conscientiousness, resilience) that help individuals persevere in the face of uncertainty (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). One important resource that has been found to be influential in successful career adaptation is career optimism (Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005).

Career optimism is defined as the tendency for individuals to “expect the best possible outcome or to emphasize the most positive aspects of one’s future career development” (Rottinghaus et al., 2005, p. 11). While career optimism is positively related to work hope (i.e., a positive motivational state that enables individuals to derive a sense of successful agency, pathway, and goals in work situations, Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006), it is established that they are conceptually and empirically distinct from each other (Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006). As a component of career adaptability, career optimism has been found to positively influence various career

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outcomes such as career aspirations, choice, exploration (Rottinghaus, Buelow, Matyja, & Schneider, 2012; Rottinghaus et al., 2005), and academic satisfaction (McIlveen, Beccaria, & Burton, 2013). Career optimism also positively relates to important work outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Kluemper, Little, & DeGroot, 2009; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). More importantly, optimism was found to be positively related to indicators of adaptability such as adjustment to college (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992) and coping with unemployment (Wanberg, 1997). Although initially conceptualized as a dispositional characteristic (Scheier & Carver, 1985), recent work suggests that optimism is malleable in that it can be shaped and strengthened by a supportive environment (Higgins, Dobrow, & Roloff, 2010). Overall, the career optimism literature provides evidence that perceptions of a positive future are indicative of career maturity and adaptability (Rottinghaus et al., 2005, 2012).

Despite our knowledge of the benefits associated with career optimism, there are still important gaps that need to be addressed. First, research on career optimism has mainly focused on investigating its outcomes and less is known regarding its antecedents. Although prior work examined potential sources of optimism, it focused primarily on broad constructs such as general self-efficacy, luck, and overall social support (Day & Maltby, 2003; Karademas, 2006; Urbig & Monsen, 2012). We argue that to fully understand how career optimism develops over time, it is essential to look beyond general sources and explore more career-relevant and context-specific antecedents. Indeed, certain context-specific supports (e.g., parental and teacher support) are particularly salient in adolescent career decision-making and expectancies of career success. This is due to their direct influence on students' learning experiences (Lent et al., 2001, 2002). We believe that to fully understand the role of optimism as an adaptive resource, there is a need to examine how it can be cultivated. Second, prior work has mainly focused on the conditions that strengthen or weaken the relationship between sources of support and optimism (Deoglas et al., 1996; Karademas, 2006). Yet, we know little about the underlying process by which social support influences career optimism. An understanding of this process is important as it may lead to the development of more accurate interventions aimed at inoculating students from career pessimism and confusion.

We address the above gaps by examining the relationship between career relevant sources of support, career decision-making self-efficacy, and career optimism among adolescents. Drawing from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), we propose that parental and teacher support positively influence career optimism through the development of career decision-making self-efficacy. That is, parental and teacher support shape an individual's confidence in making career-related decisions and this in turn enhances one's positive outlook about his or her future career. Fig. 1 outlines the theoretical relationships hypothesized in our study.

By examining these sets of relationships, we contribute to the career development literature in several important ways. First, we respond to the recent focus of career theories highlighting the important role of non-intellective capacities essential for career self-management (Lent & Brown, 2013; Rottinghaus et al., 2005; Savickas, 2005). In this paper, we focus on career optimism, an important career competency. Indeed, prior work has identified career optimism as an adaptive resource that positively predicts one's ability to adapt to career-related changes and uncertainties (Tolentino et al., 2014). Second, by applying a social cognitive approach, we attempt to clarify the nature of the relationships between social support, self-efficacy, and optimism in the career context. Specifically, we examine the specific sources of support (i.e., parental and teacher support) that are relevant to the development of adolescent's career optimism as well as explicate how career decision-making self-efficacy influences this mediated relationship. Examining domain-specific sources of career optimism and examining how they are related are important as it can potentially contribute towards the development of more targeted career counseling interventions for students. In the sections that follow, we elaborate on our proposed model, generate and test predictions concerning the expected relationships among them and discuss the implications of our findings.

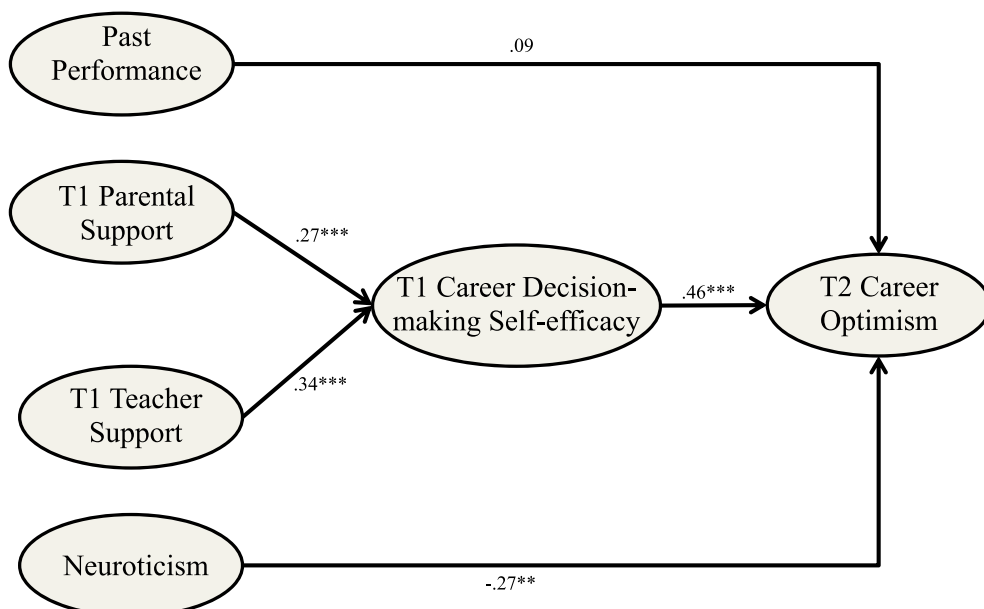


Fig. 1. Final structural mediated model with standardized regression coefficients. $N = 235$, $^{***}p < .001$, $^{**}p < .01$.

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