



## Developmental trajectories and reciprocal associations between career adaptability and vocational identity: A three-wave longitudinal study with adolescents



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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this longitudinal study was two-fold. First, we investigated patterns of stability and change in career adaptability and vocational identity in adolescents. Second, we examined reciprocal associations between career adaptability and vocational identity. In addressing both research aims we tested the moderating effects of gender, school-type, and age. Participants were 1151 (58.7% female) adolescents. They filled in measures that appraised career adaptabilities and vocational identity processes three times during a school year. Latent growth curve analyses highlighted slight longitudinal decreases in career concern, control, and confidence especially in boys, vocational school students, and middle-to-late adolescents. Also, over time boys and students attending vocational schools reported less in-depth occupational exploration, less identification with present vocational commitments, and more flexibility and self-doubt about their careers. Findings of cross-lagged path analyses highlighted reciprocal associations between career adaptability and vocational identity. Career adaptability positively predicted adolescents' ways of dealing with vocational exploration and commitment. Vocational commitment and reconsideration of commitment predicted career adaptabilities in time. These results indicate that career adaptability and vocational identity are dynamic and interrelated dimensions of adolescent career development. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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Adolescence is a critical time for vocational development, as educational and occupational paths become clearer and important career decisions are made (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). The manner in which adolescents approach career development tasks depends on their level of career adaptability and on the parameters that define their vocational identity (Savickas, 1985, 1997). It is of great importance to understand the dynamics of these dimensions through adolescence, as they scaffold personal agency and goal-setting, and contribute to positive youth development (Savickas, 2005; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Specifically, more research is needed to gain an in-depth understanding of how career adaptability and vocational identity evolve in time and how they are linked longitudinally. We approached these aspects through a three-wave longitudinal study conducted during one academic year. Additionally, we investigated whether age (i.e., early-to-middle adolescence versus middle-to-late adolescence), gender, and the type of school adolescents attended moderated these relations. In terms of school type, we considered two high-school educational tracks (Creed, Patton, & Hood, 2010): theoretical (i.e., university-bound schools that provide adolescents with general knowledge in preparing them for university studies) and vocational (i.e., work-bound schools that prepare adolescents for a specific occupation).

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## 1.1. Career adaptability

Career adaptability stands as a central component in adolescent vocational development. It is a psychosocial construct that encompasses personal readiness and resources for dealing with present and future career problems (Savickas, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012a). In this context, career adapt-abilities are general adaptive resources and strategies that people employ in the process of career construction while approaching critical situations (e.g., age-specific developmental tasks). The four adapt-abilities, also called the 4Cs of career adaptability, are: *concern* (i.e., one's future orientation, in terms of how much he/she values and becomes involved in preparing for tomorrow), *control* (i.e., the self-discipline, autonomy, and responsibility one employs when making vocational decisions), *curiosity* (i.e., an orientation toward exploring the match between self and the world of work), and *confidence* (i.e., trust in one's abilities and an anticipation of success when dealing with problems or overcoming obstacles). Career adaptability can be captured by these four dimensions (Savickas, 2005) and research underscored their positive impact on adolescents' careers. Youth with high levels in these abilities projected themselves more into their future, perceived fewer career barriers, and were more competent in translating their career intentions into behaviors (Soresi, Nota, & Ferrari, 2012). Also, the 4Cs mediated the relation between positive emotional dispositions and adolescent satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2014). Existing longitudinal studies (e.g., Creed, Muller, & Patton, 2003; Hirschi, 2009; Skorikov, 2007; Stringer, Kerpelman, & Skorikov, 2011) pointed out that career adaptability played a central role in facilitating educational and school-to-work transitions, in developing a sense of personal power over and satisfaction with one's life, and in achieving positive youth development.

Several factors can account for differences in career adaptability. A number of studies highlighted that girls scored higher than boys on career adaptability (Creed & Patton, 2003; Creed et al., 2010). Hence, we expected adolescent girls from our study to display higher levels of career adapt-abilities. Also, depending on the structure of the educational system for a specific culture, in predominantly vocational educational systems vocational school students displayed higher levels of career adaptability (e.g., Switzerland; Hirschi, 2009), while in more theoretically oriented ones theoretical school students displayed higher levels of career adaptability (e.g., Australia; Creed et al., 2010). Thus, as the Romanian high-school system has a strong theoretical focus (Ghinararu, Alexandru, Matei, & Pirciog, 2012), we expected theoretical school students to have an advantage over vocational school students in the level of career adaptability over time. This can be linked to the fact that students attending theoretical schools perceive and may also be given more opportunities for vocational development. Existing research (e.g., Skorikov, 2007; Stringer et al., 2011) indicated that older adolescents displayed higher levels of career adaptability, as they were gradually exposed to more complex career relevant activities. Therefore, we expected middle-to-late adolescents to display higher levels of career adaptability as the developmental task of choosing an occupational track is more salient in this age-group (Savickas, 2005). Namely, these students prepare for high-school graduation and may dwell more upon future choices. To conclude, in line with theoretical (Savickas, 1997, 2005) and empirical (Hirschi, 2009; Skorikov, 2007; Stringer et al., 2011) underpinnings on career adaptability, we expected changes in this construct over one academic year, with girls, theoretical school students, and middle-to-late adolescents displaying higher levels in the four career adapt-abilities.

**Hypothesis 1.** Adolescent career adaptability shows higher increases during one academic year for girls compared to boys (Hypothesis 1a), theoretical school students compared to vocational school students (Hypothesis 1b), and middle-to-late adolescents compared to early-to-middle adolescents (Hypothesis 1c).

## 1.2. Vocational identity

The vocational domain represents an important identity domain for adolescent global development, contributing to positive social adjustment and gradual integration in the job market (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Marcia's (1966) model of identity was applied to the vocational domain and several cross-sectional studies (e.g., Hirschi, 2011; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998; Vondracek, Schulenberg, Skorikov, Gillespie, & Wahlheim, 1995) focused on analyses of vocational identity statuses (e.g., achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, and diffusion). These studies linked vocational commitment and exploration to career indecision, vocational interests, and well-being. From a longitudinal perspective, Hirschi (2012) underscored that adolescents' life satisfaction increased when they progressed toward or maintained vocational identity commitments, whereas it decreased when they became involved in vocational exploration or experienced career crises. In the current study, we unpacked vocational identity dimensions into specific identity processes. Drawing on recent models of identity (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2012; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005), Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek and Weigold (2011) proposed and tested a model of vocational identity in adolescence, comprising three dimensions (i.e., commitment, exploration, and reconsideration of commitment), each defined by two processes. Commitment integrated *commitment making* (i.e., the degree of certainty about a career decision that has been taken) and *identification with commitment* (i.e., how the adolescent devotes himself/herself to a career decision that has been taken). Exploration incorporated *in-breadth exploration* (i.e., actions that help the adolescent learn about different career options) and *in-depth exploration* (i.e., activities that extend the understanding of a specific occupational choice). Reconsideration of commitment integrated *self-doubt* (i.e., the anxiety and uncertainty adolescents experience in the face of career decision-making) and *commitment flexibility* (i.e., openness to and readiness for future changes in occupational preferences and choices).

Empirical research (see Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011 for a review) brought forward that changes in vocational identity cannot be detected over short time-frames and that there is limited predictability in the individual pattern of changes for this identity domain.

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