



Career adaptability and career entrenchment



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ABSTRACT

Career adaptability constitutes a resource that can help employees to effectively manage career changes and challenges. The goal of this study was to investigate the relationship between the two higher-order constructs of career adaptability and career entrenchment (i.e., the perceived inability and/or unwillingness to pursue new career opportunities), as well as relationships among the dimensions of career adaptability and career entrenchment. We hypothesized a negative relationship between overall career adaptability and career entrenchment, and more differentiated associations among their dimensions. Data for this study came from 404 employees in Brazil. Results of structural equation modeling showed that overall career adaptability weakly negatively predicted overall career entrenchment (standardized effect = $-.13$), after controlling for age, gender, education, and job tenure. More differentiated findings emerged at the dimension level. Future research should examine the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the relationship between career adaptability and career entrenchment.

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1. Introduction

In times of increasingly diverse, fragmented, and global careers, the abilities to adapt and to navigate one's own development in the work and occupational context have become important concepts (Arthur, 1994; Biemann, Zacher, & Feldman, 2012; Raabe, Frese, & Beehr, 2007). *Career adaptability* constitutes a psychosocial resource that can help employees to effectively manage career changes and challenges, and thus facilitates employees' fit with their work environment (Goodman, 1994; Savickas, 1997). Research has shown that career adaptability is positively related to career success, job performance evaluations, and well-being (Guan et al., 2013; Hirschi, 2009; Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012; Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2013; Ohme & Zacher, 2015; Zacher, 2014a; Zacher & Griffin, 2015).

Recent research on career adaptability has been facilitated by the development of the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS), which is a measure to assess the higher-order construct of career adaptability and its four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). *Concern* involves being future oriented and anticipating new career tasks; *control* implicates taking responsibility for one's own development and work environment; *curiosity* entails the exploration of future career opportunities; finally, *confidence* means that employees believe that they can realize their career goals, solve problems, and overcome obstacles (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Career adaptability is conceptualized as a superordinate multidimensional construct, because the higher-order factor influences its first-order dimensions which, in turn, are measured in a reflective way using manifest indicators (Edwards, 2001). The goal of the current study was to contribute to the ongoing validation of the CAAS by examining the relationship between career adaptability and

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career entrenchment, which is also a higher-order, multidimensional, and career-related construct. We focus on the association between career entrenchment and career adaptability in this study because the possibility that employees' career adaptability is negatively related to their perceptions of career immobility has so far not received attention in the literature. In the following, we first define the construct of career entrenchment before developing our hypothesis on the relationship between overall career adaptability and career entrenchment, as well as hypotheses on more differentiated relationships among the dimensions of career adaptability and career entrenchment. We then report and discuss the methods and results of a study with 404 employees from Brazil that was designed to test our hypotheses.

2. Career entrenchment

Career entrenchment has been defined as employees' feelings of "immobility resulting from substantial economic and psychological investments in a career that make change difficult" (Carson, Carson, Phillips, & Roe, 1996, p. 274). The concept consists of three dimensions: perceived career investments, limited career alternatives, and emotional costs. *Career investments* involve employees' beliefs that, over time, they have invested substantial amounts of time, money, and effort (e.g., by participating in training) in their current careers, and that they would lose these accrued investments, or substantially reduce their worth, if they changed careers (Carson, Carson, & Bedeian, 1995). Employees may also feel that they risk losing accumulated benefits such as a high income and a certain status in their organization. Carson et al. (1995) defined *limited career alternatives* as employees' perceptions of the unavailability of new career opportunities, and *emotional costs* as the expected socio-emotional risks associated with the pursuit of a new career, such as the disruption of friendships with coworkers and loss of well-established professional contacts and networks (see also Carson & Carson, 1997).

Career entrenchment has been characterized as a form of "arrested career development" (Carson et al., 1996, p. 273) that may not only lead to negative consequences, but potentially also to positive outcomes. On the one hand, career entrenchment can lead to occupational strain and poor well-being, because entrenched employees may overlearn their occupation and feel bored on the job (Carson et al., 1995). Those who feel both entrenched and dissatisfied with their job become "entrapped" (Carson et al., 1996). On the other hand, Carson et al. (1995) suggested that many entrenched employees may be quite satisfied, involved in their jobs, and committed to their careers due to the extrinsic rewards they receive for remaining in their careers ("contented immobiles"; Carson et al., 1996). However, some entrenched employees may decide to proactively improve their situation by asking for and creating new challenges at work ("voice"), passively wait for the situation to improve ("loyalty"), focus on non-work activities ("neglect"), or – if the previous options do not improve their situation – they may eventually leave their stalled careers ("exit;" Carson & Carson, 1997).

Career entrenchment is conceptually related to the constructs of occupational commitment and occupational embeddedness. Employees with high levels of occupational commitment stay in their occupation because they want to (affective commitment), ought to (normative commitment), or need to (continuance commitment; Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). Continuance commitment further consists of two dimensions called *high personal sacrifice* and *few employment alternatives* (Allen & Meyer, 1996; McGee & Ford, 1987). Blau (2001a, 2001b) pointed out that the former of these dimensions is conceptually similar to the *career investments* and *emotional costs* dimensions of career entrenchment, whereas the latter overlaps with the career entrenchment dimension *limited career alternatives*. We decided to focus on career entrenchment instead of continuance commitment in this study, because the career entrenchment concept distinguishes between career investments and potential emotional costs of leaving a career and therefore allows for a more differentiated perspective on these career issues than continuance commitment (Bedeian, 2002), and can help to better understand behaviors related to career adaptability, such as managing changes and challenges.

Ng and Feldman (2007) defined *occupational embeddedness* as "the totality of forces (fit, links, and sacrifices) that keep people in their current occupations" (p. 336). Fit refers to the compatibility between employees' abilities and needs and their occupational demands and supplies at different points of the working lifespan (Zacher, Feldman, & Schulz, 2014). Links involve employees' relationships with other people in the occupation, and sacrifices refers to the losses employees would experience if they left their occupation (Ng & Feldman, 2007). Occupational embeddedness differs from career entrenchment in that it is restricted to factors residing within an occupation and does not involve employees' perceptions of career alternatives (Ng & Feldman, 2009). While perceptions of fit and links are unique to occupational embeddedness, the *sacrifices* dimension of occupational embeddedness is similar to the *career investments* and *emotional costs* dimensions of career entrenchment. We decided to include career entrenchment instead of occupational embeddedness in this study because we were interested in examining the association between career adaptability and another career-focused rather than an occupation-focused construct. In the following sections, we first explain why we expect overall career adaptability to be negatively related to overall career entrenchment, followed by a discussion of more differentiated links among the constructs and their dimensions.

3. Relationship between overall career adaptability and career entrenchment

We expect that the higher-order career adaptability construct is negatively related to overall career entrenchment for three reasons. First, employees with high levels of career adaptability should be less likely to feel entrenched in their careers, because their career adapt-abilities should enhance their general capability, willingness, and openness to change careers. Moreover, high levels of career adaptability should enable and motivate employees to make more risky career decisions that involve relinquishing investments and status benefits that have accumulated in their current careers over time (Brown, Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2012). In support of these assumptions, research has shown that career adaptability is positively related to openness to new experiences and proactivity (Rossier, Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori, & Dauwalder, 2012; Tolentino, Sedoglavich, Lu, Garcia, & Restubog, 2014b; Tolentino et al., 2014a;

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