

Self-esteem and proactive personality as predictors of future work self and career adaptability: An examination of mediating and moderating processes



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ABSTRACT

Basing on career construction theory and self-verification theory, current research examined the mediating and moderating models for the relations among self-esteem, proactive personality, career exploration, future work self and career adaptability. A two-wave survey study was conducted among Chinese university students ($N = 305$). The results showed that both self-esteem and proactive personality (measured at time 1) positively predicted future work self and career adaptability (measured at time 2), with these relationships mediated by career exploration (measured at time 1). In addition, the results further revealed that the positive effect of self-esteem on career exploration was stronger among students who had a higher level of proactive personality. In support of the hypothesized moderated mediation model, for individuals with a higher level of proactive personality, the indirect effects of self-esteem on future work self and career adaptability through career exploration were stronger. These findings carry implications for research on career construction theory and career counseling practices.

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As nowadays individuals' career patterns are becoming more and more boundaryless and non-linear, career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005, 2013) emphasizes two types of self-regulatory resources that facilitate individuals to solve problems and to improve person-environment fit during their career development. Career adaptivity, which refers to one's willingness to engage in the process of achieving person-environment integration, is proposed as a motivational force that guides individuals' career construction actions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career adaptivity has been operationalized as future work self, which refers to one's hopes and aspirations in relation to work (Guan et al., 2014; Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012). It has been found that future work self significantly predicted individuals' proactive career behaviors, job search self-efficacy and job search success (Guan et al., 2014; Strauss et al., 2012). In addition to adaptivity, individuals also need adaptive abilities to manage tasks in their career transitions. These abilities were indicated by the concept of career adaptability (Savickas, 1997; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). More and more research has demonstrated the positive effects of career adaptability on individuals' career-related outcomes (e.g. Guan et al., 2013; Pouyaud, Vignoli, Dosnon, & Lallemand, 2012; Rossier, Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori, & Dauwalder, 2012).

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Due to the importance of future work self and career adaptability in individuals' career development, researchers have started to work on both individual and contextual predictors of these two important self-regulatory resources. For example, it has been found that both self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) and proactive personality (Bateman & Crant, 1993) served as significant predictors of individuals' career adaptability (Öncel, 2014; Tolentino et al., 2014). However, not much work has been done on the underlying mechanisms of how individuals' personality affects future work self and career adaptability, as well as the additive or interactive effects of different personality variables on these outcome variables. Basing on a two-wave survey study, current study examined how self-esteem and proactive personality predict Chinese University students' future work self and career adaptability.

First, basing on career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) and self-verification theory (Swann, 1983), we proposed a mediation model in which self-esteem predicts career exploration, which in turn predicts future work self and career adaptability. Second, we also examined the role of proactive personality in this process. We argued that proactive personality and self-esteem represent different aspects of the self-concept: self-esteem reflects a positive self-regard whereas proactive personality reflects a behavioral orientation. Therefore proactive personality may add additive explanatory effect on career exploration and outcome variables. Third, we proposed that although a higher level of self-esteem can lead to more career exploration activities through inducing positive outcome expectations, it is also possible that a high level of self-esteem may decrease the engagement in career exploration through inducing illusory overconfidence. We proposed that the action orientation depicted by proactive personality (Bateman & Crant, 1993) may buffer the negative effect of self-esteem by directing individuals' attention to behavioral engagement. In other words, individuals with higher self-esteem and higher proactive personality will be more likely to engage in career exploration behaviors, which in turn will help individuals form more salient future work self and higher career adaptability. As a result, a moderated mediation model was proposed (See Fig. 1).

1. Self-esteem, future work self and career adaptability

Self-esteem refers to one's positive evaluation about himself/herself as a person (Harter, 1990; Rosenberg, 1965). Individuals high in self-esteem tend to see themselves as capable, significant and worthy, whereas those low in self-esteem often doubt their abilities and are suspicious about their self-worth. According to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983), individuals have a strong need for coherence such that they will engage in the activities that are congruent with their self-view. Individuals with high self-esteem are found to have high self-perceived competence, self-image and success expectancy (Miner, 1992). Accordingly, a high level of self-esteem may motivate individuals to set challenging career goals and engage in activities to achieve these goals (e.g. Crook, Healy, & O'Shea, 1984; Ellis & Taylor, 1983), as a way to verify their positive self-regard. Since career exploration is a key step in one's career construction process (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), we argue that individuals high in self-esteem are likely to get more involved in the career exploration activities, in order to achieve positive career goals (Patton, Bartrum, & Creed, 2004). Career exploration may in turn help individuals to develop relevant career-related identity and adaptability (Savickas, 2002, 2005).

As Stumpf, Colarelli, and Hartman (1983) indicated, career exploration consists of both self and environmental exploration. Through self-exploration, individuals make thorough examinations about their internal attributes and thus form a clear self-image in relation to work (Flum & Blustein, 2000; Stumpf et al., 1983). Through environmental exploration, individuals focus on work and occupational characteristics and identify the opportunities that fit their preferences (Neimeyer, 1988; Werbel, 2000). Previous research has demonstrated that career exploration serves as an important mediator that links one's personal growth initiative and coping strategies with vocational identity (Robitschek & Cook, 1999). In this study, we propose that self-esteem will positively predict career exploration, which will further lead to a more salient image of one's future work self (Strauss et al., 2012). On the other hand, as Savickas (1997) indicated, career adaptability consists of four dimensions: career concern (the consideration and preparation for future career opportunities), career control (the ability to exert influence on one's career development), career curiosity (the strength of exploring the self and outer environment), and career confidence (the positive belief into one's problem-solving skills). Defined as the process to collect self-related and occupational information (Stumpf et al., 1983), career exploration is conceptually related to career curiosity. Moreover, through looking into oneself and the environment, one could better plan for the future in relation to work and take control over their careers, which is evidenced by the positive relationship between career exploration and career-related outcomes such as interview

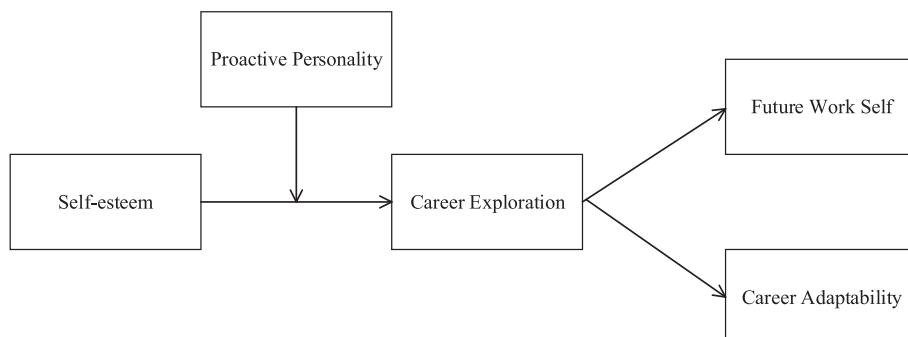


Fig. 1. The proposed moderated mediation model.

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