



Career-specific parental behaviors, career exploration and career adaptability: A three-wave investigation among Chinese undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

The current research examined the effects of career-specific parental behaviors (reported by parents at time 1) on Chinese university students' career exploration (reported by students at time 2) and career adaptability (reported by students at time 3). A survey study was conducted among Chinese university graduates ($N = 244$) and their parents ($N = 244$). The results supported a mediation model such that a high level of parental support and a low level of parental interference had beneficial effects on Chinese undergraduates' career exploration, which in turn positively predicted their career adaptability. Lack of parental career engagement had a direct negative effect on career adaptability. Significant interaction effects were also found among these three types of parental behaviors such that at a lower level of lack of parental career engagement, the positive effects of parental support, as well as the negative effects of interference on career exploration were stronger. The corresponding moderated mediation models were also supported. These findings carry implications for research on career construction theory and career counseling practices.

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1. Introduction

From a developmental perspective, most undergraduate students are in the stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), which allows for various exploratory activities to identify one's future career possibilities, and to develop relevant abilities to cope with diverse challenges in career development. Faced with many difficulties and uncertainties, undergraduates still need guidance from external sources, among which the interventions and suggestions provided by their parents cannot be easily substituted (Bryant, Zvonkovic, & Reynolds, 2006). Career-specific parental behaviors refer to the concrete actions parents use to guide the career development of their children (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009). Career-specific parental behaviors are related to the general aspects of parental practices, such as general parenting styles (Tracey, Lent, Brown, Soresi, & Nota, 2006) and attachment styles with children (Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, & Palladino, 1991); at the same time, this concept also captures parents' specific understandings and interventions for the career development of their children (Zhao, Lim, & Teo, 2012).

Dietrich and Kracke (2009) found that parental support (parents encourage youths to explore their career possibilities and provide advice whenever necessary), parental interference (parents intend to control their children's career preparation and career aspirations by imposing their own preferences), as well as the lack of parental career engagement (parents' inability or reluctance to get

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involved in their children's career development) serve as the basic elements of career-specific parental behaviors. Recent research has showed that these parental behaviors significantly predicted career exploration and career decision-making difficulties of adolescents, as well as the career self-efficacy of university students (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; Zhao et al., 2012). In spite of the progress, there still exist questions related to the roles of these parental practices in the career development of university students. First, previous research mainly relied on offspring's perceptions to measure career-specific parental behaviors (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; Zhao et al., 2012). Although the validity of this operationalization has been supported, there still exists the need to measure this construct from the perspective of parents, to further corroborate previous findings (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; Garcia, Restubog, Toledano, Tolentino, & Rafferty, 2012). Second, previous research mainly focused on the behavioral (career exploration) and social-cognitive (career decision-making difficulties and career self-efficacy) outcomes, but not much work has been done to examine how parental practices affect undergraduates' adaptive-abilities related to their career development.

The current research aims to address these gaps through the following ways. First, to better estimate the effects of these parental practices on undergraduates' career-related outcomes, we adopted parents' self-reports to measure career-specific parental behaviors, and examined their relations with students' self-reports of career-related outcomes. In addition, we measured the key variables at three time points, to reduce the potential common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Second, we also examined the relations between career-specific parental practices and Chinese undergraduates' career adaptability (Savickas, 1997, 2005, 2013). As career adaptability refers to the self-regulatory resources that help individuals to cope with the challenges and difficulties in their career transitions (Savickas, 1997), research into the antecedents of career adaptability will carry great implications in helping individuals to achieve positive career outcomes. To the best of our knowledge, there exists only one study that reveals a positive relationship between undergraduates' perception of parental support and their career adaptability (Tian & Fan, 2014). By using the three-factor framework of parental behaviors and a more direct method to measure these behaviors, the current research examined parental influence on undergraduates' career adaptability in a more comprehensive and rigorous way.

In addition, the current research also examined the dynamic relations among these variables by testing the mediating role of career exploration, as well as the interactive effects of different types of parental behaviors on outcome variables. Based on previous research (Bartley & Robitschek, 2000; Blustein, 1997; Jordaan, 1963; Stumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman, 1983), we propose that undergraduates' career exploration behavior will serve as the proximal predictor of their career adaptability, and mediate the effects of parental practices on career adaptability. From a self-determination perspective (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), we further propose that as these three types of parental behaviors are closely related to the need fulfillment of competence, autonomy and relatedness in undergraduates' career exploration, therefore career exploration will be positively predicted by parent support, but negatively predicted by parental interference and lack of parental career engagement. In addition, this research also examined the interactions among these three types of parental behaviors, to explore how the combination of different types of parental behaviors affects undergraduates' career exploration and adaptability.

2. Career exploration and career adaptability

According to career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005, 2013), career adaptability depicts the multiple psychological resources involved in the problem-solving process in one's career development, including career concern (the ability of considering future possibilities and preparing for these possibilities), career control (the ability of making deliberate decisions and taking conscientious actions), career curiosity (the strength of exploring various situations and roles) and career confidence (the positive beliefs on one's problem-solving skills across different situations). To develop these adaptive-abilities, individuals need to continuously gain insights of their own characteristics and the complexity of working environments through various personal experiences (Savickas, 2013). As career exploration refers to the activities that enable individuals to collect and analyze information that is relevant to their career development (Blustein, 1997; Jordaan, 1963; Stumpf et al., 1983), we argue that career exploration may serve as a proximal antecedent for individuals' career adaptability.

Career exploration includes self-exploration and environmental exploration (Stumpf et al., 1983). Through self-exploration, individuals can thoroughly examine their own interests, values, and experiences and thus form a clear image about who they are and how these internal attributes shape their future careers (Blustein, 1989; Flum & Blustein, 2000; Stumpf et al., 1983). Environmental exploration enables individuals to make more informed career decisions by collecting information on jobs, organizations and occupations (Blustein, 1992, 1997; Neimeyer, 1988; Super & Hall, 1978; Werbel, 2000). It has been established that both self-exploration and environment-exploration activities play important roles in helping individuals to identify suitable job opportunities, achieve better employment and cope with the difficulties and challenges in their career transitions (Werbel, 2000; Zikic & Klehe, 2006).

In this study, we propose that the continuing course of career exploration behaviors may contribute to the development of career adaptability. First of all, career exploration promotes the search for valuable information related to self-appraisal or adjustment to different jobs and occupations (Blustein, 1992, 1997; Super & Hall, 1978), which yields useful insights that advance a person to a gratifying career choice, therefore career exploration is likely to promote students' strength in exploring various situations and potential roles (*career curiosity*). As previous research has showed that career exploration correlates positively with future-oriented mental process, such as goal-directedness (Blustein, 1989), personal growth initiative (Robitschek & Cook, 1999) and the formation of ego identity (Blustein, Devenis, & Kidney, 1989), we thus propose that by collecting and processing relevant information, career exploration also motivates individuals to seriously consider their future career possibilities and prepare for these possibilities (*career concern*). In addition, previous research also suggest that the activities involved in career exploration also promote students' abilities of making deliberate decisions and taking conscientious actions (Blustein & Phillips, 1988), therefore career exploration is very likely to strengthen the abilities of *career control*. The engagement of these exploration activities can also promote the self-efficacious beliefs in their

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