



Proactive motivation and engagement in career behaviors: Investigating direct, mediated, and moderated effects



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ABSTRACT

Proactive career behaviors become increasingly important in today's career environment, but little is known about how and when motivational patterns affect individual differences. In a six-month longitudinal study among German university students (Study 1; $N = 289$) it was demonstrated that motivation in terms of "can do" (self-efficacy and context beliefs), "reason to" (autonomous career goals), and "energized to" (positive affect) significantly predicted career behaviors. Contrary to expectation, negative context beliefs had a positive effect when combined with other motivational states. Study 2 replicated and extended those results by investigating whether "can do" motivation mediates the effect of proactive personality and whether those effects are conditional upon the degree of career choice decidedness. We tested a moderated multiple mediation model with a unique sample of 134 German students, assessed three times, each interval being 6 weeks apart. The results showed that effects of proactivity were partially carried through higher self-efficacy beliefs but not context beliefs. Supporting a moderation model, indirect effects through self-efficacy beliefs were not present for students with very low decidedness.

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1. Introduction

Proactive engagement in career management behaviors is becoming increasingly important in today's career environment (Stickland, 1996). Given the increased self-directedness of contemporary careers, taking charge of one's own career development is pivotal for employees as well as university students in preparation for career transitions and for enhancing employability (Hall, 2002).

Empirical research supports the relation of proactive career behaviors, such as networking or career initiative, with objective and subjective career successes (Fuller & Marler, 2009), which makes it imperative to better understand why and when people are more or less likely to be actively engaged in career management. Existing research showed that a number of different aspects ranging from more distal variables, such as parental influences (Kracke, 1997) or basic personality traits (Reed, Bruch, & Haase, 2004) to more proximal constructs such as self-efficacy beliefs (Creed, Patton, & Prideaux, 2007) or possible future work selves (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012) predict proactive career behaviors. Recently, Parker, Bindl, and Strauss (2010) proposed that proactivity directly depends on different proactive motivation states. There is little empirical research, however, that addresses how proactive motivation affects career management behaviors when simultaneously considering a system of motivation, to what extent motivation mediates the effects of more distal variables, or under what conditions such effects occur.

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Based on the model forwarded by Parker et al. (2010), we conducted two independent short-term longitudinal studies to investigate (1) how “can do”, “reason to”, and “energized to” components of proactive motivation, viewed in conjunction as a motivational system, predict proactive career behaviors; (2) whether the effects of proactive personality on proactive career behaviors are mediated by “can do” motivation; and (3) to what extent the effects of “can do” motivation on proactive career behaviors are contingent upon the degree of career choice decidedness.

1.1. Proactive motivation as predictor of career behaviors

In line with Parker et al. (2010), we propose that inter-individual differences in the degree of engagement in proactive career behaviors can meaningfully be explained by a person's career-related motivation and that proactive motivation acts as the primary proximal predictor of proactive behaviors in terms of goal generation and goal striving. While individual differences in skills, biological functions, and contextual affordances have received a good deal of attention in the career development literature, individual differences in motivation have been relatively neglected. One of the key advantages of focusing on motivation is that it rejects generalized, trait-like conceptions of competence and effective functioning in favor of taking into account “particular contexts and value systems that specify what goals are ‘relevant,’ what means are ‘appropriate,’ and what developmental outcomes are ‘positive’” (Ford, 1992). Based on a qualitative review of the proactivity literature, Parker et al. proposed three distinct motivation states that are pivotal in explaining individual differences in proactive behavior: (1) “can do” motivation refers to expectancy such as self-efficacy perceptions, control perceptions, or perceived costs of action; (2) “reason to” motivation is concerned with the question of why individuals select or persist with particular proactive goals and is based on valence; and (3) “energized to” motivation refers to the role of affect in setting and striving for proactive goals.

While research investigated distinct motivational predictors, such as self-efficacy beliefs (Creed et al., 2007), perceived career barriers (Gushue, Clarke, Pantzer, & Scanlan, 2006), or degree of goal clarity (Rogers, Creed, & Ian Glendon, 2008) in relation to specific proactive career behaviors (e.g., career exploration), no available study investigated how a more comprehensive set of motivational components predicts proactive career behaviors in terms of their unique and combined effects. Moreover, while some aspects of motivation (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs) received a fair amount of attention, other important motivational components, such as context beliefs, affect, or nature of goals, have often been neglected in the empirical literature. In the following paragraphs, we review the literature regarding the three motivational components proposed by Parker et al. in relation to proactive career behaviors. We separated our presentation of “can do” motivation into self-efficacy and context beliefs (Ford, 1992) because they represent distinct components of “can do” motivation. While Ford (1992) refers them as capability beliefs and context beliefs, confusion will be avoided by employing the more commonly employed ‘self-efficacy’ beliefs instead of ‘capability beliefs’ in the remainder of this paper.

1.1.1. “Can do” motivation: Self-efficacy beliefs

Being proactive involves two kinds of prediction — one involves predicting events before they unfold and the second involves predicting how a course of proactive action will influence unfolding events. Changing a situation that may not yet exist toward a more favorable anticipated outcome involves a high degree of psychological risk due to the relative uncertainty of the unfolding events and how to change them before they occur. High confidence in one's predictions and capacities to effect change are, therefore, especially important (Parker et al., 2010). Research on the role of self-efficacy beliefs in career development is relatively well-documented, especially within the context of the social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002). Career self-efficacy beliefs are regarded as a pivotal aspect of SCCT, which is theoretically presumed to indirectly impact one's career choice and performance via career interests. Research suggests that higher self-efficacy is associated with greater involvement in environmental and self-exploratory activities (Blustein, 1989) and more personal initiative (Frese, Garst, & Fay, 2007). A meta-analytic study by Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz (2001) showed that job-search self-efficacy is positively related to proactive job search. In a study with young adults, Nurmi, Salmela-Aro, and Koivist (2002) found that those with greater self-efficacy toward achieving personal goals were more likely to succeed in dealing with the transition from school to work. In sum, theoretical reasoning and empirical findings suggest that greater self-efficacy concerning goal achievement enhances ones' engagement in behaviors that facilitate goal achievement.

Hypothesis 1. Career self-efficacy beliefs are related to increased engagement in proactive career behaviors.

1.1.2. “Can do” motivation: Context beliefs

People not only make appraisals regarding their own abilities but also regarding the circumstances that could possibly help or hinder their goal pursuit. For personal initiative it is important that people not only feel competent regarding their capabilities but also believe that their behavior will lead to the desired outcome and that one has some degree of control in the situation (Fay & Frese, 2001; Parker et al., 2010). Researchers used different labels to describe these kinds of beliefs about the context such as barriers (i.e., negative context beliefs; e.g., Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996) or contextual supports (i.e., positive context beliefs; e.g., Kenny et al., 2007), but they consistently suggested that the context plays an important role in career development above and beyond self-efficacy beliefs. Initial empirical findings support the theoretical arguments and showed that perceived career barriers among adolescents are related to less career exploration (Gushue et al., 2006).

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