



# The role of optimism and engagement coping in college adaptation: A career construction model



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## ABSTRACT

From the perspective of the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005, 2013), adaptation is fostered by adapt-ability resources via the process of adapting. Using this model, the current research tested hypotheses representing the conceptual formulation that academic and psychological adjustments (i.e., adaptation) are associated with optimism (i.e., an adapt-ability resource) via engagement coping (i.e., adapting). These hypotheses were tested in a short-term multiwave study with a sample of incoming college undergraduates ( $N = 236$ ). The resultant data were largely consistent with the study's hypotheses. In structural equation analyses optimism was shown to be a direct predictor of the greater use of engagement coping, and better psychological adaptation to college transition. Further, empirical tests of mediation revealed that the relationships of optimism with academic and psychological adaptation were mediated by engagement coping.

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## 1. Introduction

Adjustment to the first year of college challenges students because of a relatively lower level of academic structure and greater academic demands (Credé & Niehorster, 2012), increased time pressure (Park & Adler, 2003), and engagement in new relationships and social activities (Ross, Nielbling, & Heckert, 1999). Failing to manage these stressors may result in diminished academic self-concept (Jackson, 2003), academic failure, distress, and attrition (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). In this paper, we address the role of optimism in adaptation to college, with a focus on factors that may mediate its potentially positive association with adaptation.

We view adaptation to college from the conceptual, integrative framework of the career construction theory (CCT) and its dimension of *career adaptability* (Savickas, 2005, 2013). Career adaptability is defined as “an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and imminent vocational tasks, occupational transitions, and personal traumas” (Savickas, 2005, p. 51). According to CCT, career decision making, engagement, and satisfaction are influenced by a person's career adaptability. In this paper we report on research into career adaptability's contribution to students' transition to college life.

### 1.1. Career adaptability and concern

Career adaptability comprises four global dimensions and organizes them into a structural model. These dimensions represent general adaptability resources and strategies that individuals use to construct their careers as they cope with developmental tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas. At the highest and most abstract level the four dimensions are called concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas, 2013). In this study, we chose to concentrate specifically on the concern dimension because it has traditionally been viewed as the fundamental dimension. Elements included in concern have a long-history in vocational psychology under various names such as future time perspective, involvement, awareness, optimism, and planfulness. In more recent research,

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concern has been operationally-defined with a short six item scale that spans these elements (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012a,b). However, for the present study we decided to operationally define career concern simply as optimism. Savickas, Silling, and Schwartz (1984) have done this repeatedly in prior research using a scale designed to measure how optimistically individuals anticipate the future, named the Achievability of Future Goals Scales (Heimberg, 1961). Accordingly, in this paper we posit hypotheses and report on research into the direct and indirect relationships of optimism – measured by a newer and better scale – with both academic and psychological adaptation to the college transition in a sample of Australian freshmen.

## 1.2. Optimism and adaptation

Students who lack career concern, as optimism, should evince apathy, a lack of planning, and engagement in college life. Conversely, those students who demonstrate career concern, as optimism, should be aware of and engaged in the process of making successful occupational transitions. This should be reflected in students' academic and psychological adaptation.

### 1.2.1. Academic adaptation

We conceptualize academic adaptation as attention to and organization of study activities (Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010). Optimism disposes an active approach toward the achievement of goals across multiple contexts (e.g., Geers, Wellman, & Lassiter, 2009; Solberg Nes, Segerstrom, & Sephton, 2005), including adjusting to college (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002) and deriving satisfaction from their studies (McIlveen, Beccaria, & Burton, 2013). To the extent that optimism reflects generalized favorable outcome expectancies (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010), it may be expected to influence engagement and sustained effort toward successful organization and attention to academic work.

**Hypothesis 1.** Optimism associates positively and directly with academic adaptation to the college transition.

### 1.2.2. Psychological adaptation

Psychological adaptation is conceptualized as affective–emotional and cognitive–evaluative well-being (Lent, 2004). Aspinwall and Taylor (1992) found that higher levels of optimism predicted higher psychological well-being and lower stress by the semester's end. Furthermore, Brissette et al. (2002) reported that students higher in dispositional optimism reported smaller increases in levels of stress and depression during the first semester than their low optimism counterparts. These results have been attributed, at least in part, to (a) favorable expectancies for behavioral discrepancy reduction, thereby minimizing defeat-related negative affect, and (b) underlying attentional biases for positive stimuli (Carver et al., 2010; Isaacowitz, 2005).

**Hypothesis 2.** Optimism associates directly and positively with greater psychological adaptation to the college transition.

## 1.3. Mediation pathways between optimism and college adaptation

Adapting entails active attempts to manage new career scenarios and cope with occupational transitions, effectively by deploying adaptability resources. Therefore, one pathway through which optimism may be associated with adaptation to the college transition is via engagement coping. In the terminology of CCT, *adaptation* is fostered by an *adapt-ability* resource via the process of *adapting*; in other words: academic and psychological adjustments are affected by optimism via engagement coping.

### 1.3.1. Engagement coping

There are modest-to-moderate positive associations between optimism and engagement coping in samples of first-year college students (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Brissette et al., 2002). Additionally, in a recent meta-analytic review, Solberg Nes and Segerstrom (2006) obtained a modest weighted mean association between optimism and broad engagement coping ( $r = .15$ ). According to Solberg Nes and Segestrom, optimism may be a source of the disjunction between approach and avoidance behaviors, which resembles engagement and disengagement strategies. It may be that optimism promotes greater use of primary control engagement strategies because generalized positive expectancies for eventual success lead to greater engagement and increased effort to overcome adversity (Carver et al., 2010; Solberg Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). It may also be that optimists are more likely to use secondary control engagement strategies, such as cognitive restructuring, because they tend to frame even unfavorable events in a positive light (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). This is consistent with the dynamic interaction between vocational personality and career adaptability suggested by Savickas (2005).

**Hypothesis 3.** Optimism associates directly and positively with the use of engagement coping.

The greater use of engagement coping may, in turn, promote better academic and psychosocial adaptation to the college transition. Although engagement coping has been consistently linked with better psychological adaptation to stressful educational transitions (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Brissette et al., 2002), little attention has been paid to its role in academic adaptation. Engagement coping may reflect, in part, increased cognitive and behavioral efforts to control, change, resolve and adapt to stressors emerging from generalized expectancies for favorable adaptational outcomes (Carver et al., 2010; Scheier et al., 1986). Furthermore, specific secondary-control engagement strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, may protect students from the pathogenic effects of acute transition stressors by modulating psychobiological responses to stressors initially appraised as threatening (Taylor & Stanton, 2007). These secondary-control

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