

Abstract

Introduction

Career self-doubt — the pervasive uncertainty and questioning about one's vocational commitment — is a distinct dimension of vocational identity development. While prior evidence has associated self-doubt with indecision and diminished commitment, there is limited longitudinal evidence regarding this phenomenon, specifically when it comes to the influence of identity-based doubt on adaptive functioning as students transition from education to work, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Objectives

This study examined whether final year tertiary students' career self-doubt predicts their career adaptability a year after graduation and whether general self-efficacy mediates this longitudinal relationship.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded in vocational identity theory (Porfeli et al., 2011), career self-doubt is conceptualized as an identity instability that may constrain the development of adaptive career resources. Career adaptability—comprising concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012)—is viewed as a key psychosocial resource for navigating career transitions. Persistent self-doubt may undermine individuals' general coping efficacy (Schwarzer, 1993; Zhang & Schwarzer, 1995), thereby weakening their capacity to mobilize adaptive resources. This study also responds to calls for greater understanding of how adaptability can be supported during transitional periods (Koen et al., 2012).

Method

A three-wave longitudinal design was conducted with tertiary students in Hong Kong. At Wave 1 (2019), 578 students provided data on career self-doubt. Follow-up surveys were administered in 2020 (Wave2) and early 2021 (Wave 3) upon graduation, achieving a longitudinal sample of 229 participants responding at all three Waves. Mediation analyses were conducted on 213 participants with complete data across all study variables. Independent-samples t-tests indicated no significant baseline differences in career self-doubt between participants retained at Wave 3 and those who dropped out, suggesting minimal evidence of systematic attrition bias. Mediation was tested using PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

Results

Career self-doubt at Wave 1 was found significantly predicted lower general self-efficacy at Wave 2, which in turn significantly predicted lower career adaptability at Wave 3. The bootstrapped indirect effect was significant ($b = -0.29$, 95% CI $[-0.53, -0.07]$), indicating partial mediation. The direct effect of career self-doubt on adaptability remained significant, suggesting that identity-based doubt exerted both direct and indirect longitudinal influences. Approximately 22% of the total effect was

transmitted indirectly through reduced self-efficacy. The overall model explained 28.36% of the variance in career adaptability.

Conclusion

This study provides longitudinal evidence that career self-doubt constrains adaptive career development, which is partly through diminished coping efficacy. By identifying a temporal psychological mechanism linking career self-doubt to later adaptability, the study extended career self-doubt research in a non-Western context. It also informs educational and vocational guidance interventions aimed at strengthening identity clarity and general coping confidence during the transition to work.

(439 words)

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