

**Career Adapt-Abilities: A Model and Measures**

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## ***Career Adapt-Abilities: A Model and Measure***

Career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) conceptualizes human development as driven by adaptation to a social environment with the goal of person-environment integration. The theory takes a contextual and cultural perspective on social adaptation and niche-making. For human beings, adaptation to social life implicates all core and peripheral roles. As they design their lives (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck, & van Vianen, 2009), people must adapt to expectations that they work, play, and develop relationships. The career construction model of adaptation concentrates on only the work role in that it addresses social expectations that individuals prepare for, enter, and participate in the work role and subsequently deal with career transitions between occupational positions. From this perspective, an occupation is a mechanism of social integration or connection, one that offers a strategy for sustaining oneself in society.

### **Adapt**

To adapt comes from the Latin meaning to fit or to join. Over time, subtle distinctions have been made using the root word adapt-- including adaptivity, adaptability, adapting, and adaptation. In career construction theory (2005), these words denote a sequence ranging across adaptive readiness, adaptability resources, adapting responses, and adaptation results. People are more or less prepared to change, differ in their resources to manage change, demonstrate more or less change when change is needed, and as a result become more or less integrated into life roles over time. Given the ever-changing nature of individuals and their contexts, a person's adaptivity, adaptability, adapting, and adaptation are in varying states of activation with relative changes in person-environment harmony being the cause and consequence of activation.

### **Adaptation**

Viewing career construction as a series of attempts to implement a self-concept in work roles concentrates attention on adaptation to a series of transitions from school to work, from job to job, and from occupation to occupation. People construct careers by using adaptive strategies that implement their personalities in work roles. This adaptation is motivated and guided by the goal of bringing inner needs and outer opportunities into harmony, with the harmonics of a good fit amplifying in present activity the individual's past preoccupations and current aspirations. Adaptation, or goodness of fit, is indicated by success, satisfaction, and development.

## **Adapting**

Adaptation is the consequence of adapting, that is, performing adaptive behaviors that address changing conditions (Ployhart & Bliese, 2006). Career adapting involves mastering vocational development tasks, coping with occupational transitions, and adjusting to work traumas and contingencies. Career construction theory views adapting to these tasks, transitions, and traumas as fostered principally by five sets of behaviors, each named for their adaptive functions: orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. These constructive activities form a cycle of adaptive performance that is periodically repeated as the individual must fit into a changing context. As each call for adaptation approaches, individuals can adapt more effectively if they meet changing conditions with growing awareness and information-seeking followed by informed decision making, trial behaviors leading to a stable commitment projected forward for a certain time period, active role management, and eventually forward-looking disengagement. For example, an employee begins a new job with the challenge of adapting to the new work role, including tackling tasks like exploration of the requirements, routines, and rewards of that role. Then she becomes established in the role, manages the role for a certain time period, and eventually disengages from it either voluntarily when further growth readies her to change jobs or involuntarily when organizational changes displace her.

## **Adaptivity**

In career construction theory, adaptivity is the personality trait of flexibility or willingness to change. The willingness to meet career disequilibrium or transition with fitting responses denotes adaptiveness. The threshold to initiate the interpersonal and intrapersonal processes that guide goal-directed activity is reached when a person can no longer assimilate the changes and persevere in routine activities. At that point, the individual needs to accommodate to the disequilibrium by changing self, context, or both. The required accommodations typically prompt feelings of distress fueling motivation and bolstering the willingness to adapt.

Individuals differ in their willingness or readiness to affect change. Career construction theory views adaptivity or willingness to adapt as an increasingly stable and durable trait or basic tendency that becomes situated at the core of the individual. Adaptiveness is indicated by celerity in the Theory of Work Adjustment, meaning the quickness with which a person responds to disequilibrium (Cheung, 1975; Dawis, 1996). From the perspective of the Five-Factor Model of personality, adaptiveness appears to be a compound trait composed of facets from four of the

five dimensions. We hypothesize that career adaptivity may be indicated by openness and extroversion (positive) and conscientiousness and agreeableness (negative). We plan to use the International Personality Item Pool (Goldberg, 1999) to construct a measure of career adaptivity. Regardless of how it is operationally defined, the psychological trait of adaptiveness by itself is insufficient to support adaptive behaviors. The individual who is willing to engage in adapting behaviors must bring some resources to bear on changing the situation. Given the goal of adapting to some task, transition, or trauma, there is a need for self-regulation resources.

### **Adaptability**

Career adaptability is a psychosocial construct that denotes an individual's resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, traumas in their occupational roles that, to some degree large or small, alter their social integration (Savickas, 1997). Career adaptability resources are the self-regulation strengths or capacities that a person may draw upon to solve the unfamiliar, complex, and ill-defined problems presented by developmental vocational tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas. These resources are not at the core of the individual, they reside at the intersection of person-in-environment. Thus adapt-abilities are psycho-social constructs. We agree with Ford's (1994) living systems model in considering adapt-abilities as transactional competencies.

We view adapt-ability resources as human capital, defined as accumulated competencies and knowledge gained through education and experience (Sullivan & Sheffrin, 2003). Human capital refers to what the person knows. A recent formulation called "psychological capital" or psychcap is even closer to our view of adaptability. Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2007) defined psychcap as "an individual's positive psychological state of development that is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success" (p. 3).

Adaptability as psychosocial resources or transactional competencies is more changeable than traits. Adapt-abilities develop through interactions between the inner and outer worlds of the person. They relate strongly to specific roles and contextual contingencies. This means that culture and context place boundary conditions around adaptability. Countries vary in the degree

to which they prompt the formation of adaptability because they provide different opportunities and imperatives to develop and express psychosocial resources and transactional competencies.

In career construction theory, adaptability resources help to form the strategies that individuals use to direct their adaptive behaviors. They shape a characteristic style of adapting. Thus the adaptability resources themselves shape self-extension into the social environment because they condition the actual adapting behaviors that constitute the functions of orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. In sum, career adaptability resources should be viewed as self-regulatory, psychosocial competencies that shape adaptive strategies and actions aimed at achieving adaptation goals.

### **Interplay among Adaptiveness, Adaptability, Adapting, and Adaptation**

Higher levels of adaptation (outcome) are expected for those who are willing (adaptive) and able (adaptability) to perform behaviors that address changing conditions (adapting). An analogy to airline travel may help readers keep in mind the distinctions between readiness, resources, responses, and results. In preparing for departure, flight attendants ask passengers seated in an exit row whether they are “willing and able” to assist in an emergency. This assistance, should it be needed, requires performance of actions that fit the situation. Passengers are asked about willingness and ability because action in an emergency requires both. Some people may be willing yet unable while other people may be unwilling yet able. In the language of career construction theory, the attendant is asking the passengers whether they have the willingness and resources that may be needed to act in an emergency. Career construction theory views “willing and able” as “adaptivity and adaptability” or as “readiness and resources.”

To continue the analogy, the airplane emergency might require performance of some life-saving actions. Those that perceive themselves as willing and able may or may not perform the tasks needed to save lives should the situation present itself. Injury and fear in the moment, may overwhelm one’s will and abilities. This adapting or “doing” involves the behaviors that function to accomplish orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. The adapting, in turn, leads to some outcome or adaptation, which may be judged by injury or death. In career construction, the outcome is not usually life or death, rather it is goodness of fit or harmony as indicated by development, satisfaction, success, and stability.

### **Four Adapt-Ability Resources**

Self-regulation is based on multiple subsystems and not performed by a single structure. A configuration of resources serve development. Accordingly, career construction theory represents career adaptability resources as an aggregate construct. We presume that resources reflect adaptability, which is therefore a composite of more durable psychological and more labile psychosocial aspects. Furthermore, career adaptability resources are modeled as multi-dimensional and hierarchical. At the second-order level of the hierarchy, the multiple dimensions of the first-order level combine to become a global indicator of adaptability. The lower level consists of a multidimensional matrix of specific attitudes, beliefs, and competencies – the ABCs of career construction-- which shape the actual problem-solving strategies and coping behaviors (i.e., adapting) that individuals use to synthesize their vocational self-concepts with work roles. According to career construction theory's model of self-regulation relative to social and developmental tasks, the ABCs in the matrix are grouped into four dimensions of career adaptability resources called adapt-abilities: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Together, these four syndromes constitute career adaptability resources.

The four adapt-ability syndromes, for short the 4Cs, support self-regulation strategies. Concern about the future helps individuals look ahead and prepare for what might come next. Control enables individuals to become responsible for shaping themselves and their environments to meet what comes next by using self-discipline, effort, and persistence. Possible selves and alternative scenarios that they might shape are explored when curiosity prompts a person to think about self in various situations and roles. These exploration experiences and information-seeking activities produce aspirations and build confidence that the person can actualize choices to implement their life design. Thus when vocational tasks, occupational transitions, or work traumas occur, the adaptable individual is conceptualized as (a) becoming concerned about the vocational future, (b) taking control of trying to prepare for one's vocational future, (c) displaying curiosity by exploring possible selves and future scenarios, and (d) strengthening the confidence to pursue one's aspirations. Increasing a client's career adaptability resources or career adapt-abilities is a central goal in career education and counseling.