

Career Adaptability: Psychological Readiness and Psychosocial Resources

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Career construction theory 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. 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. Adaptability, adapting, and adaptation are considered to represent a spectrum ranging from readiness to response to result. People are more or less prepared for change, demonstrate more or less change when one is needed, and as a result of both are more or less integrated into life roles. Given the ever changing nature of the person and their contexts, a person's adaptability, adapting, and adaptation are in constantly changing degrees 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 focuses 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 brings 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 development, success, satisfaction, congruency, and harmony.

### *Adapting*

Adaptation is the consequence of adapting, that is, performing adaptive behaviors that address changing conditions (Ployhart & Bliese, 2006). Career adapting involves navigating vocational development tasks, coping with occupational transitions, and adjusting to work traumas and contingencies. Career construction theory views adapting to these tasks, transitions, 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 self to a changing context. As each call for adaptation approaches, individuals can adapt more effectively if they meet the change with growing awareness, 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 make her position redundant.

### *Adaptability*

Adaptability is distinct from adapting (doing) and adaptation (transient steady state or outcome). Career adaptability is a psychosocial construct that denotes an individual's readiness and 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, 2005). An analogy to airline travel may help readers keep in mind the distinction between readiness and resources. In preparing for departure, flight attendants ask passengers seated in an exit row seat whether they are “willing and able” to assist in an emergency. This assistance, should it be needed, requires adaptive performance. Passengers are asked about both willingness and ability because action in an emergency requires both. Some people may be willing yet unable while others may be unwilling yet able. In the language of career adaptability, the attendant is asking the passengers whether they have the readiness and resources that may be needed to act in an emergency. Career construction theory views “willing and able” as “readiness and resources.” The “doing” involves the behaviors that function to accomplish orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. To continue the analogy, the airplane emergency will require some life-saving action, some adaptation, which may be judged by injury or death. In career construction it is not safety that is judged, rather it is goodness of fit or harmony as indicated by development, satisfaction, success, and stability.

### Readiness

The motivation and willingness to meet career disequilibrium or transition with adaptive responses denotes readiness. 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, they need to accommodate to the disequilibrium. The required accommodations typically prompt feelings of distress fueling the motivation and bolstering the willingness to adapt.

Individuals differ in their readiness to affect change. Career construction theory views readiness to adapt as an increasingly stable and durable trait or basic tendency that becomes

situated at the core of the individual. Readiness to adapt is indicated by celerity in the Theory of Work Adjustment, meaning the quickness with which a person responds to disequilibrium (Cheung, 1975; Dawis, 1996). In testing the career construction model of adaptability, we are defining this individual-difference trait-like variable with multiple operational indicators, including the *California Psychological Inventory*, the *Proactive Personality Scale*, the *Cognitive Flexibility Inventory*, and Big Five personality items. The *California Psychological Inventory* (Gough, 1996) flexibility scale measures the degree of adaptability of a person's thinking and social behavior. The *Proactive Personality Scale* (Bateman & Crane, 1993) measures propensity to take action to improve the work environment or find a new one. The *Cognitive Flexibility Inventory* (Dennis & Vander Wall, 2010) measures the tendency to see difficult situations as controllable and to perceive alternatives. From the perspective of the Five-Factor Model of personality, the readiness component of adaptability appears to be a compound trait composed of facets from four of the five dimensions. We hypothesize that career adaptability readiness 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 adaptability readiness. Regardless of how it is operationally defined, readiness to adapt by itself is insufficient to support adaptive behaviors. The individual ready 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.

### Resources

Career adaptability resources are the self-regulation 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 they are psychosocial. In Ford's (1994) living systems model, adaptabilities are considered to be transactional competencies. These psychosocial resources or transactional competencies are more changeable than traits, more specific to roles and contingencies, and develop through interactions between the inner and outer worlds of the person. In career construction theory, adaptability resources help to form the strategies that individuals use to direct their adaptive behaviors, that is, they shape a characteristic style of adapting and are, therefore, what people need to transact between the inner and the outer worlds. So, 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.

#### *Four Adapt-Ability Resources*

Self-regulation is based on multiple subsystems and not performed by a single structure. A matrix of resources serve development. Accordingly, career construction theory represents career adaptability resources as an aggregate construct. We presume that resources and readiness reflect adaptability, which is therefore a composite of more durable psychological and more labile psychosocial aspects.

Given that career adaptability resources is modeled as multi-dimensional, so what are the dimensions in the matrix of resources that form career adaptability? Career construction theory's model of self-regulation relative to social and developmental tasks privileges a set 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. The ABCs 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 are named concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. *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.

#### *Measurement*

An international team of vocational psychologists is now attempting to craft an operational definition for the linguistic conception of career resources or adapt-abilities. The measure has four scales, one each of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Work on the measure of adapt-ability resources is proceeding. This symposium presents the initial results of the collaborative research project. The symposiasts report their work in formulating a *Career*

*Adapt-Abilities Inventory*. Today's session concentrates on reporting inventory construction, the initial psychometric evaluation, and construct validity.

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