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Article

Promoting Employees' Affective Well-Being: Comparing the Impact of Career Success Criteria Clarity and Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

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Abstract: Based on social cognitive career theory, this study examined career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy as mediators in the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being. Data were collected from 475 emerging adults in their early career stages in China. The results showed that both career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy mediated the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being. Career decision-making self-efficacy exhibited a stronger mediating effect on this relationship than career success criteria clarity. These findings reveal some important mechanisms underlying the role of career exploration in generating affective well-being and contribute to the social cognitive career theory model. Implications both for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: Affective well-being; career success criteria clarity; career decision-making self-efficacy; career exploration

1 Introduction

It is well known that negative affect can cause all kinds of problems for both individuals and society [1]. Evidence shows that anxiety, sadness and anger may lead to susceptibilities to stress-related physical disorders [2], unipolar depression [3], loss of work productivity [4], heart disease [5], some cancers [6], and even suicide [7]. Considering the severe suffering and loss, it is crucial to help individuals increase affective well-being to regulate negative emotions. Buffer effect of positive affect can help them relieve stress and increase their ability to cope with those challenges by incrementing coping resources [8] such as physical, intellectual, or social resources [9,10] as well as physiological toughness [11].

Besides, effective well-being is a prerequisite for emerging adults to successfully cope with school-to-work transition and career transitions [12]. How to gain affective well-being through career development is becoming an interest of researchers and practitioners. It is commonly recognized for researchers that affective well-being and a variety of favourable circumstances or characteristics have mutual causality [13]. However, the approaches to acquire affective well-being received relatively scant attention. Therefore, it is necessary to delve into the mechanism in which employees obtain affective well-being.

In the current boundaryless career world, employees play an increasingly active role in career development and move voluntarily across organizational boundaries for better employability and career success [14]. Individuals pursue jobs that are meaningful to them personally and assess career success more subjectively [15]. Whether they experience a positive or negative effect largely depends on their career choices which are affected by career-related cognitions. Byars [16] identified dynamic transaction between vocational behaviour, cognition, affect and environment. Traditional career counselling techniques also emphasize the importance of cognitions and the use of information in emotion processing [17]. Social cognitive career theory holds the view that career decision-making self-efficacy is a crucial cognitive

variable that influences career outcomes [18]. It influences one's interpretation and evaluation of career-related events as benign or upsetting, further arouse positive or negative emotions and previous studies indicate that feelings of competence are associated with affective well-being [19].

Apart from that, feelings of effect or emotions require "cognitive appraisals or meaning assessments" (p. 121) [20]. Career success criteria, representing one's attitude, cognition, and values about career success, consist of three dimensions: fulfilment of intrinsic psychological needs, the balance between work and non-work lives, and extrinsic rewards [21]. With clear career success criteria, individuals have a well-developed cognition both of themselves and their vocational goals, and they could be motivated to shoulder more responsibility and achieve improved performance, in turn leading to affective well-being [22]. Therefore, as essential cognitive components, career decision-making self-efficacy and career success criteria clarity may influence the generation of affective well-being.

Flum et al. [23] claimed that "career exploration provided cognition and affective building blocks for self-construction" (p. 382). With lifelong and adaptive function, career exploration equips individuals with the relevant information and knowledge to deal with occupational changes [24,25]. They are more capable to pursue meaningful careers at the personal level and gain affective well-being. Consistently, we suppose that career exploration behaviours will lead to a high level of career decision-making self-efficacy and career success criteria clarity, which further affects affective well-being.

This research contributes to the literature on effective well-being in several ways. First, this study attempts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how career exploration affects affective well-being by constructing an integrated conceptual framework. It will simultaneously examine the mediating roles of career decision-making self-efficacy and career success criteria clarity in the career development process to reveal the underlying mechanism between career exploration and affective well-being, improving the understanding of how these antecedents affect the generation of affective well-being. Moreover, by comparing the mediating effect of career decision-making self-efficacy and career success criteria clarity, this research will offer practical implications for both career educators and consultants and enrich the research on social cognitive career theory.

2 Hypotheses Development

2.1 The Relationship between Career Exploration and Affective Well-Being

Career exploration is a core construct in theories and models of career development [26,27]. It is defined as "purposive behaviour and cognitions that afford access to information about occupations, jobs, organizations that were not previously in the stimulus field" (p. 192) [27]. Career exploration contains self-exploration and environmental exploration. When conducting self-exploration, individuals explore their internal attributes such as values, personality, vocational interests. Exploration of relevant environment includes opportunities and challenges from social contacts, work contexts, labour market or social reality [28]. For emerging adults in the career development process, career exploration is traditionally considered as an indispensable and essential stage to make an overall career plan, manage the swift changes in the labour market and society, deal with transitions in life, and predict future career success [29-31].

When exploring their career paths, individuals could acquire information regarding their personal attributes and abilities as well as the relevant environment, further motivating them to set challenging career goals [32]. Moreover, individuals can receive effective feedback because career exploration can foster people's emotional feelings towards those pieces of information [23]. Therefore, they will have a clearer goal of future career path and become inspired and fullhearted. On the basis of social cognitive career theory, people who engage themselves in goal-directed behaviours will take part in valued activities. This may encourage them to build stronger social ties and obtain social support, and to see those activities as meaningful and interesting, thus stimulating positive effect and promoting affective well-being [33]. For example, through career exploration, people may find that they are enthusiastic to help others and hold internships in nongovernmental organizations as a social worker, getting together with a group of like-minded people and being fulfilled and contented. Besides, previous studies found that simply having goals

or having valued goals could be positively related to well-being [19,33]. Hence, these ideas lead to the following hypothesis:

H1: CE is positively related to affective well-being.

2.2 The Mediation Impact of Career Success Criteria Clarity

Career success criteria refer to one's attitude, cognition, and values about career success, including three dimensions: fulfilment of intrinsic psychological needs, the balance between work and non-work lives, and extrinsic rewards [21]. Career success criteria clarity reflects individuals' self-construction and self-evaluation about their career success. This clarity develops over time as individuals think about goals and aspirations for their careers, observe role models, and consider what they value the most in their career lives. According to Judge and colleagues [34], career exploration is a crucial source of core self-evaluation that reflects one's self-efficacy, which in turn lead to positive employment outcomes. Flum et al. [23] emphasized that exploration provides cognitive building blocks for self-construction during career development. Zikic et al. [30] also claimed that career exploration leads to positive career outcomes by shaping the way in which an individual thinks about himself/herself and further influences his/her self-concept.

Some scholars believe that one way to achieve effective well-being is to strive for career success [35]. However, both practical and academic evidence shows the complexity of the relationship between career success and affective well-being. For one thing, high income and high status with power may increase personal positive feelings. For another, time constraints, stress and other costs may cause negative emotions. The famous paradox of happiness stems from the discussion of the relationship between income and well-being [36]. Apart from inconsistent results, most scholars focus on the relationship between career outcomes and affective well-being, neglecting the influence of vocational cognition and values on happiness. Career success criteria not only denote ultimate career values and goals that individuals pursue but also reflect the values and goals of one's own view of life. For example, the work-life balance dimension of career success criteria expresses the goal of acquiring a balance between work and non-work life. The fundamental reason is that career and life are inalienable, as a career is a process through which people endow meanings to their vocations [37]. Therefore, the current study sought to examine the mediation effect of career success criteria clarity in the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being. Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Career success criteria clarity mediates the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being.

2.3 The Mediation Impact of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

Social cognitive career theory explains how people generate vocational interests, make relevant choices, and pursue positive outcomes [18,38]. Self-efficacy has been considered a key component in the model of social cognitive career theory, which refers to an individual's confidence in his abilities to accomplish tasks [39]. Taylor et al. [40] further developed the concept of career decision-making self-efficacy, especially indicating the confidence that one can perform well in the career decision-making process. The predictive role of career decision-making self-efficacy on individuals' vocational behaviours and outcomes has been identified by numerous studies [18,41,42].

Career exploration, referring to "purposive behaviour and cognitions that afford access to information about occupations, jobs, organizations that were not previously in the stimulus field", involves gathering and analyzing vocational information about the self and the environment in which they work (p. 192) [27]. Theoretically, an individual's exploration of personal and contextual attributes promotes a fit between the self and the environment and thus contributing to positive employment outcomes, such as career commitment, career engagement and career decision-making self-efficacy [43]. Career exploration reduces individuals' career indecision by assisting them to manage career distress caused by indecision [44]. A positive linkage between career exploration and career decision-making self-efficacy has been shown by

previous studies [45,46]. However, Downing et al. [47] have found an inconsistent result that young adults at universities become more indecisive as they explore more about their careers.

People with a high level of career decision-making self-efficacy tend to adopt a problem-focused coping style which motivates them to solve problems and resolve the source of stress [48,49]. Many definitions of coping highlight the effect of coping as a process of responding to stress [50]. Emerging adults (aged 18-29) are in a developing period described as one of the most stressful periods partly because of high levels of instability and uncertainty [51-55]. In this stressful transition, positive coping style can take efforts to reduce negative emotions and enhance positive emotions across situations [50].

Individuals' beliefs of efficacy have an effect on their feelings. Related research shows that a higher level of self-efficacy can predict less negative affect such as depression and anxiety [56]. There is a relative lack of studies concerning the impact of domain-specific self-efficacy on affective well-being. An empirical study by Salanova et al. [57] shows that efficacy beliefs reciprocally influence one's affective well-being. According to social cognitive theory, "affect and efficacy beliefs reciprocally come about over time, meaning that affective well-being is not only an antecedent of efficacy beliefs but also a consequence" (p. 257) [57]. Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Career decision-making self-efficacy mediates the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being.

3 Method

3.1 Data and Sample

This study focused on emerging adults (aged 18 to 29) [55]. As a result, we only invited those who were under 30 years old to take part in the survey. Participants finished the whole questionnaire at a time. We sent a total of 1000 questionnaires and received 475 valid responses (25.5% male). The effective rate of this study was 47.5%. The average age was 21.87 (SD = 1.34).

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Career Exploration

Career exploration was measured by the 5-item self-exploration subscale and the 6-item environmental exploration subscale in career exploration scale [27]. Previous studies used and validated the Chinese version of this scale [58]. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they have behaved in the following ways over the last 3 months. A sample item of the self-exploration scale was: "Been retrospective in thinking about my career". A sample item of the environmental exploration scale was: "Went to various career orientation programs". Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale from *1 = little* to *5 = a great deal*. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

3.2.2. Career Success Criteria Clarity

The 21-item career success criteria scale was developed by Zhou et al. [21]. Pan et al. [59] revised this scale into a 10-item version. To assess career success criteria clarity, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they were clear and confident while making judgement on each item of the revised career success criteria scale. For example, one of the items measuring career success criteria clarity was "I am clear and confident regarding my reviews on whether career success is that one's talents and potential capacities are fully utilized in his or her career". Participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *1 = strongly disagree)* to *7 = strongly agree*. The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was 0.94.

3.2.3 Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

We used the short form of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale (CDMSE-SF) [60] to measure career decision-making self-efficacy. This scale had 25 items and was translated and validated in Chinese context [61]. Participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale from *1 = no confidence at all* to *7 = complete confidence*. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.97.

3.2.4 Affective Well-Being

We used the positive affect subscale in positive affect and negative affect scale (PANAS) [62] to measure affective well-being. This scale was translated and tested using Chinese samples by Huang et al. [63]. There were ten words depicting different positive affect in this scale, such as "exciting" and "inspiring". In the survey, we asked participants that "during past 3 months, how often do you experience these kinds of affect". Participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale from *1 = seldom or never* to *7 = very often*. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

3.2.5 Control Variables

Previous studies indicated that age and gender differences could have influence on people's mood and emotions [64,65]. Therefore, we controlled for the effect of age and gender when conducting data analyses.

3.3 Data Analysis

Before data analysis, we conducted common method bias test. We employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus 7.4 [66] to ensure the distinctiveness of the measurement model. We employed Process 3.4 to test the multi-mediation model using bootstrapping method recommended by Preacher et al. [67]. Bootstrap sample size was 5000 and all variables were standardized before data analysis.

4 Results

4.1 Test of Common Method Bias

This study adopted Harman's single-factor test to verify the absence of common method bias [68]. After loading all the items into one factor, there was no single factor could explain the majority of the total variance, indicating that common method bias was not significant [69]. The first factor accounted for 37.66% (< 40%) of total variance. Therefore, common method bias shouldn't affect the results of this study.

4.2 Description Statistics and Correlations

Tab. 1 depicted the results of description statistics. It was noticeable that career exploration and affective well-being correlated positively and significantly ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$). This result provided support for Hypothesis 1. Besides, all main variables in the research model had a positive relationship with each other.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations ($N = 240$)

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	CE	3.23	0.86	—				
2	CSCC	5.11	1.29	0.34***	—			
3	CDSE	4.94	1.12	0.67***	0.45***	—		
4	AWB	4.78	1.18	0.45***	0.35***	0.50***	—	
5	Gender	1.75	0.44	-0.13**	-0.04	-0.06	-0.09	—
6	Age	21.87	1.34	0.06	-0.00	0.04	0.04	-0.14**

*Notes. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. CE = career exploration. CSCC = career success criteria clarity. CDSE = career decision-making self-efficacy. AWB = affective well-being.*

4.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To test the distinctiveness of measurement model, we adopted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Before CFA, we conducted KMO test (KMO value = 0.96) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$). We also paired the items to reduce the number of observed variables according to previous studies [70,71]. We chose several fit indices to test the result of CFA according to Hu et al. [72] and Byrne [73]. Those indices included χ^2, CFI (comparative fit index), TLI (Tucker-Lewis index), SRMR (standardized root-mean-square residual), and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation).

The result of CFA was shown in Tab. 2. It was obvious that the four-factor model fit with the data best, with χ^2 = 1221.78, CFI = 0.92 TLI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.07, confirming good discriminant validity of the constructs used in this study.

Table 2: CFA of the items (N = 240)

Models	χ^2	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Four-factor model	1221.78	0.92	0.92	0.05	0.07
Three-factor model	2708.68	0.79	0.77	0.09	0.12
Two-factor model	3443.75	0.72	0.70	0.10	0.13
One-factor model	4087.93	0.66	0.64	0.11	0.14

Notes. Four-factor model = career exploration, career success criteria clarity, career decision-making self-efficacy, affective well-being. Three-factor model = career exploration, career success criteria clarity + career decision-making self-efficacy, affective well-being. Two-factor model = career exploration + career success criteria clarity + career decision-making self-efficacy, affective well-being. One-factor model = career exploration + career success criteria clarity + career decision-making self-efficacy + affective well-being.

4.4 Test of Hypotheses

Tab. 3 showed the results of total effect. Career exploration positively predicted affective well-being (β = 0.45, p < 0.001) and the 95% CI was [0.36, 0.53]. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 3: Results of total effect

Variables and Statistics	Outcome: Affective Well-Being		
	β	*SE*	*t*
Career Exploration	0.45	0.04	10.75***
Gender	-0.03	0.04	-0.67
Age	0.01	0.04	0.23
R^2	0.20		
F	40.20		

Tabs. 4 and 5 demonstrated the results of the multi-mediation model. As Stages 1 and 2 in Tab. 4 showed, career exploration was positively correlated with career success criteria clarity (β = 0.34, p < 0.001) and career decision-making self-efficacy (β = 0.67, p < 0.001). In Stage 3, after adding two mediators, career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy were still positively related to affective well-being (β = 0.15, p < 0.001; β = 0.29, p < 0.001, respectively) and the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being was less significant (β = 0.20, p < 0.001), indicating the partial mediation effect of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy. In Tab. 5, the 95% CI of each mediator was not including zero. Therefore, the indirect effect of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy in this model was supported. Hypothesis 2 and 3 were proven valid. We further compared these two mediating mechanisms. As in Tab. 5, the effect size of career decision-making self-efficacy was stronger than career success criteria clarity.

Table 4: Results of indirect effect

Variables and Statistics	Stage 1. Outcome: CSCC			Stage 2. Outcome: CDSE			Stage 3. Outcome: AWB		
	β	*SE*	*t*	*β*	*SE*	*t*	*β*	*SE*	*t*
CE	0.34	0.04	7.88***	0.67	0.03	19.26***	0.20	0.05	3.74***
CSCC							0.15	0.04	3.54***
CDSE							0.29	0.05	5.38***
Gender	0.01	0.04	0.12	0.03	0.04	0.79	-0.04	0.04	-0.93
Age	-0.03	0.04	-0.72	0.00	0.03	0.11	0.01	0.04	0.33
R^2	0.12			0.44			0.29		
F	20.98			124.89			38.88		

*Notes. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. CE = career exploration. CSCC = career success criteria clarity. CDSE = career decision-making self-efficacy. AWB = affective well-being.*

Table 5: Test of the indirect effect

Mediators	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Career Success Criteria Clarity	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.10
Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy	0.20	0.05	0.10	0.29

5 Discussion

Drawing on social cognitive career theory, this research constructed and examined a conceptual model to test the relations between career exploration, career success criteria clarity, career decision-making self-efficacy, and affective well-being. The results showed that career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy partially mediated the effect of career exploration on affective well-being. In addition, the mediation effect of career decision-making self-efficacy is stronger than that of career success criteria clarity. These findings enrich the literature on career exploration and affective well-being, and address calls to improve employees' affective well-being, with implications for both career education and counseling.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

First, the results provide empirical evidence for the predicting role of career exploration, career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy on affective well-being. Through self-exploration and environmental exploration behaviours, emerging adults progressively developed their cognitions in regard to career success and confidence in making career decisions, which further generate their affective well-being. The findings support Byars' [16] idea that vocational behavior and cognition could transfer into personal affective well-being.

Second, career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy are proved as two mediators in the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being. On the one hand, social cognitive career theory views career decision-making self-efficacy as a crucial component that significantly correlated with vocational outcomes [39,42,74,75]. This research extended the model of social cognitive career theory by illustrating the mediating role of career decision-making self-efficacy in the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being. On the other hand, current research focuses on testing the impact of career exploration on career decision, employability, salaries, and job satisfaction [76]. Our findings extend the literature by examining the effect of career exploration on career success criteria clarity and affective well-being. By exploring themselves and the world-of-career, people could get a better understanding of what they want from their jobs so that they could experience more affective well-being.

Third, the results show that, compared with career success criteria clarity, career decision-making self-efficacy has stronger mediating effect in the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being. It indicates that the confidence in making career decision is more important than clear criteria towards career success in generating affective well-being. Besides, both career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy are partial mediators, so we advocate further research to discover other mediators in the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being.

5.2 Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications. First, as career exploration positively influence affective well-being through the mediating role of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy, career educators and consultants could diagnose the problems in lack of affective well-being by testing individuals' career exploration behaviours, career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy. Second, being aware that developing individuals' career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy are two effective ways to improve affective well-being, career educators and counsellors could design interventions, such as providing role models and vocational resources, to help individuals construct career success criteria and facilitate career decision-making self-efficacy. Third, since career decision-making self-efficacy has stronger explanatory power in the relationship between career exploration and affective well-being, individuals should put more effort into developing confidence in making career decisions to acquire affective well-being.

5.3 Limitations and Orientations for Future Research

There are several limitations associated with this research. First, due to the partial mediation effect of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy, future research could be conducted to investigate other mediators. We also advocate for further research to discover moderators that would strengthen the effects of career exploration on affective well-being. Additionally, since the design of this study cannot support any causal conclusions for the relationships between these variables, further research should adopt a more rigorous design, such as longitudinal design, to test the causal effects. Finally, as the results were based on a sample of Chinese emerging adults, whether the current findings could be directly transferred to other age groups or western culture awaits future investigation.

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