

How Does Proactive Personality Promote Affective Well-Being? A Chained Mediation Model

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Abstract: Based on social cognitive career theory, this research examined a chained mediation model for the relations between proactive personality, career success criteria clarity, career decision-making self-efficacy and affective well-being. A two-wave survey study was conducted among Chinese graduating students ($N = 235$). The results showed that proactive personality (measured at time 1), career success criteria clarity (measured at time 1), and career decision-making self-efficacy (measured at time 2) positively related to affective well-being respectively. In addition, the results further revealed that proactive personality was positively related to career success criteria clarity, which further predicted affective well-being through the full mediation of career decision-making self-efficacy. The findings carry theoretical implications for research on affective well-being and advance our understanding of social cognitive career theory. Practical implications for both career educators and consultants are discussed.

Keywords: Proactive personality; well-being; career success criteria clarity; career decision-making self-efficacy; chained mediation model

1 Introduction

Graduating students are under great pressure because they are facing fierce competition of job hunting and experiencing high level of uncertainty [1]. Failing to find desired employment could give rise to depression and anxiety [2], feelings of stigmatization [3,4], and even low level of well-being as the first job will affect individuals' future career development [5,6]. Proactive personality, from an occupational health psychology perspective, is a personal tendency to enact controlling behaviors to cope with such negative emotions and stress, and has arose great attention in the field of career development on account of its relationship and contribution to one's career outcomes [7,8], such as job satisfaction [9], income and promotion [10]. It is necessary to examine the influence of proactive personality on well-being and delve into the mechanism in which graduating students obtain affective well-being in school-to-work transition.

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) holds the view that school and work are two interrelated developmental spheres. Self-efficacy is a crucial component in SCCT model, representing individuals' confidence in their abilities to fulfil tasks [11], and featuring in the self-regulation of affective states [13,14]. Career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE) reflects self-efficacy in career domain referring to one's belief in successfully accomplishing tasks in regard to making career decisions [15]. Feelings of affect or emotion require "cognitive appraisals or meaning assessments" [16]. Self-efficacy beliefs with respect to making career decisions can influence one's interpretation and evaluation of career related events as benign or upsetting, further arouse positive or negative emotions. Moreover, previous studies indicate that feelings of competence are associated with greater positive affect [17].

While developing self-efficacy and feelings of affect, cognitive appraisals or meaning assessments matter [16]. Career success criteria refer to personal attitude, cognition, and values about career success,



including three dimensions, such as fulfillment of intrinsic psychological needs, balance between work and non-work lives, and extrinsic rewards [18]. Clear career success criteria, representing highly developed cognition both of individuals themselves and their career goals, motivate them to achieve career goals and well-being [19]. Relevant literature shows that proactive personality can facilitate career self-efficacy, career cognition, and further promote workplace performance [20–22]. Therefore, we suppose that proactive personality may lead to a high level of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy, which in turn improve affective well-being.

The goals of this study are twofold. First, this study employs SCCT framework [23,24] to interpret the rise in affective well-being in school-to-work transition. The original SCCT model [23] focused on career interests and performance attainments. With the growing trend towards human optimal functioning and positive psychological processes, SCCT model incorporates domain specific well-being to provide an integrative model. Taking a hedonic approach of well-being, this study considers that people who are more proactive may be apt to view their personal capabilities more favorably so that they tend to experience higher affective well-being (see Fig. 1). Second, this study reveals the underlying mechanism in the relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being by examining the multiple mediating model with career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy as mediators, which advances our understanding of school-to-work transition. This study also offers practical implications for both career educators and consultants to improve graduates' affective well-being.

2. Hypotheses Development

2.1 The Relationship between Proactive Personality and Affective Well-Being

Proactive personality is “a relatively stable tendency to effect environmental change that differentiates people based on the extent to which they take action to influence their environments” [25]. Affective well-being is a dimension of subjective well-being along with life satisfaction (cognitive evaluation of one's life integrally) [26]. There are fruitful studies regarding to predictors of well-being, among which a large number of studies indicated that personality traits played an important role [27,28]. However, the relationship between proactive personality and well-being received insufficient attention. Research about proactive personality usually focuses on career development, such as the relationship between proactive personality and career success [7,8], for example, career satisfaction and job satisfaction [9]. These kinds of subjective career success could promote people's experiences of positive affect. Besides, previous studies have indicated that people with proactivity will take actions to establish relations with others, such as leader-member exchange relationship [29] and mentoring relationship [30], which further contributes to their social resources and social support. With more social support, individuals could view events in career and life as meaningful and interesting and experience more positive affect, thus improving their affective well-being.

Lent [26] proposed a theoretical framework integrating subjective well-being and psychological well-being, revealing that people could enhance their subjective well-being by setting personal goals, engaging in valued activities, building social support system and living a meaningful life. Previous studies have shown that individuals with a propensity to be proactive will adopt more self-regulative strategies such as goal setting [21] and positive coping styles [7,31]. As a result, proactive people could experience more subjective well-being as well as affective well-being. Based on these ideas, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Proactive personality is positively related to one's affective well-being.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Career Success Criteria Clarity

Proposed by Zhou et al. [18], career success criteria refer to individuals' self-perception and evaluation towards career success and contain three dimensions, namely, extrinsic rewards, fulfillment of intrinsic psychological needs and balance between work and non-work lives. Based on this construct, career success criteria clarity reflects how well people ascertain their perception towards career success.

Career success criteria clarity develops over time as people reflect on their own career goals and what they value the most in life in their careers. During this cognitive and behavioral process, proactivity functions greatly. From a social cognitive perspective, proactivity is essential in cognitive development [32]. It is also a key competitive characteristic in career development, especially when facing the dramatically changing labor market [33]. Proactive people tend to take initiatives to seek for information about their careers when facing different career choices [33]. They are also inclined to plan for their careers and take efforts to achieve their goals [34]. Moreover, proactive employees often prepare themselves more readily to adapt to their environment and become successful in their career [35]. Therefore, we expect that proactive personality could predict career success criteria clarity.

Diener et al. [36] put forward that one way to achieve well-being is to achieve career success. Thus, well-being is an important goal of one's career. People could achieve their goals more easily if their goals are set more clearly [37]. As affected by various factors from external environment, personal characteristics and behaviors, people's career is a dynamic and complicated system [38]. In this case, career success criteria clarity may exert a key function in one's career development. When people know clearly their goals in career and life, they will make efforts to achieve their goals such as upgrading abilities and skills and implementing career plans in time. This process could regulate individuals' psychological processes and reduce negative feelings by promoting a sense of control, confidence and security over their career and life, further enhancing their affective well-being [39]. Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis:

H2: Career success criteria clarity mediates the relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being.

2.3 The Mediating Role of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

Being a core component in the model of social cognitive career theory, self-efficacy refers to individuals' confidence in their abilities to fulfil tasks successfully [40]. Comparing to general self-efficacy, domain-specific self-efficacy relates more closely to domain-specific variables [14]. In the field of career development, numerous studies have revealed the effect of career decision-making self-efficacy on career behaviors and outcomes [41,42], as well as its crucial influence on career development [43].

Social cognitive career theory proposes that personality could affect individuals' self-efficacy beliefs [44]. As a critical personality trait, proactive personality has been proved to have a positive relationship with both general self-efficacy and domain-specific self-efficacy [45–47]. People with proactivity are self-initiated to pursue better performance, improve abilities, and collect career-related information to make better decisions [33].

In light of social cognitive theory, affect and efficacy beliefs have a reciprocal relationship which means that affective well-being is both an antecedent and consequence of efficacy beliefs [48]. The generation of emotions needs cognitive appraisals towards one given object [16]. People with higher career decision-making self-efficacy tend to construe career related events as benign and beneficial, thus triggering positive emotions and promoting affective well-being. Moreover, research has proved that feelings of competence and self-efficacy have a positive relationship with affective well-being [17]. Career decision-making self-efficacy can also influence affective well-being through coping styles. A high level of career decision-making self-efficacy could propel individuals to adopt a positive coping style so as to solve problems and manage stress [49,50]. During this process, positive coping style can reduce people's negative affect and promote affective well-being [51]. Hence, we put forward the following hypothesis:

H3: Career decision-making self-efficacy mediates the relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being.

2.4 The Chained Mediation Model

Proactive people are inclined to search for career information and make career plans to adapt to future career [33,35]. Hence, proactive personality could promote career success criteria clarity. People with a high level of career decision-making self-efficacy will strive to achieve their goals [40] by adopting a problem-

focused coping style and seeking for external resources such as social support [49]. This will promote their affective well-being. The mediating roles of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy between proactive personality and affective well-being have been clarified in previous sections. In this section, we further propose that there is a chained mediation between proactive personality and affective well-being, in which career success criteria clarity could affect career decision-making self-efficacy.

People with a high level of career success criteria clarity tend to know themselves and their career goals better. Therefore, they can appraise themselves more accurately and get more vocational information. As a result, they will enhance their confidence towards goal setting and career planning to be more capable meeting the challenges and solving problems. Career decision-making self-efficacy contains five dimensions, namely, self-appraisal, career information, goal selection, planning, and problem solving [15]. Therefore, career success criteria clarity could have a key impact on career decision-making self-efficacy. In addition, as both of them are variables in the field of career development, career success criteria clarity could serve as an effective indicator when predicting career decision-making self-efficacy [52,53]. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: There is a chained mediating relationship in the relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being. The relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being is mediated by career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy.

3. Method

3.1 Data and Sample

Participants in this study were all emerging adults in their early career stages in China. They volunteered to take part in the survey and could quit the survey freely. We collected a set of panel data at two different time points to avoid common method bias [54]. At both time points, we measured proactive personality, career success criteria clarity, career decision-making self-efficacy, affective well-being as well as demographic characteristics (gender and age). In data analysis, we used data of proactive personality and career success criteria clarity measured at T1, and data of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy measured at T2. At Time 1 (T1), we sent a total of 600 questionnaires and received 413 responses. Three months later at Time 2 (T2), we delivered the second part of our survey and received 235 valid responses (33.62% male). The effective rate of this study was 39.17%. The average age was 21.78 (SD = 1.79).

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Proactive Personality

We used the 11-item Chinese version of Proactive Personality Scale (PPS) [25] translated and revised by Shang et al. [55] to measure proactive personality. Participants were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha was 0.89.

3.2.2. Career Success Criteria Clarity

To measure career success criteria clarity, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they were confident in making judgements on each item of the 10-item career success criteria scale [56]. For example, one item used 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 (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha was 0.95.

3.2.3 Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

Career decision-making self-efficacy was measured by the short form of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale (CDMSE-SF) [15] which contained 25 items. Participants were asked to rate 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

Affective well-being was measured by positive affect subscale in positive affect and negative affect scale (PANAS) [57]. Participants were asked to rate the degree of which they experienced ten kinds of positive affect (e.g., “exciting” “interesting”) during the past 3 months on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = *seldom or never* to 7 = *very often*). The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91.

3.2.5 Control Variables

This study controlled for the effect of gender and age. Although the relationship between gender and well-being is still undefined [58], previous research has found that gender could influence well-being [59]. Besides, age is also an important indicator of well-being [60].

4. Results

4.1 Description Statistics and Correlations

Tab. 1 depicted the results of mean, SD and correlations of main variables in this study. As shown in Tab. 1, proactive personality was positively related to affective well-being ($r = 0.48, p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Besides, main variables in this study positively related to each other.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations ($N = 235$)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 PP	5.39	0.97	—				
2 CSCC	5.37	1.47	0.46***	—			
3 CDSE	5.06	1.11	0.67***	0.42***	—		
4 AWB	5.00	1.16	0.48***	0.33***	0.60***	—	
5 Gender	—	—	-0.00	-0.03	-0.10	-0.04	—
6 Age	21.78	1.79	-0.10	-0.01	0.07	0.06	-0.25***

Notes. *** $p < 0.001$. PP = proactive personality. CSCC = career success criteria clarity. CDSE = career decision-making self-efficacy. AWB = affective well-being.

4.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Before hypotheses testing, we conducted KMO test (KMO value = 0.93), Bartlett’s test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to verify the distinctiveness of the measurement model using Mplus 7.4. In CFA, according to previous studies [61,62], we paired the items to reduce the number of observed variables. In light of Hu et al. [63] and Byrne [64], we chose the following fit indices to test the result of CFA: χ^2 , df, χ^2/df , CFI (comparative fit index), TLI (Tucker-Lewis index), SRMR (standardized root-mean-square residual), and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation).

Tab. 2 showed the results of CFA. Four-factor model fit with the data best, with $\chi^2 = 630.61$, $df = 371$, $\chi^2/df = 1.70$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.94, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.06. Therefore, the constructs used in this study had a good discriminant validity.

Table 2: CFA of the items ($N = 235$)

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Four-factor model	630.61	371	1.70	0.94	0.94	0.05	0.06
Three-factor model	1179.73	374	3.15	0.83	0.82	0.15	0.09
Two-factor model	1420.69	376	3.78	0.77	0.75	0.15	0.11
One-factor model	1843.00	377	5.31	0.67	0.65	0.11	0.13

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

4.3 Test of Hypotheses

We employed Model 6 of Process 3.4 to test the chained mediation model using bootstrapping method [65]. We set the bootstrap sample size as 5000 and standardized all variables before data analysis.

The results of total effect were shown in Tab. 3. In total effect, proactive personality was positively related to affective well-being ($\beta = 0.49, p < 0.001$) and the 95% CI was [0.38, 0.61]. This result supported Hypothesis 1.

Table 3: Results of total effect ($N = 235$)

Variables and Statistics	Outcome: Affective Well-Being		
	β	SE	t
Proactive Personality	0.49	0.06	8.55***
Gender	-0.01	0.06	-0.15
Age	0.11	0.06	1.84
R ²		0.24	
F		24.82	

Notes. *** $p < 0.001$.

Tabs. 4 and 5 demonstrated the results of the chained mediation model. As in Tab. 4, proactive personality was positive correlated with career success criteria clarity ($\beta = 0.47, p < 0.001$) and career decision-making self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.62, p < 0.001$). Career success criteria clarity was positively related to career decision-making self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.05$). In Stage 3, when career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy were both added into the model, only career decision-making self-efficacy was positively related to affective well-being ($\beta = 0.49, p < 0.001$). As shown in Tab. 5, only the 95% CI of the mediation model of career success criteria clarity included zero. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 and 4 were supported whereas Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Table 4: Results of indirect effects ($N = 235$)

Variables and Statistics	Stage 1.			Stage 2.			Stage 3.		
	Outcome: CSCC			Outcome: CDSE			Outcome: AWB		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
PP	0.47	0.06	7.97***	0.62	0.05	11.56***	0.13	0.07	1.70
CSCC				0.13	0.05	2.47*	0.07	0.06	1.14
CDSE							0.49	0.07	6.76***
Gender	-0.02	0.06	-0.34	-0.07	0.05	-1.42	0.03	0.05	0.51
Age	0.04	0.06	0.59	0.11	0.05	2.31*	0.05	0.05	0.90
R ²		0.22			0.49			0.38	
F		21.26			54.38			28.20	

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

Table 5: Test of indirect effects ($N = 235$)

Mediating Routes	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
PP→CSCC→AWB	0.03	0.03	-0.03	0.10
PP→CDSE→AWB	0.30	0.07	0.17	0.45
PP→CSCC→CDSE→AWB	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.06

Notes. PP = proactive personality. CSCC = career success criteria clarity. CDSE = career decision-making self-efficacy. AWB = affective well-being.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

In current study, based on social cognitive career theory, we constructed a chained mediation model to test the relations among proactive personality, career success criteria clarity, career decision-making self-efficacy, and affective well-being. The results showed that proactive personality related positively to career success criteria clarity, which further predicted affective well-being through the mediation of career decision-making self-efficacy. In addition, career decision-making self-efficacy fully mediated the above relationship. These findings advance the literature on social cognitive career theory and enrich the research of affective well-being.

Our study provided empirical evidence for the predicting role of proactive personality, career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy on affective well-being. Although previous research examined the positive effect of proactive personality on crucial vocational outcomes, such as career success [8], job satisfaction [9], income and promotion [10], not much work has been done to test the influence of proactive personality on affective well-being. Our findings showed that proactive personality, as well as career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy served as important predictors for affective well-being in career development.

Inconsistent with Hypothesis 2, the results showed that career success criteria clarity has no mediating effect in the relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being. However, both Hypotheses 3 and 4 were supported, showing that career decision-making self-efficacy is a crucial mediator in the relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being. As social cognitive career theory stated, career decision-making self-efficacy was a crucial component that significantly correlated with vocational outcomes [20,42,46,66]. Our results supported the findings of Ryan et al. [17] that career decision-making self-efficacy had a positive relationship with affective well-being. Proactive personality had also been proved as a key indicator in generating self-efficacy. Moreover, the results indicated that proactive personality enhanced affective well-being by developing career cognition and the confidence in making vocational decisions due to the chained mediating effects of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy in order.

5.2 Practical Implications

As the results revealed, proactive personality positively influenced affective well-being through the mediating role of career success criteria clarity and career decision-making self-efficacy in order. On the one hand, parents and teachers could cultivate adolescents' proactive personality. On the other hand, career educators and consultants could use these indicators to diagnose the problems individuals have during school-to-work transition, and design interventions to help individuals construct career success criteria and facilitate career decision-making self-efficacy, such as providing role models and vocational resources. Given the great importance of career decision-making self-efficacy in generating graduates' 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

Despite the theoretical and practical implications, there exist some limitations associated with this research. First, since career success criteria clarity has no mediating effect in the relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being, future research could be conducted to investigate other mediators. We also advocate for further research to discover moderators that would strengthen the effects of proactive personality on affective well-being through the mediating effect of career decision-making self-efficacy. Additionally, the design of this study could not examine the dynamic relations between these variables, further research could address the question by adopting a more rigorous design, such as longitudinal design, to test the causal effects. Finally, as the results were based on a sample of Chinese graduates, whether the current findings could be directly transferred to other age groups or other countries awaits future investigation.

6 Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of the relationship between proactive personality and affective well-being in graduating students. The chained model explained how proactive individuals generate clear career cognition and high level of self-efficacy step by step to further promote their well-being. Given the great importance of career decision-making self-efficacy in generating affective well-being, the next phase of research can serve to enhance our understanding by identifying the contextual factors that would strength the effect of career decision-making self-efficacy.

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