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Article

The relationship between psychological flexibility and career adaptability as resources to promote well-being

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Abstract

One of career counseling's goals is understanding how to promote the well-being of people interfacing with the unforeseen challenges of the changing labour market. The present study investigates the relationship between well-being and the positive resources of psychological flexibility - the ability to contact emotions and thoughts of the present moment and act in the direction of one's values, and career adaptability - the ability to adapt to changes in the world of work. 498 adult participants reply to: Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II, Career Adapt-Abilities Scale, Satisfaction with life scale, and Flourishing Scale. Results show that career adaptability mediates the relationship between psychological flexibility and life satisfaction as well as the relationship between psychological flexibility and flourishing, suggesting that career adaptability could be considered a personal resource that enhances the effects of psychological flexibility on hedonic and eudemonic well-being, fostering the ability to adapt to changes in self and situation. Implications for future studies and career counseling are presented.

Keywords: Psychological flexibility, career adaptability; life satisfaction; flourishing; well-being

Introduction

One of the most important goals of human existence is the achievement of psychological health; one of the ingredients for achieving mental health is psychological flexibility (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Psychological flexibility is difficult to define. According to some authors (Hayes et al., 2006; Hayes, et al., 2011), psychological flexibility can be defined as an individuals' ability to persist or change behavior in a way that is connected to their thoughts and feelings, allowing them to appreciate the situation, and is guided by their goals and values. Moreover, Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010) describe psychological flexibility as the way in which a person «(1) adapts to fluctuating situational demands, (2) reconfigures mental resources, (3) shifts perspective, and (4) balances competing desires, needs, and life domains» (p. 866). Some research on this construct has been conducted using other names as well: ego-resiliency (Block, 1961), executive control (Posner & Rothbart, 1998), response modulation (Patterson & Newman, 1993) and self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 2001; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). In contrast, psychological inflexibility negatively refers to quality of life, health and positive emotions, and positively refers to some typically negative measures (such as depression, social anxiety, phobias, etc.) (Barnes-Holmes et al. 2004; Chawla & Ostafin 2007; Fledderus et al. 2010; Gaudiano 2010; Hayes et al. 2006; Öst, 2008; Pull, 2008; Ruiz, 2010).

Psychological flexibility indicates good social and personal functioning (Bonanno et al., 2004); the lack of psychological flexibility can cause concern in people (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Regarding the relationship between psychological flexibility and well-being, the empirical literature has amply demonstrated that psychological flexibility is associated with greater psychological well-being (e.g., Bond et al., 2011; Gillanders et al., 2014; Gloster et al., 2017). Psychological flexibility is a prerequisite for flourishing (Fledderus et al., 2013, Hayes

et al., 2013; Bohlmeijer et al., 2015) and have a direct and positive effect on life satisfaction (Lucas & Moore, 2020).

Several studies support the hypothesis that psychological flexibility can promote adaptability and that these two resources can positively influence well-being. The theoretical model of Hayes et al. (1996) argues that “one cost [of psychological inflexibility] is that a stenotopic condition – a narrow range of adaptability to changes in environmental conditions” (p. 1160). In the study of Waldeck et al. (2021), psychological flexibility was positively correlated with adaptability when conceptualized as a general capacity divided into cognitive-behavioral dimensions (e.g., "I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations to assist me in a new situation if necessary"), and affective factors (e.g., "When uncertainty arises, I am able to minimize frustration or irritation so I can deal with it best") and positively predictive of well-being (Waldeck et al., 2021).

Contextualizing adaptability to career construction and working contexts, the construct of career adaptability has been defined as “the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by the changes in work and work conditions” (Savickas, 1997, p. 254). Savickas (1997), within the construct of career adaptability, identified four different dimensions, known as the 4 Cs: (1) concern, referring to the worry about one's future; (2) confidence, referring to the belief that one can achieve one's goals; (3) curiosity, in relation to the professional world; and (4) control, i.e., the awareness that the future is partly controllable. Regarding the relationship between career adaptability and well-being, the recent meta-analysis by Rudolph et al. (2017) showed that career adaptability was significantly associated with career satisfaction, employability, and life satisfaction. Moreover, career adaptability is related to well-being (Savickas et al., 2009; Maggiori et al., 2013), quality of life (Soresi et al., 2012), life satisfaction (Santilli et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2013) and flourishing (Lodi et al., 2020).

Studies conducted on the relationship between psychological flexibility and career adaptability are very limited. A recent study (Zidi et al., 2021) has shown that training aimed at promoting psychological flexibility in adolescents was useful for increasing career adaptability scores in a group of adolescents.

Aims of the study

The present study aims to explore the relationship between psychological flexibility, career adaptability and well-being. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1. Career adaptability can mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and life satisfaction;

H2. Career adaptability can mediate the relationship between psychological flexibility and flourishing.

Materials and methods

Participants

The participants were 498 Italians, aged between 18 and 60 years (Mean, M = 26.43; Standard Deviation, SD = 6.74). Among them, 135 participants declared that they recognize themselves in a male gender (male = 27.11%), 361 in a female gender (female = 72.49%), and 2 in "other" gender (other = 0.40%). Most of them were students (227, 45.58%) or employed (180, 36.14%); the remaining part were unemployed (91, 18.27%). The participants were recruited from the general population through a convenience sample, and they choose to participate in the online survey completely voluntarily and anonymously, knowing the possibility to abandon the research at any time. Each participant has to read and agree to the informed consent regarding research objectives and methods. Data were collected and processed following EU GDPR 679/2016 on the protection of sensitive and personal data.

Measures

- *Career adaptability*

Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS; International validation Porfeli & Savickas, 2012; Soresi, Nota, & Ferrari, 2012) was used to assess career adaptability as a psychosocial construct denoting resources for coping with occupational transitions, developmental vocational tasks, and work traumas in the intersection of person-in-environment. The measure consists of 24 items divided into four scales concerning career concern, career curiosity, career control and career confidence. Participants are asked to indicate how much believe to have each ability on a scale from 1 (not strong) to 5 (strongest). Sample item: "*how much do you feel capable of …realizing that today's choices shape my future*". In our study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.94.

- *Psychological flexibility*

Psychological flexibility was assessed using the seven-item Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011; Italian validation Pennato et al., 2013). A 7-point Likert scale from 1 (never true) to 7 (always true) allows participants to respond to all items, which were inversely coded to produce one factor of psychological flexibility. The items focus on the avoidance of unwanted internal events, on the inability to be in the present moment and on the rigid dominance of psychological reactions to negative internal events when guiding actions which prevent one from flexible value-directed actions. The AAQ-II was chosen for this study as it is the most widely utilized measure of psychological flexibility in the empirical literature (Mauda et al., 2011) demonstrating good reliability (e.g., Bond et al., 2011). Sample items: "*I'm afraid of my feelings*", "*My painful experiences and memories make it difficult for me to live a life that I would value"*. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

- *Well-being*

Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010; Giuntoli et al., 2017), to measure well-being, conceptualized as socio-psychological prosperity, characterized by positive relationships,

feelings of competence and meaning and purpose in life. Participants have to respond on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample item: "*The risks of this professional transition are high but I accept the bet*". In our study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.85.

Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985; Di Fabio & Gori, 2016), to evaluate general life satisfaction through an eight-item scale with a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample item: "*In most ways, my life is close to my ideal"*. The Cronbach's alpha for the study sample was 0.85.

Data analysis

The preliminary statistical analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version (SPSS) 25.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY) for Windows (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA). First, descriptive statistics were computed for all the observed variables. Second, normal distributions of psychological flexibility, career adaptability, life satisfaction and flourishing were tested using Shapiro–Wilk tests. Spearman correlations were undertaken to evaluate the relationships between variables.

The mediation model was tested thought SEM package (Gallucci & Jentschke, 2021) of Jamovi 2.2.5, which is based on the lavaan R package for structural equation modeling (Rosseel, 2012). Data were not-normally distributed, thus the diagonally weighted least squares (DWLS) estimation method was employed to provide accurate parameter estimates (Mindrila, 2010).

The goodness of fit for the mediation model was tested through the chi square to degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi 2/df$), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1990), Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR; Hu & Bentler, 1999), and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI; Tucker & Lewis, 1973). For the model to be considered good, the threshold values to be met are as follows: chi square to

degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi 2/df$) must be less than 3, RMSEA and SRMR less than .08 (Brown & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999), CFI and TLI greater than .90 (Bentler, 1990, 1998; Byrne, 2008).

Results

Preliminary analysis

Descriptive statistics of the sample are shown in Table I. Shapiro–Wilk tests of normality was significant (p = 0.00), showing no normal distribution for psychological flexibility, career adaptability, life satisfaction and flourishing.

Table I. Descriptive statistics of constructs

Construct	M (DS), Shapiro–Wilk (p value)
Psychological flexibility	4.47 (1.51), .97 (.00)
Career adaptability	4.18 (.61), .94 (.00)
Life satisfaction	4.71 (1.16), .98 (.00)
Flourishing	5.56 (.88), .96 (.00)

Note: M = mean; DS = standard deviation.

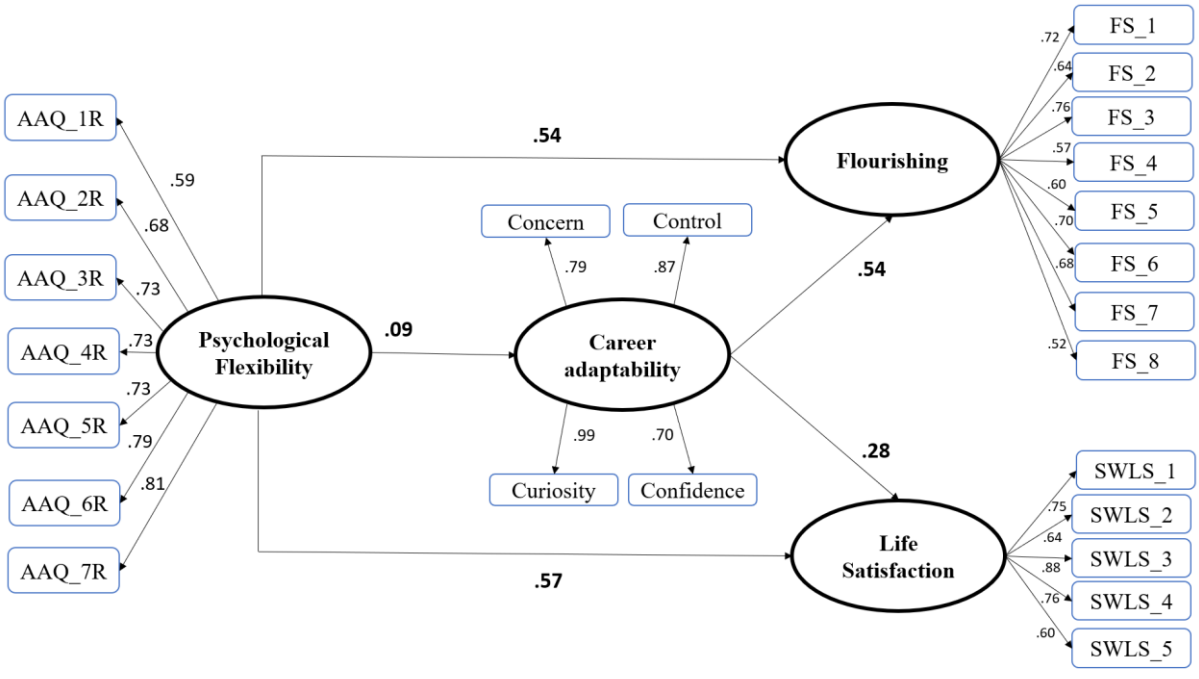
As the data were not normally distributed, we used a non-parametric test to calculate correlations between the constructs. Spearman's bivariate correlations between the variables included in our models are presented in Table II. Psychological flexibility was positively correlated with career adaptability and strongly correlated with life satisfaction and flourishing. Similarly, career adaptability was also strongly correlated with life satisfaction and flourishing. Life satisfaction and flourishing were also positively and strongly correlated.

Table II. Spearman's correlation				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**
1. Psychological flexibility	1			
2. Career adaptability	**.12***	1		
3. Life satisfaction	**.43****	**.22****	1	
4. Flourishing	**.45****	**.38****	**.66****	1
*Note. **p < .01; *p < .05*				

Mediation analysis

To examine the influence of psychological flexibility and career adaptability on life satisfaction (H1) and flourishing (H2), SEM analyses were conducted. Results showed a mediating effect of career adaptability on the relationship between psychological flexibility and life satisfaction (H1) and on the relationship between psychological flexibility and flourishing (H2).

Figure I. Mediation model



Note. AAQ = Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II; FS = Flourishing Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction with life scale.
Circles represent latent variables and squares represent observed variables.
Numbers on paths (path coefficients) leading from one variable to another variable indicate the degree to which a variable is influenced by the other variable. All associations are significant at p < .001.

The main fit indices suggested that the model fit the data adequately: $\chi^2(893) = 2496$, $p = < .001$. Further examination of fit indices confirmed the goodness of the model: RMSEA = 0.06 (< .001; 95% CI: .057–.063), SRMR = 0.07, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.95.

The analysis showed that the coefficient for the relationships between psychological flexibility and career adaptability was significant ($\beta = .09$, $p < .001$). Moreover, career adaptability was significantly associated with life satisfaction ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) and with flourishing ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$). The standardized indirect effect in the model with life satisfaction (H1) was .03 ($p < .001$), as well as the standardized indirect effect in the model with flourishing (H2) was .04 ($p < .001$). The 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect between psychological flexibility and life satisfaction and between psychological flexibility and flourishing ranged respectively from 0.022 to 0.032 and from 0.034 and 0.048, supporting these indirect effects. The standardized estimates of the model are summarized in Figure I.

Discussion

Our study moves from the intention of enriching the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005), demonstrating that psychological flexibility can have a predictive role on career adaptability, as well as supporting people's psychological well-being (e.g., Bond et al., 2011; Gillanders et al., 2014; Gloster et al., 2017). On the one hand, pre-existing theoretical literature suggests that the flexibility aspect of career adaptivity is an important antecedent of career adaptability (Savickas, 2005) and that the latter is significantly associated with well-being-related outcomes (for a meta-analysis, see Rudolph et al., 2017). On the other hand, the applied research of Zidi et al. (2021) shows that a training aimed at promoting psychological flexibility in adolescents was useful for increasing career adaptability scores in a group of adolescents. Following this premise, we hypothesized that psychological flexibility could influence career

adaptability in a group of adults and that both of these two resources could influence hedonic well-being - life satisfaction - and eudemonic well-being - flourishing.

Our results confirmed the mediating effects of career adaptability in the relationship between psychological flexibility and the two dimensions of well-being, life satisfaction (H1) and flourishing (H2). First, our study supports the extensive scientific literature showing that psychological flexibility is connected to greater psychological well-being (e.g., Bond et al., 2011; Gillanders et al., 2014; Gloster et al., 2017).

Second, our study shows that psychological flexibility – the ability to cope with, accept and adjust to stimuli in a functional way to a particular context, and that is congruent with personal values (Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth, & Steger, 2006; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010) – promotes career adaptability and well-being. In accordance to this, the evidence that flexibility in adapting to oneself and to the context could promote career adaptability had already been highlighted by Storme et al. (2020); they found that individuals with higher levels of within-person variability in personality descriptions report higher levels of all four career adaptability dimensions, suggesting that the flexibility in the expression of personality traits contributes to career adaptability.

Third, our study highlights that career adaptability could be considered a personal resource that enhances the beneficial effects of psychological flexibility on hedonic and eudemonic well-being, fostering the ability to "cope with changes in self and situation" (Hartung, 2016, p. 2). From the perspective of building sustainable careers (De Vos, 2020), the idea that the career path is capable of influencing not only professional well-being but also personal well-being must be strongly considered. Indeed, work enables people to produce goods or services that promote the development of a professional identity (Blustein, 2008), the form of social identity and a component of personal identity (Neishabouri et al., 2017), and it contributes to psychological well-being, the development of social connections, and self-determination

(Blustein, 2011). Professional experiences are not and cannot be related to a separate dimension, divorced from the matrix of experiences and meanings that constitute life design. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to remarking on the idea that taking care of people's personal well-being means knowing and recognizing not only the psychological processes that foster or promote psychological development but also getting in touch with the obstacles and resources that impede or promote the ability to adapt to today's complex and changing world of work. Summarizing, psychological flexibility could therefore be configured as one of the underlying multifaced processes capable of building career adaptability, the essential personal resource for promoting satisfying and thriving career and life paths in the changing social context.

Conclusions and limitations

The processes of defining and redefining one's personal and professional project develop with a continuous search for meaning in one's life, socio-cultural context and the dynamic relationship between person, context and time. Life design (Savickas et al., 2009; Savickas, 2012) is a nonlinear process that takes the form of a plan of action that needs to be open to the opportunities that the context offers, in a frame of "planful serendipity" (Watts, 1999), where people can make unexpected discoveries that are integrated into a flexible plan that allows them to provoke and/or take advantage of those discoveries. These processes imply not only a disposition to understand and deal with the changing contextual conditions within which the professional trajectory is to be developed (Romero Rodríguez, 2004) - here identified as career adaptability, but also a general emotional-cognitive-motivational-behavioral capability to adapt to the present context moving toward personal values - here identified as psychological flexibility.

The present study has several limitations. One of the limitations is its cross-sectional design, which does not allow for to investigation of causal relationships. Another limitation regards convenience sampling, for which the sample was not random or stratified and the participation was voluntary; therefore, there is the possibility of selection bias. Finally, the use of self-report tools may not have allowed us to grasp the broad spectrum of the variability of the participants' experiences.

Implications for future studies and practice

Our results support the awareness that the career adaptation process, as well as the whole life design process, require different kinds of personal resources that are not only linked to the way of managing the professional trajectory, such as career adaptability, but also to the more complex individual psychological functioning, as psychological flexibility.

Future studies could investigate which of the six psychological flexibility processes most impact career adaptability, using different and more structured instruments such as the Multidimensional Psychological Flexibility Inventory (MPFI; Landi et al., 2021). Indeed, potential differences in the predictive power of these instruments could have implications for theory and practice, which our current study does not address. For example, Elphinstone, Whitehead, Tinker, & Bates (2019) showed that mindfulness (a component strongly related to psychological flexibility) is positively associated with general adaptability. In addition, researchers could further investigate with large-scale studies whether demographic variables - such as gender, age, or employment status - or psychosocial variables - such as social support - moderate the relationship between psychological flexibility and career adaptability. Several studies have shown that perceived social support positively influences career adaptability (Ataç et al., 2018; Ghosh & Fouad, 2017; Karatepe and Olugbade, 2017).

As implication for practice, our study bodes well that the results achieved by Zidi et al. (2021), regarding a training to improve psychological flexibility and career adaptability among second-year middle-school students, could be replicable even with adults. Among the intervention strategies for the support and strengthening of personal resources, career counseling practitioners could integrate training to promote psychological flexibility and career adaptability, in order to help people in acting in the direction of their values, and proactively adapt to unexpected changes in working contexts, with the ultimate goal of promoting psychosocial well-being.

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Data availability statement. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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