

Coping with career insecurity in the early career stage: the moderating role of ambiguity tolerance

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Abstract

Purpose – Career insecurity is an important issue for individuals in their early career stages. On the basis of stress and resource theories, we postulate career insecurity as a stressor that initiates the use of coping strategies (i.e. approach and avoidance coping), depending on personal resources such as ambiguity tolerance (i.e. preference for or aversion to ambiguity). We further posit that approach and avoidance coping have consequences for psychological well-being and subjective career success.

Design/methodology/approach – Survey data were collected at two time points with a one-month timespan among early-career individuals in Italy (N = 411).

Findings – Path analyses showed that career insecurity was negatively related to approach coping and positively related to avoidance coping. Ambiguity tolerance played a moderating role in which preference for ambiguity weakened the career insecurity-avoidance coping relationship. Furthermore, approach coping mediated the negative relationships between career insecurity and the two outcomes (i.e. psychological well-being, subjective career success).

Practical implications – The findings suggest that promoting approach coping and a preference for ambiguity may reduce the maladaptive outcomes of career insecurity among early career individuals.

Originality/value – The study uncovers the unique roles of coping strategies and personal resources in the associations between career insecurity and individual outcomes in the early career stage.

Keywords Career insecurity, Coping, Ambiguity tolerance, Well-being, Career success

Paper type Research article

Career insecurity is an important topic in career research due to the high levels of uncertainty that characterize modern career paths (Alisic and Wiese, 2020). It generally refers to the worries that individuals have about different aspects of their career development that would affect the attainment, continuity, and stability of their career or employment (Mauno *et al.*, 2023; Spurk *et al.*, 2022). Young people’s career insecurity is a pertinent concern because it can hinder or delay the achievement of early career goals and expectations, such as leaving school, joining the labor market, earning an income, building economic stability, and establishing interpersonal relationships (Knight and Okay-Somerville, 2024; Rouvroye and Liefbroer, 2023). Even though career insecurity has been consistently linked to detrimental outcomes such as low levels of psychological well-



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being and subjective career success (Cai *et al.*, 2024; Mauno *et al.*, 2023; Spurk *et al.*, 2022), the question remains regarding how and why these relationships hold. To address these gaps in knowledge, we adopted the theoretical approach of past studies that conceptualized career insecurity as a major stressor (Colakoglu, 2011; Mauno *et al.*, 2023; Spurk *et al.*, 2022). Utilizing stress theories to comprehend the nature of career insecurity as a stressor and its impact on individuals, we investigated two mechanisms that can further expound on the associations between career insecurity and individual outcomes (i.e. psychological well-being and subjective career success) in the early career stage.

Firstly, we considered coping strategies as mediators in the relationships between career insecurity and outcomes *in lieu* of past findings that found early career individuals employing different strategies (e.g. information seeking, self-exploration tasks, relaxation, leisure activities) to cope with their career insecurity (Tien *et al.*, 2005). Previous studies have yet to clarify the effectiveness of coping in the context of career insecurity, so we employed Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping as a framework to explain the strategies (i.e. approach and avoidance) used by early career individuals. According to this theory, coping effectiveness can be interpreted based on the relationship between strategies and individual outcomes. Secondly, we deepen the investigation on career insecurity and coping strategies by considering ambiguity tolerance as a moderator in these associations. The significance of ambiguity tolerance in the modern career environment has been highlighted in the career decision-making literature in which ambiguity-tolerant individuals have been found to cope better in situations that lack structure or clarity (e.g. the development of modern careers; Xu and Tracey, 2015). Considering early career individuals' reactions to unfamiliar, complex, or inconsistent information related to their career development, we used Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory to expound on the moderating role of ambiguity tolerance in the career insecurity-coping relationships.

This study contributes to the literature by integrating the perspectives of two stress theories (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and elaborating on the mediating mechanism of coping strategies and moderating mechanism of ambiguity tolerance in the relationship between career insecurity and important outcomes. From a sustainable career perspective (e.g. Blokker *et al.*, 2023), our study gives insights into how young adults cope with concerns regarding future career development and how this impacts their well-being and career satisfaction. In this light, our findings also contribute to practice by informing how young people can be supported in establishing a solid foundation for long-term career sustainability (e.g. through tailored interventions that enhance their ability to navigate their careers in challenging and demanding environments).

Figure 1 depicts our conceptual model of coping with career insecurity.

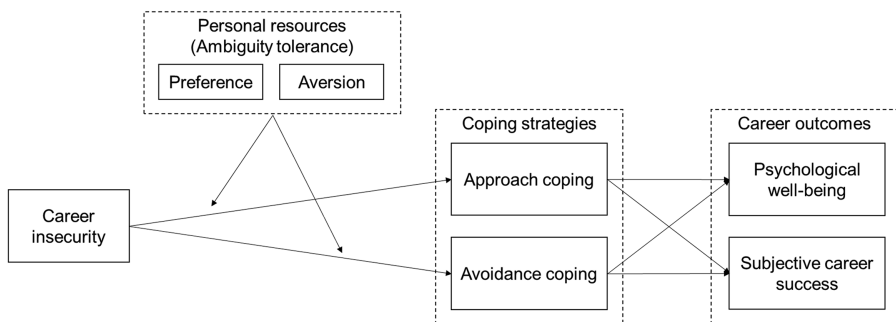


Figure 1. Conceptual model of coping with career insecurity. Source: Authors' own work

Career insecurity

Career insecurity has been defined as “an individual’s thoughts and worries that central content aspects of one’s future career might possibly develop in an undesired manner” (Spurk *et al.*, 2022, p. 257). Career insecurity is a multidimensional construct that addresses different content domains that are important in people’s career development. People’s primary motivators in work (e.g. pay, promotion, and status) change as they transition through career stages (Unite *et al.*, 2012). For example, career advancement and development opportunities are important aspects for individuals in the early career stage (Conway, 2004). Additionally, difficulties of entering the labor market and high risk of precarious employment are central worries among early-career individuals, especially for those who have invested in higher education (Tsai *et al.*, 2017; Robst, 2007). We therefore focus on career opportunities, contractual employment conditions, employment environment, and professional education and training as important dimensions of career insecurity among early-career individuals.

In line with the idea that career insecurity is a career-related stressor (Spurk *et al.*, 2022), our investigation is grounded in stress theories. Specifically, Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model of stress and coping asserts that individuals are constantly appraising stimuli within their environment. Particularly, primary appraisal determines the meaning and significance of a specific individual/environmental transaction for an individual’s well-being (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). We suggest that early-career individuals appraise career insecurity as a threat because they find themselves in an important yet undesired situation, especially in terms of their personal career goals (Smith and Kirby, 2011).

The relationship between career insecurity and coping strategies

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person” (p. 141). Considering the stress induced by the appraised discrepancy between one’s desired and present situation, career insecurity evokes coping responses or efforts from individuals to reduce the inconsistency in their situations (Smith and Kirby, 2011). As a coping response, individuals can approach a problem and make active efforts to resolve it (i.e. approach coping) or avoid the problem and focus on managing the associated emotions (i.e. avoidance coping; Moos and Holahan, 2003). Because career insecurity is a stressor that evokes coping responses, we expect positive relationships between career insecurity and both approach coping and avoidance coping.

H1. Career insecurity relates positively to approach coping.

H2. Career insecurity relates positively to avoidance coping.

The relationship between coping strategies and individual outcomes (psychological well-being, subjective career success)

The observed downward trends in young people’s well-being and prolonged periods of transition from school to stable jobs have emphasized the need to study the impact of early career experiences on individuals’ well-being and early career success (Knight and Okay-Somerville, 2024). In past research, career insecurity has often been associated with negative outcomes such as poor levels of psychological well-being and low perceptions of subjective career success (Cai *et al.*, 2024; Mauno *et al.*, 2023; Spurk *et al.*, 2022). Trevor-Roberts (2006) offered an alternative perspective regarding these negative relationships by contending that an individual’s coping response to career insecurity has a greater impact on their general well-being and career success rather than their perceptions of insecurity. To examine the effectiveness of approach and avoidance coping in response to career insecurity, we considered the implications of these strategies on the two significant outcomes that have been negatively associated with career insecurity. First, psychological well-being is an individual

outcome that refers to a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively (Huppert, 2009). Second, subjective career success is an individual outcome that generally refers to an individual's evaluation and experience in achieving personal and meaningful career outcomes (cf. Ng and Feldman, 2014).

In relation to these two outcomes, approach coping is often considered as a more adaptive orientation than avoidance coping (e.g. Taylor and Stanton, 2007). Approach coping allows individuals to make active efforts to confront and resolve the problem, positively affecting their well-being (Juth *et al.*, 2015) and contributing to their sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with their careers (Colakoglu, 2011). Avoidance coping, in contrast, disconnects the individual from the problem, increases their stress levels over time (Biggs *et al.*, 2017), and hinders them from attaining subjective career success (Colakoglu, 2011). In line with this view, we hypothesized the following relationships between coping strategies and individual outcomes:

- H3a. Approach coping relates positively to psychological well-being.
- H3b. Avoidance coping relates negatively to psychological well-being.
- H4a. Approach coping relates positively to subjective career success.
- H4b. Avoidance coping relates negatively to subjective career success.

We also examine the indirect effects of career insecurity on the two outcomes. Combining Hypotheses 1–4, we expect that career insecurity is indirectly related to psychological well-being and subjective career success through the mediating role of approach and avoidance coping.

The moderating role of ambiguity tolerance in the relationship between career insecurity and coping strategies

Lazarus (1991) contended that people's use of coping strategies is contingent on their appraisal of coping options, which includes an evaluation of their available resources. Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory also emphasizes the importance of resources that individuals possess to successfully cope with a stressor. Resources include personal resources, referring to personal traits or characteristics that aid in stress resistance (Hobfoll, 1989). Integrating the transactional model of stress and coping with the conservation of resources theory, we propose that the use of approach and avoidance coping strategies depends on the individual's personal resources, i.e. ambiguity tolerance.

Ambiguity tolerance is a multidimensional construct referring to a "tendency to react to perceived ambiguity with greater or lesser intensity" (McLain *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). It has been significantly related to career indecision (Xu and Tracey, 2015, 2017) in which individuals with higher ambiguity tolerance are more likely to consider multiple contextual interpretations and adopt better strategies to cope with stress. Prior theoretical work argued that ambiguity tolerance may function as a moderator to amplify or attenuate individual responses to uncertain or stressful situations (McLain *et al.*, 2015). In addition, some empirical support has been found such that highly ambiguity-tolerant individuals have fewer negative reactions to stressors (e.g. in the context of role conflict; Jdaitawi *et al.*, 2013).

In the present study, we considered two dimensions of ambiguity tolerance, i.e. preference and aversion, in examining their moderating role in the relationship between career insecurity and coping. Based on Hobfoll's (1989) theory, we argue that a preference for ambiguity indicates the availability of psychological resources to alleviate the negative emotions associated with ambiguity, which is instead positively appraised, even in stressful situations (Xu and Tracey, 2015). In the context of career insecurity, a preference for ambiguity becomes a personal resource for individuals that helps facilitate the use of approach coping strategies to directly deal with the source of their stress and not avoid it. In contrast, an aversion to ambiguity indicates depleted levels of psychological resources to manage ambiguity, which is perceived as a heightened threat (Xu and Tracey, 2017). In this light, individuals who are

aversive to ambiguity take a more “defensive posture” to preserve their current resources in response to the unpredictable characteristics of career insecurity by utilizing more avoidance strategies and fewer approach strategies. With these considerations, we expected ambiguity tolerance to play a moderating role in the positive relationships between career insecurity and coping strategies.

- H1a.* The positive relationship between career insecurity and approach coping is stronger among individuals who have a higher preference for ambiguity.
- H1b.* The positive relationship between career insecurity and approach coping is weaker among individuals who have a higher aversion to ambiguity.
- H2a.* The positive relationship between career insecurity and avoidance coping is weaker among individuals who have a higher preference for ambiguity.
- H2b.* The positive relationship between career insecurity and avoidance coping is stronger among individuals who have a higher aversion to ambiguity.

Lastly, we tested for moderated mediation effects. Based on the combined hypotheses, we expect conditional indirect effects of career insecurity on psychological well-being and subjective career success via coping strategies (i.e. approach and avoidance), depending on ambiguity tolerance (i.e. preference for ambiguity and aversion to ambiguity).

Method

Participants and procedure

The study participants were individuals in the early career stage as denoted by their age, i.e. ≤ 30 years old (cf. Conway, 2004; Symeonaki *et al.*, 2019). The study was approved by the ethical committee of the first author’s university. A two-wave quantitative survey was conducted in Italy using the Qualtrics platform at two timepoints with a one-month timespan (cf. Diener *et al.*, 2018) from March to July 2023. Only participants who provided their informed consent were included in the study. The Time 1 (T1) survey was promoted in the authors’ networks and by two Italian organizations that offer career services to young people using an anonymous link and a quick-response (QR) code. Of the 736 individuals who accessed the survey and provided their informed consent, 411 met the inclusion criteria and completed the T1 survey. The characteristics of the sample are reported in Table 1.

One month later, participants were contacted to answer the Time 2 (T2) survey using the e-mail addresses they provided at T1. In total, 156 participants completed the T2 survey (38.0% response). To check for selective nonresponse, we compared respondents and non-respondents in the T2 sample ($n = 156$ vs. $n = 255$), using a logistic regression with gender, age, neuroticism, and the T1 psychological variables. Some signs of nonrandom attrition were observed for career insecurity and preference for ambiguity. Separate *t*-tests showed that individuals with higher levels of career insecurity, $t(403) = -2.70$, $p = 0.007$, and preference for ambiguity, $t(388) = -2.71$, $p = 0.007$, were more likely to remain in the sample. According to a post hoc power analysis conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul *et al.*, 2009), we have 95% power to detect a medium effect size at $\alpha = 0.05$ (Cohen, 1988).

Measures

The original English career insecurity and ambiguity tolerance measures were translated into Italian using translation-backtranslation procedures. Unless indicated otherwise, measures used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Table 3 displays the Cronbach’s alphas.

Career insecurity. We measured dimensions of career insecurity that are relevant to early career individuals at T1, using the 4-item Career opportunities dimension and the 4-item Contractual employment conditions dimension from the Multidimensional Career Insecurity

Table 1. Sample descriptive statistics

| | <i>n</i> | % |
|--|----------|-------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 137 | 33.3% |
| Female | 263 | 64% |
| Age | | |
| Median | 24 | |
| <i>SD</i> | 2.21 | |
| Engaged in only one activity | | |
| Studying | 103 | 25.1% |
| Job searching | 32 | 7.8% |
| Working | 67 | 16.3% |
| Engaged in multiple activities | | |
| Studying and job searching | 46 | 11.2% |
| Studying and working | 58 | 14.1% |
| Studying, job searching and working | 23 | 5.6% |
| Job searching and working | 23 | 5.6% |
| Not in education, employment or training | 42 | 10.2% |

Note(s): *SD* = Standard Deviation
Source(s): Authors' own work

Scale (Spurk *et al.*, 2022) and the 5-item Employment Environment dimension and 4-item Professional Education Training dimension from the Career Anxiety Scale (Tsai *et al.*, 2017). We assessed the factor structure and dimensionality with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Mplus 8.9 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017), using threshold values comparative fit index (CFI) ≥ 0.90 , Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) ≥ 0.90 , root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) ≤ 0.08 , and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) ≤ 0.08 to indicate good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Though the hypothesized four-factor model with a latent second-order factor had TLI and RMSEA values slightly below the threshold, the CFI and SRMR values of the model showed acceptable fit (see Table 2).

Coping. The Italian version (Monzani *et al.*, 2015) of Carver's (1997) situational Brief Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE) Inventory was used to measure coping strategies at T1. Seven subscales from the Brief COPE, with a total of 14 items, were included. The instructions of the original Brief COPE were adapted to focus on career insecurity (see supplementary material). The response format was a Likert scale ranging from 1 (I haven't been doing this at all) to 4 (I've been doing this a lot). Following Carver *et al.*'s (1989) recommendations, we conducted CFA to assess the two-factor structure that characterizes early career individuals' coping strategies (i.e. approach and avoidance). After removing one item from the venting subscale, the analysis results showed acceptable fit (see Table 2). Avoidance coping consisted of 7 items regarding denial, self-blame, self-distraction, and

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analyses: Model fit indices

| Measure | CFI | TLI | SRMR | RMSEA | 90% CI |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------------|
| Career Insecurity (Spurk <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Tsai <i>et al.</i> , 2017) | 0.912 | 0.895 | 0.058 | 0.083 | 0.075 to 0.091 |
| Coping (Carver, 1997; Monzani <i>et al.</i> , 2015) | 0.964 | 0.951 | 0.042 | 0.043 | 0.029 to 0.057 |
| Ambiguity Tolerance (Xu and Tracey, 2015) | 0.919 | 0.897 | 0.054 | 0.064 | 0.052 to 0.077 |

Note(s): CFI = comparative fit index, TLI = Tucker-Lewis index, SRMR = standardized root mean square residual, RMSEA = root mean square of approximation and CI = confidence interval
Source(s): Authors' own work

venting, whereas approach coping consisted of 6 items regarding active coping, planning, and positive reframing.

Ambiguity tolerance. At T1, we measured ambiguity tolerance using the 6-item preference subscale and the 6-item aversion subscale of the Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (Xu and Tracey, 2015). Though the TLI value in the CFA was slightly below the threshold, the other model indices suggested acceptable fit for the two-factor model (see Table 2).

Psychological well-being. The Italian version (Politi et al., 1994) of the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ; Goldberg, 1988) was used to measure general psychological health at T2 with a Likert response scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (more than usual).

Subjective career success. The Italian version (Sarchielli and Toderi, 2005) of Greenhaus et al.'s (1990) 5-item career satisfaction scale was used to measure subjective career success at T2.

Control variables. We considered age (in years), gender and neuroticism (measured using a short version of the Big Five Inventory; Guido et al., 2015; Rammstedt and John, 2007) as potential control variables. The use of avoidant and emotion-focused strategies has been noted to decrease with age, while the use of problem-oriented strategies increases with age (e.g. Jenzer et al., 2019). Some studies have also suggested that women use more avoidance or emotion-focused coping and experience greater psychological distress compared to men (e.g. Panayiotou et al., 2017). Neuroticism has also been associated with avoidance coping, psychological distress and low subjective career success (e.g. Boyes and French, 2012; De Jong et al., 1999; Ng and Feldman, 2014).

Results

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables. To test our hypotheses, we performed an observed variable path analysis using Mplus 8.9 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017) with career insecurity as predictor, preference for and aversion to ambiguity as moderators, approach and avoidance coping as mediators, and psychological well-being and subjective career success as outcomes. Based on their significant correlations, we included gender and neuroticism as control variables. We also report in the supplementary material the results of the analyses without control variables.

Career insecurity, coping strategies, and individual outcomes

In Hypotheses 1 and 2, we proposed that career insecurity would positively relate to approach and avoidance coping. Career insecurity at T1 was negatively related to approach coping at T1 ($\beta = -0.129, p = 0.036$; not supporting Hypothesis 1) and positively related to avoidance coping at T1 ($\beta = 0.285, p < 0.01$; supporting Hypothesis 2). In Hypotheses 3 and 4, we proposed that approach and avoidance coping would relate to psychological well-being and subjective career success. Approach coping at T1 had a significant positive relationship with psychological well-being at T2 ($\beta = 0.178, p = 0.033$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. Avoidance coping at T1 had no significant relationship with psychological well-being at T2 ($\beta = -0.099, p = 0.309$), not supporting Hypothesis 3b. Furthermore, a significant positive relationship was found between approach coping at T1 and subjective career success at T2 ($\beta = 0.210, p = 0.019$), which supports Hypothesis 4a. However, no significant relationship was found between avoidance coping at T1 and subjective career success at T2 ($\beta = -0.015, p = 0.894$), which fails to support Hypothesis 4b. Figure 2 summarizes the results of the tested relationships.

Mediation model

We further tested for the indirect relationships of career insecurity with psychological well-being and subjective career success through approach and avoidance coping using 10,000 bootstrap samples (see Table 4). The total indirect effect of career insecurity on psychological well-being was not significant ($B = -0.034$; 95% CI $[-0.080, 0.005]$). However, within a 90% confidence interval, a significant indirect effect of career insecurity on psychological

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and correlations

| | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | α | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|--------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|----------|---------|
| Time 1 variables | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 Gender ^a | 411 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 Age | 411 | 23.998 | 2.207 | | -0.189** | | | | | | | | |
| 3 Neuroticism | 397 | 3.093 | 1.023 | | 0.244** | -0.078 | | | | | | | |
| 4 Career insecurity | 405 | 3.121 | 0.846 | 0.928 | 0.154** | 0.000 | 0.295** | | | | | | |
| 5 Preference for ambiguity | 411 | 4.159 | 0.604 | 0.706 | 0.098 | -0.023 | -0.085 | -0.105* | | | | | |
| 6 Aversion to ambiguity | 411 | 2.738 | 0.753 | 0.728 | -0.053 | -0.002 | 0.273** | 0.496** | -0.298** | | | | |
| 7 Approach coping | 405 | 2.976 | 0.565 | 0.768 | 0.043 | 0.064 | -0.187** | -0.163** | 0.386** | -0.306** | | | |
| 8 Avoidance coping | 405 | 2.318 | 0.570 | 0.693 | 0.114* | -0.084 | 0.356** | 0.370** | -0.177** | 0.371** | -0.093 | | |
| Time 2 variables | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9 Psychological well-being | 156 | 2.513 | 0.920 | 0.867 | -0.028 | 0.097 | -0.108 | -0.327** | 0.087 | -0.242** | 0.276** | -0.219** | |
| 10 Career satisfaction | 156 | 1.571 | 0.576 | 0.881 | -0.028 | -0.093 | -0.179* | -0.252** | -0.009 | -0.124 | 0.241** | -0.146 | 0.418** |

Note(s): ^a 0 = Male, 1 = female

**p* < 0.05 (2-tailed)

***p* < 0.01 (2-tailed)

Source(s): Authors' own work

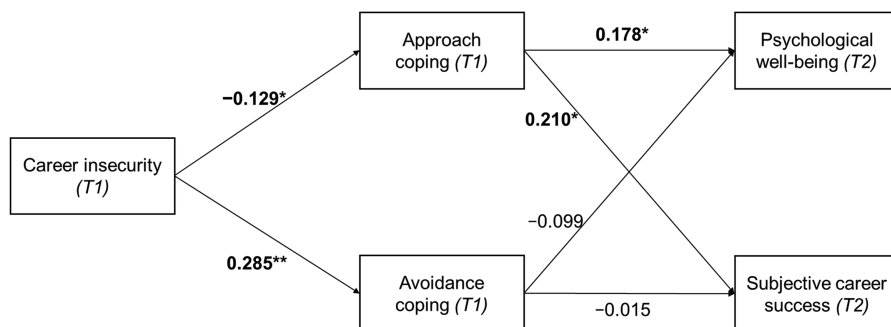


Figure 2. Path model of career insecurity, coping, and outcomes. Note. Standardized path coefficients are shown. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. Source: Authors' own work

Table 4. Estimates and confidence intervals of total, direct, and indirect effects for psychological well-being and subjective career success

| Path | Lower 2.5% | Lower 5% | Point estimate | Upper 5% | Upper 2.5% |
|---|------------|----------|----------------|----------|------------|
| Total effects from career insecurity on psychological well-being | -0.350 | -0.332 | -0.240 | -0.136 | -0.115 |
| Total indirect effects | -0.080 | -0.072 | -0.034 | -0.001 | 0.005 |
| Specific indirect effects | | | | | |
| Career insecurity → Approach coping → Psychological well-being | -0.047 | -0.041 | -0.015 | -0.002 | 0.000 |
| Career insecurity → Avoidance coping → Psychological well-being | -0.061 | -0.053 | -0.019 | 0.011 | 0.017 |
| Direct effect of career insecurity on psychological well-being | -0.329 | -0.309 | -0.205 | -0.096 | -0.073 |
| Total effects from career insecurity to subjective career success | -0.431 | -0.403 | -0.255 | -0.088 | -0.059 |
| Total indirect effects | -0.113 | -0.100 | -0.033 | 0.026 | 0.037 |
| Specific indirect effects | | | | | |
| Career insecurity → Approach coping → Subjective career success | -0.084 | -0.074 | -0.029 | -0.005 | -0.002 |
| Career insecurity → Avoidance coping → Subjective career success | -0.076 | -0.062 | -0.004 | 0.048 | 0.058 |
| Direct effect of career insecurity on subjective career success | -0.411 | -0.380 | -0.221 | -0.047 | -0.012 |

Source(s): Authors' own work

well-being was found via approach coping ($B = -0.015$; 90% CI $[-0.041, -0.002]$) but not via avoidance coping ($B = -0.019$; 90% CI $[-0.053, 0.011]$). Similarly, the total indirect effect of career insecurity on subjective career success was not significant ($B = -0.033$; 95% CI $[-0.113, 0.037]$). However, when examining the specific indirect effects, career insecurity had a significant indirect effect on subjective career success via approach coping ($B = -0.029$; 95% CI $[-0.084, -0.002]$), but not via avoidance coping ($B = -0.004$; 95% CI $[-0.076, 0.058]$).

Preference and aversion to ambiguity

Two moderation analyses were performed to test the moderating roles of preference and aversion to ambiguity in the associations between career insecurity and coping strategies (i.e. approach and avoidance coping). The predictor and moderating variables were mean-centered. Table 5 presents the results. In Hypothesis 1a, we expected preference for ambiguity to strengthen the positive relationship between career insecurity and approach coping. The results showed that the interaction of preference for ambiguity with career insecurity on approach coping was not significant ($\beta = -0.079, p = 0.091$; Hypothesis 1a not supported). However, while career insecurity was not related to approach coping ($\beta = -0.085, p = 0.083$), preference for ambiguity showed a significant positive direct relation with approach coping ($\beta = 0.352, p < 0.001$).

In Hypothesis 1b, we expected aversion to ambiguity to weaken the positive relationship between career insecurity and approach coping. The results showed that the interaction of aversion to ambiguity with career insecurity on approach coping was not significant ($\beta = -0.091, p = 0.062$; Hypothesis 1b not supported). However, while career insecurity was not significantly related to approach coping ($\beta = -0.023, p = 0.694$), aversion to ambiguity showed a significant negative direct relation with approach coping ($\beta = -0.238, p < 0.001$).

In Hypothesis 2a, we expected preference for ambiguity to weaken the positive relationship between career insecurity and avoidance coping. The results showed that in addition to significant main effect relations (i.e. career insecurity related positively to avoidance coping, $\beta = 0.289, p < 0.001$ and preference for ambiguity related negatively to avoidance coping, $\beta = -0.134, p = 0.003$), also the interaction between preference for ambiguity and career insecurity was significant ($\beta = -0.104, p = 0.022$). Subsequent simple slopes analyses showed that the positive relationship between career insecurity and avoidance coping was weaker when preference for ambiguity was high (1SD above the mean; $B = 0.127, p = 0.001$) compared to when preference for ambiguity was low (1SD below the mean; $B = 0.258, p < 0.001$; see Figure 3), supporting Hypothesis 2a.

In Hypothesis 2b, we expected aversion to ambiguity to strengthen the relationship between career insecurity and avoidance coping. The results showed that the interaction of aversion to ambiguity with career insecurity on avoidance coping was nonsignificant ($\beta = -0.045, p = 0.320$; Hypothesis 2b not supported). However, both career insecurity and

Table 5. Moderation analyses results

| | Approach coping | | | | Avoidance coping | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-------|---------|--------|------------------|-------|---------|--------|
| | B | SE | β | p | B | SE | β | p |
| Preference moderation model | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | 0.069 | 0.056 | 0.059 | 0.220 | 0.033 | 0.056 | 0.027 | 0.560 |
| Neuroticism | -0.076 | 0.027 | -0.139 | 0.005 | 0.143 | 0.027 | 0.256 | <0.001 |
| Career insecurity | -0.055 | 0.032 | -0.085 | 0.083 | 0.193 | 0.032 | 0.289 | <0.001 |
| Preference | 0.336 | 0.045 | 0.352 | <0.001 | -0.131 | 0.045 | -0.134 | 0.003 |
| Preference x Career insecurity | -0.081 | 0.048 | -0.079 | 0.091 | -0.109 | 0.048 | -0.104 | 0.022 |
| R^2 | | | 0.190 | <0.001 | | | 0.227 | <0.001 |
| Aversion moderation model | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | 0.080 | 0.059 | 0.068 | 0.177 | 0.064 | 0.056 | 0.054 | 0.252 |
| Neuroticism | -0.082 | 0.029 | -0.151 | 0.004 | 0.121 | 0.027 | 0.217 | <0.001 |
| Career insecurity | -0.015 | 0.037 | -0.023 | 0.694 | 0.112 | 0.036 | 0.168 | 0.001 |
| Aversion | -0.177 | 0.043 | -0.238 | <0.001 | 0.184 | 0.041 | 0.242 | <0.001 |
| Aversion x Career insecurity | -0.068 | 0.037 | -0.091 | 0.062 | -0.035 | 0.035 | -0.045 | 0.320 |
| R^2 | | | 0.116 | <0.001 | | | 0.241 | <0.001 |

Source(s): Authors' own work

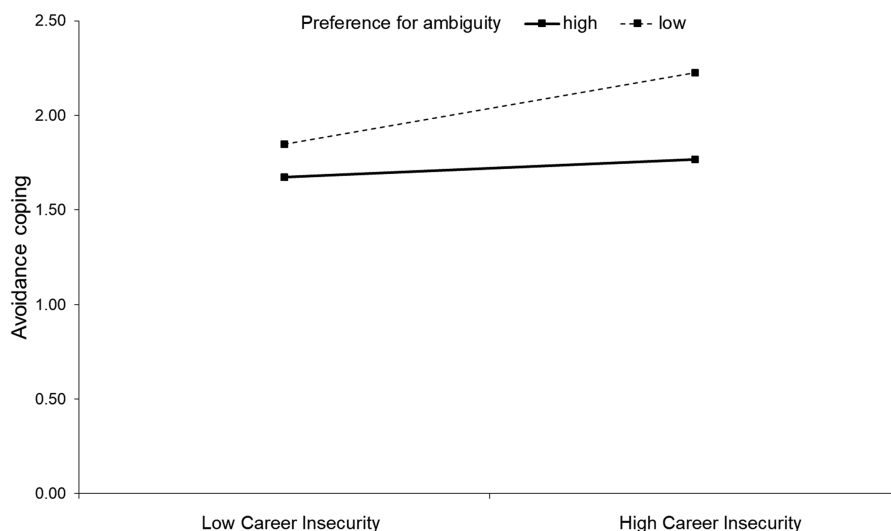


Figure 3. Preference for ambiguity as a moderator in the relationship between career insecurity and avoidance coping. Source: Authors' own work

aversion to ambiguity showed a direct positive relationship with avoidance coping ($\beta = 0.168$, $p = 0.001$ and $\beta = 0.242$, $p < 0.001$, respectively).

Moderated mediation model

Lastly, we tested for the moderated mediation effects of ambiguity tolerance (i.e. preference and aversion) and coping (i.e. approach and avoidance) in the relationships between career insecurity and the outcomes (i.e. psychological well-being and subjective career success). Two conditional path analyses were run using 10,000 bootstrap samples, one for preference and one for aversion. The interaction of preference for ambiguity with career insecurity was found to be not significant on approach coping ($\beta = -0.079$, $p = 0.213$), but it was approaching significance on avoidance coping ($\beta = -0.104$, $p = 0.071$). However, no significant conditional indirect effects were found.

Discussion

Grounded in an integrated perspective of stress theories (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), our study contributes to the literature by considering mediating and moderating mechanisms in the relationships between career insecurity and individual outcomes (i.e. psychological well-being and subjective career success). Our results found partial support for the mediating mechanism of coping strategies in these relationships. On the one hand, career insecurity did not positively relate to approach coping, failing to support our hypothesis. On the other hand, it was found to positively relate to avoidance coping, which aligned with our expectations. These findings may be explained by previous research that based the use of approach and avoidance coping strategies on the perceived controllability of a stressor (e.g. Carver *et al.*, 1989). Specifically, people are more likely to use strategies that attempt to solve the problem (e.g. approach coping) when a stressor is perceived as controllable. In contrast, they more likely use strategies that focus on managing their distress or emotions (e.g. avoidance coping) when a stressor is perceived as uncontrollable. In the context of career insecurity, early-career individuals may generally perceive themselves in a situation that is not

entirely within their control, especially in the progression of their careers. Facing high risks of unemployment and unstable employment (Symeonaki *et al.*, 2019), highly career insecure young people are more likely to adopt avoidance coping strategies (e.g. denial and distraction) to alleviate the short-term distress they may experience in such uncontrollable situations (Biggs *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, early career individuals can still be lacking experience, maturity and skills that can help them navigate and approach the stress related to labor market transitions and workforce entry (Knight and Okay-Somerville, 2024). From this perspective, they are less likely to respond with active coping and prioritize instead the management of their emotions.

In support of our hypotheses, approach coping was found to relate positively to both psychological well-being and subjective career success, and it played a significant mediating role in the negative relationships between career insecurity and both outcomes. In alignment with past research (e.g. Tuncay and Yildirim, 2015), these results imply the importance of using approach coping strategies even in the context of career insecurity to directly deal with the stressor (i.e. career insecurity). Considering, however, our unexpected findings on the negative relationship between career insecurity and approach coping, young people's reluctance to employ such strategies in response to their career insecurity could be detrimental to their well-being and career success. As opposed to our hypotheses, no significant relations were found between avoidance coping and the two study outcomes. These nonsignificant findings may be attributed to the time interval used in this research. More specifically, in the short term, avoidance coping strategies might play a dual role: they can reduce negative emotions that decrease well-being and career success, but they still fail to remove the sources of stress that are detrimental to these outcomes. In this light, the negative implications of avoidance coping may become more evident when a longer timeframe (i.e. more than a month) is used to measure the outcome variables. Further research is needed to better examine the role of time in the relationship of avoidance coping with psychological well-being and subjective career success.

In relation to the moderating role of ambiguity tolerance as a personal resource (i.e. preference for and aversion to ambiguity) in the relationships of career insecurity with approach and avoidance coping strategies, our hypotheses were only partially supported. We interpret the mixed findings based on the resource principles of Hobfoll's (1989) theory. Firstly, preference for ambiguity was observed to have an inconsistent role as a moderator in the associations between career insecurity and coping strategies. While failing to strengthen or facilitate a positive relationship between career insecurity and approach coping, it did weaken the positive relationship between career insecurity and avoidance coping. These results can be explained using the resource investment principle, which highlights the importance of having the necessary resources to cope with a stressor (Hobfoll, 1989). As a personal resource characterized by excitement and interest towards change and new things (Xu and Tracey, 2015), preference for ambiguity can serve as a buffer or protective factor from the constant use of avoidance coping strategies to deal with uncertain aspects of one's career. However, by itself, it is an insufficient resource to promote approach strategies among early career individuals, requiring them instead who invest and acquire other resources such as contextual resources. Indeed, past research has asserted the contextual nature of careers in which individuals' behaviors are shaped by their interactions with the environment, leading to either career opportunities or constraints (Blokker *et al.*, 2023). From this perspective, contextual resources (e.g. social, organizational and national support) may play a more impactful role in facilitating approach coping responses among young people compared to personal resources alone.

Secondly, our findings showed that aversion to ambiguity played no significant moderating role in either association of career insecurity and coping strategies. Considering that ambiguity-averse individuals are characterized by a depleted level of personal resource (i.e. low ambiguity tolerance), Hobfoll's (1989) desperation principle regards such individuals as entering a defensive mode to preserve the self. Since early career individuals are already prone

to defensive strategies (i.e. avoidance coping) in response to their career insecurity, the conditional effects of aversion to ambiguity on the career insecurity-avoidance coping relationship become less significant. Additionally, though our results failed to support the study hypothesis, the interaction of aversion to ambiguity with career insecurity on approach coping was approaching significance in accordance with the desperation principle (i.e. when aversion to ambiguity was low with ambiguity tolerance resources not depleted, career insecurity was more positively related to approach coping; see supplementary material). To better clarify this interaction effect, more research is needed with a larger sample size and more power for testing the hypothesized effect.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our study has theoretical implications that supplement existing career research. Foremost, our conceptual model of coping with career insecurity highlights the mechanisms of coping strategies and resources in the relationships between career insecurity and individual outcomes (Cai *et al.*, 2024). The mediating mechanism of coping strategies demonstrates approach coping as an adaptive strategy that intervenes between career insecurity and negative outcomes. The moderating role of ambiguity tolerance as a personal resource was partially supported such that a high preference for ambiguity reduced early career individuals' reliance on avoidance coping responses to career insecurity. In general, our model offers a structure that future research can apply to deepen the current understandings of career insecurity as a stressor and the corresponding strategies and resources that early career individuals utilize to cope with it.

Our study also has practical implications. By using our model as a guide, professionals can target the development of specific strategies and resources among early-career individuals managing an uncertain career environment. In particular, our results imply the relevance of training young people to adopt approach coping strategies, which they seemingly overlook *in lieu* of their inclination to avoid career insecurity as a coping response. Thus, career guidance services and organizations are encouraged to support early career individuals (e.g. job seekers, young professionals) in honing their approach to coping skills (e.g. active coping, planning, and positive reframing), which boosts positive well-being and career satisfaction. Career interventions can also nurture the ambiguity tolerance (or a preference for ambiguity) of early career individuals, especially among those with limited job experience (e.g. fresh graduates) and limited knowledge of their career options. Considering the unstable nature of modern career progressions, promoting acceptance and openness to ambiguous information would greatly benefit young people as they confront unpredictable aspects of their career development. In addition to the endorsement of such activities within university and organizational policies, local-level and national-level policymakers are recommended to consider the integration of training programs and career interventions in their current labor market policies. For instance, the development of coping skills and ambiguity tolerance can be included in the objectives of vocational assistance programs and job support initiatives that aim to decrease the underemployment rates of young people. Generally, taking into account our study findings, the significant inclusion of coping strategies and ambiguity tolerance resources in individuals' career development agendas should not be underestimated, even among highly educated young adults.

Limitations and future research directions

Some limitations need to be considered when interpreting our findings. Firstly, self-report measures were used. Though the effect of common method variance cannot be ruled out, we tried to reduce this bias by measuring the outcome variables at a different time point. Secondly, participant attrition during the second wave of our data collection and the use of convenience sampling may have reduced the representativeness of our sample. Future studies can account for a more balanced distribution by considering the gender, student or employment status,

degree program or work sector, and region of the sample composition. Thirdly, due to a lack of power, we were not able to perform full structural equation modeling (SEM) to test our conceptual model. Future research would benefit from larger sample sizes that allow for full SEM to assess the generalizability of our path model findings. Fourthly, our study design does not allow for causal interpretations. The use of a one-month interval between the two waves of data collection also limited our assessment of long-term effects, for example, regarding the negative outcomes of avoidance coping. To address this limitation, we recommend that prospective studies employ a longitudinal research design (e.g. cross-lagged panel model) with multiple waves and longer intervals (e.g. 6–12 months). In doing so, more comprehensive insights can be attained regarding the directionality and long-term implications of the hypothesized variable relationships. Lastly, future research can extend our conceptual model by considering contextual resources (e.g. social support; environmental factors) and other personal resources (e.g. career adaptability) as moderators that can facilitate the relationship between career insecurity and coping strategies. By applying these conceptual (e.g. contextual resources) and methodological (e.g. sample size, research design) recommendations, succeeding studies can better probe into the mediation and moderated mediation effects hypothesized in this research.

Conclusion

Using stress and resource theories as our theoretical bases, we tested and found some support for our model of coping with career insecurity among early-career individuals. Career insecurity was negatively related to approach coping and positively related to avoidance coping, while ambiguity tolerance played a moderating role in the career insecurity-avoidance coping relationship. Approach coping was also shown to play a mediating role in the relationships between career insecurity and individual outcomes, namely psychological well-being and subjective career success. Our study contributes to the current understanding of career insecurity's implications in the early career stage by uncovering the mediating and moderating mechanisms. Highlighting the significant roles of coping strategies and ambiguity tolerance in tempering the detrimental outcomes of career insecurity, our findings offer theoretical and practical insights, especially for the sustainable career development of young people.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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