



## **Protective and Risk Factors in Career Development**

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### **Abstract**

This paper proposes a conceptualization of protective and risk factors that influence the career development of an individual. According to the proposed model, protective and risk factors in career arise from the personal, relational, and situational domains. Personal factors are psychological traits that have been evidenced in the literature to influence career development, such as extraversion, conscientiousness, future orientation, optimism, flexibility, stress resilience, self-efficacy, cognitive capacity, or the health of an individual. Relational factors include social influences that can have either a positive or negative effect on career development, starting with the influence of parents, peers, and society, which manifests through social support and different relational styles. Situational factors represent different external influences that can influence career development, of which the socio-economic status and opportunities in the individual's place of residence are recognized in the literature. The paper elaborates the above conceptualization of protective and risk factors in career development through the framework of key theoretical approaches and current research in the field.

**Keywords:** career development, protective and risk factors, career counselling, career guidance, adolescence

### **Background**

Theories of career choice and development imply that in their career, people should strive to achieve their values, fulfil their potentials and that one should make career decisions following self-knowledge and considering various career options. However, while some adolescents are motivated to consider different career options and they make their

decisions following their interests, the career choices of some adolescents are affected by many factors that limit their choice. For example, it can be poor school achievement that makes them unable to enrol in the desired educational programme, the socioeconomic status of the family because of which they have no opportunity to attain the desired education, the social and cultural requirement to obey their parents' wishes, their peers' plans, or gender stereotypes. These factors can

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also include personality traits or low self-efficacy that prevent adolescents from dealing with the stress of the decision and from making an independent choice. The problems could also arise from the hierarchy of their values that does not motivate them to focus on career development. According to our expectations, individuals who can overcome these limitations will be intrinsically motivated to choose and develop their careers, they will want to achieve their career preferences and they will accomplish better career outcomes. On the other hand, individuals who do not have the freedom to autonomously make their career decisions will not be motivated to develop their careers, they will have difficulties in realizing their career preferences, and consequently, their career outcomes will be worse.

Traditional theoretical approaches, such as those of Holland (1959) and Super (1953), do not take into sufficient account the limitations of one's choice or the motivational factors behind the career decision. More recent approaches take into account some facilitating and inhibiting factors affecting individuals' career choice, highlighting the importance of social support and barriers (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), gender stereotypes (Gottfredson, 1981), or a range of adaptive psychological traits that may influence career development and career outcomes (Savickas, 1997). However, none of these theories addresses a wide range of protective and risk factors in career development that undeniably affect career choices. Therefore, we believe that the inclusion of risk factors as relevant determinants of career development could highlight important, yet unanswered, research questions in this area, as well as the development of a fairer, more inclusive society. In this paper, we want to present our conceptualization of career protective and risk factors and to elaborate on how it complements current theoretical models of career development.

## Protective and Risk Factors in Career Development

Theories that cover the broader context of career development provide a good framework for conceptualizing protective and risk factors. Relying on them and our insights gathered through the research in this area, we have developed a conceptual model of protective and risk factors that can facilitate or inhibit the course of career development. As shown in Figure 1, protective and risk factors can be personal, relational or situational. They can originate from various personal characteristics of an individual, from different characteristics of social relationships that an individual maintains or from various circumstances in which an individual lives. This approach attempts to cover a broad range of influencing factors from different socio-ecological levels and it corresponds to some extent to the operationalization of distal or proximal influences defined in Ecological Framework for Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) and The Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006).

*Personal factors* are psychological traits that can have a positive impact on career development. The literature has identified, for example, extraversion, conscientiousness, future orientation, optimism, flexibility, resilience, proactivity, core self-evaluations, self-efficacy, gender stereotyping, cognitive abilities, school performance and individual's health. Extraversion and conscientiousness are moderately correlated with work engagement and other positive career outcomes (Rossier, Zecca, Staufer, Maggiori, & Dauwalder, 2012); Šverko & Babarović, 2019), and their importance for career development has also been validated within the Career Construction Model of Adaptation (Hirschi, Herrmann, & Keller, 2015; Rudolph, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017; Savickas, 2002; Savickas, Porfeli, Lara Hilton, & Savickas, 2018; Šverko & Babarovic, 2019). Furthermore, positive orientation towards the future is related to career maturity and career outcomes, and it mediates the relationship between career

adaptability and life satisfaction (Santilli, Marcionetti, Rochat, Rossier, & Nota, 2016) and the relationship between career adaptability and clarity of career goals (Ginevra, Pallini, Vecchio, Nota & Soresi, 2016). Proactivity and core self-evaluations facilitate career development (Hirschi et al., 2015; Šverko & Babarović, 2019), while a higher self-efficacy supports career development in a particular area (Lent et al., 1994). The tendency to conform to gender roles has an effect on narrowing occupational choices (Gottfredson, 1981), which reduces the freedom of occupational choice. The cognitive capacities of an individual are related to educational and work achievement (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998) and are systematically reflected to school achievement, which in turn affects career outcomes (Babarović & Šverko, 2017, October; Dubow, Huesmann, Boxer, Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2006; Vuolo, Mortimer, & Staff, 2014) and career maturity (Babarović, Šverko, & Černja, 2016, June; Negru-Subtirica & Pop, 2016). Lent et al. (1994) considered that health status and disability affect the choice of activities that an individual involves in (experiences) and thus indirectly moderates the whole career development process. Also, the existence of health or psychological difficulties in childhood has proven to be a key determinant of general and occupational well-being in adulthood (Frijters, Johnston, & Shields, 2011). Although it is hard to point out the most important personal factors that have an impact on career development, by our research and professional work, we consider that low school achievement and low self-evaluations are the most common aggravating factors, while extraversion can facilitate positive career outcomes to some extent.

*Relational factors* represent a variety of social influences that can act positively or negatively on career development, starting with the influence of parents, peers, and society as a whole. The importance of social support has been confirmed in the context of Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994). Empirical studies suggest that the effect of

relational factors on career choices is direct, but also indirect, through perceived self-efficacy (Lent, Brown, Brenner, Chopra, Davis, Talleyrand, & Suthakaran, 2001; Lent, Brown, Schmidt, Brenner, Lyons, & Treistman, 2003; Lent, Lopez, Lopez, & Sheu, 2008; Lent, Paixão, Da Silva, & Leitão, 2010). Parents, peers, friends and the general school climate can be a source of support in career construction, can facilitate orientation towards the future and can raise career aspirations and foster career development (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; Lindstrom Johnson, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2016; Plucker, 1998). The importance of parenting styles in the realization of personal potentials was recognized by The Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2017). Parenting styles which act to meet basic psychological needs consequently develop intrinsically motivated behaviours, which further reflect on autonomy in career construction (Yu, Zhang, Nunes, & Levesque-Bristol, 2018; Schröder & Schimtt-Rodermund, 2013; Guay, 2005). Finally, the way the wider environment and social community interacts with the individual also affects the individual's choices. Social discrimination inhibits individuals in career development and prevents them from achieving the desired career outcomes – ranging from the discrimination based on disability (Szymanski & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996), age (Wood, Wilkinson, & Harcourt, 2008), gender (Phillips & Imhoff, 1997) or physical appearance (Marlowe, Schneider, & Nelson, 1996), to the discrimination based on ethnicity (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005) and religious affiliation (Duffy, 2006). Considering all relational factors mentioned above, our research on different age groups of children and adolescents point out that in childhood and early adolescence, parental influences are key factors in career construction, while in later adolescence it shifts more to peer influences and school climate.

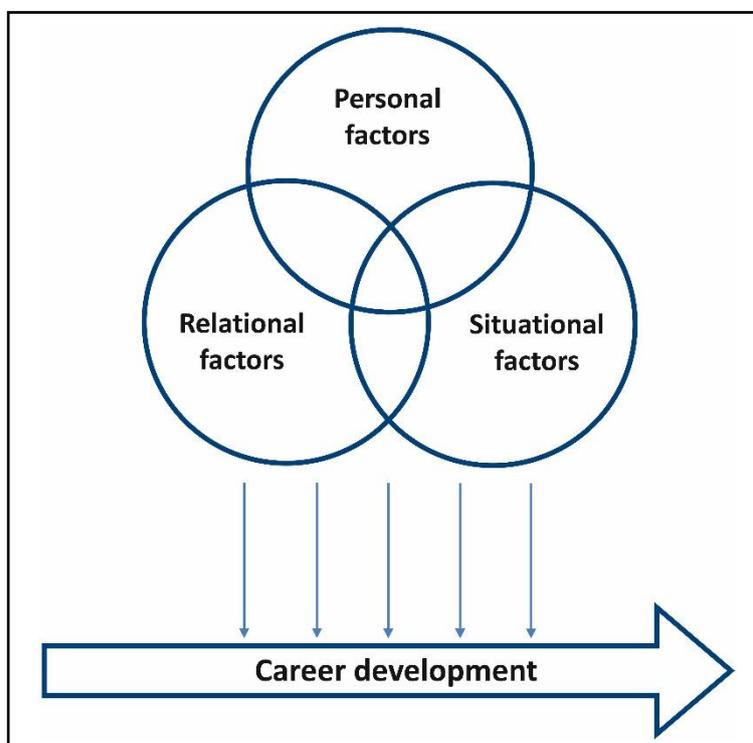
*Situational factors* represent different external influences that can affect career development. Among the living circumstances, an important effect on career development and career outcomes

may come from one's socioeconomic status and opportunities in the place of residence. Numerous studies have confirmed the adverse impact of low family socioeconomic status on career outcomes (e.g., Armstrong & Crombie, 2000; Fouad & Brown, 2000; Trusty, 1998; Turner & Lapan, 2003). Low family socioeconomic status is also associated with poor family support in career development (Keller & Whiston, 2008; Thompson & Subich, 2006). Whether it includes low income or low parental education, children of low socioeconomic status have fewer educational opportunities and have a narrower choice of possible career paths. Opportunities in the place of residence can also limit not only career choices but also opportunities for career development (Šverko & Babarović, 2019, September). Undoubtedly, low family socioeconomic status is recognized as the most important aggravating situational factor related to career development. Thus, providing career guidance and support to children

from these families should be our professional and ethical imperative.

Individuals exposed to undesirable effects of personal, social, and environmental factors have reduced opportunities for career development. The joint effect of risk factors on an individual presents a particular danger, as an exposure to a greater number of risk factors enhances their negative effects on career development (Babarović, Šverko, & Černja, 2016, June). It is necessary to detect such individuals as soon as possible, as adequate interventions that facilitate personal career development may reduce the negative impact of career-related risk factors. The elementary school system allows identification of pupils in risk and provides a place and facilities for adequate career guidance and interventions. School psychologists, school counsellors, as well as trained subject teachers should take this demanding role.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of protective and risk factors in career development



### Empirical Findings: Focus Group Results

To empirically identify the most prominent protective and risk factors in the career development of adolescents, we have conducted two focus groups with secondary school students, one focus group with university students and one focus group with school psychologists employed in high schools. The discussions revealed the importance of cognitive capacities and academic achievement, self-efficacy, and stress resilience, as well as the importance of social support and living conditions. High school students, university students and school psychologists all stressed that cognitive capacities and academic achievement strongly determine adolescents' career choices (e.g., *"It is no longer the case that you enrol in college because you want to, but because you have grades for it. I think that's a big problem."*, university student) and that the belief in personal capacities is crucial for accomplishment of career goals (e.g., *"A lot of people in my class will not even try to enrol in the desired university study because they are afraid of competition."*, high school student). It became clear that career choice and career transition place a great deal of stress on adolescents (e.g., *"One can accurately identify the students who are in the final grade. They go around, biting their nails, nervously flipping through some papers, notebooks, having some exams ... There is a lot of pressure from their environment, but also from the system itself."*, high school student) and that the stress reduces intrinsic career motivation (e.g., *"Students try to get as good grades as possible, which is why they lose all intrinsic motivation for the content they are learning. Some students experience burnout as early as in December, after which they are no longer motivated to do anything."* school psychologist). The particular stressors are the fatalistic and dysfunctional beliefs for which students think that they are making the one and the only decision for the lifetime and that further education at university level is necessary (e.g., *"Panic comes from the feeling of 'I choose for life'."*, high school student; *"And there is still*

*a sense of irreversibility of that decision."*, university student, *"High school students all think they have to go to college and in that sense they feel the pressure."*, school psychologist). Parents, peers and school climate play a big role in adolescents' choices (e.g., *"The parents also play a big role. In the end, it was just me who enrolled for psychology, and my schoolmates didn't, despite there were so many girls interested and researching and reading, but simply pressure from the environment and professors at our school distracted them."*, university student). Socioeconomic factors and educational opportunities in the place of residence strongly limit adolescents' career choices (e.g., *"I am the oldest of seven children and I enrolled university studies and therefore it would be very difficult if my next two siblings decide to study as well. Only the third sibling will be able to study... So the pressure is to make the right choice, to be happy with it, to finish it and then to pass the opportunity to others"*, university student; *"In the last couple of years in our region several studies have been established, and since then more students have enrolled in faculties. It is just because of the availability of the studies"*, school psychologist). Focus groups indicated the most prominent personal (i.e., academic achievement, cognitive capacities, belief in cognitive capacities and stress resilience), relational (i.e., social support and social dependence), and situational factors (i.e., socioeconomic status and educational opportunities) which have to be taken into account in the process of career counselling of adolescents.

### Practical Implications

Individuals who choose their occupation and career only within a very limited range of occupations usually achieve less favourable career outcomes and are also often less motivated to direct their careers. It is the reason why they do not seek the help of experts or do not participate in available career development programs. For the benefit of each individual and the development of a fairer society, it would be necessary to develop and organize interventions and career

counselling programs that would cover the majority of individuals at risk. The school environment provides a good opportunity for this. At schools, school career counsellors and teachers can provide career support to anyone, and especially to those in need, with no extra charge. Different types of career interventions may be provided at schools. Career development school programs can foster motivation for career construction and consequently increase the career maturity of students which further leads to better career outcomes. Individual career guidance and counselling provided by school counsellors can address particular career-related difficulties of an individual. We strongly advocate starting with these interventions as early as in elementary school to help children at the beginning of their career construction. We consider an early approach as most efficient and most cost-beneficial, both for an individual and a society.

### Conclusion

Theoretical models of career development include, to a greater or lesser extent, personal or environmental influences on career course, but they do not systematically disentangle protective and risk factors that may facilitate or inhibit career choice and career development. Through literature review and our research, we came to understand the protective and risk factors that affect career development.

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In this paper, we have proposed a conceptual model of protective and risk factors in career development. This conceptual model suggests the existence of three levels of sources of protective and risk factors – those that are recognized as an individual's psychological traits (personal factors), those based on the individual's social environment (relational factors) and those that originate from the individual's living or family environment (situational factors). The effects of particular constructs from the three proposed categories on career development have been well documented in the literature, but no systematic conceptualization of protective and risk factors has existed so far. The conceptualization of protective and risk factors allows researchers and practitioners to consider a wide range of potential sources that may have a positive effect on some individuals and a negative on others. It provides researchers with systematic insight into the constructs whose impact needs to be investigated or controlled in research. It can serve practitioners as an indicator of potential risks alerting them to individuals who need special assistance and additional career development support. Knowing that the process of career counselling is crucial for individuals exposed to risk factors it is important to provide career counselling systematically and thoroughly, for which we consider the school environment as ideal.

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