Does Socioeconomic Status Shape Young People's Goal Revision Processes in the Face of
Negative Career Feedback?

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Abstract

Based on social cognitive career theory and general self-regulation theories, we examined the relationships between negative career feedback (on goal suitability and goal progress) and goal revision intentions (for goal disengagement and lowering career goals), and tested the mediating role of occupational self-efficacy and the moderating role of socioeconomic status (both objective and subjective SES). Using a sample of 244 college students (73% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.28$ years), we found that both negative feedback types related to greater intentions to disengage from, and lower goals, via lower occupational self-efficacy. Higher objective SES strengthened the relationships between negative feedback on goal suitability and goal revision intentions, while higher subjective SES weakened these relationships indirectly via occupational self-efficacy. In addition, both higher objective and subjective SES weakened the relationships between negative feedback on goal progress and intentions to lower goals. Contrary to expectation, SES did not moderate the relationship between negative feedback on goal progress and goal disengagement intentions, nor did it moderate the indirect relationships between this type of feedback and both forms of goal revision intention via occupational self-efficacy. These findings highlight the importance of SES and occupational self-efficacy in young people's self-regulation processes when confronted with negative career feedback about either goal suitability or progress.

Keywords: career feedback; occupational self-efficacy; socioeconomic status; goal revision; social cognitive career theory

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For young people who are in the process of establishing a career, modifying or adjusting career goals is often an inevitable step (Creed & Hood, 2014; Hu, Hood, & Creed, 2017).

This goal revision process can be highly adaptive at times; for example, when the previous career goals are considered to be unsuitable, inaccessible, or no longer desirable (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). Giving up such goals and seeking alternative meaningful and realistic goals can prevent repeated failures and frustration that arise from unfruitful endeavours and, consequently, improve the likelihood of career success in the future (Ghassemi, Bernecker, Herrmann, & Brandstätter, 2017; Wrosch et al., 2003).

According to self-regulation theories (e.g., goal setting, Latham & Locke, 1991; control, Carver & Scheier, 1990; social cognitive, Bandura, 1991) and social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent & Brown, 2013), goal revision can be triggered by negative feedback (e.g., negative experiences). Consistent with these theories, previous studies suggest that when young people receive negative feedback that the career goals they are pursuing are not “right” for them (e.g., goals are not compatible with personal qualities) or their goal progress does not meet expectations (i.e., goals are not attainable), they are likely to withdraw commitment and effort from these goals, lower their career expectations, and/or shift to other career paths (Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Fonteyne et al., 2017; Hu, Creed, & Hood, 2017a; Hu, Hood, et al., 2017; Hu, Hood, & Creed, 2018).

However, the underlying mechanisms for explaining how young people revise their career goals have not been fully addressed in the existing literature (Ghassemi et al., 2017). Scholars have demonstrated that, when faced with setbacks, young people experience negative emotional arousal (e.g., frustration and anxiety about goal choice), which elicits goal revision strategies, such as lowering goal commitment and changing mind-set (Ghassemi et al., 2017; Hu, Hood, et al., 2017). However, not all potential mediators have been examined. Self-efficacy, for example, is considered a critical explanatory variable in SCCT and self-

regulation theories (Bandura, 1991; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010), but has only been examined in two studies related to negative feedback and goal revision (Fonteyne et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2018).

In addition, little is known about the contextual boundary conditions that moderate young people's goal revision processes in response to negative feedback. Family background, such as SES, has long been proposed as an important contextual variable influencing the education and career development of young people (Brown & Lent, 2017; Diemer & Ali, 2009). In their recent critical review of the application of SCCT, Flores, Navarro, and Ali (2017) called for more investigations into the potential moderating role of SES, as we know little about whether and how the relationships in SCCT models might differ for young people from different SES backgrounds.

In the current study, we contribute to a better understanding of the career goal revision process by examining occupational self-efficacy as a mediator in the relationships between negative career feedback (operationalized as feedback on goal suitability and feedback on goal progress) and goal revision (operationalized as intentions of goal disengagement and lowering career expectations), and examining SES as a moderator of the hypothesized relationships.

Career feedback and goal revision

Lent and Brown's (2013) most recent version of SCCT, the career self-management model (CSM), explains the processes and mechanisms that people use to manage career challenges and undertake career-related strategies/actions to achieve their goals. According to CSM, learning experiences are important sources of self-beliefs for realizing goals and directing young people's self-regulatory activities, and are essential requirements for career goal setting/adjustment and attainment (Lent & Brown, 2013). Career feedback, defined as information regarding the suitability of a career goal and the progress being made towards it,

is an important learning experience in career management (Hu, Hood, et al., 2017). Career feedback can be provided by external (e.g., important people such as parents, teachers, and peers) and internal (e.g., self-reflection) sources (Hu, Creed, et al., 2017b). Negative feedback on goal suitability indicates misfit between the current goal and the young person's interests, values, and talents, while feedback on goal progress implies that the career goal might not be attainable due to a lack of effort, engagement, and/or skills/abilities (Hu, Creed, et al., 2017b).

When young people receive negative feedback, it alerts them to gaps between their actual and desired states (i.e., generates goal-performance discrepancies; Bandura, 1991; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Latham & Locke, 1991). In response, they implement strategies to reduce/eliminate the discrepancies and, thus, alleviate the associated discomfort (Bandura, 1991; Carver & Scheier, 1990). For example, they can give up the goal, withdrawing time and commitment from it (i.e., goal disengagement) and/or aim for a less demanding/challenging goal (i.e., lowering goals; Hu, Creed, et al., 2017a). These two strategies might not necessarily occur concurrently. Young people can engage with a less demanding goal without totally disengaging from the original goal (i.e., remain somewhat committed to the original goal while simultaneously beginning to pursue a new lower goal), and they can give up the goal (i.e., disengage) without setting other goals (i.e., take "time out" from active goal pursuit; Hu, Creed, et al., 2017a; Wrosch et al., 2003).

Occupational self-efficacy as mediator between negative feedback and goal revision

Proposed underlying mechanisms for how negative career feedback triggers goal revision strategies have been well addressed in the self-regulation literature (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lord et al., 2010). Unfavourable feedback can elicit cognitive adjustments (e.g., lowering self-efficacy and outcome expectations for realizing goals, and reducing goal desirability and perceived attainability; Ghassemi et al., 2017; Lent & Brown, 2013). They can also elicit

negative affect (e.g., anxiety and frustration about failure, and uncertainty and doubts about goal choice) and trigger revision strategies (Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Latham & Locke, 1991). Last, motivational self-regulation can be activated (e.g., by increasing or reducing commitment to the goals; Hu et al., 2018; Lord et al., 2010).

Self-efficacy is proposed as a key explanatory variable between feedback and goal revision processes in self-regulation theories, including SCCT (Bandura, 1991; Lent & Brown, 2013). When faced with negative feedback that indicates unsatisfactory career goal progress or incompatible goals, young people are likely to experience unfavourable cognitive/emotional disturbances (i.e., discrepancies, disappointment; Anderson & Mounts, 2012). As a result, they are likely to doubt their capabilities to eventually achieve these goals (i.e., decreasing occupational self-efficacy), and, in turn, re-evaluate the goal content and difficulty level and undertake adjustment strategies to reduce the discrepancies and avoid failure (e.g., lowering career aspirations, giving up and pursuing other more realistic/suitable goals; Hu et al., 2018).

To our knowledge, only two studies have examined this directly. First, Fonteyne et al. (2017) found that tertiary students who were told that they might not pass their course (i.e., negative feedback) were more likely to lower their self-beliefs about completing the program, although lowered self-efficacy was unrelated to goal revision strategies such as changing study program. Similarly, Hu et al. (2018) also reported no association between occupational self-efficacy and shifting to other career goals. However, in the face of negative feedback, young people can disengage from a career goal without necessarily shifting to another one as goal disengagement and goal shifting reflect different goal adjustment strategies (Hu, Creed, et al., 2017a; Wrosch et al., 2003). In addition, people might also experience different psychological processes when they think about lowering career expectations, compared to shifting to another career path (Wrosch et al., 2003). No studies to date have examined the

indirect paths from negative career feedback to goal disengagement and/or lowering career expectations via reduced self-confidence to achieve the chosen career goal.

In the current study, we fill this gap by testing a SCCT model in which two types of negative career feedback (i.e., feedback on goal suitability and on goal progress) relate to greater intentions for goal disengagement and lowering of career goals via lower occupational self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in realizing chosen career goals; see Figure 1).

Hypothesis 1: occupational self-efficacy mediates the relationships between negative feedback on goal suitability and greater intentions for goal disengagement (H1a) and lowering of goals (H1b)

Hypothesis 2: occupational self-efficacy mediates the relationships between negative feedback on goal progress and greater intentions for goal disengagement (H2a) and lowering of goals (H2b).

SES as a contextual moderator

From a SCCT perspective, SES is an important contextual affordance that can influence career development processes such as career interests, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, perceived barriers, goal choice, and educational and occupational attainments (Brown & Lent, 2017; Diemer & Ali, 2009; Flores et al., 2017). Scholars measure SES with objective and subjective indicators (Flores et al., 2017). For young people in tertiary education settings, objective SES primarily reflects financial, material, and social resources provided by parents (Diemer, Mistry, Wadsworth, López, & Reimers, 2013; Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012). Subjective SES, on the other hand, reflects self-perceptions of social status relative to others (e.g., students in the same class, university, or country; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009).

Previous studies suggest that objective and subjective SES are moderately correlated but distinct dimensions of SES, and, thus, might play different roles in career-related processes

(Flores et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2012). However, of the existing studies that directly examined SES in SCCT models, the majority only used objective indices, and none tested SES as a moderator (Brown & Lent, 2017; Flores et al., 2017). In their review of SCCT and SES, Flores et al. (2017) proposed several possible moderating paths; for example, the relationship between career interests and career goal choice might be stronger for those from higher SES families. This is because higher SES students enjoy better resources and have more opportunities, resulting in a relatively higher focus on personal interests and happiness, and fewer concerns about economic security (Blustein et al., 2002; Flores et al., 2017).

Consistent with this, general psychological theories (e.g., social cognitive theory of social class, Kraus et al., 2012; children's early social context model; Chen & Miller, 2012) also suggest that higher SES people are more likely to pursue personal, interest-driven goals; whereas their relatively disadvantaged counterparts are more likely to pursue goals consistent with the expectations of others, due to a lifetime of reduced resources. In addition, when confronted with setbacks/threats, those with more resources might have different types of coping strategies to those from a lower SES (Chen & Miller, 2012). In the face of setbacks, people from higher SES backgrounds are more likely to undertake proactive strategies to eliminate stressors and resolve the situation; in contrast, people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to adjust themselves to the stressors due to a lower sense of personal control and fewer options (Chen & Miller, 2012; Gallo & Matthews, 2003).

From this, we expected that SES would moderate the way that young people responded to negative career feedback (i.e., to setbacks). Higher SES students are relatively more concerned with personal needs, and, thus, are more proactive in eliminating any misfit and/or seeking more appropriate goals; whereas students with reduced resources, who are used to having less choice, will be less active in this situation (Flores et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2012).

Thus, we would expect more active goal revision intentions when SES is higher and students receive feedback that their goals are unsuitable.

Hypothesis 3: in response to negative feedback on goal suitability, higher SES students, compared to lower SES students, will have greater intentions for goal disengagement (H3a) and lowering of goals (H3b).

In contrast, when facing negative feedback on goal progress, which implies that the career goals might not be achieved due to lack of effort, skill, or ability, higher SES students will be more likely to persist with their goals and exert more effort to improve their ability and goal progress (i.e., less likely to lower expectations and/or to disengage); whereas lower SES students will be more vigilant to the threat and more likely to adjust their goals to accommodate the feedback (Chen & Miller, 2012; Gallo & Matthews, 2003).

Hypothesis 4: in response to negative feedback on goal progress, higher SES students, compared to lower, will have lower intentions to disengage from (H4a) and to lower (H4b) their goals.

In addition, these potential SES effects were expected to moderate the mediation by occupational self-efficacy. In the face of setbacks, higher SES students are more likely to maintain a higher level of personal control, and, thus, less likely to lower their self-beliefs for realizing their career goals (Chen & Miller, 2012; Kraus et al., 2012).

Hypothesis 5: the indirect relationships between negative feedback on goal suitability and goal disengagement (H5a) and lowering goals (H5b), and between negative feedback on goal progress and goal disengagement (H5c) and lowering goals (H5d) via occupational self-efficacy, will be weaker for higher SES students.

Both objective and subjective SES were assessed and differences in the hypothesized relationships were explored. See Figure 1 for the hypothesized model.

Method

Participants

Invitations to participate in the study were given to 380 young adults from two colleges in Nanjing, China, and 252 accepted (response rate 66.3%). Of these, 8 were excluded due to failing attention check questions, not completing the questionnaire, or giving patterned responses (final $N = 244$). There were no missing data in this final sample (73.0% female; mean age = 19.28 years, $SD = 0.94$): 50.8% were 1st-year, 46.7% were 2nd-year, and 2.5% were 3rd-year students, drawn from a range of disciplines (e.g., public health, nutrition, engineering, air service). Just under half (44%) came from rural (vs. urban) areas to enter college. As a proxy for academic ability, we standardized the students' college entrance scores ($M = 500$; $SD = 100$; range = 228.56 to 668.35).

Measures

We used standard translation/back translation methodology (Jones, Lee, Phillips, Zhang, & Jaceldo, 2001) to convert the career goal disengagement and occupational self-efficacy scales from English to Mandarin Chinese. The items were translated by the first author, who is a bilingual Chinese national and a career development researcher. These were then back-translated to English by a bilingual Chinese national research assistant. All three authors compared the back-translated English versions with the originals and adjusted wording where needed. We used existing Chinese versions of all other scales. Unless otherwise noted, all scales used a 6-point Likert-like format (1 *strongly disagree* to 6 *strongly agree*), and higher summed scores reflected higher levels of a construct. All items were answered with respect to the following generic instruction: "You might have various career goals, but when answering these items, think about the most important career goal for which you are currently striving".

Negative career feedback. We used the 8-item Feedback on Career Goal Suitability subscale (e.g., "I am told that my preferred career choice will not let me display my real talents", "My career goals do not excite me") and 8-item Feedback on Career Goal Progress

subscale (e.g., “People tell me that I am not working hard enough to get into my chosen career”, “When I reflect on it, I don’t think I have made as much progress toward my chosen career as I wanted”) from the Feedback on Career Goals Inventory (Hu, Creed, et al., 2017b). Previously reported internal reliability was good (Cronbach’s α s from .82 to .89 for feedback on goal suitability, and from .77 to .85 for feedback on goal progress), and validity was supported (e.g., positive associations with negative feedback from significant others, career distress, and career goal-performance discrepancies; Hu, Creed, et al., 2017b). In the current sample, alphas were .85 (goal suitability) and .80 (goal progress), respectively.

Occupational self-efficacy. The 8-item Occupational Self-efficacy Scale (Schyns & von Collani, 2002) was adapted for use with young people (e.g., “Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations in my job” was adapted to “Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations regarding my chosen career goal”). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*), with higher summed scores indicating higher self-efficacy. Hu et al. (2018) reported good reliability ($\alpha = .85$) in Chinese tertiary students, and found that the scale related to lower levels of career-related stress. In the current sample, $\alpha = .80$.

Career goal disengagement. We adapted the 4-item Goal Disengagement Scale (Wrosch et al., 2003) to assess the extent to which participants were thinking about giving up their current career goals (e.g., “It is easy for me to stop thinking about the goal and let it go” was modified to “I plan to stop thinking about my current career goal and let it go”). The original scale had sound internal reliability ($\alpha = .84$) and support for validity (e.g., related to greater distress and lower personal mastery; Wrosch et al., 2003). In our sample, $\alpha = .77$.

Lowering career goals. We used the 6-item Downward Goal Revision Scale (Hu, Creed, et al., 2017a) to assess students’ intention to lower career goals (e.g., “I plan to aim for a career that is less demanding than my current choice”). The scale has good internal reliability

(α s from .88 to .91) and support for validity (positive associations with career-related stress and disengagement; Hu, Creed, et al., 2017a). In our sample, $\alpha = .83$.

Objective SES. We computed objective familial SES by summing both parents' educational level (1 = *primary school or lower* to 6 = *masters or above*) and job status (1 = *unemployed, casual labourer, job-waiting, non-technical worker, and peasant* to 5 = *professional higher managerial staff and private owners*; Shi & Shen, 2007). The mean SES level was 10.01 ($SD = 3.42$; range = 4 - 19), lying in the middle of the possible range (i.e., 4 – 22; Shi & Shen, 2007). Alpha for the composite measure (4 items) was .77.

Subjective SES. We used a single item to assess participant perceptions of their familial SES ("When you compare yourself to your classmates, how would you describe your family's current financial situation?": 1 *Much worse off than others* to 5 *Much better off than others*; Quon & McGrath, 2014). Mean score was 2.84, $SD = 0.74$.

Procedure

The study was conducted with the approval of the authors' university ethics' committee. The administration departments of the two vocational colleges involved granted permission to approach course convenors and, with their approval, data were collected during class time, approximately one month before the final exam. The first author explained the study to students in their classes and distributed paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Respondents completed and returned the questionnaires in class. Participants were eligible to enter a draw to win a CNY¥500 ($\approx$ US\$73.50) shopping voucher.

Results

Analysis strategy

We used structural equation modelling (AMOS V24; maximum likelihood estimation) to assess whether occupational self-efficacy mediated between negative feedback and the goal revision intentions (Hypotheses 1-2), and whether SES moderated these relationships

(Hypotheses 3-5). Given the large number of scale items and the relatively small sample size, we used an item-to-construct balance approach to parcel the items to reduce the number of parameter estimates and increase model parsimony (3 parcels each for negative feedback and occupational self-efficacy, 2 each for the goal revision intentions; Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Parcel alphas were satisfactory, ranging from .55 to .69 (Kishton & Widaman, 1994).

Prior to the mediation/moderation analyses, we tested a measurement model to confirm that the five latent variables could be represented by their parcels and were independent of one another. To examine the mediation effects, we assessed the two feedback types separately, resulting in two indirect effects models. When assessing the moderating role of SES, we assessed the two feedback types and the two SES dimensions separately (four moderated mediation models). The two-step residual centering approach was used to create the latent variable interaction terms (Little, Kansas, Bovaird, & Widaman, 2006; Steinmetz, Davidov, & Schmidt, 2011). In the first step, we multiplied the SES indicator with each feedback parcel, resulting in three product terms. We then regressed each product term on all indicators (i.e., SES indicator and the three feedback parcels), and retained the residuals from the regression analyses. In the second step, we used the three residuals as indicators for the latent interaction term. A significant path from an interaction term to an outcome indicates a moderation effect (Steinmetz et al., 2011). We then employed bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs; 1000 bootstrap samples) to determine if the mediation and interaction effects were significant.

Preliminary analyses

First, we examined all variables for skewness (all standardized skew statistics were between -1 and 1) and kurtosis (between -2 and 2), finding no problems (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2014). The 5-factor measurement model yielded a satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2(55)$

= 85.03, $p = .01$; CFI = .98, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .05 [.03, .07] (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). All factor loadings were $>.70$, ranging from .71 to .89. To examine the discriminative validity of the constructs, we also computed two alternative models, one 4-factor model with the two negative feedback types loading on one factor (alternative model 1), and one 4-factor model with the two outcomes (intentions for goal disengagement and lowering goals) loading on one factor (alternative model 2). As Table 1 shows, the hypothesized model was the best fit based on the obtained indices. The correlations among the latent variables for this model mirrored those for the scale totals (see Table 2). Negative feedback on goal progress and on goal suitability were related to lower occupational self-efficacy ($r = -.39$ and $-.40$, respectively; $ps < .001$) and greater intentions for lowering goals ($r = .17$ and $.38$; $ps < .05$). Contrary to expectations, only negative feedback on goal suitability was related to a greater intention for goal disengagement ($r = .46$, $p < .001$); negative feedback on goal progress was unrelated ($r = .10$, $p = .11$).

SES was not related to occupational self-efficacy and goal revision intentions ($r = -.06$ to $.06$, $ps > .05$), with one exception: objective SES had a weak association with intentions for goal disengagement ($r = .14$, $p = .02$). Academic ability was related negatively to goal disengagement intentions ($r = -.22$, $p = .01$). In addition, t -tests showed that male students ($t = 3.62$, $p < .001$) and those from urban areas ($t = -2.25$, $p = .03$) reported greater intentions to disengage from their current career goals. Thus, academic ability, gender, and family origin were included as covariates in subsequent analyses.

Mediation analyses

Occupational self-efficacy as mediator between negative feedback on goal suitability and goal revision intentions. The indirect effects model with direct paths from negative feedback on goal suitability to goal revision intentions had a good fit, $\chi^2(52) = 63.78$, $p = .13$; CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .03 [.00, .05], and showed an improved fit over the model

that only included the indirect paths, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 33.62, p < .001$. In this model, gender was the only covariate that had a significant path to one of the outcomes (to disengagement intentions, $\beta = -.17, p = .01$). We found significant negative paths from feedback on goal suitability to occupational self-efficacy ($\beta = -.46, p < .001; R^2 = .22$), and from occupational self-efficacy to intentions for disengagement and lowering goals ($\beta = -.23$ and $-.19, ps < .05$). In addition, with the mediator included, there were significant direct paths from negative feedback on goal suitability to goal disengagement ($\beta = .44, p < .001, R^2 = .40$) and lowering goals intentions ($\beta = .35, p < .001, R^2 = .23$). We then confirmed that occupational self-efficacy partially mediated between negative feedback on goal suitability and intentions for goal disengagement ($CI_{95}: .04, .18$; indirect effect = .11; total effect = .54) and lowering goals ($CI_{95}: .02, .18$; indirect effect = .09; total effect = .44; see Table 3). Thus, H1 was confirmed.

Occupational self-efficacy as mediator between negative feedback on goal progress and goal revision intentions. The indirect effects model had a good fit, $\chi^2(52) = 78.10, p = .01$; CFI = .98, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .05 [.02, .07], but was not significantly different from the model without direct paths from negative feedback on goal progress to goal revision intentions, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 2.09, p > .05$. Of the covariates, gender and academic ability had negative paths to disengagement intentions ($\beta = -.18$ and $-.16$, respectively; $ps < .05$). There were significant negative paths from feedback on goal progress to occupational self-efficacy ($\beta = -.49, p < .001; R^2 = .22$), and from occupational self-efficacy to intentions for disengagement and lowering goals ($\beta = -.44$ and $-.31, ps < .001$). With occupational self-efficacy included, there were no significant paths from negative feedback on goal progress to goal disengagement ($\beta = -.04, p = .63, R^2 = .28$) and lowering goals intentions ($\beta = .08, p = .33, R^2 = .15$). We then confirmed significant indirect effects for negative feedback on goal progress on intentions for goal disengagement ($CI_{95}: .12, .31$; indirect effect = .21; total effect = .17)

and lowering goals (CI_{95} : .08, .25; indirect effect = .15; total effect = .24; see Table 3). H2 was supported.

Moderation analyses

SES as moderator between negative feedback on goal suitability and goal revision

intentions. When assessing whether SES moderated the negative feedback on goal suitability/goal revision intentions relationships (Hypotheses 3-5), we controlled for subjective SES when testing objective SES as a moderator, and vice versa. First, we tested the moderating effect of SES on the mediation model where negative feedback on goal suitability related to goal revision intentions via occupational self-efficacy. To do this, we linked the latent interaction term to both mediator and outcomes.

The model for objective SES fitted well, $\chi^2(114) = 140.73$, $p = .05$; CFI = .99, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .03 [.01, .05]. See Figure 2 for estimates. There were significant total effects for the interaction term on both intentions for goal disengagement ($\beta = .16$; CI_{95} : .01, .29, $p = .01$; $R^2 = .40$) and lowering goals ($\beta = .20$; CI_{95} : .07, .35, $p = .01$; $R^2 = .35$), indicating that higher objective SES strengthened the links between negative feedback on goal suitability and goal revision intentions. As shown in Figures 3a and 3b, the effects of this feedback on disengagement and lowering goals intentions, respectively, were weaker for students with lower objective SES and stronger for students with higher objective SES; H3a and H3b were supported. However, we found no significant path from the interaction term to occupational self-efficacy ($\beta = .01$; CI_{95} : -.11, .20, $p = .87$; $R^2 = .21$), and there were no significant indirect effects from the interaction term to disengagement (CI_{95} : -.05, .02) and lowering goals (CI_{95} : -.06, .02), indicating that objective SES did not moderate the indirect relationships via occupational self-efficacy. H5a and H5b, thus, were not supported.

With subjective SES, $\chi^2(114) = 124.26$, $p = .24$; CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .02 [.00, .04], we found no significant total effects for the interaction term on intentions for

disengagement ($\beta = .02$; CI_{95} : $-.15, .16$, $p = .02$; $R^2 = .37$) or lowering goals ($\beta = .01$; CI_{95} : $-.13, .14$, $p = .38$; $R^2 = .21$), and there were no moderating effects of subjective SES on the negative feedback on goal suitability/goal revision intention links. Thus, for subjective SES, H3a and H3b were not supported. We found one significant path from the interaction term to occupational self-efficacy ($\beta = .19$; CI_{95} : $.08, .35$, $p = .01$; $R^2 = .24$). As indicated in Figure 3c, higher subjective SES buffered the relationship between negative feedback on goal suitability and occupational self-efficacy. In addition, we found significant moderations by subjective SES of the indirect paths from negative feedback on goal suitability to goal revision intentions via occupational self-efficacy (goal disengagement CI_{95} : $-.11, -.01$; lowering goals CI_{95} : $-.11, -.01$). Higher subjective SES buffered the negative feedback on goal suitability/goal revision intentions links via occupational self-efficacy. H5a and H5b were confirmed with subjective SES.

SES as moderator between negative feedback on goal progress and goal revision intentions.

We then tested the moderating role of SES in the mediation model where negative feedback on goal progress was the predictor. The model with objective SES fitted well, $\chi^2(114) = 134.31$, $p = .09$; CFI = .99, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .03 [.00, .04]. See Figure 4 for estimates. We found significant total effects for the interaction term on intentions for lowering goals ($\beta = -.17$; CI_{95} : $-.31, -.02$, $p = .02$; $R^2 = .11$), but not goal disengagement ($\beta = -.01$; CI_{95} : $-.20, .15$, $p = .93$; $R^2 = .14$); H4b, but not H4a, was supported. The effect of negative feedback on goal progress on intentions to lower goals was weaker for higher SES students and stronger for those with lower SES (see Figure 5a). We found no significant path from the interaction term to occupational self-efficacy ($\beta = -.11$; CI_{95} : $-.22, .12$, $p = .13$; $R^2 = .26$), nor did we find significant effects on the indirect paths from negative feedback on goal progress via occupational self-efficacy to intentions for disengagement (CI_{95} : $-.04, .10$)

or lowering goals (CI_{95} : -.01, .09). Thus, objective SES did not moderate the indirect relationships via occupational self-efficacy; H5c and H5d were not confirmed.

With subjective SES, there was also a good fit, $\chi^2(114) = 124.22$, $p = .24$; CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .02 [.00, .04]. We found similar patterns to objective SES. There was a significant total effect for the interaction term on intentions for lowering goals ($\beta = -.17$; CI_{95} : -.30, -.01, $p = .02$; $R^2 = .10$), but not on goal disengagement ($\beta = -.06$; CI_{95} : -.24, .09, $p = .38$; $R^2 = .14$); H4b, but not H4a, was supported. The effect of negative feedback on goal progress was weaker for higher SES students and stronger for those with lower SES (see Figure 5b). Again, there were no significant effects for the interaction term on either occupational self-efficacy ($\beta = -.03$; CI_{95} : -.15, .15, $p = .69$; $R^2 = .23$) or the indirect path from negative feedback on goal progress through occupational self-efficacy to goal disengagement (CI_{95} : -.06, .07) and lowering goals intentions (CI_{95} : -.04, .06); H5c and H5d were not supported.

Discussion

Based on self-regulation (Bandura, 1991; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Latham & Locke, 1991) and SCCT perspectives (Lent & Brown, 2013), we examined the mediating role of occupational self-efficacy in the relationships between two types of negative career feedback (i.e., on goal suitability and goal progress) and intentions for goal disengagement and lowering career goals. Also, we investigated whether SES (both objective and subjective) moderated the negative feedback to goal revision intentions links. Results partially supported the hypotheses.

Mediating role of occupational self-efficacy

Consistent with self-regulation theories and SCCT, our results showed that negative feedback on goal suitability related to greater intentions for goal disengagement (explaining 18.5% of the variance) and lowering goals (12.3%). The results were consistent with previous findings that feedback indicating misfit between goals and personal qualities relates to goal

revision processes, suggesting that negative feedback can create doubts and trigger a re-consideration about goal choice, and, thus, can be detrimental to goal engagement and persistence (Hu, Creed, et al., 2017a; Hu, Hood, et al., 2017).

In addition, we found that occupational self-efficacy was an important mediator in explaining these relationships. In particular, young people who perceived that they received more negative feedback regarding the suitability of their career goals were more likely to report lower self-confidence for achieving future career goals, and, then, were more likely to report withdrawing their attention and investment from the goals and/or considering shifting to more realistic or less challenging ones. However, as this mediation was partial, other mediators need to be considered. Previous studies have shown that negative feedback on goal suitability is related to goal revision processes via increasing emotional disturbance (Hu, Creed, et al., 2017a) and decreasing motivation (Fonteyne et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2018). Future research needs to investigate the relative importance of different variables as mediators between this type of feedback and goal revision strategies.

Second, we found that negative feedback on goal progress was indirectly related to goal revision intentions via occupational self-efficacy. This suggests that when feedback indicates room for improvement (e.g., more effort or engagement required), it will elicit intentions to give up or lower career goals/expectations through decreasing self-beliefs about achieving the goals. As the bivariate correlation between negative feedback on goal progress and intentions for goal disengagement was not significant, this type of feedback only related indirectly to disengagement intentions via occupational self-efficacy. Previous findings on this link have not been straightforward. Consistent with the current bivariate results, Hu, Creed, et al. (2017a) reported that negative feedback on career goal progress was not related to intentions to disengage from goals six months later in a sample of Chinese students. However, Hu et al. (2018) in another study with Chinese students found that this feedback was related to higher,

rather than lower, goal commitment, and consequently to fewer intentions for goal shifting.

However, a weak, positive association was found with a Western sample (Hu, Hood, et al., 2017). These mixed results suggest moderators might influence the relationship. For example, young people might have different explanatory styles when interpreting negative feedback on goal progress, which influences what they do in response (Hayes & Weathington, 2007).

Those with more optimism or a stronger belief in effort might focus more on improvements implied in the feedback (e.g., working harder, engaging more with the goal, and/or seeking ways to make better progress), while those with different explanatory styles might devalue goal attainability and desirability and show goal disengagement (Ghassemi et al., 2017; Hu, Hood, et al., 2017).

Moderating role of SES

We contributed to the existing literature by examining one potential moderator, SES. SES moderated the negative feedback/goal revision intentions relationships, but the direction of the moderating effects differed across the two types of feedback and with the different measures of SES. Specifically, in response to negative feedback on goal suitability, students with higher objective SES reported a greater intention to disengage and to lower their career goals. These results support the theoretical proposition that students with more family resources attach greater value to unique personal interests/values in career goal choice, and, thus, might be more vigilant to misfit between goals and personal qualities; whereas their lower objective SES counterparts are more accepting and accommodating in this situation (Flores et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2012). Future research needs to investigate the mechanisms underlying why and how students with more family resources are more likely to intend to revise their goals in this situation (e.g., whether the strengthening role of objective SES is mediated by self-regulation mechanisms). It seems plausible that, in the face of this feedback, young people from higher SES families will be more likely to generate doubts and

uncertainty about goal choices, devalue goal desirability/attainability, explore other possibilities, and, in turn, adjust goals.

However, subjective SES did not affect the links between negative feedback on goal suitability and goal revision intentions, but it did buffer the indirect relationships via occupational self-efficacy (objective SES did not moderate these indirect effects). These findings suggest that subjective and objective SES play different roles in shaping young peoples' reactions to this feedback. A potential explanation is that the effects of different SES measures might depend on which is more relevant in the particular situation (Tan & Kraus, 2018). For example, although students with greater resources (objective and subjective) focus more on self-expression in life (Lee, Hall, & Wood, 2018), objective, rather than subjective (or relative), resources might be more relevant when making important, real-life decisions, such as abandoning a career goal and pursuing a more suitable one. In contrast, compared to objective SES, subjective SES might relate more strongly and consistently to personal control by directly shaping the person's perceived social standing (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Kraus et al., 2012). Thus, students with higher subjective SES will be more likely to have a greater sense of personal control in the face of negative feedback on goal suitability, maintain higher levels of self-beliefs for realizing career goals in the future, and, in turn, show lower intentions to adjust goals.

One limitation of the study is that we measured subjective SES using a single item relating to perceived family financial condition, and this might not capture the breadth of this construct sufficiently (e.g., educational resources and job connections; Adler et al., 2000). This might explain the inconsistent findings between objective and subjective SES, and might have weakened the moderating effects of subjective SES. Nevertheless, this explanation is speculative and future research needs to examine these relationships using other subjective SES measures.

Objective and subjective SES played similar roles in moderating the relationships between negative feedback on goal progress and goal revision intentions. The link between this type of feedback and intentions for lowering goals was weaker for students from higher SES backgrounds, regardless of how SES was measured. Negative feedback on goal progress implies that the goal might not be attainable due to unsatisfactory progress (e.g., lack of effort), and, thus, might be considered more temporary and rectifiable (Hu et al., 2018). Consistent with the general literature on SES, students with more actual or perceived resources are more likely to persist with goals in response to this feedback; in contrast, lower SES students are more likely to adjust (i.e., lower goals), as they might perceive fewer available options and have less resources to deal with the situation (Chen & Miller, 2012; Kraus et al., 2012).

To confirm this, future research needs to examine whether higher SES young people undertake more proactive strategies, such as exerting more effort and seeking new strategies to facilitate goal achievement in response to negative feedback on goal progress. Also, future research needs to examine the underlying mechanisms by which lower SES students are more likely to reduce career goal expectations. For example, it is possible that lower SES young people feel more stressed in response to this type of feedback, and, thus, are more likely to lower their goals to eliminate the emotional disturbance.

Despite our promising results, neither objective nor subjective SES moderated the relationship between negative feedback on goal progress and intentions for goal disengagement. In addition, neither measure of SES buffered the indirect relationships between this type of feedback and goal revision intentions via occupational self-efficacy. However, before we can draw firm conclusions, future research needs to replicate these findings, using broader measures of subjective SES, and test for other underlying mechanisms.

Practical implications

The findings indicate that negative career feedback is related to goal revision intentions at least partially via lowering occupational self-efficacy. Career counsellors can help young people identify the specific type of negative feedback that troubles them, integrate more objective feedback (e.g., exam results) into goal evaluation, and help them manage their goal revision processes accordingly. When confronted with adverse feedback on goal suitability, young people are likely to lower their self-confidence for realizing their goals, and, in turn, contemplate revising their goals. This type of feedback emphasises potential poor person-goal fit, and when this feedback is credible, revising goals in accordance with the feedback can prevent future failures and frustration, which can be beneficial for students.

It will be critical also to take student family background into account. Our findings suggest that students from lower SES families will have lower intentions to revise goals, possibly because they perceive less personal control in life and are constrained by limited options, financial concerns, and other people's expectations (Chen & Miller, 2012; Flores et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2012). Career counsellors, in this case, are encouraged to help them assess the credibility of the feedback by augmenting it with more objective feedback, and if it is credible, help them to explore other achievable career possibilities and assist them to adjust their career goals accordingly. Young people with more family resources will have a greater tendency to revise goals as they focus more on finding a unique career path that fits with their personal interests and values. In this case, counsellors need to help them evaluate whether the revised goal is indeed suitable.

In the face of negative feedback on goal progress, students from lower SES families are more at risk of lowering career expectations. Career counsellors can help these students assess whether lowering goals is the most appropriate strategy or whether increased effort and engagement and new goal pursuit strategies can remedy the lack of goal progress.

Counsellors are encouraged to help these students find the personal strength and resources to resolve the impasse. This should aid lower SES students to restore their self-confidence and assist them to progress their goals.

Limitations and future research

There are some limitations to the study. First, we used a college student sample and had disproportionately more females than males, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, we noted that there was a slight restriction in the range of objective SES in the sample, with no participants in the highest score range (i.e., scores of 20 – 22). This might have attenuated the moderating effects in the study (Brown & Lent, 2017; Flores et al., 2017), and might explain the non-significant bivariate correlation between objective SES and occupational self-efficacy. In addition, we had a relatively small sample, which might have limited statistical power to detect moderation effects, resulting in Type II errors. Thus, future research with a larger and more diverse sample would be useful to replicate and extend the current findings.

We measured negative career feedback provided by important others as well as through self-reflection. It is possible that students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to perceive or be aware of barriers that hinder them from reaching career goals, and, thus, might perceive more negative feedback on goal attainability (Blustein et al., 2002). Future research might use more “objective” measures of feedback on career goals (e.g., exam results that indicate suitability of the chosen career path) to examine whether lower SES students are more likely to revise goals in response to other types of feedback.

The findings were also limited to cross-sectional data, and while the relationships were consistent with theoretical propositions, we could not make strong causal statements regarding the relationships. Last, we assessed goal disengagement and lowering goals as intentions rather than actual behaviours. Therefore, our findings do not provide direct

evidence for the theoretical assumptions in self-regulation theories and SCCT. Experimental designs could be used to examine how young people respond to manipulated career feedback; for example, by investigating the difference in effort/time expended in pursuing a goal or perceived prestige of career goals before and after different types of negative feedback.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings suggest that negative career feedback indicating poor goal-person fit is related to a greater intention to disengage from the current goals and lower career expectations via lowering occupational self-efficacy. Students with more objective familial resources were more likely than those with lower objective SES to revise their goals in response to this type of feedback. In contrast, those with more perceived resources (i.e., higher subjective SES) were more likely to maintain a higher level of occupational self-efficacy in this situation, and, thus, had lower intentions to revise goals. In addition, although feedback indicating unsatisfactory goal progress was also related to a greater intention to lower goals via lowering occupational self-efficacy, this link was stronger for students with fewer resources. These findings demonstrate that occupational self-efficacy is an important mediator in the negative feedback/goal revision intentions connection, and the strength of this connection differs depending on students' SES. Understanding the underlying mechanism and boundary conditions of the feedback/goal revision relationship is important to inform interventions that can assist young people to manage negative feedback and revise goals effectively and appropriately.

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Table 1
Measurement Model Comparison (N = 244)

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta \chi^2 (\Delta df)$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Hypothesized model	85.03	55		.98	.97	.05 [.03, .07]
Alternative model 1	292.28	59	207.25 (4)*	.84	.79	.13 [.11, .14]
Alternative model 2	180.23	59	95.20 (4)*	.92	.89	.09 [.08, .11]

Note. CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation. * = chi-difference statistic $p < .05$ compared with the hypothesized model.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N = 244)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender ^a	-	-	-									
2. Rural/urban origin ^b	-	-	-.10	-								
3. Academic ability	500.00	100.00	.42***	-.09	-							
4. Objective SES	10.01	3.43	-.09	.46***	-.05	-						
5. Subjective SES	2.84	0.74	-.01	.37***	.06	.54***	-					
6. Negative feedback on goal progress	3.53	0.78	.07	-.03	.04	-.17**	-.09	-				
7. Negative feedback on goal suitability	2.82	0.85	-.09	.05	-.15*	-.03	-.05	.38***	-			
8. Occupational self-efficacy	3.41	0.59	-.02	-.04	-.01	-.03	.06	-.39***	-.40***	-		
9. Goal disengagement intentions	2.40	0.76	-.23***	.14*	-.22**	.14*	.06	.10	.46***	-.34***	-	
10. Lowering goals intentions	2.80	0.80	-.10	.06	-.09	.04	-.06	.17**	.38***	-.29***	.55***	-

Note. ^a 0 = male, 1 = female; ^b 0 = rural, 1 = urban; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Summary Data for Indirect Effects Models (N = 244)

		Occupational self-efficacy	Disengagement intentions	Lowering goals intentions
Negative feedback on goal suitability	Gender	-.02	-.17*	-.07
	Academic ability	-.05	-.10	-.02
	Urban/rural origin	-.03	.12	.04
	Feedback	-.46***	.43***	.35***
	Occupational self-efficacy		-.23**	-.19*
	R ²	.22***	.40***	.23***
	Indirect effect		.11 [.04, .18]	.09 [.02, .18]
Negative feedback on goal progress	Gender	.01	-.18*	-.17
	Academic ability	.01	-.16*	-.06
	Urban/rural origin	-.04	.11	.04
	Feedback	-.49***	-.04	.08
	Occupational self-efficacy		-.44***	-.31***
	R ²	.24***	.28***	.15***
	Indirect effect		.21 [.12, .31]	.15 [.08, .25]

Note. Standardized coefficients are reported. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 1. Hypothesized model. Negative feedback on goal suitability and goal progress relate to career goal revision intentions (i.e., goal disengagement and lowering career goals) via occupational self-efficacy; SES strengthens relationships between negative feedback on goal suitability and goal revision strategies, and buffers indirect relationships with the outcomes via occupational self-efficacy; SES buffers relationships between negative feedback on goal progress and goal revision strategies, and buffers indirect relationships with the outcomes via occupational self-efficacy.

Figure 2. Standardised estimates for moderated mediation model for negative feedback on goal suitability. Solid lines indicate significant paths; dashed lines indicate non-significant paths. Coefficients before slash represent total effects; coefficients after slash represent direct effects in the presence of the mediator. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

(a) Objective SES moderated between negative feedback on goal suitability and disengagement intentions

(b) Objective SES moderated between negative feedback on goal suitability and intentions to lower goals

(c) Subjective SES moderated between negative feedback on goal suitability and occupational self-efficacy

Figure 3. The moderating role of SES in the relationships between negative feedback on goal suitability and occupational self-efficacy and goal revision intentions.

Figure 4. Standardised estimates for moderated mediation model for negative feedback on goal progress. Solid lines indicate significant paths; dashed lines indicate non-significant paths. Coefficients before slash represent total effects; coefficients after slash represent direct effects in the presence of the mediator. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

(a) Objective SES moderated between negative feedback on goal progress and intentions to lower goals.

(b) Subjective SES moderated between negative feedback on goal progress and intentions to lower goals

Figure 5. Moderating role of SES in the relationships between negative feedback on goal progress and goal revision intentions.

Highlights

- Negative feedback related to greater intentions of goal disengagement
- Negative feedback related to greater intentions of lowering goals
- Occupational self-efficacy mediated between negative feedback and goal revision
- Higher SES strengthened the link of feedback on goal suitability and goal revision
- Higher SES buffered the link of feedback on goal progress and lowering goals

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Does socioeconomic status shape young people's goal revision processes in the face of negative career feedback?

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