

The relationship between career adaptability and job content plateau: The mediating roles of fit perceptions

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Abstract

This study is the first to test career adaptability as an antecedent of the job content plateau. Based on career construction theory and person-environment fit theory, it examined the mediating effects of person-job fit and person-organization fit on the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau. Results from 270 full time workers showed that employees with higher levels of career adaptability were less likely to experience job content plateaus. Partial mediating effects were found for both person-job fit and person-organization fit. Specifically, career adaptability firstly led to increased person-job fit and person-organization fit, which in turn resulted in decreased job content plateaus. Additional analyses showed that the mediating effect of person-job fit was stronger for female than for male employees. This study identified a new antecedent (i.e., career adaptability) of the job content plateau and revealed the functional mechanism underlying the effect of this antecedent. It offers innovative and useful insights for career management practice.

Keywords: career adaptability, person-job fit, person-organization fit, job content plateau

1. Introduction

The career plateau perceived by employees has been a growing source of organizational concern (Allen, Russell, Poteet, & Dobbins, 1999; Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). Considerable evidence indicates that reaching a career plateau may result in negative consequences, such as decreased job and career satisfaction (Chang, 2003; McCleese & Eby, 2006), reduced organizational commitment (McCleese & Eby, 2006), unsatisfactory performance (Stout, Slocum, & Cron, 1988), and increased intention to quit (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). The career plateau was traditionally defined as a point in one's career beyond which promotion becomes highly unlikely (FERENCE, Stoner, & Warren, 1977), followed by Feldman and Weitz's (1988) extension of the connotation of little likelihood of obtaining assignments of increased responsibility. This traditional view focuses on a hierarchical (or structural) plateau, which concerns employees' vertical movement in the organization (Allen et al., 1999; Bardwick, 1986) and has been dominantly studied in the career plateau literature (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Xie, Lu, & Zhou, 2015). However, advances in research suggest that in addition to experiencing a hierarchical plateau, employees may also experience the job content plateau, which occurs when employees are no longer challenged by work or job responsibilities (Bardwick, 1986).

Recent scholars point out that our currently changing business environments (e.g., the popularity of boundary-less careers and unpredictability of organizational downsizing and restructuring) have made understanding and addressing the job content plateau particularly important (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014; McCleese & Eby, 2006). There is also research suggesting that the job content plateau is related to more negative employee attitudes and, compared to the hierarchical plateau, can be more detrimental to the organization (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 1998). Emerging efforts thus have been devoted to exploring various antecedents of the job content plateau to identify useful strategies for solving issues caused by this type of plateau. For example, research has identified antecedents such as tenure, education, personality, work centrality, mentoring, supervisory and coworker support, and perceived respect (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008; Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). Despite this informed evidence, our knowledge of the factors influencing the job content plateau is limited because the current literature has largely overlooked some important characteristics associated with the resolution of the career plateau (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). For instance, the process of coping with the job content plateau involves self-regulating one's own psychological states to resume positive attitudes toward job or career duties (McCleese, Eby, Scharlau, & Hoffman, 2007; Milliman, 1992). This perspective suggests that personal factors that reflect self-regulatory competences may provide a relatively new lens through which to study the job content plateau.

The present study aims to advance this area by examining career adaptability as an antecedent of the job content plateau. Career adaptability involves self-regulatory capacities in career development (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) and is regarded as a psychosocial construct that resides at people's interactions with the environment and reflects their psychological resources for dealing with work and career challenges (Savickas, 1997). It involves a range of "attitudes, competencies, and behaviors that individuals use in fitting themselves to work that suits them" (Savickas, 2013, p. 45). Such attributes of career adaptability may facilitate individuals in overcoming career plateaus. The current study also examines the mechanisms of the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau by testing the mediating effects of person-environment fit perceptions (i.e., person-job fit and person-organization fit). The person-environment fit perspective is chosen because career development is driven by dynamic adaptation to one's associated environments with an emphasis on person-environment congruence (Guan et al., 2013; Savickas, 2005), and also because the career plateau is argued to be a person-environment interaction process (Hall, 1987). Specifically, drawing on career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005), it is proposed that career adaptability allows employees better to fit into their jobs and organizations, which in turn, based on person-environment fit theory (Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1998), reduces the likelihood of experiencing the job content plateau.

In summary, the present study examines the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau, with a focus on the mediating roles of person-job fit and person-organization fit. It contributes to the literature in two ways. First, this study examines a new antecedent of the career plateau. Although the importance of career adaptability in the career development process is well acknowledged (e.g., Sibunruang, Garcia, & Tolentino, 2016;

Urbanaviciute, Kairys, Pociute, & Liniauskaite, 2014), how it may influence career plateau issues, particularly the job content plateau, is not known. The exploration of career adaptability as a potential antecedent of the job content plateau serves as a basis for identifying new approaches to understand and address employees' plateau status in the career development journey. It also further affirms the broad applicability of career adaptability in solving career-related obstacles and bottlenecks. Second, this study investigates the mediation effects of person-environment fit perceptions. The career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005), along with its associated theoretical and empirical models (e.g., Hirschi, Herrmann, & Keller, 2015; Tolentino et al., 2014), assert the interrelations between career adaptive, adaptability, and adapting. The present study extends this theory and relevant models by establishing an integrative framework of career adaptability, fit perceptions, and job content plateau to highlight the mechanism through which adaptability strengths can lead to adapting responses. For instance, it offers deeper insights regarding the process by which the role of career adaptability (a reflection of adaptability strength) can be transmitted to cope with the job content plateau (a reflection of adapting response).

1.1. Career adaptability and the job content plateau

Career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005) suggests that individuals continuously adapt themselves to the environment through self-regulation and, in this process, actively build careers and work lives by imposing meaning on vocational behaviors. In career development, individuals develop various psychological resources to effectively cope with career-related tasks, transitions, traumas, and obstacles (e.g., career plateaus). Based on this theory, Savickas (1997) initiated the concept of career adaptability and defined it as the "readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions" (p. 254). Consistent with this definition, Savickas and Porfeli (2012) further explain that career adaptability resources are dynamic and changing self-regulatory capabilities over time and across situations, rather than stable traits. They have verified that career adaptability is a higher-order hierarchical construct that consists of four dimensions (i.e., concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) at the lower level, with these dimensions adding up to a global indicator that reflects the overall level of the construct (Savickas, 1997; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). *Concern* refers to the degree to which individuals care about the future and prepare for upcoming career and work tasks and challenges. *Control* describes the extent to which individuals hold personal responsibility for shaping themselves and the environment by showing self-discipline, effort, and persistence. *Curiosity* is defined as the extent to which people explore possible selves and future scenarios, and think about the self with regard to influencing various work situations and roles. *Confidence* is about individuals' beliefs that they can achieve career goals and aspirations, solve career problems, and conquer career obstacles. These four adaptability resources jointly function to shape actual problem-solving and coping strategies and direct adaptive behaviors in career and work life (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In light of career construction theory, this paper argues that career adaptability, which involves individuals' self-regulation capacities in facing work roles and

environments (Zacher, Ambiel, & Noronha, 2015), will reduce employees' chances of experiencing job content plateaus.

The job content plateau is regarded as an issue employees experience when they feel that their work has been mastered and perceive job tasks to be routine, boring, and unchallenging (Allen et al., 1999). Research shows that those employees who are adept at career exploration and planning, self-regulation, self-control, positive thinking, role transfer, and other career-related adaptations are less likely to experience job content plateaus (Allen et al., 1999; Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014; Wang, Hu, Hurst, & Yang, 2014). This decreased likelihood could result from these employees' abilities to mentally and psychologically cope with job-related problems, which might be a trigger for them to constantly infuse new and interesting elements to work (e.g., by proactively seeking alternative opportunities for skill development) (McCleese & Eby, 2006). According to career construction theory, employees with higher levels of career adaptability are more likely and willing to effectively use physical, cognitive, and emotional resources and efforts in their careers and work lives (Guo et al., 2014; Savickas, 2013). This tendency may lead highly adaptable employees to acquire enhanced self-regulatory abilities, to positively face openness to change, to gain new experiences, and to keep career proactivity (Zacher et al., 2015). Thus, career adaptability may promote employees to perceive positive aspects of their jobs and subsequently experience enjoyment at work. Although no studies have directly tested the effect of career adaptability on the job content plateau, in support of the above theoretical elaboration, research shows that career adaptability and its related characteristics can increase employees' perceptions of optimism about work duties and responsibilities (Tolentino et al., 2014; Zacher et al., 2015). Therefore, taken together, it may be expected that career adaptability decreases employees' perceptions of the job content plateau.

Hypothesis 1: Career adaptability is negatively related to job content plateau.

1.2. The mediating role of fit perceptions

This article further argues that career adaptability influences the job content plateau because it can influence employees' fit into their work roles and environments. Person-environment fit is a broad construct that encompasses a wide range of lower-level constructs that involve the nexus between the individual and the environment (Oh et al., 2014). It is one of the ideal psychological states preferred and pursued by most human beings (Jiang & Jiang, 2015). In the organizational setting, person-environment fit refers to the perceived compatibility or congruence between the characteristics of the employee and that of his or her associated work settings (Edwards et al., 1998). Since in the workplace person-environment fit has been popularly operationalized at the work and organization levels (Guan et al., 2013; Saks & Ashforth, 1997), this study follows prior research (e.g., Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001) in focusing on person-job fit and person-organization fit. In this article, it is proposed that employees' career adaptability, as a psychological resource, facilitates the process of their integration into their jobs and organizations, which subsequently helps alleviate perceptions of the job content plateau. As discussed below, career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2013) provides a basis for the effects of career adaptability on fit perceptions, and

person-environment theory (Edwards et al., 1998; Edwards & Van Harrison, 1993) may explain the influence of fit perceptions on the job content plateau.

According to career construction theory (Savickas, 2002, 2013), career development and adjustment is a contextualization process driven by adaptation to various career- and work-related settings, with the attempt to achieve person-environment integration. In this process, career adaptability resources, such as concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, can integratively function to guide employees' thoughts, reflections, and perceptions at work. As Guan et al. (2013) argued, the roles of these self-regulatory resources finally promote employees to perceive person-environment congruence. For example, career concern directs employees to spend time and energy in planning how to fit into the characteristics of work settings; career control assists them with work matters based on careful decisions and conscientious behaviors; career curiosity facilitates them in exploring the self and the environment; and career confidence ensures that employees will sustain their efforts and persistence should difficulties emerge when they blend into their jobs and organizations. Altogether, these psychological resources embedded in career adaptability play important roles in the person-environment integration process, increasing the likelihood that employees will find a good match of their personal attributes to the characteristics of the job and the organization (Guan et al., 2013). In support of this theoretical elaboration, empirical studies demonstrate that overall career adaptability is positively related to perceptions of person-job fit and person-organization fit by university graduates at the pre-entry career stage (Guan et al., 2013).

Plateau perceptions are generally regarded as undesirable career experiences for an individual, as they are commonly assumed to cause personal stress and depression (McCleese et al., 2007). Based on prior research, the job content plateau is inherently a psychological status wherein employees experience strain and particularly boredom (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). Person-environment fit theory (Edwards & Van Harrison, 1993) suggests that coincidence between an employee and his or her work and organization creates less negative career experiences. Despite the lack of direct research on the effect of person-environment fit on the career plateau, empirical evidence demonstrates that the job content plateau is lessened by effective use of coping strategies (McCleese et al., 2007), for which person-environment fit is to some extent viewed as a lubricant (Edwards et al., 1998). Similarly, research shows that person-job fit and person-organization fit decrease employees' perceptions of boredom in the workplace (Edwards & Van Harrison, 1993), which is a key characteristic reflected in the connotation of the job content plateau (Allen et al., 1999). Taken together, the above theoretical discussion, along with the empirical findings that support the relationships between career adaptability and fit perceptions as well as the relationships between fit perceptions and the job content plateau, suggest that fit perceptions may serve as mediators in the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau. Therefore, it is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Person-job fit mediates the relationship between career adaptability and job content plateau.

Hypothesis 3: Person-organization fit mediates the relationship between career adaptability and job content plateau.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Data were collected from an online survey administered on the website of a professional research company. Participants were full-time Chinese employees who were members of a professional research pool run by this company. Potential respondents were sent an invitation containing a hyperlink to the online survey. The first section of the survey informed respondents that participation in this study was completely voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Voluntary participants then continued to complete the entire questionnaire. A similar procedure has been adopted in numerous studies and confirmed to be adequately reliable (e.g., Holland, Allen, & Cooper, 2013; Jiang & Hu, 2015). An advantage of this procedure is its ability to generate data with wide representation of occupational roles (Holland et al., 2013).

Two hundred and seventy usable questionnaires were returned. Among these workers, 46.7% (n = 126) were female and 53.3% (n = 144) were male. As for their age, 12.6% (n = 34) were 18-25 years old; 34.1% (n = 92) were 26-30 years old; 35.9% (n = 97) were 31-40 years old; 14.4% (n = 39) were 41-50 years old; 1.9% (n = 5) were 51-60 years old; and 1.1% (n = 3) were over 60 years old. For education, 8.9% (n = 24) reported a level of high school or below; 15.2% (n = 41) held tertiary diplomas (without a degree); 66.7% (n = 180) held bachelor's degrees; and 9.3% (n = 25) had postgraduate qualifications. Out of these respondents, 1.9% (n = 5) had worked for less than 1 year in the current organization; 17.0% (n = 46) for 1-3 years (exclusive); 17.8% (n = 48) for 3-5 years (exclusive); 32.6% (n = 88) for 5-10 years (exclusive); 14.8% (n = 40) for 10-15 years (exclusive); 7.0% (n = 19) for 15-20 years (exclusive); and 8.9% (n = 24) for 20 years or over.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Career adaptability

The Career Adapt-Ability Scale (CAAS)-China Form (Hou, Leung, Li, Li, & Xu, 2012) was employed to assess respondents' career adaptability. As with the international version of the CAAS (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), the CAAS-China consists of four subscales with six items each for measuring concern, control, curiosity, and confidence as adaptive resources for people's career development. Respondents first read the following instructions in Chinese: "Different people use different strengths to build their careers. No one is good at everything; each of us emphasizes some strengths more than others. Please rate how strongly you have developed each of the following abilities using the scale below." Then they rated each item on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not strong) to 5 (strongest). Example items include

“Concerned about my career” (concern), “Taking responsibility for my actions” (control), “Observing different ways of doing things” (curiosity), and “Taking care to do things well” (confidence). Following Hou et al. (2012), a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (concern, control, curiosity, and confidence were first-order factors loaded on the second-order factor, i.e., career adaptability) was performed to test the factor structure of the CAAS-China. Results indicated that this higher-order factorial model adequately fit the data ($\chi^2 = 533.57$, $df = 248$, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .91), considering the relatively small sample size (Guan et al., 2013; Yang, Guan, Lai, She, & Lockwood, 2015). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the four subscales were .86 (concern), .83 (control), .85 (curiosity), and .85 (confidence). Cronbach’s alpha for overall career adaptability was .95. All results suggested that the CAAS-China had good structural validity in the current study.

2.2.2. *Fit perceptions*

All items for fit perceptions were presented in Chinese and responded to on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Person-job fit was measured by four items developed by prior researchers (Cable & Judge, 1996; Saks & Ashforth, 1997) that have been used in the Chinese context and verified to be reliable (Guan et al., 2013). An example item is “My knowledge, skills, and abilities match the requirements of the job”. Cronbach’s alpha for person-job fit was .82. Person-organization fit was assessed employing three items from Cable and Judge (1996) that have already been tested among Chinese workers (e.g., Guan, Deng, Risavy, Bond, & Li, 2011; Guan et al., 2013). An example item is “The values and personality of my organization reflect my own values and personality”. Cronbach’s alpha for person-organization fit was .84. CFA was performed to examine whether these two fit perceptions could be distinguished from each other. The two-factor model fit the data reasonably well ($\chi^2 = 42.65$, $df = 12$, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .09, CFI = .97), better than the single-factor model ($\chi^2 = 493.91$, $df = 13$, SRMR = .07, RMSEA = .19, CFI = .86). These results demonstrated that person-job fit and person-organization fit were two distinct constructs in this study.

2.2.3. *The job content plateau*

The job content plateau was measured using two items developed by Milliman (1992). These items have been employed in numerous studies (Allen et al., 1999; Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014) and confirmed to be applicable in the Chinese context (e.g., Wang et al., 2014; Xie et al., 2015). An example item is “I am challenged by my job” (reverse coded). These items were presented in Chinese and rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for the job content plateau was .78 in this study.

2.3. *Data analysis*

Following previous studies (Chen, Aryee, & Lee, 2005; Jiang, 2015; Jiang & Jiang, 2015), a two-step procedure involving both CFA and structural equation modelling was used to analyze data. First, CFA was conducted to test the hypothesized four-factor measurement model. This four-factor model was compared with three three-factor models, a two-factor

model, and a single-factor model. Second, alternative SEM models were compared to confirm the best fitting structural model and thus test the mediation hypotheses. Based on the advice of prior researchers (Chen et al., 2005; Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002), four item parcels were created for the overall-level career adaptability in CFA and SEM, with each six-item parcel reflecting concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, respectively. The score for such a parcel was the mean score of all six items assigned to this parcel. Item parceling could potentially reduce the inflated measurement errors, which occur when a large number of indicators (e.g., career adaptability has 24 items) are assigned to a latent variable and which may cause biased results (Jiang & Jiang, 2015; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Wisenbaker, 2006). In addition, the multidimensionality approach-based item parceling used in this study was also able to keep the multi-facet nature of career adaptability explicit (Little et al., 2002).

3. Results

The CFA results are presented in Table 1. As expected, the hypothesized four-factor model was the best model based on the combinational consideration of fit indexes (Jiang & Jiang, 2015). This result supported the discriminant validity of the model, indicating that the study variables (career adaptability, person-job fit, person-organization fit, and job content plateau) used in this study could be distinguished (Chen et al., 2005). In other words, it was both theoretically and statistically legitimate to treat these four variables as distinctive constructs in the following analyses. Additionally, as fit indexes demonstrated that the four-factor model fit the data much better than the single-factor model, the convergent validity of the measurement model was supported as per Bagozzi and Yi (1988). According to prior researchers (Iverson & Maguire, 2000; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), these results also demonstrated that the influence of common method bias was minimized in the current study. As Iverson and Maguire (2000) pointed out, this is further affirmed by the better fit as competing models increased in complexity.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables are presented in Table 2. As shown in this table, career adaptability, person-job fit, person-organization fit, and job content plateau were significantly correlated in the expected direction.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

As with prior scholars (Chen et al., 2005; Jiang, 2016), four conditions of mediation proposed by Prussia and Kinicki (1996) were examined to test the hypotheses. The testing procedure of

these conditions was in alignment with that put forward by Baron and Kenny (1986), with the fourth condition examined based on model comparison (Prussia & Kinicki, 1996). As demonstrated in Table 2, correlational analyses showed that career adaptability was negatively and significantly related to job content plateau ($r = -.48, p < .001$), satisfying the first condition and supporting Hypothesis 1. The second condition was met, for career adaptability was positively and significantly related to both person-job fit ($r = .55, p < .001$) and person-organization fit ($r = .64, p < .001$). The third condition was supported, for person-job fit ($r = -.50, p < .001$) and person-organization fit ($r = -.51, p < .001$) were negatively and significantly related to job content plateau. Post hoc analyses indicated that when examined using regression analyses that controlled for the influence of age, gender, education, and tenure, these three conditions were still supported.

To test the fourth condition, the baseline structural model (the full mediation model) was compared with the partial mediation model. As shown in Table 3, the combined evidence of fit indexes indicated that the partial mediation model had better fit than the full mediation model. Specifically, the values of SRMR and RMSEA were smaller for the partial mediation model. A chi-square difference test also showed that the difference in model fit was statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 10.62, \Delta df = 1, p < .01$). Therefore, the partial mediation model was identified as the final structural model. The standardized path coefficients are displayed in Fig. 1. When the direct path from career adaptability to job content plateau was added to the baseline model, the paths from career adaptability to person-job fit and person-organization fit as well as the paths from person-job fit and person-organization fit to job content plateau remained significant. Since the coefficient for the added direct path was also significant ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$), these results indicated that person-job fit and person-organization fit partially mediated the relationship between career adaptability and job content plateau (Chen et al., 2005; Prussia & Kinicki, 1996), supporting Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3. As recommended by Hayes (2013), the significance of unstandardized indirect effects was also tested using the bootstrap sampling approach (5000 samples). Bootstrap-based analysis does not impose normal distribution of indirect effects and has been confirmed to produce results of higher accuracy than does a normal theory test (e.g., Sobel test) (Hayes, 2013). Results showed that the indirect effect of career adaptability on job content plateau via person-job fit ($B = -.20, \text{Boot SE} = .07, 95\% \text{ biased-corrected confidence interval (CI)} = [-.33, -.07]$) was statistically significant, as was the indirect effect via person-organization fit ($B = -.18, \text{Boot SE} = .10, 95\% \text{ biased-corrected CI} = [-.39, -.01]$). Therefore, the bootstrap results provided further support for Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

INSERT FIG. 1 ABOUT HERE

Although this study did not hypothesize gender differences, additional analyses were run to explore whether the mediating roles of person-job fit and person-organization fit would vary with sex. Employing Kim, Weber, Leung, and Muramoto's (2010) methods, multi-group CFA was first performed to test the configural and metric invariance of the measurement model between male and female groups. Results supported the cross-group equivalence of the measures at both the configural ($\chi^2 = 254.84$, $df = 114$, SRMR = .09, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .93) and metric ($\chi^2 = 264.54$, $df = 123$, SRMR = .09, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .93) levels. The two gender groups shared the same pattern of fixed and free factor loadings and had invariant factor loadings, so it was legitimate to conduct cross-group comparisons. Following Kafetsios and Sideridis' (2006) approach, in multi-group SEM the paths for the particular indirect relationships were constrained to be equal across groups, and gender differences were confirmed by chi-square difference tests. Multi-group SEM results demonstrated a gender difference only in the indirect effect of career adaptability on job content plateau via person-job fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 12.54$, $\Delta df = 2$, $p < .01$). Specifically, this indirect effect was stronger for females ($B = -.29$, Boot SE = .10, 95% bias-corrected CI = [-.56, -.14]) than for males ($B = -.02$, Boot SE = .11, 95% bias-corrected CI = [-.22, .20]).

4. Discussion

4.1. Findings and theoretical implications

This study aimed to examine the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau and explore the mechanism underlying this relationship through investigating the mediating role of person-environment fit in the workplace. Results demonstrated that career adaptability was negatively related to the job content plateau, and that this relationship was mediated by both person-job fit and person-organization fit. Additional analyses also suggested that a gender difference existed in the mediating effect of person-job fit. These findings carry important theoretical implications, which are elaborated in this section.

First of all, as the first study to empirically examine the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau, the present study further confirms the role of career adaptability in coping with career obstacles (e.g., vocational bottlenecks). It has been found that career adaptability helps employees to alleviate their perceptions of the job content plateau. This finding extends the standpoint rooted in career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005) that adaptability resources equip individuals with self-regulatory capacities to deal with stressful situations (Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2013) such as career plateaus (McCleese et al., 2007). Specifically, when employees are highly adaptable in their work and career lives, they are less likely to experience negative psychological states such as a plateau status due to their ownership of more self-regulatory resources. Since coping with career plateaus may be regarded as a type of adapting response in career contexts, this finding has further confirmed recent theoretical models suggesting that career adaptability precedes and shapes adapting responses or indicators (Hirschi et al., 2015;

Savickas, 2013). Also, the identification of the impact of career adaptability has also enriched the career plateau research by introducing a new factor that may need consideration in the development or diminishment of plateau perceptions, in particular the job content plateau.

Second, the empirical examination has revealed the person-environment fit-based mediation mechanism underlying the influence of career adaptability on the job content plateau, and thus it offers possible explanations for why career adaptability might facilitate the overcoming of career plateau issues. The mediation results reflect previous theoretical and empirical perspectives that highlight the relevance of person-environment fit in career and work settings. On the one hand, career construction theory suggests that the career development process is driven by adapting to the environment with the goal of person-environment integration (Savickas, 2005). On the other hand, the job content plateau, treated as an unfavorable vocational experience in one's career journey (McCleese et al., 2007), has been found to be a function of both personal and contextual factors (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014; McCleese et al., 2007). Extending these perspectives, the present findings indicate that person-environment fit, as the integration of the exploration and reflection of both self and environment (Edwards et al., 1998), can be a connector linking employees' career adaptability to the job content plateau. This evidence suggests the importance of person-environment fit in transmitting the effects of career adaptability resources to cope with job content plateaus. On the whole, the identified mediation path integrates career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005) and person-environment theory (Edwards et al., 1998) to explain the psychological process of alleviating plateau perceptions at work from self-regulation based adaptability resources. More importantly, this mediation process has extended prior models (e.g., Hirschi et al., 2015) rooted in career construction theory by validating the path linking adaptability and adapting constructs from the perspective of person-environment integration.

In addition, the post hoc analyses detected a gender difference in the indirect effect of career adaptability on job content plateau through person-job fit: This effect was greater among female than among male employees. This result implies that female employees tend to rely more on person-job fit when they utilize career adaptability resources to conquer the job content plateau. No gender differences were detected for the indirect effect via person-organization fit. This may suggest that both gender groups value their fit into the organizational characteristics to a similar extent regarding the use of adaptability resources in resolving the job content plateau.

4.2. Practical implications

The findings of the present study carry important practical implications for career management and counseling. As with prior research (e.g., Fiori, Bollmann, & Rossier, 2015), the present findings emphasize the role of career adaptability in managing career-relevant situations (e.g., a stressful and dissatisfied career status). Since career adaptability consists of various psychological resources that facilitate self-regulation in the vocational development process, career counselors may design interventions in alignment with these resources, such as concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), to help resolve job

content plateaus. For example, in designing interventions for clients facing plateaus, counselors can guide them to think positively about their own career futures, practice tasks that facilitate developing decision-making skills, participate in activities that drive their exploring and inquisitive behaviors, and motivate themselves for enhancing self-confidence in overcoming career difficulties. These interventional strategies may be integrated simultaneously into the counseling techniques, given that individuals may need multiple adaptability resources to deal with undesirable career psychological states.

Additionally, the findings offer career counselors key knowledge regarding the psychological pathways that connect career adaptability and the job content plateau. With the evidence presented in this study, counselors will be able to appreciate the functional mechanism through which counsees' self-regulatory capacities in career development can reduce perceptions of job content plateaus. Based on the current findings, counselors need to consider a counselee's internal factors (e.g., career adaptability resources) as well as the compatibility between this counselee and his or her career contexts when seeking to deal with career traumas or obstacles (e.g., plateaus) (Maggiori et al., 2013). It is also recommended that career counseling practices take into account counsees' congruence with both their jobs and their organizational climates in initiating and designing interventions for undesirable vocational experiences such as job content plateaus. Furthermore, the findings of this research suggest that in order to make the best use of intervention strategies, vocational counselors may also consider gender differences. For instance, for female counsees, counselors may emphasize more strongly the psychological interventions that are used to establish and maintain the congruence between the individual and the job itself.

4.3. Limitations and future research directions

Despite the theoretical and practical implications elaborated above, several limitations should be addressed in future research. First, the employment of a cross-sectional design prevented further inferences regarding the causal relationships between career adaptability, fit perception, and job content plateau. Although the proposed mediation paths are driven by a strong theoretical foundation, the cross-sectional design is not able to exclude empirically potential reciprocal effects of the study variables on each other. Future research may use experimental or longitudinal studies to confirm causality. Second, the questionnaires were completed using a self-report format at the same time point. This approach may have caused common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Zhao, Hwang, & Lee, 2016; Zhao, Hwang, Low, Thomson, & Shen, 2016). Although the CFA results presented above have to some extent reduced this concern, future research is suggested to collect multi-source or multi-wave data as a way to address common method bias. Third, following previous research (e.g., Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001), this study operationalized person-environment fit as person-job fit and person-organization fit in the workplace. However, recent research has identified more person-environment fit constructs in the work setting, such as person-supervisor fit and person-coworker fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Different types of person-job fit (e.g., needs-supply fit and demand-ability fit) have also been verified in the literature (Guan et al., 2013). The consideration of overall person-job fit and person-

organization fit may only partially capture the mechanism underlying the relationship between career adaptability and the job content plateau. Future research should consider comprehensively the person-environment fit constructs in the work context and conduct more nuanced analyses. Fourth, as this study examined only a single type of career plateau, future research should incorporate both the job content plateau and hierarchical plateau to help obtain a fuller understanding of how career adaptability may help manage career plateau issues.

4.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has identified a new factor (i.e., career adaptability) that contributes to solving the job content plateau. It has also successfully established a mediation model that explains how career adaptability could reduce the job content plateau, with an emphasis on the importance of person-environment fit in transmitting the influence of career adaptability to handle plateau issues. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that highly adaptable employees are more likely to perceive fit between themselves and their jobs and organizations, which in turn leads them to experience lower levels of the job content plateau. The findings of this study empirically extend career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005) and person-environment fit theory (Edwards et al., 1998) to understand the psychological process of dealing with undesirable and unwanted vocational experiences. In practice, these findings offer career counsellors innovative strategies drawn from career adaptability resources to deal with career plateaus, especially job content plateaus. It is recommended that future research continue to explore approaches to manage plateau issues, particularly those unexplored mediation pathways and possible contingent conditions for the relationship between career adaptability and career plateau.

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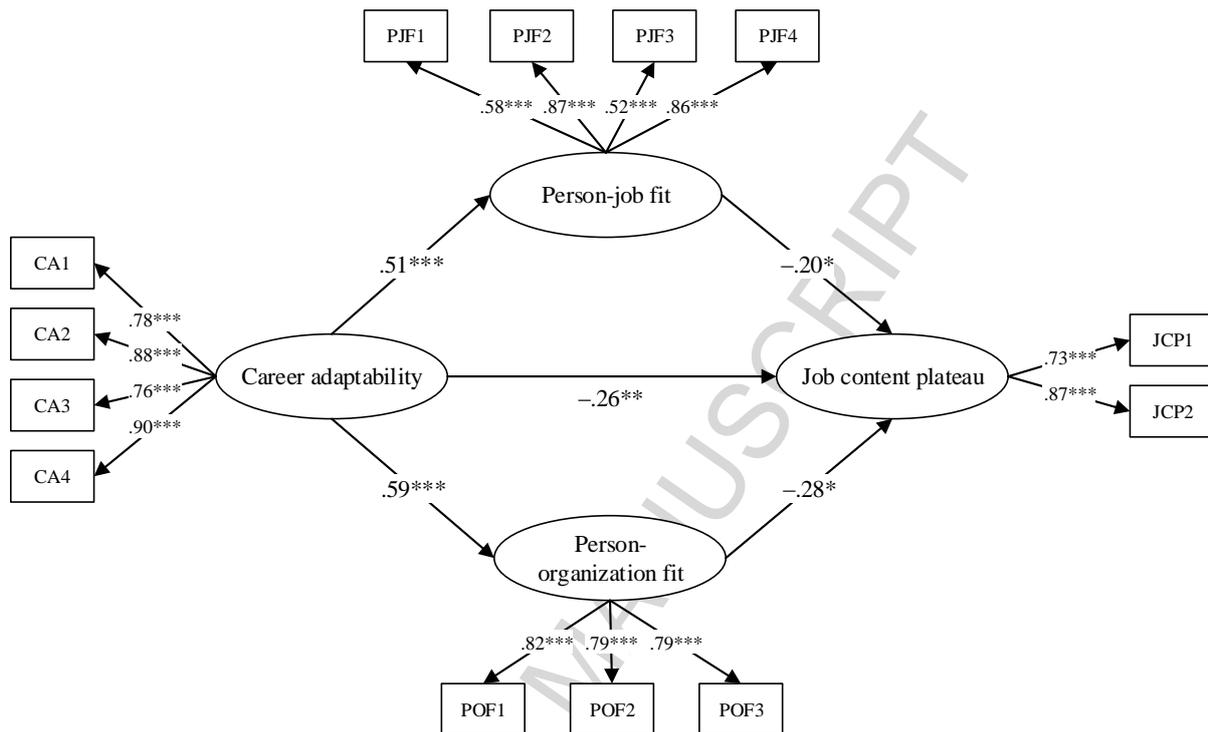


Fig. 1. The best structural model (the partial mediation model). *Note:* standardized coefficients are displayed. The fit indexes are presented in Table 3 (Model 2). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 1

CFA results for the measurement model

Models	χ^2	<i>df</i>	SRMR	RMSEA	CFI
4-factor model	168.28	57	.06	.08	.95
3-factor model A	261.16	60	.06	.11	.90
3-factor model B	396.74	60	.09	.14	.84
3-factor model C	394.86	60	.10	.14	.84
2-factor model	382.97	62	.09	.14	.85
1-factor model	575.49	63	.09	.17	.76

Note: N = 270. 4-factor model: each variables was loaded on a single factor; 3-factor model A: person-job fit and person-organization fit were loaded on one factor; 3-factor model B: career adaptability and person-job fit were loaded on one factor; 3-factor model C: career adaptability and person-organization fit were loaded on one factor; 2-factor model: person-job fit and person-organization fit were loaded on one factor; career adaptability and job content plateau were loaded on the other factor; 1-factor: all variables were loaded on a single factor.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	.53	.50							
2. Age	2.62	1.01	.27***						
3. Education	2.76	.74	.04	-.16**					
4. Tenure	3.98	1.50	.21***	.82***	-.19**				
5. Career adaptability	3.83	.55	.12*	.03	.17**	.03			
6. Person-job fit	5.31	.89	.13*	.16**	.32**	.17**	.53***		
7. Person-organization fit	5.18	.96	-.01	.05	.31***	.04	.55***	.64***	
8. Job content plateau	2.42	1.02	.02	.14*	-.37***	.12 ⁺	-.48***	-.50***	-.51***

Note: N = 270. ⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Fit indexes for competing structural models

Fit indexes	Full mediation model	Partial mediation model
χ^2	243.72	233.10
<i>df</i>	94	93
SRMR	.07	.06
RMSEA	.08	.07
CFI	.94	.94

Note: N = 270. There are two indirect paths in the full mediation model: career adaptability → person-job fit → job content plateau and career adaptability → person-organization fit → job content plateau. The Partial mediation model adds to the full mediation model the direct path career adaptability → job content plateau.

Highlights:

- Career adaptability (CA) negatively related to job content plateau (JCP).
- CA positively related to person-job (P-J) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit.
- P-J fit and P-O fit negatively related to JCP.
- P-J fit and P-O fit mediated the relationship between CA and JCP.
- Women had a stronger indirect effect of CA on JCP via P-J fit than men.

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The relationship between career adaptability and job content plateau: The mediating roles of fit perceptions

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