Disengaging from unattainable career goals and re-engaging in more achievable ones

Peter Creed and Michelle Hood

Disengaging from Unattainable Career Goals and Re-engaging in More Achievable Ones

Abstract

Participants were 181 university students who completed measures of career development (self-efficacy, perceived barriers, distress, planning, and exploration) and goal adjustment capacity (disengagement and re-engagement). We expected (a) that when contemplating unachievable goals, those with a higher capacity to adjust their goals (i.e., to disengage and re-engage) would report less distress, more career planning, and more exploration; and expected (b) that the relationships between goal adjustment and the outcome variables (distress, planning, and exploration) would be moderated by self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers. We found that those with a higher capacity to adjust their goals by disengaging and re-engaging reported more exploration. Less distress was associated with disengagement, but not re-engagement, whereas more planning was associated with re-engagement, but not disengagement. Additionally, we found moderating effects for self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers; that is, having higher levels of efficacy and perceiving fewer barriers protected when goal adjustment capacity was lower.

Keywords: career compromise; goal disengagement; goal re-engagement; career distress; career planning; career exploration; career self-efficacy; career barriers
All career theories specifically incorporate, or imply, that the life-long process of career development involves many episodes of compromise (cf. Gottfredson, 1996, 2005). Compromises occur before the individual has settled on a career, while managing a career, and when disengaging from it. Young people are attracted to many career pathways but have to give up or modify them because of perceived barriers; adults compromise constantly in their career as, for example, other life roles (e.g., partner, parent) compete for attention; and older people engage in ongoing compromise as they reduce their work in order to retire. While there are cultural norms associated with “not giving up”, there is a growing literature that suggests that giving up is appropriate and beneficial when individual goals are not attainable, and that how these incidents are managed has implications for well-being and behaviour (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schultz, 2003).

The literature on the management and effects of career compromise is very limited. The current study contributes to this literature by testing whether personal resources for managing compromise (operationalised as individual differences in the capacity to disengage from a previously held career goal, which is now viewed as unattainable, and to re-engage in new goals; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003) are associated with distress (operationalised as career distress) and behaviour (operationalised as exploration and planning) in the career domain. We also tested whether third variables affect these relationships (i.e., do career self-efficacy and perceptions of career barriers moderate these relationships). Testing these relationships has the potential to shed light on the mechanisms associated with compromise, distress, and behaviour in the career domain.

Compromise

Compromise can be considered as the process of giving up on, or adjusting, a previously held goal when it becomes unfeasible (i.e., goal disengagement), and either adopting a modified version of the goal or adopting a quite different goal (i.e., goal re-engagement;
Carver & Scheier, 1998). Specifically, goal disengagement involves withdrawing effort and commitment from an unattainable goal, while goal re-engagement involves processes around identifying alternate goals, giving value to those goals, and orientating oneself to achieving them (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003). While these two processes can occur sequentially, they do operate independently, meaning that individuals can engage in new goals without disengaging from old ones, and disengage from old goals without re-engaging in new ones (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003).

Much literature has focused on the importance of committing to a goal, developing confidence and skills to achieving it, and persisting with it, even in the face of setbacks (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010); however, individuals are forced to a compromise for many reasons, including biological endowment, physical growth and decline cycles, normative social cycles, and availability of time (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003). Goal compromise is an everyday occurrence, and, thus, can be considered part of the normal process of managing one’s life direction and achievements. Individuals set goals for themselves, monitor their progress towards these goals, and make adjustments to them or the behaviours associated with achieving them when discrepancies occur between their current situation and where they want to be. Goal adjustment strategies involve modifying the goal (e.g., raising, lowering, amending, discarding it), and adjusting the behaviours around the goal (e.g., intensifying or reducing effort towards achieving the goal; Locke & Latham, 2002; Lord et al., 2010). Adjustments occur around very abstract goals (e.g., living a good life, being ethical), specific goals (e.g., studying a particular course, buying a car), and behavioural sequences (e.g., driving to work, washing one’s clothes; Carver & Scheier, 1998). Finally, some people find it easier to adjust their goals than others. This reflects individual differences in cognitive processes, self-appraisals, and personality, which affect
how individuals typically manage the goal adjustment process across different situations (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003).

In the career area, compromise is reflected in most career theories. For example, person-environment fit theories (e.g., Holland, 1997) propose that career development is a process of matching one’s abilities, values, and interests with occupations that can accommodate these personal qualities and meet individual needs. While the individual may be attracted to many careers, satisfaction and success are associated with determining a good fit, and careers that do not meet this criterion should be discarded. Social cognitive career theories (e.g., Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1996) account for career goal striving through the development of efficacy and ability/contingency relationships (i.e., believing one can do well in a particular career domain, and that expending effort on it will be worthwhile), but that individuals must moderate, or compromise, on their career goals when confronted with contextual barriers, such as the inability to gain entry to a needed education program (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). Finally, Gottfredson’s (1996) theory of circumscription and compromise proposes that individuals proceed through a series of age-based circumscription stages (a narrowing of career options based, in turn, on gender, values, and self-concept), which culminates in a compromise stage, during which the individual discards desirable options for more achievable ones. Goal compromise in the career domain can occur also at the abstract (e.g., having an influential job, or one working with people), specific (e.g., becoming a veterinary surgeon, enrolling in a doctoral program), and concrete levels (e.g., completing a university assignment, being interviewed for a job).

The current study assessed the career-related compromises made by students transitioning to university for the first time. In Australia, students explore, consider, and rank order their preferences for university and course in the year prior to commencing tertiary study. There are many opportunities for compromise before they start their studies (e.g., only applying for
universities that are acceptable to their parents, or being rejected for their first choice course), as well as after they commence their studies (e.g., discovering their course is not what they expected, or that occupational opportunities are more limited than they thought; Albion, 2000). Compromising on a career pathway cannot be considered a trivial matter; rather, such a compromise is more likely to reflect goal compromises at the specific or broad level. Whereas individuals can typically compromise on trivial goals without cost, compromising on more important goals is more difficult, as these goals are more likely to be aligned with core values, and discarding or modifying them can be potentially more costly psychologically to the individual (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003).

**Compromise and Well-being**

Compromising on an unattainable goal by disengaging from it or scaling it back, and re-engaging in a new goal, can be adaptive for the individual as it reduces helplessness associated with the unattainable goal, frees up personal resources that were committed to it, and gives purpose by providing a new goal and challenges (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003). Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, and Carver (2003) found better well-being in students making the transition to college when they had a better capacity to disengage from unattainable goals and re-engage in new ones. Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, and Brun de Pontet (2007) found that goal disengagement (but not re-engagement) was negatively associated with health problems and sleep disturbance in college students. Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, et al. (2007) also tested for effects on changes in well-being, finding that poor goal disengagement (but not re-engagement) was associated with a decline in psychological well-being, and that those who were poor on both measures showed stronger declines in life satisfaction. Other studies have shown effects for disengagement and re-engagement on other samples, including parents of disabled children (Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, et al., 2007), older adults with health
problems (Duke, Leventhal, Brownlee, & Leventhal, 2002), and children with ADHD (Babb, Levine, & Arsenault, 2010). For a review, see Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Schulz (2010).

Compromise and Behaviour

“Goals are the starting point and/or reference point of almost all behavior” (Dijksterhuis & Arts, 2009, p. 479). Thus, giving up on or moderating unattainable goals (i.e., reducing energy, effort, and commitment) and re-engaging in new or revised goals (i.e., re-directing energy, effort, and commitment) will also be associated with a change in behaviour for the individual. These relationships are reflected in goal setting theories and implicit in the self-regulation of behaviour (Locke & Latham, 2002; Lord et al., 2010). Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al. (2003) showed that students with better disengagement and re-engagement capacities managed the transition to college better (i.e., reported better well-being), and reported higher levels of mastery, which reflects the contingency view that expending effort will produce rewards (Pearlin & Schoolder, 1978). Moskowitz, Folkman, Collette, and Vittinghoff (1996) showed that, in couples, when one partner becomes chronically ill, changing existing goals and setting amended goals leads to changes in behaviour around the new goals (behaviour change resulting from goal adjustment is reviewed by Heckhausen et al., 2010).

Current Study

While there is growing evidence that disengaging from an existing, unattainable goal and re-engaging in a new or pared-back goal can be adaptive, and associated with better well-being and changes in behaviour, much of the research has focused on populations with health issues. In the career domain, adolescents and young adults invest time, resources, and much of themselves in career choices. Having the capacity to disengage and re-engage if options become unfeasible should also be adaptive and be associated with less career-related distress and increased career-related behaviour. We expected that students with a better capacity to disengage and re-engage in compromise situations to also report less career distress as they
are not resisting letting go of unobtainable goals, and to report more exploratory and planning behaviours as letting go of a familiar path should stimulate thinking and action related to a new or revised pathway. Career exploration and planning are key career behaviours (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1996): career exploration is the assembling of information relevant to progressing one’s career goals; whereas career planning involves organizing this information to devise a course of action (Zikic & Klehe, 2006).

**Third Variables**

While evidence is accumulating as to the benefits of being able to disengage from unachievable goals and re-engage in new or modified goals, there is variability in the associations between these capacities and the benefits to the individual (Heckhausen et al., 2010; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003), suggesting that third variables may play a role. In support of this contention, Duke et al. (2002) found that social support and dispositional optimism facilitated older adults’ re-engagement in new activities after they were forced to give up their physical exercise due to ill-health. Rasmussen, Wrosch, Scheier, and Carver (2006) reported, in two samples of college students, that re-engaging in new goals was moderated by dispositional optimism. They suggested that optimists (compared to pessimists) find it easier to identify new goals (e.g., new social networks and academic commitments after transitioning to college) when forced to give up on previous goals (e.g., valued high school leisure pursuits), and find it easier to commit to the new goals, as they are more confident that things will work out in the future. Rasmussen et al. (2006) also suggested that self-efficacy might play a moderating role. When goal attainment efforts are disrupted, people reflect on their capacity to adjust their goal (i.e., evaluate their efficacy to take an alternate pathway to the existing goal, or set a modified goal), and weigh up their chances of success (i.e., evaluate their efficacy to follow an alternate pathway, or to master the modified goal), with those lower on self-efficacy less likely to manage the required goal adjustment.
Based on this literature, our study tested the moderating effects of two variables: career self efficacy and perceptions of career barriers. Career self-efficacy is the appraisal or judgement about the ability to perform behaviours associated with career choice (Anderson & Betz, 2001; Fouad & Smith, 1997). It is an important predictor of many foundation career behaviours, such as exploration, planning, outcome expectations, career goals, and career supports (Rogers & Creed, 2011). Career barriers are “events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, that make career progress difficult” (Swanson & Woitke, 1997, p. 434). We considered that students with higher levels of career self-efficacy and perceptions of fewer career barriers (in contrast to students with lower levels of efficacy and perceptions of more barriers) would better manage disruptions to their career goals; thus, we expected career self-efficacy and career barriers to moderate the relationship between disengagement and re-engagement and career distress, planning, and exploration.

Method

Participants

Participants were 181 first year students from a large public university in Queensland, Australia. Almost all students were Caucasian, which is typical of the campus student body, which draws largely from local high schools. The potential pool of students was approximately 220. We received surveys from 188, although seven cases were deleted because the surveys were largely incomplete. There were 134 female students (74%) and 47 male students (mean age = 21.79 years; SD = 6.66). There were disproportionately more female students as this is typical for social science based courses at this university. On a self-assessed measure of educational achievement (5-point scale: 1 = Very high achievement to 5 = Very low achievement) students reported a mean of 1.11 (SD = .65).

Measures
All scales utilised a 6-point Likert-like scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 6 = *Strongly Agree*). Total scores were used, with higher scores representing higher level of a construct. Internal reliability coefficients for all scales used in the study are reported in Table 1.

**Goal disengagement and re-engagement.** We used the 4-item Goal Disengagement Scale and 6-item Goal Re-engagement Scale, which assess individual differences in goal disengagement and goal re-engagement tendencies (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). Students were asked to think about the careers they had considered when deciding what course to enrol in at university; in particular, to think about careers and options they had discarded because they decided they were not attainable (e.g., because they doubted they could achieve the required university entry score, the training would have been too expensive or too long). This priming is similar to that used by Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al. (2003), except that their participants were asked to “identify specific self-defined goals that they had to stop pursuing” (p. 1497). Some items were modified to make them specific to the career domain (e.g., the goal disengagement item, “It was easy for me to stop thinking about that goal and let it go”, was amended to, “It was easy for me to stop thinking about that career goal and let it go”, and the goal re-engagement item, “I put effort towards other meaningful goals”, was amended to, “I put effort towards other meaningful career goals”). Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al. reported Cronbach alphas of .84 and .86 with undergraduate students, and demonstrated initial validity by showing that disengagement was positively correlated with the ease of abandoning specific goals, and that re-engagement was positively correlated with the perceived availability of alternative goals.

**Career distress.** We used eight items from the 21-item Subjective Career Distress and Obstacles Scale (Larson, Toulouse, Ngumba, Fitzpatrick, & Heppner, 1994). These were the eight highest loading items from a factor analysis reported by the authors, all of which tapped aspects of distress over one’s career situation. A sample items was, “I often feel a sense of
helplessness about selecting and planning my career”. Larsen et al. reported a Cronbach alpha of .90 with college students for the full scale, and addressed validity by demonstrating positive associations with context-free anxiety and negative associations with academic self-efficacy and active problem solving. The 8-item version used in our study was associated negatively with career self-efficacy, supporting construct validity.

**Career planning.** This was measured with the 8-item career thinking and planning subscale of Greenhaus’s (1971) Career Salience Scale. The subscale assesses the level and importance of career planning. Sample items were, “I enjoy thinking about and making plans about my future career”, and, “Deciding on a career is just about the most important decision a young person makes”. Creed, Macpherson, and Hood (2011) reported an alpha of .74 with undergraduate university students, and supported validity using factor analysis and showing the subscale was positively associated with proactive disposition and self-regulation.

**Career exploration.** This was measured using the 5-item self-exploration dimension of Stumpf, Colarelli, and Hartman’s (1983) Career Exploration Survey. The scale assesses the level of thought, reflection, and insight into one’s career development. Sample items were, “In relation to your career exploration, in the past three months how much have you: …focused your thoughts on yourself as a person in relation to your career”, and, “…had an insight for your future life and career from thinking about your past”. Creed et al. (2011) reported an alpha coefficient with university students of .82, and assessed validity using factor analysis and by showing the scale was positively associated with career planning.

**Career self-efficacy.** We used 12 items from the 25-item Career Decision Making Self-efficacy Scale (Betz, Klein, & Taylor, 1996) to assess career-related confidence. These 12 items were selected by Fouad and Smith (1997), and validated with middle-school adolescents. Sample items were, “How confident are you that you could: …decide what you value most in an occupation/…select one occupation from a list of possible occupations you
are considering”. Fouad and Smith reported a reliability coefficient of .79 with their student sample, and assessed validity using factor analysis and by showing the scale was positively associated with career goals.

Career barriers. These were assessed using 12 items based on McWhirter’s (1997) Perceptions of Barriers Scale. The original scale contained 24 items, but has been used in other studies in shortened versions (see Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003). The scale assesses the individual’s perceptions of potential career and educational barriers, including barriers related to family support, ability, expense, gender, ethnicity, educational preparation, need to relocate, and availability of jobs. Kenny et al. reported an internal reliability of .81 with students for an 8-item version of the scale, and, in support of validity, found negative associations with social support and career aspirations.

Procedure

The study was cross-sectional and survey based. Students were recruited from first-year university classes during the first semester of their studies. They received course credit for completing the survey. The students were able to complete the survey in their own time and return it to the researchers. The study had approval of the university’s ethics committee.

Results

Predicting Career Distress and Career-related Behaviours

In order to assess the correlates of the three outcome variables independently, and to test the interaction terms with each outcome variable individually, we conducted three separate hierarchical regression analyses. These analyses assessed the effects of goal disengagement, re-engagement (predictors), self-efficacy, and barriers (moderators) on the outcome variables of distress, planning, and exploration. Goal disengagement and re-engagement were entered at Step 1, self-efficacy and barriers at Step 2, and four 2-way interaction terms (based on the products of standardised scores) were entered in turn at Step 3. Age, gender, and educational
achievement were assessed as possible covariates. Educational achievement was significantly associated with career distress ($r = .23, p = .002$), and was included as a covariate when testing career distress. See Table 1 for summary data and bivariate correlations.

Goal disengagement and re-engagement at Step 1 accounted for approximately 5% of the variance in each of the outcome variables: disengagement uniquely predicted distress ($sr^2 = 5.02\%$; $sr^2$ is the squared semi-partial correlation, which is the percentage of unique variance explained by this variable after the effects of the other predictor variables are partialled out, or controlled) and exploration ($sr^2 = 3.28\%$), while re-engagement uniquely predicted planning ($sr^2 = 4.54\%$) and exploration ($sr^2 = 2.86\%$). See Table 2. Self-efficacy and barriers at Step 2 accounted for between 6% and 15% of the variance in the outcome variables, with only self-efficacy accounting for unique variance in each case (7.95%, 12.46%, and 5.90%, respectively). There were significant interaction effects at Step 3 for self-efficacy: self-efficacy x re-engagement on distress, and self-efficacy x disengagement on exploration. Additionally, there were significant interaction effects for barriers: barriers x disengagement on distress and exploration, and barriers x re-engagement on planning and exploration.

To facilitate interpretation, we graphed the interaction effects using simple regression equations based on values of the moderator 1 $SD$ above and 1 $SD$ below the mean. With self-efficacy as moderator, career distress increased for the low self-efficacy group as the tendency to re-engage increased (there was no change for the high self-efficacy group; Figure 1), and career exploration increased for the high self-efficacy group as the tendency to disengage reduced (there was no increase for the low self-efficacy group; Figure 2). These results suggest that higher levels of self-efficacy act as a buffer against elevated tendencies to disengage from goals and re-engage in new ones.

With career barriers as moderator, career distress (Figure 3) and career exploration (Figure 4) both reduced for the low perceived barriers group as the tendency to disengage increased
(there was no change for the high perceived barriers group), and career planning (Figure 5) and career exploration (Figure 6) both reduced for the high perceived barriers group as the tendency to re-engage reduced, with no change in the low barriers group. These results suggest that, on the one hand, the perception of fewer barriers acts as a buffer against higher tendencies to disengage from goals, and buffer, on the other hand, against lower tendencies to re-engage in new ones.

**Discussion**

**Career Distress**

This study tested the relationship between the capacity to disengage from unrealisable goals and re-engage in modified or new ones (i.e., tested processes around the capacity to compromise) and (a) well-being in the career domain (operationalised as career distress), and (b) career-related behaviours (career planning and exploration).

In relation to career distress, there was a negative association with goal disengagement; that is, students who reported a lower capacity to disengage also reported more distress. This result is consistent with other studies that have examined context-free disengagement and well-being in young adults. Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al. (2003), for example, found negative associations between disengagement and two measures of distress (stress and intrusive thoughts) in a sample of college students. The results from the current study contribute to the career development area by demonstrating that flexibility to discard or modify career goals that become unattainable can be associated with better career-specific well-being.

Most career theories suggest that managing the tasks associated with career development results in better personal functioning and well-being, as task management allows the individual to negotiate current career demands and prepares them for later transitions and challenges (Super, 1990). However, career theories do not articulate mechanisms that explain
distress or wellness in the career domain, and few studies have specifically attempted to
assess the relationship between the two (Skorikov, 2007). From the current study, one
mechanism that might account for reduced career-related well-being is the tendency to
persevere with career goals when they are unattainable. When individuals withdraw effort
and commitment to a lost cause they can redefine the goal as unessential, reduce their
experience of failure, and free energy and resources for other challenges (Wrosch, Scheier,
Miller, et al., 2003). Being able to disengage from goals when they become unviable can be
particularly adaptive in the career area, where individuals will develop many goals, only to
have to give them up or modify them when they become impractical or unachievable (cf.

Additionally, self-efficacy was negatively associated with career distress; that is, students
who reported lower self-efficacy also reported more career distress. The general literature has
consistently demonstrated a relationship between self-efficacy and well-being (Argyle, 1999;
Ryan & Deci, 2001), and previous studies have shown that self-efficacy is related to well-
being in the career domain (Creed, Muller, & Patton, 2003). When young people are deciding
on a career, they are advantaged in relation to well-being if they are confident in their
abilities to manage their career tasks and goals.

We found no direct relationship between re-engagement and career distress, which has
been demonstrated in other samples (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). The interaction
effects found in the study do shed some light on this null effect, and also add to the
understanding around disengagement. We expected that self-efficacy and perceptions of
career barriers would buffer the relationship between goal disengagement and re-engagement
and career distress, and we found effects for both moderators. When disengagement was
high, distress was buffered by perceptions of fewer barriers, and when re-engagement was
high, distress was buffered by higher self-efficacy. These protective effects are consistent
with the proposition by Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al. (2003) that having positive future expectations is protective, generally, for young people.

**Career Planning and Exploration**

Career planning was higher when self-efficacy and re-engagement were higher. Career self-efficacy has been shown consistently to be associated with more career planning and exploration (Rogers & Creed, 2011), and these relationships are expected. They are modelled in the social cognitive career theory (Lent, 2005), which proposes that self-efficacy enhances the effort/outcome contingency relationship and leads to higher career goals, which, in turn, drive career behaviours like planning and exploration. Career planning was associated also with goal re-engagement, but not disengagement, suggesting that, in the career domain, students do not need necessarily to disengage from existing, non-achievable goals to undertake planning, but that engaging in new goals will be associated with more planning. Additionally, goal re-engagement was moderated by perceptions of career barriers: perceiving fewer barriers was associated with more planning when re-engagement was low, suggesting that helping students manage perceptions of barriers, and helping them develop skills and strategies to deal with them, will assist them with planning ahead when they are compromising.

Similar to career planning, there was more career exploration when self-efficacy and re-engagement were higher, suggesting that exploration is facilitated, on the one hand, by being more confident, and, on the other, by engaging in new or revised goals. More exploration was associated also with lower disengagement. This result was unexpected and suggests that career exploration continues even when there is a tendency to maintain existing goals, which might reflect exploration of alternate pathways to achieving existing or modified goals (Rasmussen et al., 2006). Disengagement was moderated by self-efficacy and career barriers: when the tendency to disengage was low, there was more exploration when efficacy was
higher and barriers were perceived to be lower. This suggests that self-efficacy and a more positive future outlook facilitate career exploration when there is a tendency to maintain existing goals. Finally, re-engagement was moderated by career barriers: there was more exploration when re-engaging when barriers were perceived to be higher, suggesting that when engaging new goals, exploration is stimulated when more barriers are perceived.

**Conclusion and Applications**

This study has contributed to a better understanding of the feelings and behaviours of young people when they contemplate goals that cannot be achieved. Overall, the results suggest that having the capacity to manage unattainable goals is associated with better well-being and more functional career behaviours. Managing goal disruption in the career domain is important, given the myriad of goals, whether they are at the broad, specific, or concrete levels, which are set, modified, and re-set, as individuals address the complex tasks around career development and choice. The inability to manage disrupted goals seems likely to account for at least some of the variance in distress around career development and decision-making, and to affect motivation around career behaviours.

There are a number of applied implications from this research. First, experience and the extant literature tell us that compromise is an everyday occurrence, and commonplace in the career domain. Practitioners should expect young people to be constantly dealing with compromises and adjustments. Second, practitioners need to be aware that there are individual differences in the capacity to disengage from an unachievable goal and re-engage in a new one: some young people have the tendency to hang on to goals longer than they should, whereas others will have a tendency to give up prematurely. Our study suggests that practitioners need to be alert especially to young people who have trouble giving up on aspirations that are unrealistic, and help them explore the costs and benefits associated with such persistence. Finally, the study demonstrated the value of self-efficacy and having an
optimistic view of the future when adjusting career goals. Both variables have been shown to be important in the careers area generally, and now should be seen as important when contemplating compromise. There is considerable existing literature on how self-efficacy and optimism might be developed, and practitioners can draw on this (e.g., Lent, 2005).

Limitations and Future Research

The study was cross-sectional; thus, the causal relationships implied, while plausible, and consistent with goal setting and goal adjustment theories (Locke & Latham, 2002; Lord et al., 2010; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003), need to be assessed longitudinally. Further, the contextual influences (e.g., social support) and developmental trajectories for these capacities to manage disrupted career goals are not understood. Nor is it understood whether they can be influenced by interventions, and how well they protect individuals and foster functional behaviours at other transition points, such as applying for employment when leaving university. Our study contained disproportionately more women, and, as gender differences are commonly found in career studies (Patton, Bartrum, & Creed, 2004), future research needs to assess if young men and women differ on these compromise processes. We also tested the three outcome variables using the same sample. As this created a potential for inflated Type 1 error, the outcomes need to be confirmed on other samples. Other goal management strategies also need to be examined. Creed, Tilbury, Buys, and Crawford (2011), for example, demonstrated a relationship between goal orientation and career aspiration; yet, there have been no studies testing the role of goal orientation when individuals face goals that have to be discarded. The sample used in the study comprised recent-entry university students. Individuals at all ages and at all career stages need to manage disrupted and unachievable goals; thus, other populations should also be examined, especially at transition and crisis points, which are times when the focus on career and life goals become most salient. Finally, we used an abbreviated scale for the outcome variable of
career distress. Future studies need to assess a broader career well-being domain to confirm our results.

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**References**


Figure 1. Self-efficacy x goal re-engagement on career distress. The vertical axis is based on standardised scores. Only the simple slope for low self-efficacy was significant, $b = 2.61$, $t(168) = 1.98$, $p = .05$. 
Figure 2. Self-efficacy x goal disengagement on career exploration. The vertical axis is based on standardised scores. Only the simple slope for high self-efficacy was significant, \( b = -1.35, t(168) = -2.71, p = .008. \)
Figure 3. Career barriers x goal disengagement on career distress. The vertical axis is based on standardised scores. Only the simple slope for low barriers was significant, $b = -3.22$, $t(168) = -3.41$, $p < .001$. 
Figure 4. Career barriers x goal disengagement on career exploration. The vertical axis is based on standardised scores. Only the simple slope for low barriers was significant, $b = -1.38$, $t(168) = -2.71$, $p = .007$. 
Figure 5. Career barriers x goal re-engagement on career planning. The vertical axis is based on standardised scores. Only the simple slope for high barriers was significant, $b = 1.77$, $t(168) = 2.79$, $p = .006$. 
Figure 6. Barriers x re-engagement on career exploration. The vertical axis is based on standardised scores. Only the simple slope for high barriers was significant, $b = 1.24$, $t(168) = 1.24$, $p = .03$. 
## Table 1

**Summary Data, Internal Reliability Coefficients, and Bivariate Correlations; N = 181**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Career distress</td>
<td>23.06</td>
<td>9.12</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.36***</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
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<td>2. Career planning</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>-.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Career exploration</td>
<td>20.04</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Goal disengagement</td>
<td>15.20</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Goal re-engagement</td>
<td>28.53</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Career self-efficacy</td>
<td>51.93</td>
<td>9.03</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.27***</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
**Table 2**

*Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Career Distress, Career Planning and Career Barriers; N = 181*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Career Distress</th>
<th></th>
<th>Career Planning</th>
<th></th>
<th>Career Exploration</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$sr^2$ (%)</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$sr^2$ (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal disengagement (GD)</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>&lt; 1</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>&lt; 1</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>2.86</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Career self-efficacy (SE)</td>
<td>-.31***</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>.38***</td>
<td>12.46</td>
<td>.26**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career barriers (CB)</td>
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<td>1.21</td>
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<td>&lt; 1</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&lt; 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>SE x GD</td>
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<td>1.64</td>
<td>-.09</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.90</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>1.44</td>
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<td>1.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>CB x GD</td>
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<td>.13</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.16*</td>
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<tr>
<td>CB x GR</td>
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<td>.19**</td>
<td>3.50</td>
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<td>Total $R^2$</td>
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<td>.24</td>
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*Note:* For simplicity, the educational achievement covariate included when predicting career distress is not reported in the table. $sr^2$ is the squared semi-partial correlation, which is the percentage of unique variance explained after the effects of the other predictor variables are partialled out, or controlled. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$