

The Effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Perceived Social Support on Career Adaptability: Narrative Review

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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences and their negative impacts have garnered significant attention. While most studies have primarily focused on their effects on mental health, relatively little research has explored their influence on career development, as well as the underlying mechanisms and protective factors involved. To address this gap, this narrative review examines the impact of adverse childhood experiences on career adaptability and the role of perceived social support in this relationship. The findings indicate that: (1) the effects of adverse childhood experiences on career adaptability can be both negative and positive; (2) perceived social support can partially buffer the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences on career development and career adaptability. However, the protective role of perceived social support has certain limitations. This review provides theoretical insights for future research and practical recommendations for career and psychological counselling practitioners.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, perceived social support, career adaptability, literature review

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Background

Recently, there has been a noticeable increase in awareness of self-exploration among people, contributing to a rising trend in reading psychology books. Many psychologists, including Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and John Bowlby, have emphasized the critical role of childhood experiences in shaping an individual's future development, and the general public has come to recognize these theories. In fact, by browsing social media platforms, many youths share their experiences regarding adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) online.

ACEs are highly prevalent. Surveys in the United States reveal that 64% of U. S. adults report experiencing at least one type of ACEs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). While no authoritative organization in China currently provides official statistics on the prevalence of ACEs, previous studies have estimated an incidence rate ranging from 31% to 93.5% (Chen et al., 2022). Given the widespread prevalence, understanding the long-term psychological and developmental impacts has become a critical area of research. Horney (1937) emphasized that low-income family relationships are a significant cause of psychological trauma. She pointed out that childhood neglect – a form of ACEs– could lead to a fear of isolation, which, in turn, creates deep-seated anxiety affecting mental health in adulthood.

Childhood experiences play a crucial role in career development. Edward Bordin, a proponent of psychodynamic theory, emphasized that the dynamics influencing career choices stem from an adaptation system shaped by early experiences. He argued that exploring career needs should involve examining an individual's past experiences (W. X. Zhou et al., 2022). Additionally, Career Construction Theory (CCT) underscores the significance of past experiences in career development (Savickas, 2005). Specifically, these experiences influence the formation of life themes, which subsequently affect career adaptability. Career adaptability is defined as the readiness to utilize resources for current and anticipated career development tasks (W. X. Zhou et al., 2022).

ACEs can significantly impact career development; however, this effect can be alleviated if individuals have adequate social support. The Stress Buffering Model (SBM) emphasizes that social support can mitigate the negative consequences of stressful events (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Similarly, the adverse effects of ACEs can be lessened through social support. Therefore, it is essential to discuss how adverse childhood experiences influence career adaptability and the protective role of perceived social support.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Felitti et al. (1998) introduced the term ACEs to describe a combination of violence, abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction, including witnessing violence, parental violence, and separation from parents, as well as mental health problems within the home. These experiences typically occur before the age of 18 and can have lifelong impacts, not only through intergenerational transmission but also by affecting children's social and emotional development (Samji et al., 2024; Treat et al., 2019). According to the CDC, these experiences encompass various risk factors categorized as individual, family, and community risk factors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Hietamäki et al. (2023) expanded this concept by including childhood bullying and economic difficulties as additional ACEs.

While ACEs are inherently negative events, Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (PTG) suggests that individuals may derive certain benefits from traumatic experiences in three areas: changes in self-perception, changes in interpersonal relationships, and a shift in life philosophy (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Despite these potential positive effects, they can vary significantly from person to person. In many instances, the negative consequences of ACEs are not only overwhelming but also tend to have a more profound and lasting impact on individuals.

Freud (1917) proposed that negative childhood experiences are repressed in the unconscious and influence behavior in adulthood, potentially leading to issues such as anxiety, neurosis, or personality disorders. Similarly, Karen Horney argued that a lack of adequate security and love during childhood triggers fear of isolation and abandonment, which can create deep-rooted anxiety and ultimately result in various psychological problems in adulthood. She particularly emphasized unhealthy family relationships as a primary source of trauma (Horney, 1937). More importantly, children who are victims of abuse and violence often become intensely focused on the external world of trauma, neglecting to reflect on and explore their internal experiences (Wagner-Skacel et al., 2022).

Traumatic ACEs have been shown to impair executive functioning. These experiences can lead to various mental health issues, including poor sleep quality, substance use, suicidal thoughts, non-suicidal self-injurious behaviours, depression, and anxiety (Maheshwari et al., 2024; McCollum et al., 2024; Nan et al., 2023; Rogerson et al., 2024). Moreover, individuals exposed to ACEs tend to exhibit higher levels of anxiety and depression, along with a sense of powerlessness when facing stressful situations (Hughes et al., 2024; Russo et al., 2022). These negative experiences can lead to harmful coping strategies, further exacerbating the situation and increasing the prevalence of major depressive disorders (Li et al., 2024).

Additionally, ACEs significantly impact the development of interpersonal relationships. According to Social Learning Theory, individuals learn behaviours by observing others (Bandura, 1977). Consequently, those who experience physical or emotional abuse during childhood may unintentionally adopt these behaviours, potentially leading them to become perpetrators of similar abuse in adulthood. This cycle not only perpetuates harm but also contributes to their children's social and emotional difficulties (McClure & Parmenter, 2020; Merrin et al., 2024; Treat et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2024). Moreover, systematic literature reviews have shown that individuals with ACEs exhibit lower levels of trust in interpersonal relationships and related support services. They often have fewer friends, place less importance on peer relationships, and maintain weaker social connections overall (Hughes et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Social Support and Perceived Social Support

ACEs can result in both negative and potentially positive changes in interpersonal relationships. These relationships, which are crucial for providing support, hold particular significance in certain cultural contexts. This highlights the importance of social support for individuals who have had such experiences. Social support refers to the process of making individuals feel cared for and valued by others, including family and friends (Cobb, 1976; Dewani & Nuzulia, 2024). Building on this foundation, social support was introduced as a subjective cognitive component, giving rise to the concept of perceived social support. Zimet et al. (1990) divided perceived social support into three dimensions: family support, friend support, and other support. The Buffering Hypothesis (BH) proposed by Cohen and Wills

(1985) expands on the role of social support in the SBM. According to this, perceived social support – including emotional, esteem, instrumental, and information support – acts as a buffer against various sources of stress. Similarly, Hobfoll (2001) introduced the Conservation of Resources Theory (CRT), which also views social support as a valuable and limited resource that helps individuals cope with stressful situations and mitigates their impact.

Cultural background can significantly influence how individuals perceive social support. While one might assume that individuals from collectivistic cultures have a greater need for social support, research indicates the opposite. People from collectivistic backgrounds often have a lower need for social support because they fear that seeking help could harm their existing interpersonal relationships (H. S. Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2004). For instance, a study found that Japanese participants from East Asian cultures sought social support less frequently in stressful situations compared to European Canadians (Zheng et al., 2021). Additionally, early experiences and the environment in which one is raised are significant predictors of social support levels. Childhood trauma can result in reduced perceptions of social support (Angelakis & Gooding, 2022; Caravaca-Sánchez et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2019). Specifically, adverse childhood experiences are linked to lower perceived family support (Dorri et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023).

Lower perception of social support can lead to heightened feelings of loneliness and increased rumination. This, in turn, raises the risk of various mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (Cheong et al., 2017; Dorri et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2021). For young individuals, perceived social support significantly influences their future development, particularly in terms of expectations and career choices (Fraser et al., 2024; Ghosh & Fouad, 2017). In stressful situations, social support serves as a crucial protective resource and plays a key role in coping with adversity (Cassel, 1976; Szkody et al., 2020). According to the BH and the CRT, perceived social support can mitigate the negative effects of stress to some extent (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Hobfoll, 2001). Furthermore, it can enhance cognitive and emotional processing of experienced events, aiding individuals in reappraising stressful situations (Cheong et al., 2017).

Career Adaptability

Factors such as ACEs and a lack of social support can impact coping strategies and increase sensitivity to stress. This may result in insufficient self-regulation when faced with uncertainties in career development. Roe, Ginzberg, and Super have pointed out that career development is a lifelong process. From the moment of birth, individuals begin exploring their career paths (Dugger, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to understand and develop the necessary competencies throughout this journey.

The definition of career adaptability was first introduced in CCT by Savickas (2005), which encompasses actions, attitudes, beliefs, and competencies, highlighting an ongoing interaction between the inner and external worlds. It was further defined as the readiness of resources for an individual's current and anticipated career development tasks (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). It comprises four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Among these dimensions, the most significant is career concern, which focuses on attention to and anticipation of future career possibilities (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; W. X. Zhou et al., 2022).

In some cultural contexts, parents' sense of honour is heavily influenced by their children's career success. They hold high expectations for their children and hope that their career choices will enhance the family's socioeconomic status (Song et al., 2022; N. Zhou et al., 2020; W. X. Zhou et al., 2022). Consequently, many parents adopt the mindset that "one person's success elevates the entire family," which often leads them to intervene in their children's career choices and development. This intervention can create uncertainty for young people as they navigate their career paths (N. Zhou et al., 2020), potentially resulting in diminished self-regulation skills and lower levels of career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Considering these factors, support resources become particularly important. Studies have confirmed that the resources and support individuals obtain through social networks play a predictive role in career adaptability (Gheyassi & Alambeigi, 2024; Karacan-ozdemir & Yerin Guneri, 2016; Mini et al., 2024). Specifically, perceived support from parents has been shown to predict career adaptability, with core self-evaluation moderating this relationship (Mini et al., 2024).

Certain personal factors also contribute to career adaptability. Studies indicate that individuals with personality traits such as optimism, extroversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability tend to exhibit stronger career adaptability (Gustmann de Castro et al., 2024; Karacan-ozdemir & Yerin Guneri, 2016). Moreover, psychological capital, which includes self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, also plays a significant role in predicting career adaptability (Gerçek, 2024; Gheyassi & Alambeigi, 2024; Karacan-ozdemir & Yerin Guneri, 2016).

Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Career Adaptability

CCT emphasizes the essential role of past experiences in career development. Specifically, past experiences influence the formation of life themes, which subsequently impact career adaptability (Savickas, 2005; W. X. Zhou et al., 2022). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as negative past experiences predict career adaptability (J. Kim & Smith, 2021). This is further supported by Bryce et al. (2023), who found that career development could also be influenced by ACEs; the way individuals experience and interpret trauma plays a crucial role in their ability to adjust and build their careers.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024), low family socioeconomic status (i.e., low income) and low parental education are risk factors for ACEs. Studies have confirmed that these risk factors affect individuals' career choices, career development, and career adaptability. Regarding socioeconomic status, even when individuals have high career aspirations, growing up in a low socioeconomic environment often results in a lack of adequate resources (Chukwu & Tor-Anyiin, 2024; Gjerustad & von Soest, 2012), hindering the development of career adaptability. Similarly, a mother's education level is positively correlated with her children's career adaptability (Song et al., 2022).

However, according to the PTG theory, traumatic events may promote individual development to some extent, enabling new possibilities to emerge (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). This theory posits that traumatic events disrupt individuals' existing beliefs about the world, prompting a re-evaluation of the meaning and goals of their lives. Through cognitive reconstruction, individuals may uncover new possibilities in life and adjust their life direction. In other words, people with ACEs may become more attuned to their own needs, be more likely to explore new paths and opportunities, and thus establish relatively clear goals in their

career development. Furthermore, the theory highlights that traumatic events may enhance an individual's psychological adaptability through deep reflection and coping. Consequently, individuals with adverse childhood experiences will exhibit greater courage in facing difficulties when confronted with challenges and uncertainties in their career development, developing a high level of career adaptability.

The Buffering Role of Perceived Social Support

Even when individuals experience similar levels of ACEs, their outcomes can vary significantly. The Diathesis-Stress Model emphasizes that this difference may arise from protective factors, such as social support (Ingram & Luxton, 2005). Whether among adolescents, university students, or the general adult population, ACEs can adversely affect mental health and behavior. However, perceiving adequate social support can mitigate these negative effects (Evans et al., 2013; Li et al., 2024; McCollum et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Watt et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2023; Xiang et al., 2024; G. Zhou & Li, 2024). The protective role of social support and perceived social support for these individuals can be explored from two perspectives.

From the perspective of ACEs as traumatic events, PTG suggests that the vulnerability caused by such experiences may enhance sensitivity to others, increasing the willingness to accept help (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In this way, individuals with ACEs may be more sensitive to social support, making them more likely to recognize support from others. This sensitivity helps improve their career adaptability levels (Agoes Salim et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Dewani & Nuzulia, 2024; Xue, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). Similarly, when viewing ACEs and their influence on career adaptability as a stressful event, the SBM emphasizes that social support mitigates the negative impacts of stress by reducing stress assessment responses (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Murthi & Espelage, 2005). Once enough social support is felt, individuals are less likely to choose emotionally focused coping strategies when facing difficulties (Smaoui et al., 2024).

Building on this, theories and previous research have confirmed that perceived social support can impact career adaptability. The Chaos Theory of Careers emphasizes that an individual's career development relies on interaction with external social relationship networks and interplay with internal relational networks (Bloch, 2005; Bright & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2007). Strong social networks are closely linked to perceived social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Specifically, parental emotional and academic support play a crucial role in enhancing children's career maturity (Lim & Jung, 2024), which is a key indicator of psychological preparation and adaptability in career development. Likewise, both peer and parental support have been recognized as essential variables with significant positive impacts on career adaptability (Agoes Salim et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Dewani & Nuzulia, 2024; Ghosh & Fouad, 2017; Xue, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). By perceiving such support, individuals are more likely to set meaningful career goals, explore career opportunities freely, increase their motivation, and navigate the uncertainties and challenges of career development effectively (Ghosh & Fouad, 2017; Lent et al., 2000; Song et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2022).

While perceived social support often plays a protective role, it is essential to acknowledge that its effects are not universally positive. Overly intrusive social support can exacerbate stress (Taylor, 2011). In other words, perceiving excessive support from parents may be misinterpreted as overly high expectations. Research shows that perceiving excessively high parental expectations not only increases individuals' confusion regarding their career

development path but also impairs their career adaptability (Zhou et al., 2020). Moreover, when the form of perceived social support is mismatched – for instance, receiving instrumental support when emotional support is desired – it can diminish the effectiveness of social support in alleviating stress (Taylor, 2011). This suggests that the impact of perceived social support on career adaptability may follow an “optimal level,” beyond which it could have counterproductive effects.

Perceived social support often mitigates the adverse effects of ACEs and promotes career adaptability, but its protective role is not always consistent. In certain conditions, ACEs may reduce the availability and effectiveness of social support, highlighting its limitations. According to the Social Support Deterioration Model, ACEs serve as an early stressful event that reduces an individual's perception of the availability and effectiveness of social support (Barrera, 1986; Xiang et al., 2024). Additionally, Taylor (2011) notes that individuals in chronically stressful situations may be inclined to confide in their sources of social support, such as friends, about their distress. Over time, this action may alienate their support network, diminishing social support and exacerbating distress. Most importantly, such supportive social networks are difficult to access for those with childhood adversity, and the lack of social support itself exacerbates the negative effects of ACEs (Evans et al., 2013; Hoskins & Kunkel, 2022; McLafferty et al., 2019).

Discussion

This article reveals that ACEs have detrimental effects on career development and adaptability, with these effects primarily evident through the perspectives of parent-child relationships and family economic status. Fortunately, perceived social support plays a protective role in mitigating the negative impacts of ACEs. However, some controversies exist in the current literature.

First, as a traumatic event, ACEs can benefit individuals (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). This suggests that the impact of ACEs on aspects like career development and adaptability may follow a nonlinear pattern. Similarly, the protective effect of perceived social support remains consistent, as overly intrusive support can heighten stress (Taylor, 2011). In other words, the protective effect of perceived social support may also be nonlinear, indicating that its protective capacity might vary in this way. Furthermore, previous studies have often treated perceived social support as a mediating or moderating variable, yet its combined effect with ACEs has rarely been examined.

Based on these gaps, future research could explore the following questions: First, do adverse childhood experiences exhibit both linear and nonlinear relationships with career adaptability? Second, does perceived social support also show both linear and nonlinear relationships with career adaptability? Third, how do adverse childhood experiences and perceived social support interact, and how does this interaction influence career adaptability? Lastly, what role does the combination of adverse childhood experiences and perceived social support play in shaping career adaptability? Research on these issues is urgent. Early experiences, particularly ACEs, critically influence individual development, often in unconscious ways. In China, many young adults continue to endure the consequences of ACEs, hindering their ability to succeed in personal and professional contexts. These negative experiences largely shape their perceptions of their future and career pathways.

In the context of Chinese collectivist culture, social support systems are particularly crucial. Research shows a complex interplay between ACEs and perceived social support. Therefore, investigating their combined effect on career adaptability holds significant research importance. Such studies could offer a new theoretical basis for exploring potential protective or risk factors associated with ACEs. Additionally, they could foster theoretical integration and methodological innovation in career development research.

Conclusion

This article draws several conclusions from the narrative review. First, ACEs have a detrimental effect on career development and adaptability, which can be seen through the lenses of parent-child relationships and family economic status. However, as a traumatic event, ACEs may motivate individuals to pursue personal growth. This serves as a reminder for career counsellors that when working with clients who have experienced ACEs, it is important to consider not only their current abilities, needs, and goals but also the influence of their early environment on career planning. For psychological counsellors, addressing clients with ACEs should involve not just a focus on the negative consequences but also guidance on how clients can derive benefits from their traumatic experiences.

Second, perceived social support plays a protective role in alleviating the negative effects of ACEs. Evidence suggests that, as a stressful event, it can lessen the impact of ACEs by reducing stress responses. Nevertheless, this protective role is not absolute; excessive social support can become intrusive and may even increase stress levels for individuals. This underscores the importance for those with ACEs to learn to effectively utilize the supportive resources available to them in finding a suitable career development path.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

This study only used ChatGPT and Grammarly for language polishing.

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