

**The Role of Career Exploration When Dealing With Negative Career Feedback: Mediated by  
Career Self-Efficacy and Moderated by SES**

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### **Abstract**

Research showed that individuals who know how to explore well in their careers, benefit by having an increased person-job fit, a higher career related engagement and career satisfaction. Therefore, this study aims to examine how employees display career exploratory behaviours in the face of negative career feedback, through career self-efficacy. This study suggests that individuals who receive more negative career feedback also tend to have a lowered career self-efficacy and explore less in their careers. Additionally, this study examined if having a low subjective socioeconomic status will have a steeper loss of career self-efficacy following negative career feedback, leading to less career exploration. This study surveyed 99 young adults with ages ranging between 18 – 35 years. In contrast to the hypotheses, the results, examined via a moderated mediation analyses, showed no link between negative career feedback and career exploration via career self-efficacy. Also, the results did not support the suggestion that socioeconomic status influences this relation. Possible due to use of a narrowed measurement of negative career feedback, the measures did not fully reflect the way how employees perceive negative career feedback. Additionally, this study was cross-sectional and could therefore not clarify the direction of the relationships. Meaning, that individuals who explore more often in their careers, may have a higher career self-efficacy and therefore receive less negative career feedback. Future research can examine causal directions by use of a longitudinal design.

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Research has shown that higher levels of career exploration are predictive of greater congruence between personality and occupation (Grotevant et al., 1986), which is positively linked to longer tenure and greater job satisfaction (Mount & Muchinsky, 1978; Villwock et al., 1976). Jordaan (1963) stated that career exploration encompasses “activities, mental or physical, undertaken with the more or less conscious purpose or hope of eliciting information about oneself or one’s environment” (p.59). Yet, it is unlikely that every adult is exploring adequately for their career needs. Lemme (1999) suggested that most university graduates do not work in jobs related to their field of study five years following graduation. Young adults tend to stabilize in occupations in their mid to late 20s primarily because of financial and family obligations rather than because of satisfaction with their careers. This suggests that the window of youth is reserved for trial and error and exploration, yet adults may also change their occupation at a later time and change their career goals.

Additionally, Lemme (1999) stated that 64% of the workers would choose another career if they could start over and the majority of workers feel they could have been more satisfied and productive if they had known how to make better career decisions. This suggests that knowing how to explore in your career, is a relevant topic to focus on in research because it may contribute to a better understanding of increasing the person-job fit, career related engagement and career satisfaction (Anderson and Mount, 2012; Xu et al., 2014).

In understanding the drivers of career exploration, Hu et al., (2018) are suggesting that negative career feedback (NCF), which refers to negative information regarding individuals’ career goal progress (Hu et al., 2016), is related to a substantial decrease in such behaviours. These findings contradict existing research of Anderson and Mounts (2012) who found an indirect positive effect between NCF and career exploration. Following the career identity

control theory (Anderson and Mounts, 2012; Kerpelman and Lamke, 1997) NCF elicits an identity disturbance which can lead to implementing adaptive career strategies like higher investment in career exploration activities. Furthermore, research of Hu et al., (2018) suggests that career self-efficacy mediates the relation between NCF and career exploration which this study will take into account while researching the relation between NCF and career exploration. Lastly, research stated that a higher socioeconomic status (SES) is positively related with higher levels of occupational self-efficacy, which is in disadvantage for those having a lower SES (Hu et al., 2019). Understanding the role of a low SES condition when facing setbacks in terms of NCF, is important to inform interventions that can assist employees to manage the feedback in a constructive way. Such as being more proactive in career exploration. Therefore, this study examines the moderating role of SES, aiming the following research question: how does NCF influence career exploration through career self-efficacy? and is the relationship between NCF and self-efficacy moderated by SES?

Thus, one aim of the present study is to find more clarity about NCF as a driver or inhibitor of career exploration relation by doing replication of earlier research of Hu et al., (2018). This can contribute to the sparse and contradicting present findings in the literature. Second, relying on career self-efficacy to explain this relationship may shed light into how NCF affects explorative outcomes. This may help organizations or career coaches empower their employees or clients, especially those with a lower SES or those who tend to experience frequent NCF. Thus, with adequate support for their exploration behaviours, employees make better informed decisions about their career goals, enrich their job satisfaction and sustain long-term career success.

### **The Relevance of Career Exploration Activities**

Career exploration is an adaptive career development strategy which is positive related to a better person-job fit (Grotevant et al., 1986), higher career related engagement (Creed et

al., 2011), and more often experiencing a meaningful work life (Flum and Blustein, 2000). Career exploration is important for young adults to develop a career identity and to facilitate progress towards their future career, especially when facing setbacks (Anderson and Mounts, 2012). This suggests that employees who spend more time in career exploration activities (e.g. seeking information on specific areas of career interest; going to various career orientation programs) are more likely to have fewer difficulties in making a commitment to a career path (Xu et al., 2014) and might stay in a job for career satisfaction rather than financial obligations. According to Wrosch et al., (2003) this means for employees, as well as for employers, that career exploration may increase the likelihood of more success in their future careers and the overall organizational performance.

### **Role of Negative Career Feedback Within Career Exploration**

In this research, following the definition of Hu et al., (2018), NCF refers to negative feedback being made towards an individual's career goal progress and goals (e.g. feedback stating that someone does not work hard enough to get into the chosen career). In response to this type of NCF, the career identity control theory (CICT) suggests that discrepancies between the person's current state (e.g. goal progress) and goals (e.g. aspirations), arise (Anderson and Mounts, 2012; Kerpelman and Lamke, 1997). To eliminate these discrepancies, individuals reconsider and self-reflect on their current goal choice which can trigger career exploration activities such as, gathering further information related to possible selves and career options. Thus, the career identity control theory suggests that discrepancies between an individual's career goal and perceiving negative feedback on the progress towards this goal, might elicit career exploration.

According to the existing body of research, the findings on the link between negative career feedback and career exploration is sparse, indirect and contradicting. Hu et al., (2018) found a direct negative effect of NCF on career exploration, suggesting that young people

were less likely to gather information about their possible selves and career options in the face of negative feedback. They suggest that it seems plausible that more NCF initiates more engagement and effort in progressing the current career goals. Contradicting, only one other study found an indirect positive link between NCF and career exploration (Anderson and Mounts, 2012) through having a low certainty of identity (e.g. individual who is not sure about his/her current person-job fit) and by experiencing high importance (e.g. current personal goals and ambitions are seen as highly relevant). This suggests that receiving NCF elicits exploration of environment and additional occupational areas, through having a low certainty of identity, and a high importance in means of relevance to personal goals and ambitions.

Thus, while the CICT is not in favour of this, the present study hopes to replicate the findings of Hu et al., (2018), who found support for a direct negative effect of NCF being linked to less career exploration.

*Hypothesis 1: Negative career feedback relates negatively to career exploration.*

### **Mediating Role of Career Self-Efficacy Between NCF and Career Exploration**

According to the self-regulatory framework of work, young people allocate cognitive, affective, and motivational resources to progress/adjust their goals in response to negative feedback (Lord et al., 2010). Specifically, within the framework of self-regulation, in response to unfavourable information that indicates unsatisfactory progress or unsuitable goals, young adults are likely to re-evaluate their capabilities for achieving their future career goals by lowering their self-efficacy. Career self-efficacy refers to an individuals' perceived ability to perform specific tasks necessary for career preparation, entry or adjustment (Lent and Brown, 2013). According to CICT, self-efficacy can be required for an individual in achieving their current career goals.

Creed et al., (2015) and Hu et al., (2016) are suggesting that negative career feedback relates negatively to career self-efficacy. This means that individuals who perceive more NCF also tend to experience a lower career self-efficacy. According to Hu et al., (2018), this can be linked to less career exploration activities and a reduced emotional well-being. Following Hu et al., (2018), self-efficacy is mediating the relationship between NCF and career exploration, where NCF was related to less career exploration rather than more. On this line of reasoning, negative feedback indicates an experience where young people feel lower self-confidence in their general career capacity, which makes them less active in career exploration activities. Also, this is in line with the reasoning of the CICT who state that negative feedback can elicit a decrease in career exploration via a lowered career self-efficacy. Therefore, this study contributes to the career feedback-exploration link by further trying to establish a mechanism for the relationship.

*Hypothesis 2:* Negative career feedback relates negatively to career self-efficacy, and thus career self-efficacy positively influences career exploration.

### **Moderating Role of Socioeconomic Status**

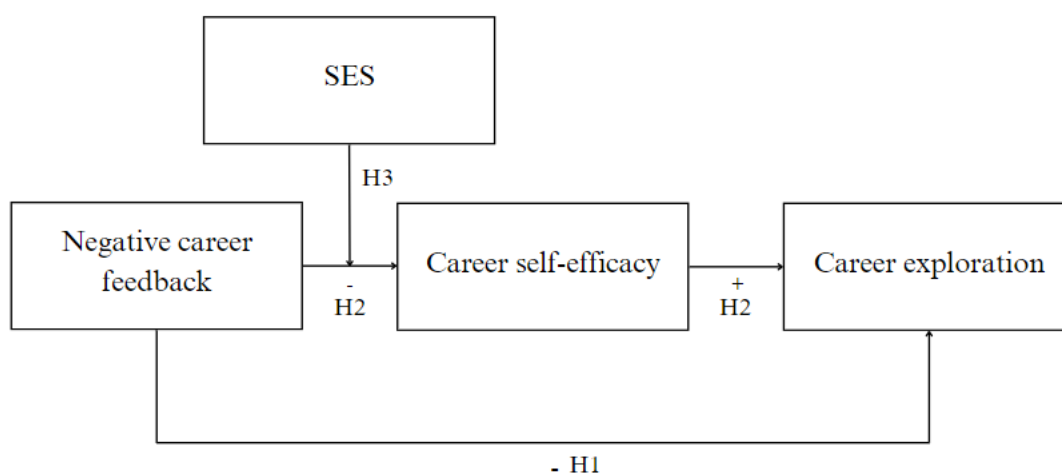
Socioeconomic status (SES) is an important contextual affordance that can influence career development processes such as career interests, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, perceived barriers, goal choice, and educational and occupational attainments (Brown & Lent, 2017; Diemer et al., 2009; Flores et al., 2017). Following the study of Diemer et al., (2013) three key components of SES are extensively used in research, namely: occupational prestige, educational attainment, and income can be considered. There are two ways to conceptualize and measure social class (Diemer and Ali, 2009): via objective criteria (i.e., SES) and subjective perceptions (i.e., subjective social status). When having a low SES condition, which is associated with less economic and social resources (Duffy et al., 2016), individuals have to rely more on their psychological resources, such as career adaptability, to cope with

resource depletion and achieve adaptive career outcomes (Liu and Yu, 2019). The studies of Chen and Miller (2012) and Gallo and Matthews (2003), are suggesting that when facing negative career feedback, lower SES students will be more vigilant to the threat and more likely to adjust their goals to accommodate the feedback. Therefore, this study expects that a subjective low SES condition strengthens the negative relation between facing NCF and career self-efficacy. On the other hand, higher subjective SES may act as a buffer, protecting individuals from negative career experiences (e.g. higher stress and lower self-efficacy). As such, this research investigates whether perceiving your socioeconomic status as lower puts employees at a disadvantage when receiving negative feedback.

*Hypothesis 3:* Subjective SES will moderate the relationship between NCF and career self-efficacy such that low SES employees will have a steeper loss of career self-efficacy following NCF, leading to less career exploration as well.

### Figure 1

*Conceptual Model and Hypotheses of the Relation Between NCF and Career Exploration Through Career Self-Efficacy Moderated by SES*



## Methods

### Participants



A total of 99 participants were included in the study ( $M$  age = 23.8 years,  $SD$  = 3.2, range = 20-35, female 49.5%, male 49.5%, and others 1%). Participants were recruited by the research team targeting their personal networks. The recruitment criteria included active pursuit towards a career goal (i.e., studying, employment, or both) and an age between 18 and 35 years. This specific age range was chosen due to the explorative period and fluidity of career goals in early adulthood typically lasting until late 20s (Lemme, 1999). The present study consisted of three waves of data collection of which the first survey was completed by 100 participants. Due to time constraints and attrition rates, the present report focuses only on the first wave of measurement. While majority of participants had Dutch nationality (69%), other nationalities were also represented, namely Finnish (27%), and others (4%). Majority of the participants were students (60%), others employed (31%), and some were both or self-employed (9%). Approval from the Ethics Committee of Psychology at the University of Groningen was obtained prior to commencing the sampling procedure.

### **Procedure**

This study was part of a larger study employing a cross-lagged study design with three waves of data collection. However, due to the low response rates and practical constraints, only the first wave will be analyzed. Participants were recruited through a convenience sampling method, where the initial striving was reaching 150 participants by virtue of a previously completed power analysis. Invitations to participate were sent out via messages, email, and recruitment advertisements. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were informed that the initial survey would take around 15 minutes, with follow-up surveys taking approximately seven minutes each. No compensation was offered for participation. Data collection was conducted online using the Qualtrics survey platform. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study, including its purpose and procedures,

through an informed consent form. Only those who provided informed consent proceeded to complete the survey.

Participants were initially asked to provide general demographic information, including employment status, age, gender, and country of residence. Following demographic questions, participants were asked to reflect on their current career goal and possible setbacks encountered in their goal pursuit within the last six months. Participants were then presented with questions assessing negative career feedback, and potential mediators and moderators related to their career goals. This included career self-efficacy and their SES. Lastly, participants answered to items assessing their career exploration.

### **Measures**

The surveys completed by the participants consisted of self-report measures utilizing Likert format scales. The measures relevant to the present study were designed to capture aspects related to negative career feedback, career exploration, career self-efficacy and socioeconomic status.

#### ***Negative Career Feedback Inventory***

This study used 16 items of the 24-item Feedback on Career Goal Inventory (Hu et al., 2016) to assess negative feedback on progress (e.g., “People tell me that I am not working hard enough to get into my chosen career”) and on goal suitability (e.g. “I am told that my preferred career choice will not let me display my real talents”). All items used a 6-point Likert-like format, wherefore 1=*strongly disagree* to 6=*strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s alpha of negative career feedback shows a good internal reliability which ranges from .82 (goal suitability) to .85 (progress) (Hu et al., 2016). In this study a Cronbach alpha of .87 (progress) is found.

#### ***Environmental Career Exploration Scale***

To assess young adult's environmental career exploration 6 items (e.g. "I initiated conversations with knowledgeable individuals in my chosen area") were used out of the 11-item Career Exploration Survey (Stumpf et al., 1983). The items were answered with respect to the stem: "In relation to your career exploration in the past three months...". All items used a 5-point Likert type response scale which ranged from 1=*never* to 5=*very frequently*. The 11-item scale has a Cronbach's alpha which ranges from .79 to .90 (Stumpf et al., 1983). In this study a Cronbach alpha of .75 is found.

### ***Career Self-efficacy Scale***

This study used the 8-item Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale (Schyns & Von Collani, 2002) to assess young adults' career-related self-efficacy (e.g. "Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations regarding my chosen career"). Participants responded on a 6-point Likert-type scale which ranged from 1=*completely true* to 6=*not at all true*. The 8-item scale reported a good internal reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .88 (Schyns & Von Collani, 2002). In this study a Cronbach alpha of .80 is found.

### ***Socioeconomic Status Single Item***

To assess participants' perceptions of their subjective SES this study used a single item (e.g. "When you compare yourself to your classmates/peers/colleagues, how would you generally describe your current financial situation") (Quon and McGrath, 2014). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale which ranged from 1=*much worse off than others* to 5=*much better off than others*.

### **Statistical Analysis Plan**

The data was transferred to IBM SPSS 28 for conducting a moderated mediation analysis, exploring the relationship between negative career feedback on career exploration, mediated by career self-efficacy, and moderated by SES.

The statistical analyses followed a structured approach, beginning with data integrity checks

and descriptive analyses of demographic variables. Prior to the analysis, all items with negative wording were reverse scored. Assumption checks considered model validity, focusing on linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity. Linear regression analyses and diagnostic plots were conducted to assess model fit and identify outliers. A specialized toolkit provided by the PROCESS Macro developed by Andrew Hayes (2022) was utilized to facilitate mediation and moderated mediation regression analyses by use of Model 7. These analyses aimed to uncover insights into indirect effects and moderated mediation effects as shown in Figure 1 (see Appendix).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 (see Appendix) presents the means, standard deviations and Pearson's correlations of the variables focused on in this research. The results show a mean score of career exploration that is not high, neither low. This suggests that youth moderately spend time in career exploration activities. The mean age is skewed towards younger participants ( $M = 23.76$ ,  $SD = 3.25$ ), meaning that the sample contains more young adults over middle-aged adults. Furthermore, the only significant correlation is a negative relation between career self-efficacy and negative feedback on career progress ( $r = -.484$ ,  $p = .000$ ). No other correlation between the focal variables and sample demographics was significant, however, we proceed with subsequent preliminary analyses to complete the aim of the report.

The assumptions needed for the regression analysis seem to have been met. The residuals of the dependent variable career exploration, look symmetrical and bell-shaped which suggests a normal distribution. Also, a scatterplot which presents the standardized residuals of the dependent variable, shows an equal spread and is lacking any pattern. This suggests homoscedasticity. Furthermore, the PP-plot presents datapoints, with regard to the residuals, in a diagonal line from the bottom left to the right top suggesting a valid linear

relation. Outliers were not found according to Cook's Distance. The model also presented no evidence of multicollinearity ( $VIF < 4$ ).

### **Hypotheses**

Despite the insignificance of almost every correlation between the research variables, the decision is made to proceed with the analysis in order to complete the bachelor thesis for graduation. The present statistical analysis featured several linear regressions modelled by means of PROCESS Macro for SPSS, Model 7 for moderated mediation (Hayes, 2018).

One of the research aims, referring to Hypotheses 1, was to find out if negative career feedback on career progress relates negatively to career exploration. According to the results of the regression analyses, this thought of a direct effect is not significant nor supported ( $B = -.126$ ,  $SE = .104$ ,  $p = .277$ , 95%  $CI [-.332, .080]$ ).

Hypotheses 2 suggested an indirect mediation effect where career self-efficacy related negatively to negative career feedback on progress, and positively to career exploration. The results did not support both relations. There was found an insignificant negative small effect between negative career feedback and career self-efficacy ( $B = -.126$ ,  $SE = .100$ , 95%  $CI [-.318, .074]$ ). Also, a small positive relation between career self-efficacy and career exploration showed an insignificant effect ( $B = .040$ ,  $SE = .114$ , 95%  $CI [-.182, .260]$ ). Furthermore, these two independent variables insignificantly explained 2.6% of the variance in the career exploration variable ( $R^2 = .026$ ,  $p = .286$ ).

Hypotheses 3 suggested a moderated mediation which suggested that having a subjective low SES condition, is related to having a lower career self-efficacy, when facing negative career feedback. First, the standardized independent variables SES and NCF were computed in to an interaction-term before the analysis ran in SPSS. The results show a significant negative effect between negative career feedback and career self-efficacy ( $B = -.388$ ,  $SE = .069$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $CI [-.525, -.251]$ ), supporting the suggestion that individuals who

receive more negative career feedback, also have a lower career self-efficacy. Further, despite the insignificance of the focal variables, the results show a significant negative effect between the interaction-term (see Figure 1 Appendix) and career self-efficacy ( $B = -.253$ ,  $SE = .070$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95%  $CI [-.393, -.114]$ ). Specifically, the conditional effects of the focal predictors, show partly significance for a moderate ( $B = -.388$ ,  $SE = .069$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95%  $CI = [-.525, -.251]$ ), and high ( $B = -.602$ ,  $SE = .063$ ,  $p = .000$ , 95%  $CI [-.787, -.418]$ ) score on SES. The results for the low SES condition were almost significant and therefore do not support hypothesis 3. This suggests that youth who are perceiving more negative career feedback, and are having a moderate or high SES condition, perceive a higher career self-efficacy compared to low SES employees. Lastly, the results show a significant positive relation between a subjective low SES condition and career self-efficacy ( $B = .152$ ,  $SE = .071$ ,  $p = .036$ , 95%  $CI [.010, .294]$ ). These variables together explained significantly 33.46% of the variance in career self-efficacy ( $R^2 = .335$ ,  $p = .000$ ). However, regarding the overall model, the index of the moderated mediation remained insignificant (95%  $CI [-.073, .046]$ ). Thus, Hypotheses 3 also remains unsupported.

### Discussion

Previous literature has linked career feedback to young adults' career self-regulation and career related outcomes such as career exploration activities. The present investigation sought to apply from the career identity control theory (Anderson and Mounts, 2012) to experiencing NCF, by showing that it triggers a decrease in occupational self-efficacy, which in turn leads to less career exploration behaviours. Further, another aim was to contribute to clarifying the contradicted and limited findings the present literature shows on the link between negative career feedback and career exploration, as well as mechanisms of action that can explain this link. Lastly, looking at the moderating role of socioeconomic status on the relation between negative career feedback and career self-efficacy is also highlighted.

The results of the present study do not support the first expectation which stated that receiving negative career feedback leads to a decrease in career exploration activities, as no link could be observed between people's ratings of receiving NCF and their reported exploratory activities. While no indirect effect can be observed placed in light of this lack of relationship, the results do not support the hypothesis that career self-efficacy decreases in the face of NCF and therefore leads to an increase in career exploratory behaviours. However, a partial link between NCF and career self-efficacy is supported. Due to the partial findings, the conditions for examining the influence of SES on this link are also partially been met. Therefore, this study failed to replicate previous findings which has been supported by the career identity control theory (Anderson and Mounts, 2012; Kerpelman and Lamke, 1997). Lastly, the third hypothesis suggested that low SES employees will have a steeper loss of career self-efficacy following negative career feedback, compared to moderate and high SES employees. Consequently, this should predict less career exploration. This hypothesis is not supported by the findings because there was no link between negative career feedback and career exploration. Due to this, no further links can be established. However, partial results were found in the first arm of the research model, aiming that facing negative career feedback decreases career self-efficacy. However, the lack of support for hypothesis 3 contradicts with previous findings of studies (Chen and Miller, 2012); Gallo and Matthews, 2003), who suggested that lower SES students will be more vigilant to the threat when facing negative career feedback, and are more likely to adjust their goals to accommodate the feedback. The present research, therefore, contributes to a growing body of limited and contradicted findings, suggesting that there is no support for the link between negative career feedback and career exploration, through career self-efficacy, strengthened by SES. This may be caused

### **Limitations**

There are at least two potential limitations concerning the results of this study. A first limitation concerns that the concept of negative career feedback on progress, used in this study following the career identity control theory, is too short-sighted. A previous study of Hu et al., (2018) used, next to the negative feedback on progress, also two other dimensions: negative feedback on goal suitability and on improvement. They found a supported link between negative feedback on progress triggering a decrease in career exploration, while they took the three feedback types in conjunction. In the present study, only the negative career feedback on progress was included which may not fully reflect how students possibly perceive negative career feedback. In terms of future research, it would be useful to extend the research by using a broader scale of negative career feedback. For example, other research (Praskova and Johnston, 2021) used three dimensions, including the intensity, for measurement of negative career feedback. In their research they found support for the link between negative career feedback with more proactive career behaviors. An explanation for this study not finding support can be that we did not take into account individual differences in how people may agree or disagree with the perceived feedback. For example, when individuals cannot find themselves in the negative feedback they have been given, they can decide to do nothing with it and therefore do not display career exploratory behaviors.

Second, another limitation is that the study contained one measurement and therefore cannot support a causal relationship between NCF and career exploration. It is possible that young people who more often explore their career options, are more confident in their capacity to realize their career goals. Meaning, that these individuals seem more “on track” with progressing towards their career goals and therefore may receive less negative feedback on their career progress. Thus, it could be that more career exploration leads to greater career self-efficacy, which then leads to perceiving less negative career feedback. Longitudinal and



experimental studies in the future can examine causal directions and give more clarification to this relationship.

### **Study Implications and Practical Relevance**

Despite these limitations and non-supporting findings, this study still contributes to practical implications. In this study the link between NCF may not be related to immediate exploration due to a lowered self-confidence. It is possible that having a lower SES condition is related to this decrease of self-confidence which leads to less career exploratory behaviours. Career counsellors, in this case, can focus on restoring people's self-efficacy and assist them with exploring their abilities and other suitable careers. In particular those who are more vigilant, like people with a lower SES condition, who more likely experience less self-confidence.

In conclusion, the present findings do not support the suggestion that negative career feedback decreases career exploring activities, via a decreased career self-efficacy, with an even steeper loss of career self-efficacy linked to low SES employees. However, we learned that in the face of NCF, those coming from lower SES may experience less career self-efficacy and therefore explore less within achieving the career they admire. This suggests that the findings on the link between negative career feedback and career related outcomes, such as career exploration, needs more clarification within the few and controversial findings present in the literature. Understanding how people react to negative career feedback, is important to effectively assist young people with exploration in their careers, to enhance a better person-job fit and overall job satisfaction.

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## Appendix

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of the Variables*

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Career Exploration	2.83	.75	x	-.16	.10	.05	.11	.18
2. Negative Career Feedback	2.35	.84	x	x	-.48**	-.18	.02	-.02
3. Career Self-efficacy	4.49	.68	x	x	x	.18	.16	.28**
4. SES	3.28	.85	x	x	x	x	-.08	.18
5. Age	23.76	3.25	x	x	x	x	x	.01
6. Gender (Female)	-	-	x	x	x	x	x	x

*Note:*  $N = 99$ . \*. Correlation is significant on the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\* Correlation is significant on 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Figure 1**

*Moderated Mediation Interaction Between SES and Negative Career Feedback on Career Self-Efficacy*

