How Negative Career Feedback Impacts Career Exploration: The Role of Career

Self-Efficacy and Maladaptive Perfectionism

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Abstract

Negative feedback is essential in young professionals' careers, yet research shows few positive responses to this feedback. This study explores the experiences and reactions of young professionals specifically toward negative career feedback. It is part of a two-wave study investigating how confidence in adaptive career planning influences responses to negative career feedback. Specifically, we explored the relationship between negative career feedback and career exploration, considering the mediating role of career self-efficacy and the moderating role of maladaptive perfectionism. A sample of 182 young professionals completed an online survey. Contrary to expectations, negative career feedback did not predict career exploration. However, an indirect-only mediation was found through career self-efficacy, suggesting that higher levels of self-efficacy alleviated the impact of negative career feedback on career exploration. Finally, maladaptive perfectionism did not moderate this relationship. Implications for improving feedback practices in the workplace are discussed, highlighting the benefits of constructive feedback in enhancing self-efficacy and supporting career development efforts among young professionals.

Keywords: negative career feedback, career exploration, career self-efficacy, maladaptive perfectionism

How Negative Career Feedback Impacts Career Exploration: The Role of Career

Self-Efficacy and Maladaptive Perfectionism

A large part of the world's population will start their careers between the ages of 18 to 35 years old (UNCTAD, 2023), a time that is punctuated with uncertainty, instability, and doubt in their choices. Feedback and responses are essential to build young confident workers, thus looking at effective ways to improve and guide young professionals is crucial. During career development, goal pursuit is a fundamental driver of progress and achievement (Lent et al., 2017). However, the path to achieving these goals is often met with challenges and obstacles, requiring individuals to navigate feedback regarding their performance and goal progress frequently. This feedback plays an important role in shaping individuals' career paths and impacts employees' subsequent actions and behaviors (Hu et al., 2018). Negative career feedback (NCF) is particularly important in the context of career development, as it identifies areas for improvement and indicates gaps between individuals' current status and their career goals (Creed et al., 2015).

Previous research has shown that individuals respond differently to NCF, influenced by various factors such as personality traits, coping mechanisms, and contextual variables (Andrews et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2014). Adaptive career behavior refers to the use of self-regulatory processes, social resources, and a professional's inherent tendencies to navigate and efficiently adjust to changes in their career paths (Hu et al., 2018). Employing this, some individuals are able to handle NCF more effectively, maintaining their motivation and self-efficacy, while others may experience increased distress and lower goal commitment (Creed et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2018). As a consequence of NCF, career exploration (CE) becomes an important career strategy, prompting individuals to seek information about their interests or job opportunities, and

enhancing their career decision-making (Taveira & Moreno, 2003). These different responses make it relevant to understand the underlying career management processes that affect professional goal pursuit, especially in the context of exploring career options.

Furthermore, according to Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), self-regulatory processes play a key role in how individuals monitor and adapt their career goals in response to feedback cues, with self-efficacy being strongly influenced by learning experiences, such as NCF (Lent et al., 1994). Additionally, perfectionism may impact career self-efficacy (CSE) since it shapes beliefs about performance standards (Thakre et al., 2021). Specifically, maladaptive perfectionists tend to have less accurate self-appraisals, skewed towards insecurity and self-blaming (Ganske & Ashby, 2007). However, the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism, career self-efficacy, and career exploration remains understudied within a career decision-making context (Andrews et al., 2014; Ganske & Ashby, 2007). This study aims to address this gap by investigating the moderating role of maladaptive perfectionism in the relationship between career self-efficacy and career exploration.

In this paper, we will examine the relationship between negative career feedback and career exploration, by focusing on the mediating role of career self-efficacy and the moderating role of maladaptive perfectionism through a mediated moderation analysis (Figure 1). We seek to answer the following research question: What is the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between negative feedback and career exploration, and how does maladaptive perfectionism moderate this process? Building upon existing literature, we propose hypotheses for the relationships between NCF, CSE, MP, and CE. These insights can benefit career counselors, organizations, and young individuals in navigating their career paths, contributing to more effective career development interventions and strategies.

Negative Career Feedback

Negative Career Feedback (NCF) plays an important role in shaping individuals' career development by highlighting discrepancies between their current status and their desired career outcomes (Carver and Scheier, 1982; Creed et al., 2015). It reflects information regarding current goal progress, goal suitability, and needed improvements toward eventual achievement (Hu et al., 2018). In the broader scope of career planning, NCF can be a learning experience as suggested by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). It promotes self-reflection and prompts individuals to reassess their goals as well as develop skills and adaptive strategies to better align their career goals with their interests. This study focuses on NCF related to progress as it provides specific information about how well an individual is advancing toward their career goal. NCF on goal progress elicits a sense of discrepancy between individuals' actual career trajectories and their aspirational goals, prompting them to engage in cognitive or behavioral processes to address these gaps and reduce the mental discomfort of goal discrepancy (Creed et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2018). After progress assessment, individuals adapt their strategies in response to the feedback, illustrating an adaptive response that drives them to realign their career paths with their goals (Savickas et al., 1997). This adaptive response potentially leads to a stronger experience of career stress, reduced career self-efficacy, and decreased career goal commitment, impacting their career exploration and goal-shifting behaviors (Creed et al, 2015; Hu et al., 2018). Positive outcomes have been noticed in the past, as the realignment of behavior can manifest in individuals developing resilience and adaptive strategies to overcome challenges (Richey, 2011). For example, Richey (2011) found that negative feedback has positive effects on performance, especially when the receivers found the feedback useful for improving their skills. This suggests that, by identifying areas for improvement and enhancing their skills and competencies,

individuals may also use negative career feedback as an opportunity for growth and development.

Career Exploration

Career exploration (CE) plays an important role in an individual's journey toward achieving their career goals, being a strategy that allows us to to gain knowledge about ourselves and different career opportunities (Taveira & Moreno, 2003). Individuals can engage in CE by researching different career options and current job openings (Levi & Ziegler, 1993), or networking and acquiring new skills (Betz & Voyten, 1997; Nasta, 2007), which all help foster career growth and development. Within career development, CE is important for broadening horizons, discovering new possibilities, and making informed career decisions (Taveira & Moreno, 2003).

According to SCCT, individuals' career planning and exploration behaviors are influenced by their self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations derived from learning experiences such as negative career feedback (Lent et al., 1994). However, receiving frequent NCF can present challenges, undermining confidence and motivation to explore different career paths (Hu et al., 2018). This suggests that NCF may disrupt an individual's willingness to engage in CE. For our first hypothesis (H1), we predict that receiving high levels of negative career feedback will be associated with lower levels of career exploration, as individuals may opt for safer, more familiar career trajectories instead of exploring new opportunities. This relationship will further be assessed by exploring the mediating role of career self-efficacy.

Career Self-Efficacy as a Mediator

A cognitive process that plays a role in career development is career self-efficacy (CSE). Rooted in Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977), CSE represents individuals' confidence in their

ability to accomplish specific career goals, shaping how they respond to challenges along their career paths. As a central component of SCCT, CSE is influenced by individual predispositions, such as maladaptive perfectionism, and learning experiences related to successes and failures, such as receiving negative career feedback. CSE, in turn, influences outcome expectations and personal goals by adjusting people's confidence levels regarding their career abilities and shaping their career behaviors such as career exploration. NCF has been linked to decreased CSE, interfering with individuals' commitment to their career goals and their exploration of alternative career pathways (Hu et al., 2018).

SCCT highlights that self-efficacy beliefs are strengthened by supportive environments and adequate skills, which in turn enhance individuals' interests and performance levels (Lent et al., 2016). This suggests that increased CSE fosters positive outcome expectations, promoting active engagement in CE, and thus works as a motivator in the goal-action-outcome process. For our second hypothesis (H2), we predict that career self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between negative career feedback and career exploration. We expect that individuals with high levels of NCF will exhibit higher levels of CE when they also have high levels of CSE. This mediated relationship will further be assessed by exploring the moderating role of maladaptive perfectionism.

Maladaptive Perfectionism as a Moderator

In the context of career development, perfectionism plays a significant role in shaping how individuals navigate their career goals because it affects how people relate to setbacks, and the threat of failure (Suh & Flores, 2023). Characterized by the pursuit of exceptionally high standards, perfectionism is an individual trait that reflects a striving for excellence as well as a tendency towards self-imposed pressure and harsh self-evaluation (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

Perfectionism becomes less of an asset when standards become unreachable and self-criticism intensifies (Szymanski, 2011). This implies two distinct dimensions: adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism (Hamacheck, 1978). Adaptive perfectionism is characterized by a healthy striving for excellence while also remaining aware of one's limitations, often leading to positive outcomes (Andrews et al., 2014). Maladaptive perfectionism (MP) is characterized by overly high and unrealistic standards and harsh self-criticism (Andrews et al., 2014), often resulting in more negative outcomes such as increased anxiety (Gutierrez et al., 2022), and decreased psychological well-being (Park & Jeong, 2015).

According to SCCT, individual differences and predispositions can affect the incorporation of learning experiences, such as negative career feedback. For individuals with MP, NCF may be internalized as a drastic fault, intensifying insecurities and self-blame, in turn negatively impacting their career self-efficacy and subsequent career exploration behaviors. This suggests that rather than directly impacting certain processes, an individual's level of MP acts as a lens through which individuals interpret and integrate CSE beliefs. When mistakes and shortcomings are viewed as inherent drawbacks, NCF highlights what one is lacking, reducing motivation and engagement in proactive career behaviors such as CE. For example, maladaptive perfectionists demonstrate lower levels of career decision-making self-efficacy than adaptive perfectionists, but higher levels than non-perfectionists (Andrews et al., 2014). Individuals with high levels of MP may struggle with heightened negative career thoughts, such as fear of failure, which can undermine their confidence in navigating their career paths effectively (Ganske & Ashby, 2007). This tendency towards unattainable standards and harsh self-criticism presents professionals with unique challenges in career exploration and decision-making because they view their career progress with harsh judgment and a sense of inadequacy. This suggests that

individuals are more likely to interpret setbacks as personal failings instead of growth opportunities, leading to decreased engagement in CE behaviors. For our third hypothesis (H3), we predict that maladaptive perfectionism will moderate the relationship between career self-efficacy and career exploration. We expect that for individuals with high levels of MP, lower levels of CSE will be observed, which will, in turn, mediate the relationship between NCF and CE, leading to decreased levels of CE.

Overall, we expect NCF to influence CE via CSE, and we assume MP to moderate the relationship between CSE and CE (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Mediated Moderation Model
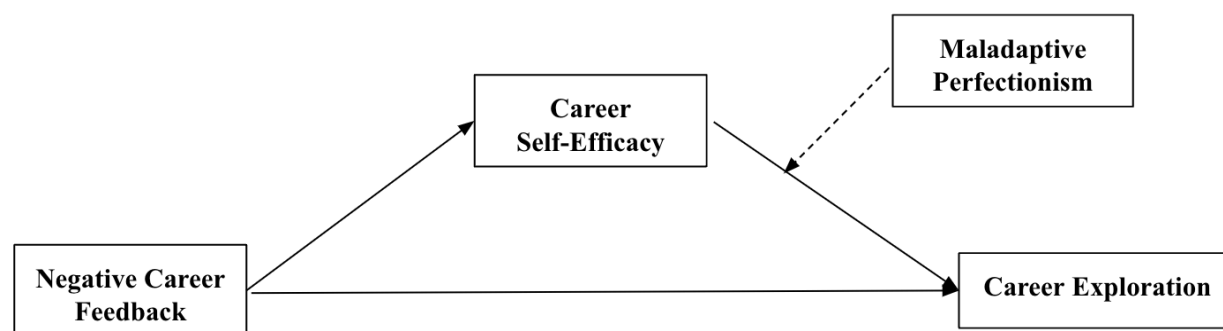
Methods

Sample

An online survey was conducted using a sample of participants ($N = 329$) recruited via social networks and online platforms, given the necessity for convenience sampling. The target population was aimed to consist of participants who either had the status of a university student or an employee ranging from 18 to 35 years old. This criterion was set to ensure that the participants included in the sample were in the process of finding their career paths at the time of completing the survey, as opposed to having already committed to a specific career. We

excluded 3 participants from our final sample because they did not meet the age criterion to be eligible for this study. 6 participants were excluded for not providing informed consent. Data was missing from 137 participants, who were therefore removed. One participant was removed as they were unemployed and not a student. Our final sample size was 182 participants.

The final sample was relatively young with an average age of $M = 23.52$ years ($SD = 3.02$). A total of 62.1% of the sample were female ($N = 113$), 36.8% were male ($N = 67$), and 1.1% indicated 'Non-binary' ($N = 2$). 63.7% of the participants were enrolled in a university program ($N = 116$) at the time of study completion, while 29.1% indicated being employed ($N = 53$) in different work sectors. Only a small minority, 7.1%, were both students and employed ($N = 13$). The majority of the sample, 53.3%, indicated the Netherlands as their country of residence ($N = 97$), while 14.8% lived in Germany at the time of data collection ($N = 27$), and 31.9% specified other countries of residence ($N = 58$).

Measures

The measures analyzed in the present study are various online self-report questionnaires administered using the online survey platform Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT).

Feedback on Career Goals (FCG) Inventory

In order to assess negative feedback towards career goals, our independent variable, we used the Feedback on Career Goals inventory by Hu et al. (2017). The original material is made of three subscales, containing 24 items. For the current study, we only made use of one of these three subscales, namely feedback on current career progress (e.g., "People tell me that I am not working hard enough to get into/improve/maintain my chosen career"), containing eight items each. Response options follow a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". The higher the scores on the scale, the stronger the intensity of negative

feedback experienced by the participants. The inventory shows good internal reliability with a Cronbach's α of .77 for feedback on career progress. Cronbach's α for our sample was .87.

Occupational Self-Efficacy (OCCSEFF) Scale

To assess career self-efficacy, our mediator, we employed the short version of the Occupational Self-Efficacy scale by Schyns and Collani (2002). The scale was adapted after Hu et al. (2018) to fit the career context instead of the work domain by exchanging the word "work" for "career". The scale consists of eight items (e.g., "If I am in trouble in my career, I can usually think of something to do"; "I can remain calm when facing difficulties in my career because I can rely on my abilities"), which were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "completely true" to "not at all true". Higher scores on the OCCSEFF scale indicate a stronger sense of career self-efficacy in the participants. The scale reports a good internal consistency with a Cronbach's α of .84. Cronbach's α for our sample was .80.

Short Almost Perfect Scale (SAPS)

To measure perfectionism, our moderator, we used the Short Almost Perfect Scale by Rice et al. (2014). The two subscales used in the SAPS are Standards and Discrepancy, each containing four items. The Standards subscale refers to the individuals' expectations of performance (e.g., "I set very high standards for myself"), while the Discrepancy subscale estimates the difference between the individuals' expectations of their performance and their perceived self-evaluation in meeting these expectations (e.g., "My performance rarely measures up to my standards"). In line with prior research (Barnett & Sharp, 2016), this study operationalized maladaptive perfectionism as the discrepancy scale. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Higher scores suggest a higher level of maladaptive perfectionism. With a Cronbach's α of .87 for the Standards

subscale and a Cronbach's α of .84 for the Discrepancy subscale, the SAPS shows good internal consistency. In this study, Cronbach's α was .87 for the Standards subscale and .86 for the Discrepancy subscale, indicating high reliability for both measures.

Career Exploration Scale

To measure participants' career exploration, our dependent variable, we used the 6-item Environmental Career Exploration subscale from the Career Exploration Scale (Stumpf et al., 1983). We assessed participants' career exploration activities in the last three months, with items such as "Went to various career orientation programs" and "Investigated career possibilities". The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from "never" to "very frequently"). The higher the scores, the more career exploration was undertaken by the participant. Previous studies have indicated that the Environmental Career Exploration subscale demonstrates acceptable levels of reliability (Hirschi et al., 2009; Stumpf et al., 1983). Cronbach's α for our sample was .78.

Procedure

This project was part of a three-wave, longitudinal study with two weeks between the first and second wave, and one month between the second and third wave. Our study focused only on the first wave. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and completed a survey in English, using the online program Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Participants were sent the link to the survey, which they had a week to complete. In this survey, participants received information on the purpose of the study, what they would be doing, reasons for participation, how their data would be treated, and points of contact for any further information. Participants also signed a consent form before starting the survey, where they acknowledged their right to withdraw from the study at any point and that their participation was voluntary.

After signing the consent form, participants provided some demographic information, such as employment status, age, gender, work sector, and country of residence. Participants then answered questionnaires on the measures described above. The survey also included other questionnaires on other measures although they are beyond the scope of this paper. This survey took around 15 minutes to complete. There was no monetary incentive for completion of this survey. The research procedure was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychology at the University of Groningen.

Statistical Analysis

Using SPSS, we ran a preliminary analysis to investigate the quality of the data which included initial correlations and descriptive statistics. Additionally, we checked whether the data was fit for the analysis by looking at scale reliabilities, data trends, and assumptions of linear regression. We explored significant relationships that allowed us to investigate our regression model. Our statistical analysis includes several linear regression analyses. Moreover, we used PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013), an extension of SPSS, in order to investigate the mediated moderation path. Lastly, since we are investigating maladaptive perfectionism, it is customary to control for the effects of adaptive perfectionism as a covariate.

<div align="center">

Results

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Preliminary Analysis and Descriptive Statistics

We analyzed the means, standard deviations, and correlations of our variables (Table 1). A negative correlation between NCF and CE was found; however, this was non-significant ($r =$ -.13, $p = .08$).[1]

An assumptions check was done prior to our main analysis. The PP-Plot showed that our data was approximately normally distributed with minor deviations (see Figure A1 in the

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[1] Despite this, we continue with our analysis due to the current research purposes of this report.

Appendix). While these deviations are present, they are not significant enough to affect the validity of our analysis. Additionally, our data showed good homoscedasticity, though we noted the presence of some outliers (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). Lastly, we found a linear relationship between NCF and career exploration, indicating that the linearity assumption was met (see Figure A3 in the Appendix).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Career Exploration (CE)	3.06	.67	-					
2. Negative Career Feedback (NCF)	2.37	.86	-.13	-				
3. Career Self-Efficacy (CSE)	3.80	1.00	.29**	-.42**	-			
4. Maladaptive Perfectionism (MP)	5.14	1.09	.22**	.35	.04	-		
5. Age	23.52	3.02	.07	-.08	.18*	-.06	-	
6. Gender (female) [a]	.62	.49	-.11	-.04	-.30**	.11	-.30	-

Note. The analysis was run with *N* = 182 participants. *p < .05. **p < .01

[a] We left out 2 non-binary participants when coding gender, resulting in a sample of 180.

Main Analysis

Main Effect

To test H1, a regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between NCF and CE. The model accounted for 2% of the variance in CE (R^2 = .02) and was not statistically significant, $F(1, 180) = 3.15$, $p = .08$. The direct effect of NCF on CE was not significant ($B =$ -.10, $SE = .06$, $p = .08$). These findings do not support the hypothesis that higher levels of negative career feedback reduce levels of career exploration, thus H1 is rejected.
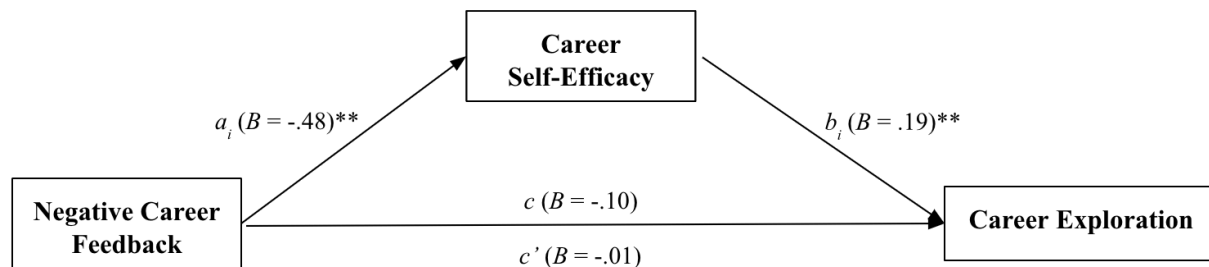
Mediation

Before testing H2, a regression analysis was conducted to assess any possible interaction of age and gender with CSE in predicting CE. There was no significant interaction effect for age ($p = .59$) or gender ($p =.39$). Therefore, we proceeded with our mediation analysis without controlling for age and gender.

To test H2, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the role of CSE in the relationship between NCF and CE using Hayes' Model 4. The model which included NCF ($B = -.48$, $SE = .08$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [-.64, -.33]) as a predictor, was significant, $F(2, 179) = 37.80$, $p < .01$, and accounted for 18% of the variance in CSE ($R^2 = .17$). The following model was also significant, $F(1, 180) = 8.17$, $p < .01$, and accounted for 8% of the variance in CE ($R^2 = .08$). NCF was not a significant predictor of CE ($B = -.01$, $SE = .06$, $p = .87$, 95% CI [-.13, .11]). CSE positively predicted CE ($B = .19$, $SE = .05$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.09, .29]). The indirect effect of NCF on CE, through CSE, was negative ($B = -.09$, 95% CI [-.15, -.04]). However, the direct effect was not significant and neither was it in the primary analysis – so this is called an indirect-only mediation. These findings partially support the hypothesis that career self-efficacy mediates the relationship between negative career feedback and career exploration. Thus, H2 is partially supported. For the significant pathways, see the graph below (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Mediation Model

Mediated Moderation

To test H3, a mediated moderation analysis was conducted to examine the role of maladaptive perfectionism (MP) in the mediation of career self-efficacy (CSE) on the relationship between negative career feedback (NCF) and career exploration (CE) using Hayes' Model 14. As suggested by Rice et al. (2014), we controlled for adaptive perfectionism when measuring maladaptive perfectionism. First, we included NCF and adaptive perfectionism as predictors in a significant model, $F(2, 179) = 20.30$, $p < .001$, which explained 18% of the variance in CSE ($R^2 = .18$). NCF negatively predicted CSE ($B = -.47$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.62, -.31]), while adaptive perfectionism was not a significant predictor of CSE ($B = .11$, $SE = .07$, $p = .12$, 95% CI [-.03, .24]). The following model, which included NCF, CSE, MP, adaptive perfectionism, and the interaction of CSE and MP, as predictors, was significant $F(5, 176) = 5.43$, $p < .001$, and explained 13% of the variance in CE ($R^2 = .13$). Only CSE positively predicted CE ($B = .17$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.07, .27]). NCF was not a significant predictor of CE ($B = -.00$, $SE = .06$, $p = .98$, 95% CI [-.13, .12]). Adaptive perfectionism was not a significant predictor of CE ($B = .12$, $SE = .13$, $p = .99$, 95% CI [-.12, .37]) and neither was MP ($B = .03$, $SE = .11$, $p = .82$, 95% CI [-.20, .25]). The interaction between CSE and MP was also not a significant predictor of CE ($B = .01$, $SE = .04$, $p = .75$, 95% CI [-.07, .10]). The index of moderated mediation was non-significant ($B = -.01$, 95% CI [-.05, .04]; see Figure A4 in the Appendix). These findings do not support the hypothesis that maladaptive perfectionism moderates the mediation of career self-efficacy on the relationship between negative career feedback and career exploration. Thus, H3 is rejected.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated the relationship between negative career feedback (NCF) and career exploration (CE), examining the mediating role of career self-efficacy (CSE) and the moderating role of maladaptive perfectionism (MP), respectively. Our first hypothesis expected higher levels of NCF to be associated with reduced CE. We found that NCF did not influence individuals' engagement, contradicting our hypothesis. Furthermore, we expected that CSE would mediate the relationship between NCF and CE, such that individuals with higher levels of NCF would experience lower CSE and be less likely to engage in CE. Our findings partially supported our expectation, since we found an indirect-only mediation. Lastly, we hypothesized that higher levels of MP would moderate the relationship between CSE and CE, such that individuals with high MP would experience lower CSE and engage in less CE. Contrary to our hypothesis, we found that MP did not moderate the relationship. Beyond its limited predictive value, MP exhibited a ceiling effect in our sample, with a mean score of 5.14, indicating that a significant number of participants scored between 4 and 6. This potentially reduces the variability, affecting the results.

Theoretical Implications

Our expectation for the direct effect of negative career feedback on career exploration was based on existing research suggesting that receiving high levels of NCF would lead to lower CE (Hu et al., 2018). However, our findings did not show this direct effect. The discrepancy between our findings and previous research could be due to various contextual factors, including how NCF is perceived and internalized. These factors may differ based on career stage. For example, individuals in the early stages of their careers might be more sensitive to NCF and less confident in their abilities to explore career options (Hu et al., 2014), and these results provide us

with a more complex understanding of the feedback's effects. Considering our relatively young sample, it is relevant to discuss how common it is for this age group to explore other career options. Hu et al. (2018) suggest that young individuals tend to be working toward a singular specific career goal; thus, receiving NCF about progress would prompt them to be more engaged and put more effort into their current career goal rather than engaging in CE. Another potential reason for the discrepancy is that there was not enough time for NCF to take effect. Since this is a pilot study and all variables were measured simultaneously, we were not able to observe the consequent effect of NCF on career exploration over time. We can relate our findings to Social Cognitive Career Theory, which highlights the role of learning experiences in career development (Lent et al., 1994). In our sample, NCF may not have had an immediate impact on CE because the feedback might initially trigger self-reflection instead of immediate action. While negative career feedback might not lead to immediate career exploration, it could still play a role in long-term career planning and development.

Our findings highlight the complex role of career self-efficacy in mediating the relationship between negative career feedback and career exploration. Despite the absence of a direct influence of NCF on CE in our study, the significant indirect-only mediation of CSE suggests that individuals' beliefs in their abilities impact career exploration. This aligns with prior research that highlights the important role of CSE as a self-regulation process through which NCF manifests its effects on CE (Hu et al., 2018; Lent et al., 2017). Social Cognitive Career Theory states that self-efficacy beliefs are important in shaping career-related behaviors and outcomes (Lent et al., 1994). CSE allows individuals to interpret and integrate feedback constructively, promoting proactive career behaviors such as CE. We found that high levels of CSE lead to high CE, supporting the idea that when individuals believe in their capabilities, they

are more likely to engage in exploratory behaviors, even in the face of negative feedback. Moreover, CSE works as an intermediary factor for the negative impact of NCF, since it turns it into a motivational resource instead of an obstacle. This process aligns with Bandura's (1977) idea that self-efficacy influences how challenges are perceived and handled. Our findings suggest that individuals with high CSE are likely to view NCF as a growth opportunity that promotes their CE. Since our mediation analysis assumes a causal pathway, we have to take into account our cross-sectional design and lack of temporal precedence in our measurements, meaning that we cannot establish clear causality (Kazdin, 2007). Our study contributes to existing research by highlighting that while negative career feedback may not directly impact career exploration, its impact is mediated through self-efficacy beliefs, emphasizing the importance of enhancing career self-efficacy in career development interventions.

Regarding perfectionism, maladaptive perfectionism did not act as a moderator in our model. We expected that individuals with perfectionistic tendencies would differ in their confidence about their ability to make effective career choices based on the findings from Ganske and Ashby (2007). Contrary to our expectations, our findings do not align with existing research which suggests that strong negative career thoughts associated with MP, such as fear of failure, can reduce confidence about one's career path (Andrews et al., 2014). These discrepancies might be explained by the ceiling effect within our sample, as it may have restricted the range of values that MP could take, preventing us from observing a potential moderating effect on CSE. Moreover, our findings contrast with the idea that individuals high in MP tend to be more affected by negative feedback regarding their performance (Lo & Abbott, 2019). This suggests that while MP may influence how individuals perceive and respond to career feedback, its role in the specific context of negative career feedback and career

exploration seems complex and may be better explained by additional factors not measured in the current study.

Relating our findings to SCCT allows us to better understand these results. SCCT posits that individual differences, such as personality traits and perfectionism, can affect how feedback is internalized and responded to (Lent et al., 1994). For individuals with high levels of MP, NCF might not lead directly to career exploration due to their tendency to view feedback through a lens of self-criticism and fear of failure. This could lower their CSE, preventing them from engaging in proactive career behaviors like CE. According to SCCT, self-efficacy beliefs are important in interpreting and responding to feedback. Therefore, the interplay between maladaptive perfectionism and career self-efficacy might mediate how negative career feedback impacts career exploration, suggesting a more complex pathway rather than a direct moderation effect, which could be investigated in future research.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of our study lies in its sample size of 182 participants, which enhances its statistical power. Moreover, while having young participants can be seen as a limitation due to their limited experience, it can also provide valuable insights into how younger generations perceive and respond to negative career feedback in the workplace, or during the early stages of their careers (Maree, 2020). This understanding is important for designing career development interventions and strategies that effectively meet the needs of younger professionals.

However, the study also has several limitations. The first is that the cross-sectional design prevents us from observing changes in career self-efficacy and career exploration over time. This design limitation restricts our ability to determine causality (Thomas, 2023) and to understand how these variables develop throughout goal pursuit. Future research could make use of a

longitudinal design, specifically a cross-lagged design, to observe these delayed effects (Caruana et al., 2015) and provide a clearer picture of the relationship between NCF and CE.

Another limitation is the unspecified source of negative feedback. The impact of feedback might differ depending on whether it comes from supervisors, colleagues, or other sources (Son & Kim, 2015). This suggests that the perceived credibility of the evaluator might influence how feedback is met. For example, Greller and Herold (1975) suggest that feedback from different sources can vary in its perceived informativeness and impact. This means that feedback from a supervisor might be perceived as more authoritative and could have a stronger impact on career exploration compared to feedback from colleagues. Future research should consider exploring how feedback sources and delivery methods influence individuals' reactions and adaptive career behaviors to gain a better understanding of these dynamics.

Finally, the ceiling effect observed in the measurement of maladaptive perfectionism may have restricted the range of our values. This concentration of scores near the higher end of the scale suggests a limited variability in responses, which may have reduced our ability to observe a significant effect of MP. A reason for the found effect could be that our sample was relatively young. Younger individuals, specifically those in academic or early career stages, often have higher standards and more self-criticism, leading them to exhibit higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism (Andrews et al., 2014). These increased standards might skew their scores towards the upper end of the scale, reducing the range of values. Future research should consider using a more diverse sample to include a wider age range and varied professional backgrounds as it might alleviate the ceiling effect by providing a more representative distribution of perfectionism scores.

Practical Implications

Understanding the complex roles of negative career feedback and career self-efficacy on career exploration has practical implications for career counselors and organizational practitioners. Our study highlights that young professionals with higher levels of career self-efficacy are more likely to engage in career exploration, despite encountering negative career feedback. This suggests that interventions aimed at strengthening career self-efficacy, such as mentoring programs and skills training could be beneficial (Lent et al., 2017). These interventions give individuals the resilience needed to respond constructively to negative career feedback in their career development. By fostering resilient self-efficacy beliefs, organizations can better support employees in achieving their career goals even in the face of setbacks (Newton et al., 2008).

Moreover, our findings highlight the importance of promoting a supportive feedback culture that is able to effectively manage negative feedback in the workplace. While our study mainly focuses on how young professionals perceive and respond to negative career feedback, previous research suggests that fostering a feedback environment that considers the quality and nature of feedback provided by supervisors and colleagues, can contribute to a more positive work environment (Steelman et al., 2004). Additionally, implementing feedback strategies that consider individual differences in how feedback is met can foster a more inclusive and growth-oriented organizational culture (Anseel et al., 2015). One such feedback strategy is constructive feedback, which has been linked to greater job satisfaction and more confidence in abilities for career development (Sommer et al., 2012). We believe that these implications not only benefit individual career development but also help improve organizational responsiveness.

Further Research

Future research should explore the potential moderating effects of other relevant personal traits on the relationship between career self-efficacy and career exploration. Resilience seems to be an important characteristic in responding to setbacks and adversity (Crum et al., 2013), which could allow us to consider potential interactions between maladaptive perfectionism and resilience. Moreover, Hu et al. (2019) found a significant moderating effect of socioeconomic status on the relationship between negative career feedback and goal revision intentions. This suggests that socioeconomic status could also influence career exploration which could be worth investigating. Exploring the role of various individual differences could allow for a better understanding of the interplay between negative career feedback, career self-efficacy, and career exploration.

Additionally, our study was not domain-specific, meaning that we explored the impacts of negative feedback and the adaptive strategies linked to it in the general work context. Future research could consider investigating the different effects of negative career feedback on career goal development within specific professional domains. Domain-specific research could provide us with information about how different fields influence the impact of feedback on individuals. For example, feedback is important for young healthcare practitioners, such as nurses, since it gives them insights into personal safety and improves their clinical skills, which further enhances patient care (Song et al., 2024). Exploring these domain-specific differences could help design career development interventions tailored to specific professional populations.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between negative career feedback and career exploration, focusing on the mediating role of career self-efficacy and the moderating role of

maladaptive perfectionism. While we did not find a direct effect of negative career feedback on career exploration, our findings highlight the significant mediating role of self-efficacy. This emphasizes the importance of interventions aimed at enhancing career self-efficacy to foster effective career development among young professionals. Having confident and skilled young professionals is essential for the healthy functioning of workplaces and the overall workforce well-being. Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of the complex interactions between negative career feedback, career exploration, career self-efficacy, and maladaptive perfectionism. Organizations can benefit from these insights by promoting environments that support the well-being and professional growth of their employees.

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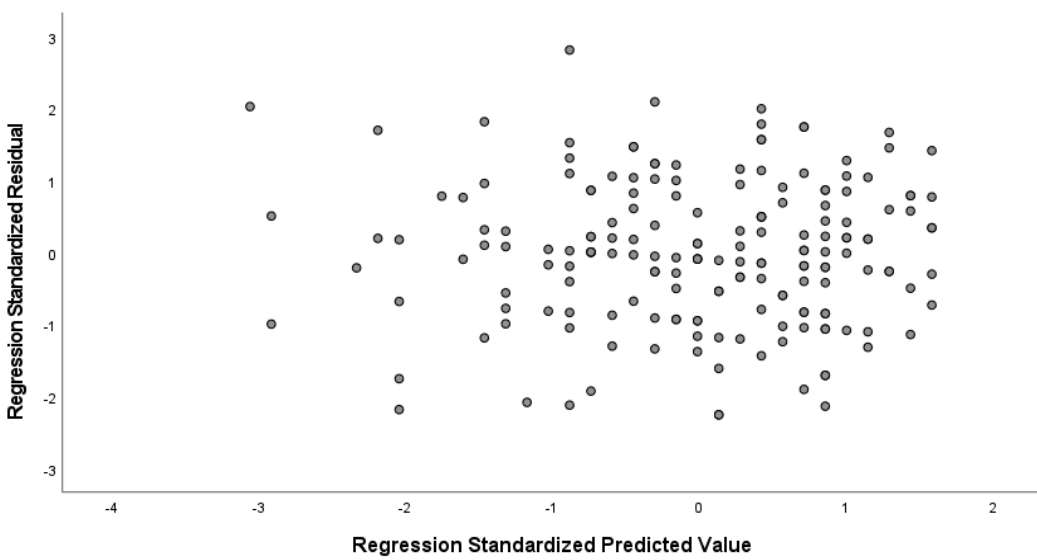
Appendix - Data Analysis
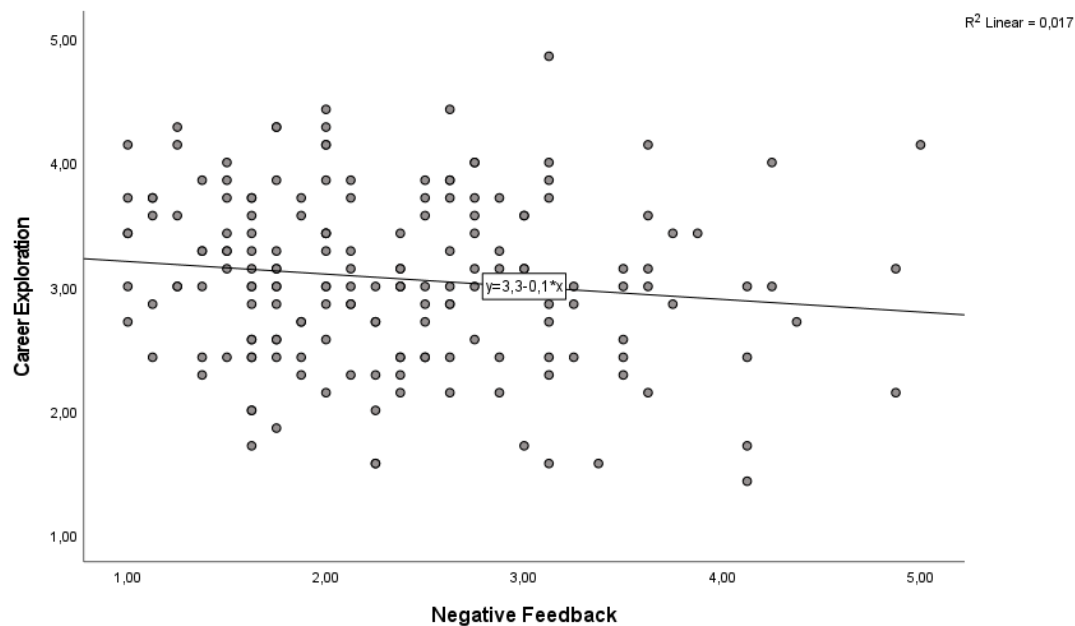
Figure A1

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residuals
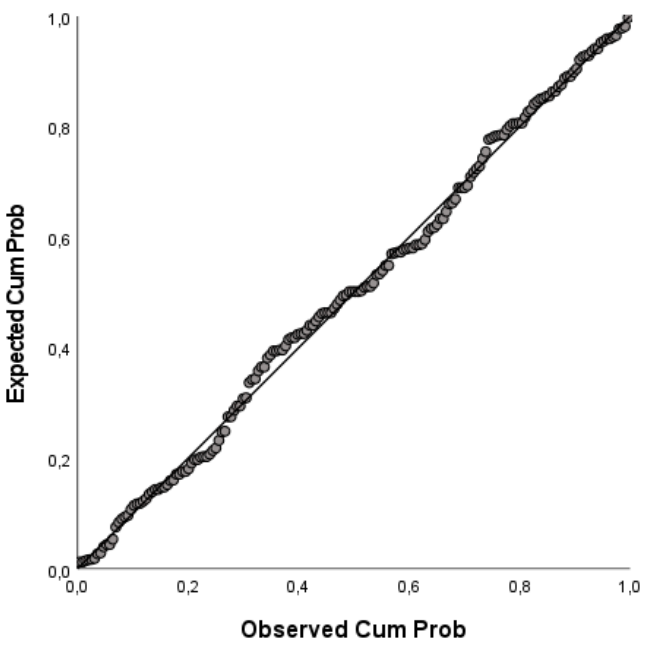
Figure A2

Homoscedasticity Scatterplot for Career Exploration

Figure A3

Assumption of Linearity

Figure A4

Conditional Effects of Career Self-Efficacy at Different Levels of Maladaptive Perfectionism