

# Subjective social status, work volition, and career adaptability: A longitudinal study

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## ABSTRACT

Building from the Psychology of Working Theory, we explore relations between subjective social status, work volition, and career adaptability over time in a sample of 267 undergraduate students. Participants completed a questionnaire assessing study variables in three waves over a period of six months. Structural equation modeling was used to examine cross-lagged relations between all three variables as well as examine the mediating effect of work volition in the link from social status to career adaptability. Results showed Time 1 and Time 2 social status to predict Time 2 and Time 3 work volition respectively. Likewise, Time 1 and Time 2 work volition significantly predicted Time 2 and Time 3 career adaptability. Finally, we found work volition to significantly mediate the relation between social status and career adaptability. Results provide preliminary support for the Psychology of Working Theory hypotheses regarding the relations from financial constraints and marginalization to work volition and career adaptability. Practical implications and future directions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades, career adaptability has emerged as a pivotal variable in the prediction of positive career outcomes. First introduced as a component of Career Construction Theory (CCT; Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005), career adaptability has been conceptualized as the ability to use resources to cope with current and anticipated vocational tasks (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). These resources include self-regulatory strengths that allow for flexible responses to the person, environment, and their interaction (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Thus, career adaptability is a dynamic construct, and a person who is highly adaptable at work has the ability to adjust in order to meet work demands.

Despite a surge in research on career adaptability since its introduction into the literature, the role of contextual variables in the development of career adaptability has received little attention from researchers. In the current study, we attend to some of these contextual factors; specifically, we examine two indicators of vocational privilege—subjective social status (SSS) and work volition—in relation to career adaptability. We assess these variables at three time points over a six month period, examining direct and indirect relations between SSS, work volition, and career adaptability. We build from the recently developed Psychology of Working Theory (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016), which places contextual variables related to social and economic privilege as critical predictors of vocational and overall well-being outcomes.

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## 2. Theoretical framework

In introducing the Psychology of Working Framework (PWF; Blustein, 2006), Blustein observed that an assumption of personal freedom of work choice is pervasive in previous vocational theories. He challenged this assumption by bringing to light a different assumption that, on the contrary, most people in the world face considerable constraints in choosing their occupations. The PWF asserted that constructs like person-environment fit and personal values only partially explain how people find their way to various job paths (Blustein, 2006, 2008; Blustein, Kenna, Gill, & DeVoy, 2008). Further, the PWF highlights constraints caused by oppressive social and economic structures. Thus, from the PWF lens, marginalization based on race, gender, disability status, sexual orientation, social status, and other minority identities serves as a pivotal predictor of work outcomes. A key tenet of the PWF (Blustein, 2006, 2008) is the idea that work has the ability to fulfill needs for survival, relatedness, and self-determination. Although working has the capacity to fulfill these needs, limited freedom of work choice resulting from oppression and marginalization may prevent a person from engaging in work that fulfills these needs.

Recently, PWF researchers have proposed a theoretical model to make the original tenets of the PWF testable (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). This new theoretical framework, the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), proposed that economic constraints and experiences with marginalization are key predictors that, over time, impact the unfolding of people's work lives. Specifically, economic constraints and marginalization experiences are hypothesized to predict both work volition and career adaptability. Within the model these variables are hypothesized to be correlated, but no directional link is offered given a lack of available research to substantiate the temporal relations of these constructs. However, regardless of the directionality between the constructs, it is proposed that volition and adaptability each promote access to decent work that fulfills survival and basic psychological needs. According to the theory, need satisfaction ultimately leads to work fulfillment and overall well-being (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016). Given the recency of the PWT model, no known empirical studies have tested its propositions. In the current study, we begin to test pieces of the model, particularly focusing on the relation of economic constraints to work volition and career adaptability over time.

## 3. Career adaptability

As previously mentioned, career adaptability is a multifaceted and dynamic variable that allows an individual to have flexible coping responses to work demands (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). It is comprised of four separate components: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas, 1997). Concern reflects levels of preparation for future vocational tasks. Control is the level of responsibility a person takes for shaping their vocational future. Curiosity is indicative of a person's exploration of potential vocational opportunities. Finally, confidence pertains to the degree to which a person feels able to overcome potential barriers related to vocational aspirations (Savickas, 2002).

Among college students and adults, career adaptability has been linked with positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, career success, and career decision self-efficacy (Douglass & Duffy, 2015; Guo et al., 2014; Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2013; Zacher, 2014). Given these benefits, predictors of career adaptability have been a primary question in recent research. Results of empirical studies have found variables such as future temporal focus, education, core self-evaluations, emotional intelligence, various personality constructs (e.g., proactive personality, extraversion), and extrinsic work values (e.g., high income) to predict career adaptability (Cai et al., 2015; Coetzee & Harry, 2014; Hou, Wu, & Liu, 2014; Ye, 2015; Zacher, 2014). Although these findings have been important in teasing out factors that lead to being more adaptable at work, they primarily focus on within-person factors, largely neglecting contextual variables. Thus, in the current study, we attempt to fill this gap in the literature by examining SSS and its direct and indirect effects- via work volition- on career adaptability.

### 3.1. Predictors of career adaptability

#### 3.1.1. Subjective social status

Subjective social status is one of two components of social class. Social class refers to a person's relative position in a society's cultural and economic hierarchy and reflects the control, influence, and power that result from this position (Diemer, Mistry, Wadsworth, López, & Reimers, 2013). It is a multifaceted construct with both objective and subjective components. Objective measures of social class (often termed *socioeconomic status* [SES]) include income, education level, and occupational prestige. Subjective social status is a person's subjective sense of where they stand in society and has implications for the psychological experience of being a part of a particular class background. Although it is necessary to study both components of social class, in the current study, our focus is on the latter. Because we are interested in *perceived* work choice and *perceived* status, our measures will reflect that of SSS.

A focus on SSS allows for a person's subjective appraisal of their experienced social class along with resulting classism or social class expectations (Liu, Ali, Soleck, Hopps, & Pickett, 2004). Liu et al. (2004) outlined several reasons why SSS may be more useful in understanding behavior in the context of social class. In addition to objective social class indices being poor predictors of factors such as prejudicial attitudes (Liu et al., 2004; Seeman, 1992), SES measures tend to be limited in capturing a full understanding of a person's social standing. For instance, measuring income does not necessarily account for family wealth, nor does it factor in credit and borrowing (Liu et al., 2004). Similarly, the authors note that simply indicating one's education level leaves out information about social benefits gained and cultural norms learned in specific educational settings.

Past research shows that SSS plays a significant role in vocational development. For example, Thompson and Subich (2006) found that college students with higher perceived social status were more likely to express comfort and a high level of efficacy in career decision making as well as career certainty. Thompson and Dahling (2012) found perceived social status to be a direct positive predictor of enhanced work-related learning experiences among a sample of undergraduate students. The researchers also found perceived social status to indirectly predict self-efficacy and outcome expectations in the work domain. Other studies have found aspects of social status to correlate with variables closely related to adaptability, such as achievement motivation (Argyle, 1994) and exposure to/evaluation of career options (Lapour & Heppner, 2009).

Social status may play a particularly vital role for the working class and poor (Ali, 2013; Allan, Autin, & Duffy, 2014; Blustein et al., 2002; Noonan, Hall, & Blustein, 2007). Although focusing on objective social class measures, Blustein et al. (2002) provided compelling evidence for the role of social status in a person's vocational trajectory. They found that, compared to participants of a lower SES, higher SES participants had more access to external resources and were more likely to view work as a source of personal satisfaction. They also reported higher levels of career adaptability, which was described in Blustein et al.'s (2002) study as an aptitude for career exploration and planfulness. Building from these findings, coupled with theoretical propositions of PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016) suggesting a link between social status and career adaptability, we hypothesize that social status will be associated with career adaptability. Specifically, individuals higher in social status at Time 1 and Time 2 will be more likely to feel adaptable in their careers at Time 2 and Time 3, respectively (*Hypothesis 1*).

### 3.1.2. Work volition

Work volition is a person's perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints (Duffy, Diemer, Perry, Laurenzi, & Torrey, 2012). The variable was implicitly introduced in the PWF (Blustein, 2006), which highlighted the pervasive assumption of individual choice present in predominant vocational theories. Blustein (2006) underscored the fact that many individuals are not able to freely make occupational choices due to factors such as social and economic constraints. Building from this implicit assertion within the PWF, Duffy, Diemer, Perry, Laurenzi and Torrey (2012) defined the construct of work volition and developed a scale to assess a person's perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints. Most recently, within the PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016), work volition has been positioned as a central construct in a person's ability to secure decent and fulfilling work. Within the PWT, work volition is proposed to be predicted by marginalization and social class and is, in turn, hypothesized to be linked with career adaptability.

The PWT proposes social status and work volition are separate but related constructs (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016). Although few studies have examined the link between work volition and social status, Allan et al. (2014) and Duffy, Autin, and Douglass (2016) found weak to moderate relations between social status and work volition, each suggesting that economic and social barriers contribute to lower levels of work volition. Additionally, studies have linked social status with constructs related to work volition such as career decision self-efficacy, career barriers, locus of control, access to resources, and experiences of discrimination (Blustein et al., 2002; Duffy, Jadidian, Douglass, & Allan, 2015; Fuller-Rowell, Evans, & Ong, 2012; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Thompson & Subich, 2006, 2011). The measure used to assess work volition among students – the Work Volition Scale – Student Version – (WVS-SV; Duffy, Diemer, Perry, Laurenzi and Torrey, 2012) assesses two components of volition: a general sense of volition (positively valenced) and constraints to volition (negatively valenced). Considering that we were most interested in the positively valenced, general sense of volition, like previous studies with college students, only this subscale was used to assess work volition (Duffy, Douglass, & Autin, 2015). Guided by findings from prior studies, we hypothesize that social status at Time 1 and Time 2 will positively predict work volition at Time 2 and Time 3 (*Hypothesis 2*).

### 3.2. Work volition as a mediator

In addition to examining the direct link between social status to career adaptability and work volition, a three wave study also allows for examination of mediation effects. Specifically, in the current study, we position work volition as a mediator between social status and career adaptability. Duffy, Blustein, et al. (2016) posited that work volition and career adaptability share a reciprocal relation – this relation has been supported by past research finding weak to moderate relations between each component of career adaptability and work volition (Buyukgoze-Kavas, Duffy, & Douglass, 2015; Duffy, Douglass, et al., 2016). Although the link between work volition and career adaptability has been proposed to be reciprocal, a majority of the research to date on work volition has temporally positioned work volition as a predictor of vocational outcomes (e.g., Duffy & Autin, 2013; Duffy, Bott, Allan, & Torrey, 2013; Jadidian & Duffy, 2011). Most recently, one study demonstrated that work volition fully mediated the link of social status to career commitment and meaningful work among an adult sample population (Duffy et al., 2016).

As such, for the current study, we hypothesize that a general sense of choice in one's career – which is positioned as an outcome of social status – is an attitude that college students would develop prior to the development of more specific career abilities within the career domain. In this sense, work volition would temporally precede career adaptability because students would develop a sense of volition at a younger age, potentially influencing downstream vocational outcomes such as adaptability. Specifically, building from this developmental lens, we propose that work volition at Time 1 and Time 2 will positively predict career adaptability at Time 2 and Time 3 (*Hypothesis 3*). Additionally, we hypothesize that work volition at Time 2 will significantly mediate the relation between social status at Time 1 and career adaptability at Time 3 (*Hypothesis 4*).

### 3.3. Present study

The goal of the present manuscript is to address the gap in the literature pertaining to the relation between contextual variables related to vocational privilege and career adaptability over time. Our theoretical framework and supporting literature review demonstrate the links among these variables and provide evidence that work volition may help explain the relation of social status and career adaptability (Allan et al., 2014; Blustein et al., 2002; Blustein, 2006; Duffy, Autin and Bott, 2015). We investigate this model with a 3-wave longitudinal study among a diverse sample of undergraduate students over the course of six months using structural equation modeling and analyzing the data with well-established cross-lagged data analysis procedures (Wu, Selig, & Little, 2013). We hypothesize that work volition and social status will predict career adaptability over time and that work volition will serve as a significant mediator linking social status and adaptability.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

The sample consisted of undergraduate students from a large southeastern public university. Six hundred twenty-four students participated in the first wave of the study. Fifty-six participants only completed the demographic section and no measurement scales, 84 students failed one or more validity checks, 39 students completed less than half of the questionnaire, and 13 cases were duplicates. These cases were removed from the dataset, leaving 432 participants. Of these, only 267 completed the questionnaire at more than one time point, and these were the cases that were retained for analysis. This left 267 cases completed at the first wave of the study, 266 completed at the second wave, and 95 completed the third wave. The average age of our sample was 20 years, with a range from 18 to 55. Two hundred twenty-two (83.1%) participants identified as women, and 45 (16.9%) participants identified as men. One hundred fifty-nine (59.6%) participants identified as white, 15 (5.6%) as African American, 49 (18.4%) as Hispanic/Latina/o, 22 (8.2%) as Asian/Asian American, 15 (5.6%) as Asian Indian, 2 (0.7%) as Arab American/Middle Eastern, and 5 (1.9%) as Other. Participants reported current social class backgrounds ranging from lower class (9; 3.4%), working class (54; 20.2%), middle class (125; 46.8%), upper-middle class (78; 29.2%), and upper class (1; 0.4%).

### 4.2. Procedure

Data were collected using online survey methods. Participants were recruited from introductory psychology courses at a large public southeastern university. To complete the course, students were required to obtain a certain number of research credits; one way of obtaining these credits was to participate in research studies within the university. A questionnaire was created using Qualtrics, an online survey generator. Validity checks were embedded within the questionnaire. These consisted of items like, "For this item, please select Strongly Agree." Students accessed the link to the questionnaire and were awarded credit using the university's research participant pool system. For the first two waves, students were awarded one course credit for each wave. The third wave was completed after the formal semester ended; students who wished to complete the third wave were compensated with a \$5.00 Amazon e-gift card. There were three months between each wave of the questionnaire.

### 4.3. Instruments

#### 4.3.1. Subjective social status

Subjective social status was measured with three 1-item self-report indicator variables. Two of these items asked, "How would you describe your childhood social class" and "How would you describe your current social class?" Participants answered these items on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (*lower class*) to 5 (*upper class*). Additionally, we used the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000). For this item, participants viewed a picture of a ladder and the following instructions: "Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in our society. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off, those who have the most money, most education, and best jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off, those who have me least money, least education, and worst jobs or no job." Participants were asked to indicate where they fall on the ladder on a scale from 1 (*bottom rung*) to 10 (*top rung*). Adler et al. (2000) found the measure to consistently relate to measures of psychological functioning and health-related factors (e.g., heart rate), even after controlling for objective measures of social class. Furthermore, despite the subjective nature of this measure, previous research has shown SSS to be a reliable predictor of material wealth, education, and occupational status, all of which are objective indicators of social class (Adler et al., 2008).

#### 4.3.2. Work volition

Perceived freedom of work choice was measured using the Work Volition Scale-Student Version (WVS-SV; Duffy, Diemer, & Jaidian, 2012). The WVS-SV was comprised of a seven-item Volition subscale and a nine-item Constraints subscale. In the current study, we used only the volition subscale, as we were interested general perceptions of volition rather than perceptions of constraints. Students responded to each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The possible scores on this instrument ranged from 7 to 49. Volition subscale example items included "I will be able to choose the jobs that I want" and "I feel total control over my future job choices." In the instrument development study, authors found scores



on both subscales to correlate in the expected directions with measures of career decision self-efficacy, Big-5 personality traits, and career locus of control. Internal consistency reliability of the volition scale in the initial validation study was  $\alpha = 0.78$ . In the present study, the estimated internal consistency reliability of the volition subscale was  $\alpha = 0.87$ , for Time 1,  $\alpha = 0.88$  for Time 2, and  $\alpha = 0.89$  for Time 3.

#### 4.3.3. Career adaptability

We used the 24-item Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) to measure career adaptability. The instrument consists of four subscales: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Each subscale is comprised of six items. Subscales are summed to form the total CAAS score. We provided students with the following directions: "Please rate how strongly you have developed each of the following abilities." Students then responded to statements such as "Working up to my ability" and "Solving problems" using a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (*not strong*) to 5 (*strongest*). Possible scores for this scale ranged from 24 to 120. In a study by Porfeli and Savickas (2012), the CAAS correlated in predicted directions with vocational identity formation. Furthermore, the scale has demonstrated reliability and validity across 13 different countries (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Internal consistency reliabilities in the initial validation study for the subscales ranged from  $\alpha = 0.75$  to  $\alpha = 0.85$ , and  $\alpha = 0.92$  was reported for the total score (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In the present study, estimated internal consistency reliability of the subscales ranged from  $\alpha = 0.80$  to  $\alpha = 0.86$  for Time 1, from  $\alpha = 0.84$  to  $\alpha = 0.91$  for Time 2, and from  $\alpha = 0.87$  to  $\alpha = 0.91$  for Time 3. Internal consistency reliability for the total scale was estimated at  $\alpha = 0.91$  for Time 1,  $\alpha = 0.94$  for Time 2, and  $\alpha = 0.96$  for Time 3.

#### 4.3.4. Statistical analyses

To evaluate the models, we used structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 18 (Arbuckle, 2007). We selected the chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ), the comparative fit index (CFI), The Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and Akaike's Information Criteria (AIC) as our fit indices. Although a significant  $\chi^2$  can indicate a poor fitting model, this test is not reliable in larger samples (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Criteria used by previous scholars for the CFI, TLI, and RMSEA have varied from less conservative (CFI  $\geq 0.90$ ; TLI  $\geq 0.90$ ; RMSEA  $\leq 0.10$ ) to more conservative (CFI  $\geq 0.95$ ; TLI  $\geq 0.95$ ; RMSEA  $\leq 0.08$ ; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Quintana & Maxwell, 1999; Weston & Gore, 2006). Additionally, scholars advise caution when using these criteria as strict cut-offs; sample size and model complexity should be considered when evaluating model fit (Weston & Gore, 2006). The AIC is calculated by subtracting two times the degrees of freedom from the model chi-square and, thus, accounts for model parsimony (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Instead of having a cut-off value, the AIC is used to compare models with lower values representing more parsimonious and better fitting models.

For factors with more than five observed indicators, parcels were created. Parceling is a common procedure in SEM and has several advantages over using item-level data (Dow, Wong, Jackson, & Leitch, 2008; Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Item parceling results in more precise parameter estimates, less bias in structural parameter estimates, higher reliability, less skewness and kurtosis, and reduction in sampling error (Bandalos, 2002; Bandalos & Finney, 2001; Dow et al., 2008; Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Douglass, 2014; Little et al., 2002; MacCallum, Widaman, Zhang, & Hong, 1999). In order to maintain consistency and allow for error correlations, data from the first wave were used to construct parcels and were identical in each subsequent wave. Only three items were used for the social status factors, so no item parcels were necessary. For the Volition subscale of the WVS-SV, we followed methods proposed by Weston and Gore (2006) and first performed an exploratory factor analysis on the scale. Then, items were assigned to parcels in countervailing order according to the size of the factor loading so that the parcels would have approximately equivalent factor loadings. This procedure resulted in two 2-item parcels and one 3-item parcel. Subscales from the CAAS were used to create four parcels for the career adaptability factor. For every model described below, errors in each wave were allowed to correlate with their corresponding errors. For example, the error of the first item in the social status in Time 1 was allowed to correlate with the errors of the first items in the social status in Times 2 and 3. AMOS 18 is unable to test individual indirect effects, so we used RMediation, which uses the distribution of product coefficients method, to generate confidence intervals for indirect effects (Tofghi & MacKinnon, 2011).

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Missing data

In order to determine if the pattern of missing data at each wave was random or systematically related to scores on study variables, we conducted Little's (1988) Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test. According to Little (1988), non-significant values using this test suggest that there is limited reason to believe the data are systematically missing. Little's (1988) MCAR test yielded non-significant results in each wave of the study: Wave 1  $\chi^2 (956) = 1004.11, p = 0.14$ ; Wave 2  $\chi^2 (544) = 593.85, p = 0.068$ ; Wave 3  $\chi^2 (126) = 100.71, p = 0.953$ . These results suggest that the missing data within each wave was not systematically influenced by another variable. As such, we used Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation to account for missing data in the SEM models (Enders & Bandalos, 2001). Additionally, we tested for significant differences on study variables between participants who dropped out of the study and participants who completed all three waves. We created a variable indicating whether or not each participant from the first wave completed the study. Using this as our grouping variable, we conducted independent samples *t*-tests to test for significant differences between Wave 1 means on each study variable and found no

significant differences (social class:  $t(222) = 1.51, p = 0.13$ ; work volition:  $t(275) = 1.28, p = 0.20$ ; career adaptability:  $t(268) = 0.68, p = 0.40$ ).

### 5.2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Prior to testing structural models, manifest variables were tested for skewness and kurtosis and manifest correlations were examined. No skewness and kurtosis statistics exceeded an absolute value of 1, and all manifest correlations were in the expected direction. Next, a measurement model with the three study variables at each time period was constructed to obtain factor correlations. Each participant had a unique identifier, which was used to match their responses at each time point. The measurement model had good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(339) = 497.73, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.97, AIC = 809.73, RMSEA = 0.04$ . All study variables correlated in the expected directions with one another. Table 1 shows manifest correlations, raw means, and standard deviations for all study variables. Table 2 shows all factor correlations.

### 5.3. Structural model

We tested the structural model in three steps. In the first step, we began with the full autoregressive cross-lagged model (Schlueter, Davidov, & Schmidt, 2007) which included all regression paths from Time 1 variables to Time 2 variables and Time 2 variables to Time 3 variables. All latent variables were allowed to correlate at each time period. In this initial model, the only constraint was placed on disturbance terms of the same variables at Time 2 and Time 3. These were set to be equal to each other to control for random error across the two time points. This model had good fit indices,  $\chi^2(357) = 540.57, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.96, AIC = 816.57, RMSEA = 0.04$ . In the second step, we tested for invariance of regression on the same variables at Time 1 and Time 2 by restricting regression paths (e.g., work volition 1 to work volition 2) to be the same as at Time 2 to Time 3 (e.g., work volition 2 to work volition 3). We observed no significant change ( $\chi^2(3) = 3.33, p = 0.34$ ) in fit,  $\chi^2(360) = 570.26, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.95, AIC = 840.26, RMSEA = 0.04$ . In step 3, we tested for invariance of regression paths from Time 1 to Time 2 and Time 2 to Time 3 among different variables (e.g., Work Volition Time 1 to Career Adaptability Time 2 and Work Volition Time 2 to Career Adaptability Time 3) and saw no significant change ( $\chi^2(6) = 7.89, p = 0.25$ ) in fit,  $\chi^2(366) = 557.69, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.97, AIC = 815.69, RMSEA = 0.04$ .

To achieve the most parsimonious model and remain consistent with hypothesized PWT links, we removed the following non-significant paths: work volition Time 2 to social status Time 1, work volition Time 3 to social status Time 2, career adaptability Time 2 to social status Time 1, and Career Adaptability Time 3 to Social status Time 2. This model had comparable fit indices,  $\chi^2(368) = 559.05, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.96, AIC = 813.05, RMSEA = 0.04$ . All paths were significant (see Fig. 1). That is, social class at Time 1 and Time 2 positively predicted work volition and career adaptability at Time 2 and Time 3 respectively, as suggested by Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. Additionally, work volition at Time 1 and Time 2 social status at Time 1 and Time 2 positively predicted career adaptability at Time 2 and Time 3 respectively, as suggested by Hypothesis 3.

We used Tofghi and MacKinnon's (2011) RMediation to test indirect effects. The test provides confidence intervals for indirect effects. The indirect effect is significant if zero does not fall within the confidence interval. The indirect effect from Time 1 social status to Time 3 career adaptability via Time 2 work volition was significant ( $c' = 0.96, SE = 0.44, 95\% CI = 0.24, 1.94$ ), as predicted by Hypothesis 4.

## 6. Discussion

The goal of the current study was to advance the knowledge base concerning the degree to which aspects of vocational privilege relate to career adaptability. To date, no research has specifically highlighted the relation of social status and career adaptability. In the current study we do so by examining these relations over time and by positioning work volition as a theoretically and empirically supported mediator variable. The four hypotheses were supported: social status related to work volition and

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and manifest correlations of variables at three time points.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Social Class T1	1								
2. Social Class T2	0.88**	1							
3. Social Class T3	0.83**	0.90**	1						
4. Work Volition T1	0.48**	0.47**	0.51**	1					
5. Work Volition T2	0.40**	0.45**	0.51**	0.66**	1				
6. Work Volition T3	0.48**	0.46**	0.44**	0.72**	0.75**	1			
7. Career Adaptability T1	0.08	0.11	0.01	0.16**	0.23**	0.084	1		
8. Career Adaptability T2	0.22**	0.25**	0.23*	0.27**	0.34**	0.409**	0.695**	1	
9. Career Adaptability T3	0.18	0.09	0.21*	0.23*	0.300**	0.388**	0.573**	0.752**	1
Means	0.26	0.19	0.23	50.28	49.05	50.07	84.72	84.95	86.91
SD	2.44	2.55	2.45	10.09	9.76	10.64	13.98	16.21	18.15

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 2**

Factor correlations of variables at three time points.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Social Status T1	–								
2. Social Status T2	0.86*	–							
3. Social Status T3	0.81*	0.87*	–						
4. Work Volition T1	0.44*	0.39*	0.51*	–					
5. Work Volition T2	0.41*	0.40*	0.39*	0.74*	–				
6. Work Volition T3	0.40*	0.39*	0.40*	0.77*	0.84*	–			
7. Career Adaptability T1	0.15*	0.18	0.03	0.33*	0.30*	0.18	–		
8. Career Adaptability T2	0.25*	0.23*	0.21*	0.38*	0.41*	0.44*	0.68*	–	
9. Career Adaptability T3	0.07	0.02	0.13	0.38*	0.40*	0.46*	0.59*	0.76*	–

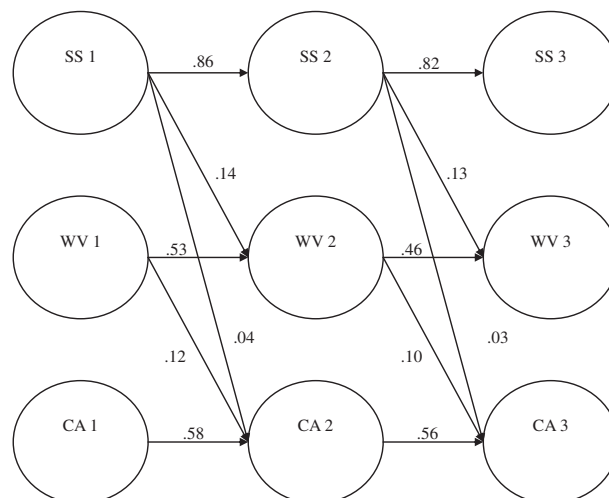
\* Significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

career adaptability cross-sectionally and over time; work volition related to career adaptability cross-sectionally and over time; work volition at Time 2 significantly mediated the relation of Time 1 social status to Time 3 career adaptability. Below we discuss each of these findings as well as practical implications, limitations, and future directions.

Fig. 1 pictorially depicts variables that were significantly related over time in this study. Not surprisingly, social status remains relatively stable with no predictor variables at Time 2 and Time 3. Over a six month period with a college student population, it would be surprising to see any meaningful change in one's subjective social status. However, meaningful variability existed in the prediction of work volition and career adaptability. Both career adaptability and work volition were predicted by social status. Individuals from higher social status backgrounds were, over time, more likely to endorse higher levels of work volition and career adaptability. These results match with previous studies which have documented how aspects of economic privilege have meaningful impacts on college students' career development over time, specifically work volition (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016). This study, however, offers the first results to demonstrate these links longitudinally with career adaptability as an outcome. Like work volition, it may be that feeling adaptable in one's career over time is, in part, influenced by one's subjective social status (SSS). This is an important finding in relation to the larger PWT theory. Preliminary work in the development of PWT emphasized the importance that social class plays in accessing opportunity structures (Blustein, 2006). It may be that belonging to a higher social class background allows one access to specific social contexts that build volition and career adaptability. In future research, it may be beneficial to examine what specific aspects of social class explain the links to volition and adaptability.

Longitudinal links existed between work volition and career adaptability, but these were not reciprocal as only work volition was found to be a significant predictor of adaptability over time. Although these exact longitudinal links have not been examined in previous studies, the results do corroborate those by Douglass and Duffy (2015) and Buyukgoze-Kavas et al. (2015) who found work volition and adaptability to be significantly correlated. They are also consistent with Duffy, Douglass and Autin (2015) who found that feeling volitional over time helps students feel fewer barriers in their career and have a greater sense of overall control. For this study, findings suggest that, for undergraduate students, feeling choice in one's future career may influence the development of self-regulatory career strengths. As research continues to examine longitudinal predictors of career adaptability (Hirschi, Herrmann, & Keller, 2015; Negru-Subtirica & Pop, 2016), work volition may be an important variable to include in these studies.

Finally, it is important to highlight the significant mediating effect of work volition in the link between social status and career adaptability. The PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016) proposes that work volition and career adaptability each act as mediators

**Fig. 1.** Final model with only significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) paths.

linking economic constraints to decent work – individuals with fewer economic constraints will be more likely to feel volition and be adaptable, and, in turn, will be more likely to secure decent work. The results of the current study suggest that not only are social status and volition each building blocks of career adaptability, but also that work volition partially explains why social status links to adaptability over time. Specifically, students from higher social status backgrounds may develop greater self-regulatory career strengths because they feel more choice in their careers. Although more research is needed in this area, we may speculate that greater perceived work choice – which is grown in part from a higher social status background – creates generally more positive cognitions regarding work prospects that then have behavioral implications. Specifically, feeling able to choose one's desired future career may promote the generation of skills and resources needed to pursue that career.

In total, these findings make an important contribution to the career adaptability literature by highlighting an understudied predictor variable (social status), replicating past findings concerning the relation to work volition, and showcasing the effect that social status and work volition have on promoting career adaptability in undergraduate students over time. These findings have implications for career counseling.

### 6.1. Practical implications

The present study provides an important contribution by not only highlighting the relation between social status and career adaptability, but also through the exploration of what may account for this relation – work volition. In addition to deepening our understanding, these results have a number of implications for practice with individuals struggling through work-related issues. Previous research has shown that greater career adaptability is associated with more positive outcomes (Douglass & Duffy, 2015; Guo, Guan, Yang, Xu, Zhou, et al., 2014; Maggiori et al., 2013; Zacher, 2014), and this study emphasizes the importance of considering contextual and environmental factors when working with clients. Individuals lower in social status were more likely to endorse lower career adaptability, highlighting the negative effects social status may have on their flexibility of coping responses at work. Indeed, belonging to a lower social status may be a risk factor for clients, and interventions should be aimed at helping these individuals increase adaptability at work.

Further, work volition significantly mediated the relation between social status and career adaptability, suggesting yet another risk factor for those lower in social status. In other words, those reporting less of a perceived choice in work-related decisions were unable to exercise as much adaptability at work. Interventions aimed at increasing work volition, especially in those belonging to a lower social status, may act as a buffer against the possible harmful effects of living within a lower social status. Practitioners can work with clients in strategizing how they may work towards overcoming experienced barriers and constraints while also increasing critical consciousness through greater awareness of how systemic inequalities are impacting their lives (Ali, 2013). In fact, increasing critical consciousness has been associated with more positive work outcomes (Chronister & McWhirter, 2006). Working with clients in order to increase their feelings of work volition may help lower-class populations that are at higher risk for decreased career adaptability, ultimately increasing vocational well-being.

### 6.2. Limitations and future directions

These results should be reviewed considering some limitations that may inform future directions for research. First, our sample consisted of undergraduate students from the United States who were mostly women, and more than half identified as white. An important area for future research includes deepening our knowledge about work volition and career adaptability in more diverse populations, reflecting work experiences across all individuals. Second, although in the current study we conceptualized social status as a contextual variable, there are aspects of the variable that might best be conceptualized as an in-person factor. In future studies, researchers might examine further the extent to which social status represents contextual versus in-person factors and how this might impact the role of social class in the PWT model. Third, although our study sheds light on mechanisms within proposed PWT theory, future research will be needed to flesh out these findings in further detail. For example, it will be important to examine what specific aspects of social status contribute to increased work volition. Likewise, it is important that future studies empirically examine potential reasons why work volition mediates the link between social status and work volition. Fourth, the present study only focused on work volition as a mediator; future studies might focus on other possible mediators that may help to further explain the relation between social status and career adaptability. Finally, it is important to note that over half of the sample was lost to attrition. Although missing data analyses indicated no differences between those who completed the study and those who were lost to attrition, it is important that results be replicated by future researchers with an emphasis on participant retention.

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