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Influence of Mobility Constraints and Educational Experiences on Future Decent Work Access Among Chinese Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Drawing on the Psychology of Working Theory, the present study investigates whether and how mobility constraints and educational experiences predict access to future decent work among two samples of Chinese undergraduates. The results reveal that educational experiences are directly related to future decent work access, while also indirectly linked to future decent work access via career adaptability and work volition, respectively. In addition, both objective and subjective mobility constraints are not associated with future decent work access, yet they are indirectly linked to future decent work access through career adaptability and work volition, respectively. Moreover, subjective mobility constraints but not objective mobility constraints are indirectly linked to future decent work access through educational experiences. The results provide empirical evidence for the recent expansion of decent education and of the school-to-work transition expansion of the Psychology of Working Theory.

Keywords

psychology of working theory, school-to-work transition, future decent work, educational experiences, mobility constraints

Introduction

The Decent Work Agenda, introduced by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2016, has garnered attention from scholars and international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Despite the ILO's efforts to promote decent work for all, certain groups continue to lack opportunities for decent work (Allan et al., 2021; Blustein et al., 2020). For instance, racial and sexual minorities are still underprivileged in the inequitable labor market (Douglass et al.,

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2020; Smith et al., 2020). Similarly, migrants, both internal and external, are often subjected to precarious employment conditions (Deshingkar et al., 2012; Tu et al., 2019). As precarious work does not contribute to societal welfare and negatively affects well-being (Allan et al., 2021), focusing on the "decency" of work is a promising approach to achieving the overall Sustainable Development Goals.

The Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), introduced by Duffy and colleagues (2016a), explains the factors that influence individuals' access to decent work. Specifically, the PWT proposes that lifetime experiences of marginalization and economic constraints predict one's access to decent work through career adaptability and work volition (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016). Despite a surge in research using the PWT to investigate how contextual factors impact decent work securement among working adults, understanding potential precursors to future decent work access for emerging adults remains insufficient (e.g., university students; Kim et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2022).

Research indicates that positive expectations of future work predict attainment outcomes (Lent et al., 2002, 2017), while negative perceptions lead to academic disengagement and employment anxiety (Ma et al., 2021; Wan et al., 2024). Research on perceptions of future work is imperative, especially regarding what and how potential precursors may play a role in influencing the likelihood young adults feel of attaining it in the future. In doing so, tailored practices may be developed to facilitate students' access to future decent work and mitigate underemployment risks.

Educational experiences, perhaps the most proximal precursor to one's future decent work access, have been recently proposed yet have not been empirically examined (Duffy et al., 2022). Previous research suggests that an individual's educational experiences impact the development of their career choice capability (Galliott & Graham, 2015). For instance, the lack of tailored career services and internship opportunities during college can influence an individual's perception of what is realistically desirable or achievable. The first aim of this study is to examine how educational experiences are associated with students' future decent work access.

Second, we aim to introduce a culturally specific contextual constraint: mobility constraints, which may limit students' future decent work access in China. Internal migration for employment has the potential for poverty alleviation and reduction (Deshingkar et al., 2012); however, in China, the household registration (*Hukou*) system restricts citizens' social and geographical mobility (Fan, 2007; Hung, 2022). Millions of rural graduates are ineligible for urban benefits, leading to underemployment or returning to rural hometowns with limited job opportunities. The second aim is to examine how mobility constraints are associated with students' future decent work access, especially for those who migrate to cities for undergraduate studies.

By examining the roles of educational experiences and mobility constraints in predicting students' future decent work access in the Chinese context, the present study expands the PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016) and informs career counseling practices. On the one hand, scholars recommend expanding the PWT by "efficiently opening avenues of research, especially when surveying college students and young adults whose experiences in high school are relatively recent" (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 10). This highlights the importance of assessing the likelihood young adults feel of attaining decent work in the future. Our focus on the predicting role of educational experiences expands the PWT by considering a relatively proximal yet overlooked precursor to future decent work. On the other hand, research calls for applying the PWT to different cultural contexts and introducing additional predictors and outcomes to expand the theoretical framework. The Chinese context, unique with its *Hukou* system, allows exploration of the role of mobility constraints in shaping access to future decent work, expanding the PWT by considering cultural context.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework and Future Decent Work

The PWT was developed to enhance our understanding of how economic constraints and lifetime experiences of marginalization can impact their vocational development processes and general well-being (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016). Specifically, an individual's background can affect their work volition and career adaptability, predict their access to decent work, and influence their need satisfaction and well-being (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016). Decent work, a core concept of the PWT, is defined as acceptable and aspirational employment with features such as safe working conditions, sufficient rest time, fair compensation, health care coverage, and alignment with one's personal and social values (Duffy et al., 2017). Research has demonstrated that individuals from higher social classes and/or with lower financial constraints are more likely to secure access to decent work (e.g., Wang et al., 2019).

The PWT aims to encompass the work experiences of all individuals, including those who are unemployed or ready to enter the labor market (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016). For students preparing to enter the labor market, the perception of their access to future decent work deserves attention because it can influence their current attitudes and behaviors. For instance, perceptions of future decent work access can partially determine college students' academic engagement and satisfaction during their college years (Ma et al., 2021). Therefore, it is critical to explore the antecedents of one's perceived access to future decent work and identify how these predictive effects occur among student populations.

In recognition of the value of the PWT for student populations, scholars have expanded the PWT framework to include the school-to-work transition process (Masdonati et al., 2022). Recently, Duffy et al. (2022) proposed the decent education expansion of the PWT to incorporate the role of education in accessing decent work. More specifically, the decent education expansion proposes that a broad array of factors contribute to the subjective experience of education, inclusive of both direct experiences with education (e.g., teaching and learning) and experiences within the educational environment (e.g., safety, relationships, and connectedness). Such educational experiences play a crucial role in determining students' access to future decent work. Furthermore, educational experiences may act as a mediator variable connecting structural factors (e.g., economic constraints, marginalization) to students' future decent work access.

The present study draws on the decent education expansion to examine how educational experiences are associated with students' access to future decent work, and how educational experiences may serve as a link connecting students' contextual constraints (i.e., mobility constraints) to their access to future decent work.

Educational Experiences and Future Decent Work

Educational experiences, in the present study, refer to both direct experiences with education (e.g., quality of instruction) and experiences within the educational environment (e.g., peer relationships). Previous research has suggested that positive educational experiences are crucial in accelerating students' expected educational and career outcomes (Roksa & Whitley, 2017), as such experiences equip students with academic preparation, career competencies, and both technical and soft skills necessary for employability and career success (Lam & Ching, 2007; Ocampo et al., 2020; Yiu & Law, 2012).

In contrast, students who have negative educational experiences are more likely to report lower access to career education sessions, higher drop-out rates, a lack of professional skills expected by employers, increased uncertainty regarding their future career plans, and a tendency to end up in

low-skill/low-pay jobs that do not require a college education (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Galliott & Graham, 2015; Hora et al., 2018; Mattern et al., 2014; Song & Lee, 2023).

We argue that students' future career prospects are influenced by both their direct experiences with education and their encounters within the educational environment. For instance, students who receive high-quality instruction may develop a diverse skill set encompassing academic preparation and career competencies, which are crucial for their employability. Additionally, students in supportive learning environments may nurture soft skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving, enabling them to navigate the complexities of the job market with confidence.

It is reasonable to anticipate that students who have positive experiences with education and their educational environment may perceive greater access to future decent work. Consequently, we propose that educational experiences are positively associated with students' access to future decent work (Hypothesis 1).

Educational Experiences, Career Adaptability, Future Decent Work

There might be an indirect association between educational experiences and students' access to future decent work through career adaptability. Career adaptability refers to four career-related capabilities (i.e., concern, control, curiosity, confidence) that allow individuals to cope "with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, traumas in their occupational roles" (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, p. 662). Students may develop these capabilities from their educational experiences, which subsequently predict their access to future decent work.

First, positive educational experiences imply studying in a supportive environment where students can communicate career concerns with teachers and peers (Duffy et al., 2022). When students receive advice on career interests, constructive feedback on career choices, and emotional support from those around them, they are more likely to demonstrate control and confidence in dealing with upcoming career-related tasks (Wang & Fu, 2015). Furthermore, a good educational experience provides students with career exploration opportunities such as internships (Ocampo et al., 2020). By exploring various vocational roles, students can translate theoretical knowledge learned in school into practical experience in the real world (Yiu & Law, 2012) and gain job-related technical skills (Lam & Ching, 2007). Such hands-on experience may enable students to maximize their sense of fulfillment in career exploration and better facilitate their career readiness. Thus, we propose that educational experiences are associated with students' career adaptability (Hypothesis 2).

Based on the theoretical framework of the PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016) and empirical evidence suggesting that career adaptability is a proximal predictor of future decent work access (e.g., Wei et al., 2022), we also hypothesize that career adaptability is associated with students' access to future decent work (Hypothesis 3). Overall, it is expected that positive educational experiences may benefit students' career adaptability, which in turn facilitates their access to future decent work. We further propose that the indirect effect of educational experiences on future decent work access might be through career adaptability (Hypothesis 4).

Educational Experiences, Work Volition, Future Decent Work

The indirect association between educational experiences and students' access to future decent work might be also through work volition. Work volition is defined as an individual's perceived freedom of future work choice despite constraints (Duffy et al., 2012). A positive educational experience satisfies students by making them enthusiastic about their majors and enjoying the courses they take (Kenny et al., 2006). This passion might motivate students to pursue post-graduation studies, drive them to be professional in the career of their choice, or promote

self-efficacy and creativity in career decision-making (Brown & Lent, 2013; Duffy, Douglass, et al., 2016). Therefore, we propose that educational experiences are associated with students' work volition (Hypothesis 5).

Consistent with the theoretical framework of the PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016) and previous research suggesting that work volition is a proximal predictor of future decent work access (e.g., Wei et al., 2022), we hypothesize that work volition is associated with students' access to future decent work (Hypothesis 6). It is expected that positive educational experiences may benefit students' work volition, which in turn facilitates their access to future decent work. Thus, we further propose that the indirect effect of educational experiences on future decent work access might also be through work volition (Hypothesis 7).

Mobility Constraints and Future Decent Work

Social mobility, which refers to changes in one's status in the social and economic hierarchy throughout their life (Perez et al., 2023), enables individuals to ascend the social hierarchy (Kraus & Tan, 2015). However, social mobility is uniquely constrained in China, particularly for the hundreds of millions of rural migrants. The government's household registration (*Hukou*) system constrains the social and geographical mobility of rural citizens, blocking their access to social and economic benefits in cities, such as healthcare, pensions, unemployment subsidies, and urban public schools (Xie et al., 2021). As a result, the integration of rural migrants into mainstream urban society becomes complicated or even impossible, and their children may end up in slum rural schools, perpetuating a vicious cycle of educational and welfare disadvantages (Hung, 2022). In this study, we define mobility constraints as constraining access to social and economic benefits due to the *Hukou* system.

The *Hukou* system has led to a "dual labor market" in China, where rural job seekers are often offered lower-paying and less stable jobs with fewer benefits and protections compared to urban applicants (Dreger & Zhang, 2017). Additionally, Chen and Hoy (2011) discovered that companies are generally unwilling to assist rural job seekers in obtaining residence permits that would make them eligible for urban benefits. As a result, rural students seeking jobs in cities often accept offers with lower wages and fewer employment benefits if they plan to settle in urban areas (Wang et al., 2023), rather than continuing to search for potentially higher-paying jobs that align with their skills and training (Ji, 2020). Alternatively, they may opt to work in their rural hometowns where high-quality and decent jobs are scarce (Moffatt & Wang, 2008). We thus propose that mobility constraints are associated with students' access to future decent work (Hypothesis 8).

Mobility Constraints, Career Adaptability, Work Volition, and Future Decent Work

The relationship between mobility constraints and future decent work access might be through career adaptability and work volition separately. Students from rural areas, nomadic areas, and border regions often face mobility constraints that limit their access to necessary career support and job search resources. These obstacles may include inadequate training opportunities, limited access to career counseling, insufficient exposure to different career paths, and inadequate access to information about job markets and opportunities (Tian & Chen, 2018). For example, constrained rural students may attend lower-quality schools with fewer career services and less experienced counselors during adolescence due to limited access to subsidized public education. In addition, they may lack access to role models or mentors in their desired career fields (Chen & Tian, 2023), which can make it difficult for them to envision themselves in certain professions or industries.

Consequently, these obstacles may result in students having a narrow view of their career options and may hinder their ability to make informed career decisions, limiting their access to future decent work. We thus propose that mobility constraints are associated with students' career adaptability (Hypothesis 9) and work volition (Hypothesis 10). Furthermore, there might be indirect associations between mobility constraints and students' access to future decent work through career adaptability (Hypothesis 11) and work volition (Hypothesis 12).

Mobility Constraints, Educational Experiences, Future Decent Work

Apart from career adaptability and work volition, the indirect association between mobility constraints and future decent work access might also be through educational experiences. Compared to their urban peers, constrained rural students are expected to experience more emotional and cognitive tensions about their educational experiences, which could lead to frustration about their access to future decent work.

First, students who migrate from rural villages to urban universities often experience a mismatch between their past and current environments, a phenomenon known as hysteresis effects (Chen, 2022). These effects can result in a "painfully fragmented self" (Friedman, 2016, p. 132) and difficulty adjusting to the newly established social order (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 161), leading to unpleasant educational experiences. In essence, the transition from a rural to an urban setting may entail a significant social habit shift. For instance, in rural settings, social relationships are often tightly knit, with a high degree of familiarity among community members. However, moving to an urban university where anonymity is more prevalent can induce feelings of social isolation. This adjustment may trigger sensations of alienation or anxiety, impeding academic performance and overall educational satisfaction.

Second, students graduating from rural high schools may face discriminatory treatment, including biases against their rural dialects, attire, and behaviors, which urban peers may easily identify and perceive as undesirable cultural traits (Hu & Salazar, 2008). Consequently, students from rural backgrounds may struggle to form connections and establish social networks within the urban university milieu. This form of discrimination often leads to feelings of exclusion and marginalization among rural students, hindering their social integration and impeding the development of meaningful relationships with their urban counterparts. Consequently, the absence of social support and a sense of belonging can exacerbate challenges associated with hysteresis effects, contributing to a less favorable overall educational experience. Thus, we hypothesize that mobility constraints are associated with students' educational experiences (Hypothesis 13).

Furthermore, given the adverse impact of negative educational experiences on students' access to future decent work, we also propose that the indirect effect of mobility constraints on students' access to future decent work might be through educational experiences (Hypothesis 14).

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedures. The final sample included 1245 Chinese undergraduate students, with 56.1% self-identifying as female ($n = 699$), 35.0% as male ($n = 436$), and 8.8% not reporting their gender ($n = 110$). The age of participants ranged from 17 to 25 years old, with the most common age group being 20 to 22 years old ($n = 802$, 64.4%). The student sample included comparable numbers of junior ($n = 724$, 58.1%) and senior ($n = 521$, 41.9%) students across several academic programs, including Clinical Medicine, Linguistics, Bioscience, Environmental Science, and Management.

We recruited undergraduate students from a university in central China with the assistance of the university's student affairs office. Student mentors recruited willing participants through class announcements, or a survey link sent via WeChat groups. The cover letter accompanying the questionnaire assured participants that the survey was conducted solely for academic research purposes, and the confidentiality of responses was ensured. Participants were not compensated for their participation, but they could access their assessment reports.

Instruments. Survey items were presented in Chinese. Future decent work and career adaptability were measured using existing Chinese versions, while other study variables (e.g., educational experiences) were translated into Chinese using a back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). Unless otherwise specified, the response format was a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Educational Experiences. Referring to the decent education expansion of the PWT, educational experiences were conceptualized as "the subjective experience an individual has with their school-based education" (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 2). According to the social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964), students only feel grateful when they have access to high-quality education and a decent learning environment. To operationalize these subjective experiences in college, we used the College Gratitude Scale (Renshaw & Bolognino, 2016). Sample items include: "I feel thankful for the opportunity to learn so many new things" and "I am grateful for the people who have helped me succeed in college." The scale was reliable in the scale development study (α = .85; Renshaw & Bolognino, 2016), and the Cronbach's alpha for this study is .95.

Mobility Constraints. Mobility constraints were measured using an objective question (i.e., objective mobility constraints): "Where is your *Hukou* registration place?" As mentioned, the Chinese *Hukou* system is a primary governing tool for residence registers, which assigns individuals to an "agricultural" (rural) or "non-agricultural" (urban) *Hukou* based on their birthplace (Wang et al., 2019). In China, people are well informed about their *Hukou* registration place and the hierarchical features of the *Hukou* system (Wang et al., 2023). For example, rural students are limited to residing in the cities where their universities are located due to constraints imposed by the hierarchical *Hukou* system. For this study, students were provided three choices: 1 = Rural area or others (e.g., nomads), 2 = Town, and 3 = City. The final sample included 690 students (55.4%) from rural areas or other, with 222 students (17.8%) and 333 students (26.7%) from towns and cities, respectively. Responses to the question were coded from 1 = More mobility constraints to 3 = Less mobility constraints.

Career Adaptability. Career adaptability was measured with the 24-item Career Adapt-Abilities Scale-China Form (CAAS-China; Hou et al., 2012). The CAAS-China measures all four dimensions of career adaptability, including concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Sample items from the scale include: "Thinking about what my future will be like," "Making decisions by myself," "Observing different ways of doing things," and "Overcoming obstacles." This scale was widely used in prior PWT research (Kim et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2022). The reliability of the scale was high in Hou et al.'s (2012) study (α = .92), and the Cronbach's alpha for this study is .97.

Work Volition. Work volition was measured using the Chinese version of the 7-item volition subscale of Work Volition Scale for students (Duffy et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2022). One sample item is: "Once I enter the work world, I will easily find a new job if I want to." In this study, two items related to "changing jobs" and "discrimination" were excluded from the analysis due to their low factor loadings. This scale was widely used in prior PWT research (e.g., Kim et al., 2019). The

scale was demonstrated to be adequately reliable in the original study (α = .70), and the Cronbach's alpha for this study is .92.

Future Decent Work. Students' access to future decent work was measured using the Chinese version of the 15-item Future Decent Work Scale (Kim et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2022). The scale assessed five components, including safe working conditions, access to healthcare, adequate compensation, free time for rest, and organizational and community value match. Sample items from the scale include, "I will feel emotionally safe interacting with people at my future work," "I will get good healthcare benefits from my future job," "I will be rewarded adequately for my work," "I will have free time during the work week," and "The values of my future organization will match my family values." This scale was widely used in prior PWT research and has demonstrated high reliability in previous studies (e.g., α = .86; Ma et al., 2021). The Cronbach's alpha for this study is .96.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We conducted preliminary analyses using SPSS v. 25 to examine the data for missing values, normality of continuous variables (i.e., skewness and kurtosis), outliers, and correlations (see Table 1). There was no missing data for the study variables because all survey questions were compulsory. Skewness and kurtosis were assessed using Weston and Gore's (2006) guidelines, which set the thresholds for skewness at >|3| and for kurtosis at >|10|. None of the study variables exceeded these thresholds. We excluded 39 univariate outliers with a z-score greater than |3.29| for the study variables and 25 multivariate outliers with a significant Mahalanobis distance at $p < .001$, using the corresponding $\chi 2$ value (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Subsequent analyses were conducted without these outliers. To test our hypotheses, we used structural equation modeling in Mplus version 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2018) with maximum likelihood estimation. Model fit was evaluated using the $\chi 2$ test, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Based on prior research, we followed recommended guidelines for adequate fit: CFI ≥ .90, TLI ≥ .90, RMSEA ≤ .10 (Weston & Gore, 2006).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations of latent variables in Study 1.

	FDW	EE	CA	WV
Future decent work (FDW)	(.96)			
Educational experiences (EE)	.623**	(.95)		
Career adaptability (CA)	.718**	.679**	(.97)	
Work volition (WV)	.692**	.414**	.598**	(.92)
M	5.17	5.72	5.23	4.64
SD	1.03	1.12	0.95	1.13

M = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation.
**$p < .01$.

Measurement Model

Prior to hypothesis testing, we conducted a measurement model analysis, in which all indicators were loaded onto their respective factors. For unidimensional latent variables (i.e., educational experiences and work volition), we used individual scale items. For multidimensional latent variables, we employed a higher-order structure, where individual scale items loaded onto their respective subscales, which, in turn, loaded onto the higher-order constructs (i.e., career adaptability and future decent work). The measurement model demonstrated a good fit to the data, with CFI = .946, TLI = .943, RMSEA = .051 (90% CI [.049, .052]).

Structural Model

The structural model included all hypothesized direct and indirect pathways. The model fit the data well: CFI = .940, TLI = .937, RMSEA = .051 (90% CI [.050, .053]). As depicted in Figure 1, educational experiences showed positive relationships with career adaptability (β = .567, SE = .027, $p < .001$), work volition (β = .390, SE = .029, $p < .001$), and future decent work (β = .206, SE = .024, $p < .001$). Additionally, career adaptability (β = .371, SE = .040, $p < .001$) and work volition (β = .327, SE = .023, $p < .001$) showed positive relationships with future decent work. Indirect effects were tested with 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples, with a significant effect indicated by a 95% confidence interval that does not include zero. The indirect effects of educational experiences on future decent work through career adaptability (β = .211, 95% CI [.172, .252]) and work volition (β = .128, 95% CI [.107, .152]) were both significant.

We also examined the direct and indirect effects of objective mobility constraints on future decent work, with objective mobility constraints considered as a multicategorical predictor with three groups. Following the strategy of indicator coding (Hayes & Preacher, 2014), we created two dummy variables: D1 represents slight constraints, and D2 represents strong constraints, compared to the reference group, which represents no/fewer constraints. We chose indicator coding for two main reasons: (1) it is common and perhaps the most frequently used coding system, and (2) it

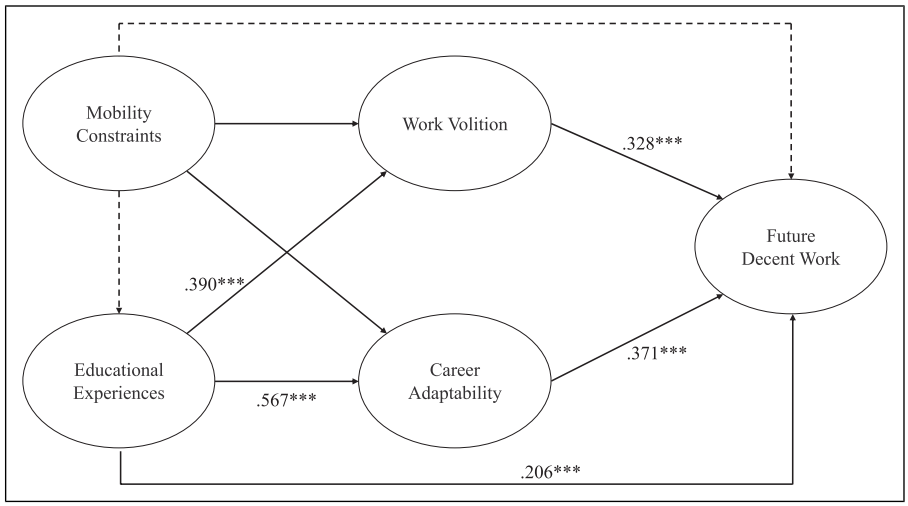

Figure 1. The Results of the Hypothesized Model in Study 1. *Note.* Dash lines indicate insignificant findings. ***$p < .001$.

helps to capture the differences in dependent variable(s) between coded groups (i.e., slight constraints and strong constraints) and the reference group (i.e., no constraints). Our path analysis examined the relative effect of the level of objective mobility constraints on career adaptability, work volition, and future decent work, as well as educational experiences.

Compared to urban students with no or fewer objective mobility constraints, slightly constrained students demonstrated significantly less career adaptability (β = −.113, 95% CI [−.217, −.020]) and work volition (β = −.219, 95% CI [−.384, −.075]). Similarly, strongly constrained students also demonstrated significantly less career adaptability (β = −.141, 95% CI [−.211, −.063]) and work volition (β = −.221, 95% CI [−.331, −.092]). However, slight objective mobility constraints were not significantly related to future decent work (β = −.008, 95% CI [−.081, .067]), while strong objective mobility constraints were only marginally related to future decent work (β = −.067, 95% CI [−.134, −.015]).

Relative to the reference group, the indirect effects of slight objective mobility constraints on future decent work through career adaptability (β = −.041, 95% CI [−.081, −.011]) and work volition (β = −.071, 95% CI [−.120, −.032]) were significant. In addition, the indirect effects of strong objective mobility constraints on future decent work through career adaptability (β = −.051, 95% CI [−.073, −.023]) and work volition (β = −.069, 95% CI [−.108, −.034]) were also significant. In addition, we found that both slight objective mobility constraints (β = −.047, 95% CI [−.210, .115]) and strong objective mobility constraints (β = −.063, 95% CI [−.176, .060]) were not significantly related to educational experiences. Also, both slight objective mobility constraints (β = −.010, 95% CI [−.042, .023]) and strong objective mobility constraints (β = −.013, 95% CI [−.037, .012]) were not indirectly associated with future decent work via educational experiences. The path analysis results are shown in Table 2.

Study 2

To enhance the generalizability of the results from Study 1 and ensure that the measures better capture the operationalization of constructs, we conducted Study 2.

Table 2. Hypothesis testing from structural model in Study 1.

Hypothesized path	Support?
1. Educational experiences -> Future decent work	Supported
2. Educational experiences -> Career adaptability	Supported
3. Career adaptability -> Future decent work	Supported
4. Educational experiences -> Career adaptability -> Future decent work	Supported
5. Educational experiences -> Work volition	Supported
6. Work volition -> Future decent work	Supported
7. Educational experiences -> Work volition -> Future decent work	Supported
8. Objective mobility constraints -> Future decent work	Unsupported
9. Objective mobility constraints -> Career adaptability	Supported
10. Objective mobility constraints -> Work volition	Supported
11. Objective mobility constraints -> Career adaptability -> Future decent work	Supported
12. Objective mobility constraints -> Work volition -> Future decent work	Supported
13. Objective mobility constraints -> Educational experiences	Unsupported
14. Objective mobility constraints -> Educational experiences -> Future decent work	Unsupported

Method

Participants and Procedures. The sample included 211 Chinese undergraduate students from different universities, with 58.3% self-identifying as female ($n = 123$), 41.2% as male ($n = 87$), and 0.5% not reporting their gender ($n = 1$). The age of participants ranged from 18 to 24 years old, with the most common age group being 19 to 22 years old ($n = 182$, 86.3%). The student sample included comparable numbers of junior (i.e., first- and second-year student, $n = 72$, 34.1%) and senior (i.e., third- and fourth-year student, $n = 139$, 65.9%) students. The residential status of participants includes (1) rural agricultural *Hukou* status (villager; $n = 102$, 48.3%), (2) urban resident with agricultural *Hukou* status (temporary rural-to-urban migrant; $n = 28$, 13.3%), (3) rural-to-urban converted *Hukou* status (permanent rural-to-urban migrant; $n = 10$, 4.74%), and (4) non-agricultural urban *Hukou* (urban local citizen; $n = 71$, 33.7%).

Among the participants, 35.5% of their fathers have educational attainment below middle school, while 26.1% completed high school. For their mothers, 44.5% have educational attainment below middle school, while 24.6% completed high school. Additionally, 23.2% of their families do not own any vehicles. 9.5% of these students lack individual bedrooms, while 40.3% of families did not go on vacations in the past 12 months. Finally, 3.8% of families do not own any computers.

We collected data through the Chinese professional online survey platform Wenjuanxing (https://www.wjx.cn), similar to Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and widely used in many published studies (e.g., Miao et al., 2021). This platform offers a paid data collection service designed to help researchers invite a target audience that meets specific criteria (e.g., age, student status) to participate in surveys. With a membership base exceeding 6.2 million individuals from diverse regions and occupations across China, this service facilitated our access to a diverse sample of emerging adults (i.e., university students in this study). We chose to use the data collection service instead of recruiting through our social network to avoid community bias and enhance the generalizability of our results.

Instruments. The survey items were presented in Chinese. Future decent work and career adaptability were assessed using the existing Chinese versions, while other study variables (e.g., educational experiences) were translated into Chinese using a back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). Unless otherwise specified, respondents used a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Educational Experiences. Educational experiences were measured with the 39-item school climate scale (Zullig et al., 2010). We adopted seven out of eight dimensions of the school climate scale, including positive student–teacher relationships, school connectedness, academic support, order and discipline, school social environment, perceived exclusion/privilege, and academic satisfaction. This scale includes items covering various dimensions similar to the conceptualization of decent education. Sample items from the scale include: "Teachers understand my problems", "This school makes students enthusiastic about learning", "Teachers make it clear what work needs to be done to get the grade I want", "School rules are enforced consistently and fairly", "I am happy with kinds of students who go to my school", "At my school, the same person always gets to help the teacher", and "I am happy about the number of tests I have". The Cronbach's alpha of the scale for the present study is .93.

Mobility Constraints. Mobility constraints were measured with a scale adapted from the 3-item Lifetime Experiences of Marginalization Scale (Duffy et al., 2019). In acknowledging the subjective nature of "feeling constrained", which varies among individuals and may impact its

predictive validity, we chose to capture individuals' subjective feelings of being marginalized due to social and geographical constraints during university life (i.e., subjective mobility constraints). The adapted scale captures such experiences of marginalization due to coming from rural or underdeveloped regions during university life. The adapted items include: "During my university life, I have had many interpersonal interactions that have often left me feeling marginalized", "Throughout my university, I have had many experiences that have made me feel marginalized", and "I have felt marginalized within the university setting for as long as I can remember". The Cronbach's alpha of the scale for the present study is .91.

Career Adaptability. Career adaptability was measured with the 12-item short version Career Adapt-Abilities Scale-China Form (Yu et al., 2020). The CAAS-China measures all four dimensions of career adaptability, including concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Sample items from the scale include: "Thinking about what my future will be like", "Taking responsibility for my actions", "Looking for opportunities to grow as a person", and "Taking care to do things well". This scale was widely used in career research (e.g., Yu et al., 2020). The reliability of the scale was high in the original study (i.e., overall Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale ranged from .91 to .94; Yu et al., 2020), and the Cronbach's alpha for this study is .80.

Work Volition. Work volition was measured using the Chinese version of the 7-item volition subscale of Work Volition Scale for students (Duffy et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2022). A sample item was: "Once I enter the work world, I will easily find a new job if I want to." This scale was widely used in prior PWT research (Kim et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2022). The scale was demonstrated to be adequately reliable in the original study ($\alpha = .70$), and the Cronbach's alpha for this study is .82.

Future Decent Work. Students' access to future decent work was measured using the Chinese version of the 15-item Future Decent Work Scale (Kim et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2022). The scale assessed five components, including safe working conditions, access to healthcare, adequate compensation, free time for rest, and organizational and community value match. Sample items from the scale include, "I will feel emotionally safe interacting with people at my future work," "I will get good healthcare benefits from my future job," "I will be rewarded adequately for my work," "I will have free time during the work week," and "The values of my future organization will match my family values". This scale was widely used in prior PWT research and has demonstrated high reliability in previous studies (e.g., $\alpha = .86$; Ma et al., 2021). The Cronbach's alpha for this study is .87.

Results

We conducted hypothesis analyses using SPSS v. 29 to replicate the results of Study 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations of latent variables for Study 2 are shown in Table 3. We used PROCESS v4.2 for testing the mediation analysis. Consistent with the findings of Study 1, educational experiences showed positive relationships with career adaptability ($\beta = .517$, $p < .001$), work volition ($\beta = .655$, $p < .001$), and future decent work ($\beta = .581$, $p < .001$). Additionally, career adaptability ($\beta = .461$, $p < .001$) and work volition ($\beta = .560$, $p < .001$) exhibited positive relationships with future decent work. Indirect effects were tested with 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples, with significance indicated by a 95% confidence interval that does not include zero. The indirect effects of educational experiences on future decent work through career adaptability ($\beta = .110$, 95% CI [.038, .180]) and work volition ($\beta = .199$, 95% CI [.096, .306]) were both significant.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations of latent variables in Study 2.

	SMC	EE	WV	CA	FDW
Subjective mobility constraints (SMC)	(.91)				
Educational experiences (EE)	−.164*	(.93)			
Work volition (WV)	−.113*	.655**	(.82)		
Career adaptability (CA)	−.225**	.517**	.495**	(.80)	
Future decent work (FDW)	−.064	.581**	.560**	.461**	(.87)

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$. Figures in brackets are Cronbach's alphas.

Subjective mobility constraints showed negative relationships with educational experiences ($\beta = -.164$, $p < .05$), career adaptability ($\beta = -.225$, $p < .001$), and work volition ($\beta = -.113$, $p < .05$), but not future decent work ($\beta = -.064$, $p = .359$). We also tested indirect effects using 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples, with significance indicated by a 95% confidence interval that does not include zero. The indirect effects of subjective mobility constraints on future decent work through educational experiences ($\beta = -.046$, 95% CI [−.088, −.006]), career adaptability ($\beta = -.051$, 95% CI [−.091, −.018]), and work volition ($\beta = -.030$, 95% CI [−.072, −.011]) were all significant. The results supported all hypotheses except for hypothesis 8.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

This study introduces and investigates two under-researched predictors of future access to decent work within the Chinese cultural context: educational experiences and mobility constraints. While Duffy and colleagues (2022) suggest that decent educational experiences are a precursor to obtaining future decent work, empirical evidence supporting this proposition is limited. Similarly, there is a lack of research on the role of both objective and subjective mobility constraints in predicting access to future decent work, despite social and geographical constraints being prevalent in many cultures (e.g., immigrant status; Kim et al., 2023; Tu et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that educational experiences, and both objective and subjective mobility constraints, are significant predictors of future access to decent work, thereby expanding upon the predictor section of the PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016).

As predicted, students' access to future decent work is predicted by their educational experiences, and the predictive effect is indirectly mediated through their career adaptability and work volition. Building on the decent education expansion (Duffy et al., 2022) and the school-to-work transition expansion (Masdonati et al., 2022) of the PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016), our findings suggest that students who hold negative attitudes towards their educational experiences are less likely to be prepared for their career, which is associated with self-doubt and difficulty envisioning a decent future work-self. In contrast, students with positive educational experiences are more likely to have greater confidence and higher self-efficacy in career development, which can facilitate securing decent jobs.

In the context of predicting future decent work within China, the *Hukou* system serves as an objective and valid tool (Guo et al., 2017), reflecting individuals' social and geographical mobility constraints. In Study 1, we directly utilized *Hukou* as a proxy for objective mobility constraints, examining its role as a predictor of future decent work. However, acknowledging the subjective nature of "feeling constrained", which varies among individuals and may impact its predictive

validity, we chose to capture individuals' subjective feelings of being marginalized due to social and geographical constraints during university life in Study 2.

Our findings offer valuable insights. Both objective and subjective mobility constraints did not directly impede students' access to future decent work. Interestingly, subjective mobility constraints (as opposed to objective ones) emerged as predictors of future access to decent work via influencing students' educational experiences. This observation suggests that objective mobility constraints, represented by China's *Hukou* system, may not directly predict future decent work access. The non-significant finding may arise from the inability of this objective tool to capture the individualized experiences of social and geographical mobility constraints. In other words, relying on objective measures alone may overlook the intricate interplay of psychological, social, and cultural factors influencing individuals' pathways to decent work. In contrast, subjective feelings of being socially and geographically constrained can significantly and adversely shape students' connections with peers, mentors, and potential employers, as well as impede their professional growth and skill acquisition. These subjective experiences play a crucial role in influencing students' career exploration behaviors and eventual occupational attainments.

Furthermore, both objective and subjective mobility constraints are indirectly associated with students' access to future decent work by impeding their career adaptability and work volition. There are three reasons why constrained students may demonstrate inadequate career adaptability and work volition to secure future decent work. First, the career services that students can access at college might be limited or unsuitable for students who come from rural areas. Second, without an existing social network and funds to participate in activities, rural students have limited prospects to enlarge their network or gain access to internships, mentoring, or job shadowing opportunities, compared to their more affluent peers from urban families who have wider networks. Third, rural students have limited funds to invest in extra classes to sharpen or acquire additional skills. They also have limited opportunities for public examinations such as the national and local civil servant exams, and other obstacles that hinder learning; for example, they may need to work part-time to be more self-sufficient, which detracts from a focus on academic performance. In essence, constrained students still consider it difficult to develop career-related adaptability and volition during the transitional process, which is associated with a lack of access to future decent work.

In sum, the current study expands on the PWT (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016) and adds to the discussion on the Decent Work Agenda (ILO, 2016) by investigating the direct and indirect effects of contextual factors on shaping students' access to future decent work. These findings highlight the need to account for specific economic, social, and cultural conditions when applying the PWT to investigate decent work and future decent work.

Practical Implications

This study offers practical guidance for educational institutions to bolster support for students in achieving academic and career success, particularly focusing on rural students who often grapple with identity conflicts and emotional challenges during the transition to urban environments. Firstly, institutions can facilitate the integration of rural freshmen into urban settings through orientation programs, peer support groups, and online activities. For instance, launching a social media campaign encouraging rural students to connect with peers who share similar backgrounds or interests (e.g., hobbies, career aspirations, cultural heritage, and academic interests) can foster meaningful connections and a stronger sense of belongingness (Zhao et al., 2012).

Secondly, institutions should prioritize developing support services tailored to the unique needs of rural students. Establishing a "Rural Student Support Center" staffed with specialists offering individual counseling, group workshops, and career development seminars is an effective strategy (Chaney et al., 1998; Grant-Vallone et al., 2003). Collaboration with local organizations can

facilitate the creation of culturally sensitive mentorship programs, pairing rural students with mentors who have successfully navigated similar school-to-work transitions (Renn et al., 2014).

Thirdly, workshops should focus on managing stress and cultivating a positive mindset to help students address identity conflicts and emotional challenges (e.g., Weinstein et al., 2009). For example, offering sessions on fostering critical consciousness can empower rural students to recognize and change marginalizing conditions (Cadenas & McWhirter, 2022). These supports aim to provide rural students with better educational experiences, thereby enhancing their access to future decent work opportunities.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

This study has several limitations that deserve consideration in future research. Firstly, our use of a cross-sectional design and single time-point data may have led to biased estimates of the indirect effects between variables in the model (Rohrer et al., 2022). To address this, longitudinal follow-up studies are recommended to track the development of career-related capabilities and access to decent work over time.

Secondly, the study's focus on university students from China might limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could explore samples from diverse cultural backgrounds to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. For instance, examining culturally specific antecedents could expand the PWT framework (Duffy, Blustein, et al., 2016).

Lastly, future research could investigate potential moderators that could mitigate the negative impact of both subjective and objective mobility constraints on students' career adaptability, work volition, and access to future decent work. Identifying factors such as social support could inform interventions and support mechanisms for vulnerable student populations.

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