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A career domain approach to adolescents' hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing

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Abstract

The theoretical understanding and empirical measurement of adolescents' career wellbeing is limited to the hedonic dimension of wellbeing. Although valuable, a more integrated framework for assessing adolescents' career wellbeing that includes a eudaimonic wellbeing perspective is needed. This paper raises the following critical questions for adolescents' career development and wellbeing: What does career wellbeing mean from the eudaimonic perspective of wellbeing, and how is this different from the hedonic definition of career wellbeing? How can eudaimonic career wellbeing be measured or operationalised among adolescents? And What are the practical implications of an integrated framework for assessing adolescents' career wellbeing?

Key words: Adolescents, career wellbeing, hedonia, eudaimonia

Introduction

Adolescents' wellbeing has been assessed using global and domain-specific measures. While global wellbeing measures focus on adolescents' overall perceptions of their lives, typically operationalised in the academic literature as 'life satisfaction' (Diener et al. 1985; Hirschi, 2011), domain-specific measures of wellbeing have mainly centred on adolescents' subjective feelings about school, family, and peer relationships (Clarke, 2023; McLellan &

Steward, 2015). Few studies have extended this domain approach to the career domain. Adolescents' wellbeing in this domain, otherwise known as 'career wellbeing' is currently understood and measured as the degree of satisfaction with their career choice and the extent to which they experience emotional distress about choosing a career (Pesch et al., 2016). Following this definitional approach, two prominent measures of adolescents' career wellbeing have emerged, namely: *academic major satisfaction*, which measures adolescents' satisfaction with their choice of specialised subjects for their secondary school leaving exams, and *subjective career distress*, measuring emotional responses towards the career decision-making process such as feelings of anxiety, stress and depression, including perceived internal and external barriers such as self-doubt and disapproval from someone held in high esteem (Creed et al., 2016; Katz et al., 2018; Pesch et al., 2016).

Despite the value of developing an empirical measure of adolescents' career wellbeing, this paper argues that the construct, as currently operationalised, is limited to the subjective dimension of wellbeing as evident in both adults' and adolescents' career wellbeing studies (Creed et al., 2016; Larson et al., 1994; Pesch et al., 2016; Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019). This suggests that career wellbeing is yet to be rigorously conceptualised and situated within the overarching wellbeing framework in positive psychology, comprising two dimensions: subjective or hedonic and psychological or eudaimonic wellbeing (Huta & Ryan, 2010).

Wellbeing from the hedonic perspective is understood as an individual's emotive state comprising either feelings of pleasure, enjoyment and happiness or dissatisfaction and angst resulting from activities, experiences and decisions. Eudaimonic wellbeing, on the other hand, is concerned with how activities, experiences and decisions contribute to an individual's fulfilment of their intrinsic nature and, ultimately, their self-actualisation (Huta & Ryan, 2010).

The current paper argues that for career wellbeing, a derivative wellbeing construct, to be adequately rooted in the science of wellbeing in positive psychology, it needs to include a psychological or eudaimonic dimension of wellbeing, which is currently lacking (Mansfield, 2024; Robertson, 2018). Such an integrated measure of career wellbeing will measure not only the presence or absence of satisfaction and depressive states concerning the career decision-making process but also how adolescents' career decision-making contributes to the development of their fullest potential and the realisation of their best selves (Disabato et al., 2016; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

This paper contributes to the literature on adolescents' wellbeing and career development by presenting an in-depth conceptual evaluation and framework for career wellbeing, which extends current theoretical understanding. Drawing from the wellbeing literature in positive psychology, it discusses the differences between the subjective and psychological dimensions of career wellbeing, described here as subjective or hedonic career wellbeing and psychological or eudaimonic career wellbeing. This paper will demonstrate the theoretical and practical implications of both wellbeing dimensions on adolescents' career development, highlighting the importance of measuring both dimensions in parallel (Henderson & Knight, 2012; Huta & Ryan, 2010; McLellan & Steward, 2015).

Using supporting arguments and evidence from the academic literature on wellbeing, the first section discusses adolescents' wellbeing from both subjective and psychological perspectives. It also examines career wellbeing as a domain measure of adolescents' wellbeing needing revision. The second section proposes vocational identity as a relevant

theoretical and empirical measure of psychological career wellbeing, though it has yet to be conceived as such in the academic literature. The final section presents implications and recommendations for future research, policy and counselling practice involving adolescents.

Adolescents' (career) wellbeing: How is it conceptualised and measured?

With the enactment of the United Nations Convention on Child Rights in 1989, wellbeing research has gradually expanded to include the wellbeing of children, adolescents, and young adults. Adolescence is generally conceived as the period between childhood and adulthood. Although theorists in developmental psychology, neuroscience, and social psychology have proposed different age boundaries that constitute adolescence, they mostly agree that adolescence begins at age 10 or 11, following the onset of puberty (Blakemore, 2008; Curtis, 2015). Other physiological and psychological changes, such as the heightened ability for abstract reasoning, decision-making, and goal-oriented and risk-taking behaviours, markedly differentiate adolescence from childhood (Abbott & Burkitt, 2023; Blakemore, 2008; Parker & Crabtree, 2020).

However, the end of adolescence and transition to adulthood is less clear and influenced by social and cultural circumstances and norms (Parker & Crabtree, 2020). While some researchers suggest an endpoint of up to 25 years, others have delineated different stages within the continuum from adolescence to adulthood as early (10 – 13), middle (14 – 17) and late adolescence or young/emerging adulthood (18 – 25). This paper defines adolescence as the typical age range for secondary school students, generally between 11 and 17 years. This period is further divided into early and late adolescence, corresponding to the two stages of secondary education: lower and upper levels.

Different disciplines use the phrase *being well* to represent the individual's health and quality of life across the physical, mental, and economic domains (McLellan & Steward, 2015). In positive psychology, the hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions of wellbeing have framed the discourse (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Margolis et al., 2022; McLellan & Steward, 2015; Waterman et al., 2008). Hedonic wellbeing is concerned with the attainment of happiness or the search for pleasure while eudaimonic wellbeing is focused on how ultimate happiness is derived from the satisfaction of one's inherent talents and values (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Waterman, 1993).

Popular measures of wellbeing among adolescents, such as the positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS), the personal wellbeing index, the general health questionnaire, school-related burnout, and the satisfaction with life scale (Cummins & Lau, 2005; Diener et al., 1985; Katz et al., 2018; Watson et al., 1988) mainly assess adolescents' feelings and moods, and degrees of happiness or distress, in other words, their subjective wellbeing. In contrast, psychological wellbeing focuses on the meaningfulness of life, not just how satisfied one is (Margolis et al., 2022). It is concerned with an individual's sense of self-actualisation and attainment of inherent potential (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2008). As such, the measures of psychological wellbeing point to the satisfaction of innate psychological needs and intrinsic life goals (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryff, 1989).

Psychological wellbeing theories and measures emphasise the *process* or *means* of attaining happiness in life, for example, by satisfying essential psychological needs like autonomy, competence, relatedness, environmental mastery, and personal growth believed to constitute the basis of a well-lived life (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryff, 1989). Subjective wellbeing, on the other hand, is less focused on *how* happiness and life satisfaction should be attained (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Instead, happiness and life satisfaction are perceived as ends in themselves (Diener et al., 1999). A further justification for differentiating psychological from subjective wellbeing is that pursuing goals that are intrinsically motivated can result in subjective wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2008). Hedonic satisfaction that includes eudaimonic elements can thus be considered *authentic* or *meaningful* happiness rather than just happiness (Baumeister et al., 2013).

Wellbeing, in general, has been considered an 'elusive' concept to measure (Gennings et al., 2021). However, compared to subjective wellbeing, measuring psychological or eudaimonic wellbeing is more challenging (Huta, 2020; Proctor & Tweed, 2016). It is, therefore, not surprising that most studies on adolescents' wellbeing have focused on hedonic wellbeing. One prominent measure of psychological wellbeing was developed by Ryff, (1989 and 1995) for adults and has been influential in the growth and understanding of psychological wellbeing. At first glance, the fundamental psychological wellbeing questions of what constitutes the 'ultimate good' and a life worth living or what it means to live authentically or purposefully (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Huta & Waterman, 2014) may seem abstract and challenging to contextualise among adolescents. A plausible argument for this is that adolescents are still in the formative stages of personal identity construction and fulfilling crucial developmental tasks and expectations like excelling at school, forming relationships with peers, and deciding on a career (Iovu et al., 2018; Stringer et al., 2012; Todorović et al., 2023). Therefore, such high-level abstraction of what it means to have a sense of purpose may not be immediately obvious or considered as timely.

I argue that despite its seeming elusiveness, the interest in psychological wellbeing should not be restricted to adults only (Ryff, 1995). Assessing the conditions that facilitate a sense of purpose, optimal functioning and flourishing among adolescents is crucial to satisfying developmental priorities like academic attainment (Clarke, 2023) and transition into adulthood.

To mitigate the measurement ambiguity and challenge of psychological wellbeing in adolescents' literature, this paper recommends that the meaning of psychological wellbeing as fulfilling one's potential or realising personal meaning and purpose should be concretised and operationalised within specific relevant domains during adolescence, making it more applicable to this developmental stage. For example, what does being authentic within the school, career and friendship domains imply during adolescence?

Some existing studies on subjective wellbeing have adopted this domain approach, but have focused largely on the school domain, assessing how adolescents' feel about being in school and the school environment. (Anderson & Graham, 2016; McLellan & Steward, 2015). While school is vital at this developmental stage, adolescents in the later years of secondary school are more curious and ambivalent about the relevance of the curriculum to post-secondary school goals and transitions (Hill et al., 2018). This suggests the value of a stronger focus on adolescents' wellbeing from the eudaimonic perspective through assessing how school activities are potentially *meaningful* for their future trajectories and career readiness.

To unravel the definition and measurement challenges associated with hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, Huta, (2020) recommended four definition categories - (1) Orientation or motives for acting (2) Behaviours, actions, or activities (3) Experiences – affective or cognitive feelings and evaluation, and (4) Functioning. Investigating wellbeing from the orientation perspective will seek to understand which motives influence individuals' actions and behaviours – the *why* of acting. The behaviour perspective emphasises what people *do* to realise their preconceived motives. Experiences and Functioning are the expected outcomes from the joint effect of one's motives and chosen actions.

It would appear from the above classification that most definitions and explanations of subjective and psychological wellbeing are focused on the *outcome* perspective. While subjective wellbeing defines wellbeing as feeling happy and satisfied, psychological wellbeing defines wellbeing as a state of optimal functioning, human flourishing, and self-actualisation. However, unlike subjective wellbeing, the historical and theoretical approach to psychological wellbeing prescribes the preconditions for realising optimum psychological health (Steger et al., 2008), suggesting that eudaimonic wellbeing alludes to 'ideal' motives and behaviours essential for realising wellbeing.

Some studies have shown interest in differentiating hedonic from eudaimonic motives and behaviours. That is, which motives and behaviours result in hedonic or eudaimonic wellbeing outcomes? Studies in this area have suggested that hedonic motives relate to pursuing pleasure and enjoyment, influencing the adoption of hedonic behaviours like watching a movie or attending a concert. Eudaimonic motives, in contrast, relate to seeking to pursue personal ideals, investing time to learn a skill or providing service, prompting behaviours like goal setting or volunteering. Hedonic motives and behaviours are arguably present-focused and self-oriented, while eudaimonic motives and behaviours are future or other-oriented (see Huta, 2020 and Steger et al., 2008 for a full list of empirically tested hedonic and eudaimonic motives and corresponding behaviours). These studies have, however, mainly focused on global measures and have been developed among higher education students. Similar to outcome measures of wellbeing, domain measures of hedonic and eudaimonic motives and behaviours among adolescents are limited.

Studies have shown that career decision-making is a significant predictor of adolescents' wellbeing and impacts the attainment of personal goals and quality of life (Dietrich et al., 2012; Guay et al., 2006; Hirschi, 2011). In extending the theoretical understanding of psychological wellbeing to the career domain, this paper argues that *psychological career wellbeing* will aim at understanding *why* adolescents are satisfied with their career choice and attempt to suggest the most favourable conditions that can lead to greater satisfaction. Different from *subjective career wellbeing*, which measures purely satisfaction or dissatisfaction with career choice, and the level of stress and positive or negative self-appraisal regarding the career decision-making process, further insight into the conditionality of young people's career choice satisfaction is needed to understand and evaluate young people's career decision-making lens. For example, are career choices based on awareness of their interests, strengths and talents, personal goals and values? Are they based on prevailing life circumstances, realities, or future expectations and what is possible? (see Table 1 for an analytical distinction between subjective and psychological career wellbeing).

From Table 1, subjective career wellbeing aims to identify whether adolescents are happy about the career decision-making process and what is needed to make this experience more enjoyable and less frustrating. In line with the psychological wellbeing tradition of uncovering 'essence', 'value', 'quality', and 'meaning', an interest in adolescents' psychological career wellbeing will seek to understand and uncover what optimal career development or career *functioning* (as opposed to satisfaction) signifies among adolescents and what conditions hinder or promote its realisation. Like the qualitative distinction between work and *decent* or *quality* work, livelihood and *sustainable* livelihood, I argue that optimal or purposeful career development implies a higher-order classification of career outcomes and objective and universal criteria for strengthening human excellence and flourishing (Robertson, 2018). A pertinent research question in this regard is: How can adolescents experience or attain personal excellence and self-realisation as an outcome of career decision-making? (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Table 1. Analytical conceptual distinction between the subjective and psychological dimensions of adolescents' career wellbeing

Career Wellbeing		
Subjective Career Wellbeing (current measure of career wellbeing		**Psychological Career Wellbeing (underexamined measure of career wellbeing)**
Affective component	*Cognitive component*	
• Adolescents' emotive experience or subjective feelings associated with choosing a career or towards the career decision-making process. • Investigates how adolescents emotively describe the process. As stressful, burdensome, exciting? • The career decision-making process is evaluated in terms of how it maximises pleasure and minimises pain.	• Adolescents' mental assessment, evaluation or judgement about the career preparation process.	• Scrutinises the conditionalities linked to adolescents' emotive and cognitive states derived from career decision-making. Evaluates the *value* of these conditions beyond positive and negative affect and satisfaction. • Asks *why* adolescents feel however they do – content, sad, unhappy, or distressed about the career preparation process and proposes a yardstick for evaluating emotions; not just whether adolescents are happy or not but also enquires further: Happy because of…? Distressed because of…? • Investigates to what extent the process of career decision-making facilitates the experience of personal flourishing. • Aims at objective preconditions for adolescents to attain self-actualisation through the career decision-making process.

Proposing vocational identity as a theoretical and empirical dimension of adolescents' psychological career wellbeing

Vocational identity entails a clear conception and awareness of one's interests, goals, strengths and values (Creed & Hennessy, 2016). Beyond choosing a career path, vocational identity includes matching this choice with one's interests and strengths (Park et al., 2022). Achieving such a match has resulted in beneficial outcomes in adolescents' academic and psychological domains, like improved school engagement, academic adjustment, and perceived competence (Porfeli et al., 2011; Wong & Kaur, 2017). The emphasis on the synergy between one's sense of self and career pursuits suggests a theoretical link between vocational identity and the eudaimonic perspective of wellbeing. Although vocational identity was not explicitly mentioned, Waterman (1993) defined eudaimonic wellbeing as the cultivation of one's inherent 'skills and talents' (p. 679). The standardised measures of vocational identity and eudaimonic wellbeing are also alike. For example, the question 'I have a strong sense of who I am in relation to my career' in the Vocational Identity Measure (VIM) developed by Gupta et al., (2015) is similar to the question 'This activity gives me my strongest feeling that this is who I really am' in the Personally Expressive Activities Questionnaire, which measures psychological wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Waterman, 1993). Empirical studies have also found a positive relationship between vocational identity and concepts like meaning and purpose in life (Li et al., 2018; Strauser et al., 2008), further strengthening the possibility of repositioning vocational identity as a psychological dimension of career wellbeing.

Despite the promise of integrating vocational identity within the career wellbeing construct, it is important to acknowledge its potential empirical limitations and challenges among adolescents. Vocational Identity can be measured as a unidimensional and multidimensional construct. The unidimensional measure assesses whether a firm and certain career choice has been made (Holland, et al., 1980; Gupta et al., 2015). While suitable for young adults and adults, this measurement approach may not be developmentally appropriate during early adolescence. Given the career-specific focus of this paper, I define early adolescence as the period before students choose their subject specialisation areas, broadly understood as the lower secondary school years. Measuring their vocational identity in a unidimensional form at this time may lead to identity diffusion (a low level of exploration of interests combined with a low level of commitment to a career choice) or identity foreclosure (a low level of self-exploration but a high degree of career commitment). Both possibilities are considered maladaptive career decision-making outcomes, and the ideal outcome and developmental process would be for a thorough exploration of one's interests before a career decision is made, which should be encouraged and actively pursued during adolescence. (see Marcia's (1966) seminal identity status theory for a detailed analysis of the four identity categories during adolescence).

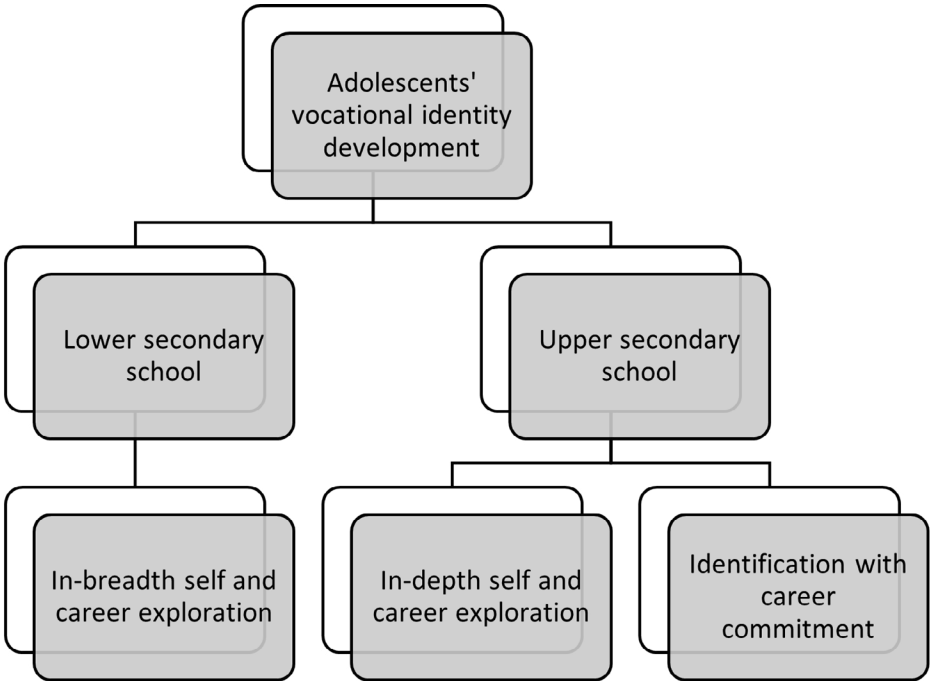
Rather than focusing solely on whether adolescents have committed to a career choice, the multidimensional measure of vocational identity allows for the following:

1. Greater flexibility in how the vocational identity development process is measured across different developmental stages.
2. Better monitoring of the extent and nature of adolescents' exploration within the different periods of adolescence (early – late adolescence).
3. A stronger justification for this paper's argument for vocational identity as a psychological dimension of adolescents' career wellbeing.

These three points will be expanded on using Porfeli et al.'s (2011) multidimensional measure of vocational identity. To achieve (1) and (2) above, I propose that during the lower secondary years, career scholars and practitioners examine the extent to which adolescents engage in a broad search of personal interests and information about potential careers and subject area competence. This is theoretically known as *in-breadth exploration*. Encouraging such behaviours during early adolescence, rather than emphasising a firm commitment to a career choice at this educational and developmental stage, may help reduce emotional and mental distress related to selecting subject specialisation areas in senior or upper secondary school. A sample question measuring in-breadth exploration is, 'I am trying to have many different experiences so that I can find several jobs that might suit me' (Porfeli et al., 2011).

To achieve (3) above, I propose focusing on these two constructs: *in-depth self and career exploration* and *identification with career commitment*. Compared to in-breadth exploration, in-depth exploration is the search for information about specific and preferred career interests, while identifying with a career choice suggests internalising this choice to achieve harmony with one's true self (Porfeli et al., 2011; Wong & Kaur, 2017). These two sub-dimensions of vocational identity are what I propose in this paper as the eudaimonic conceptualisation and measurement of adolescents' career wellbeing, which are most applicable to the later secondary school years. A sample question of in-depth exploration and identification with career commitment include 'I am learning what I can do to improve my chances of getting into my chosen career' and 'My career will help me satisfy deeply personal goals', respectively. Figure 1 below depicts this paper's proposed multi-dimensional framework for assessing adolescents' vocational identity development.

Figure 1. A proposed empirical multidimensional measurement framework for adolescents' vocational identity development



Conceptualising vocational identity as a measure of adolescents' psychological career wellbeing is the first step in achieving a congruence with the current layer of operationalisation of subjective career wellbeing (outcome-based). While subjective career wellbeing accounts for the emotional and cognitive sub-dimensions of subjective wellbeing

more generally by asking how adolescents feel about their career choice and how satisfied they are, psychological career wellbeing emphasises career functioning and flourishing based on how developed adolescents' vocational identity is.

To achieve a more integrated framework for adolescents' career wellbeing, I extend the position of this paper to recommend consideration of hedonic and eudaimonic career motives and behaviours, not just outcomes. Figure 2 adapts Huta's (2020) framework and presents a multi-level career-specific model for assessing adolescents' career wellbeing based on their career motives, career behaviours, and career outcomes, considering the hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing perspectives. Table 2 builds on this to proffer some recommendations for career motives and behaviours with support from existing literature on adolescents' career self-management, career adaptability, and career preparation.

By integrating the subjective and psychological wellbeing dimensions, this paper redefines adolescents' career wellbeing as the extent to which they attain optimal career functioning or flourishing and their degree of perceived satisfaction and distress about the developmental task of career decision-making. Following this definition, high or positive career wellbeing will likely entail the following: a strong commitment to a career that expresses an adolescent's interests and personal goals, accompanied by a high level of satisfaction with this career choice and a low level of negative affect comprising anxiety and self-doubt. In reverse, low or poor career wellbeing is likely to imply career indecision or uncertainty, which may be caused by the difficulty in discerning one's strengths, interests, and goals accompanied by a low level of satisfaction with one's career choice and a high degree of mental strain from the career decision-making process.

Figure 2. A three-dimensional measurement model of adolescents' career wellbeing

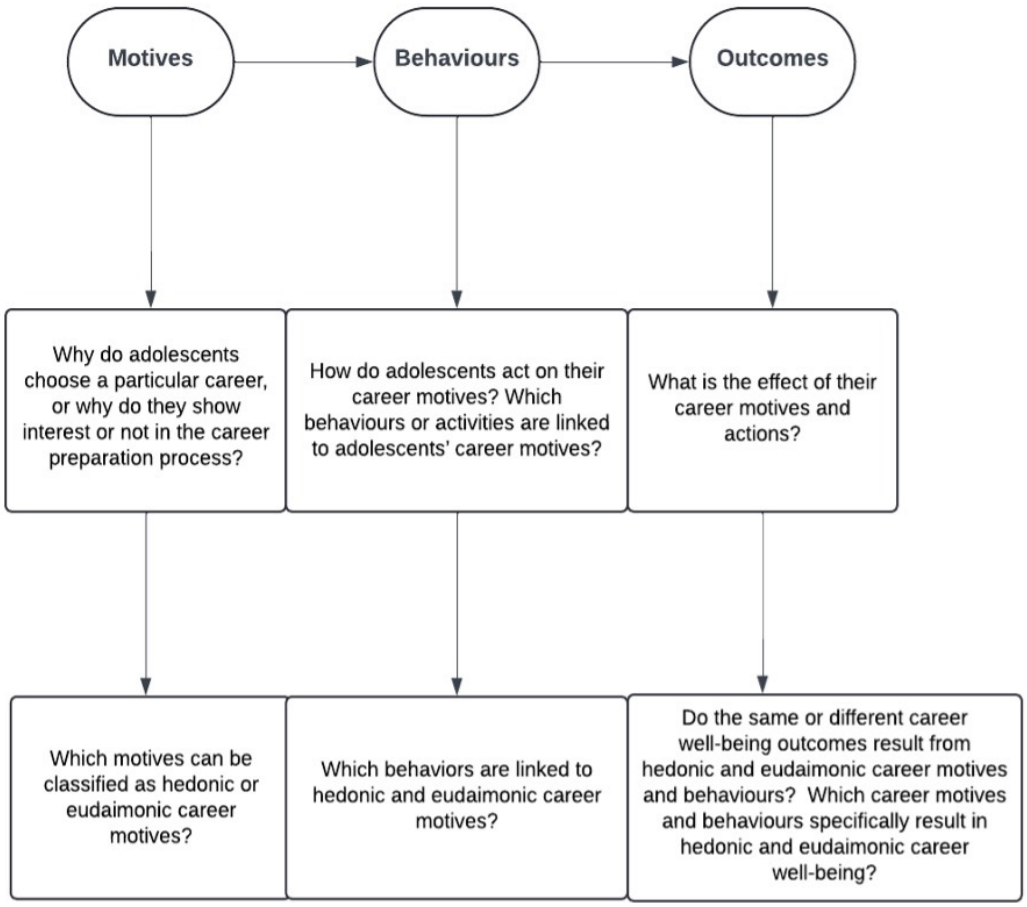


Table 2. An integrated measurement framework for adolescents' career wellbeing

Hedonic Perspective			**Eudaimonic Perspective**	
		Scale Examples		**Scale Examples**
Career outcome	Positive or negative feelings emanating from career choice or the career decision-making process and the degree of satisfaction with career choice.	Larson et al., (1994), Pesch et al., (2016)	Pursuit of vocational identity	Gupta et al., (2015), Hirschi, (2011), Porfeli et al., (2011)
Career motives	Seeking to enhance personal satisfaction, social status, recognition, and acceptance.	Katz et al., (2018)	Seeking to enhance self-acceptance and personal growth; develop career self-management; and pursue increased knowledge of inherent talents and abilities. Aligning career aspirations with pro-social motives like advancing one or more of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals	Ho, (2024); Katz et al. (2018), Wilhelm & Hirschi, (2019)
Career behaviours	Seeking the approval of others to authenticate career choice and choosing the same subject-area specialisation as friends. Implementing the working backwards approach to careers information search: starting from career or perceived career prestige and aligning with personal interests.	Katz et al., (2018)	Goal setting behaviours like writing down goals and keeping a record. Career exploration - internal and external, and in-depth and in-breadth. Volunteering, engaging in extra-curricular activities, taking psychometric strengths tests, networking, identifying a role model, and engaging in career conversations with professionals.	Beal & Crockett, (2010), Marciniak et al., (2021), Wilhelm & Hirschi, (2019)

Implications for future research, policy and practice

I recommend that future studies use the three-dimensional measurement model of adolescents' career wellbeing proposed in this paper to examine the relationship between career motives, behaviours, and outcomes from both the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. Further, to increase the validity and impact of future quantitative research on adolescents' career wellbeing, scholars should consider making clear the dimension (subjective, psychological or both) of interest and justify the study's choice in relation to its adolescent or young adult sample. In addition to vocational identity, other empirical measures of adolescents' psychological career wellbeing could be developed from future qualitative studies exploring how adolescents interpret and situate meaning and authenticity within the career domain, considering their social and cultural environment and influences.

This paper recommends that education policy strategies for students' career development in secondary school avoid a one-size-fits-all approach for all students or focus primarily on the transition period at the end of secondary school to post-secondary education. Instead, career policy interventions should be tailored to lower and upper secondary school students, taking into consideration this paper's recommendation to promote broad self and career exploration during early adolescence and more focused exploration and commitment to career choices during late adolescence.

Encouraging the exploration of interests and talents at these different periods can serve as a roadmap for individuals to assess their personal and career development during adolescence and beyond.

The integrated conception of career wellbeing presented in this paper strengthens career counselling strategies that begin with helping adolescents identify their strengths and, from there, gradually assist them in fashioning out a fitting career path. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals can be used as a practical tool to reinforce this practice (Ho, 2024), enabling career counsellors to help adolescents contextualise and explore how their interests and values relate to their local and global social and environmental contexts. By doing so, career counsellors move away from an overly individualistic or decontextualised view of the person, embracing instead the perspective that individuals are socially connected yet possess agency.

Conclusion

Integrating the subjective and psychological dimensions of wellbeing into the career wellbeing construct offers a balanced approach to evaluating adolescents' career development. On the one hand, researchers and counsellors can assess how adolescents feel about their career choices, using subjective career wellbeing as a measure of happiness and satisfaction with those choices. At the same time, acknowledging psychological career wellbeing helps in promoting strengths-based interventions that encourage adolescents to explore and appreciate their talents and abilities.

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