

## THE PATTERN OF CHANGE IN AUTONOMOUS CAREER MOTIVATION IN MID-ADOLESCENCE

Toni Babarović, Iva Šverko, & Eta Krpanec  
*Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences (Croatia)*

### Abstract

This study focuses on the changes in autonomous career motivation during middle adolescence. Autonomous Career Motivation is a recently developed construct defined as motivation for personal vocational development and career construction, expressed along a relative autonomy continuum (RAC) encompassing six types of career motivation (internal, identified, positive introjected, negative introjected, external, and amotivation). A cohort accelerated longitudinal design was employed, commencing with two cohorts of high school students from the 1st (15 years old) and the 2nd (16 years old) grade, and tracking them for three consecutive years. The sample consisted of 688 adolescents (329 in the younger cohort and 359 in the older cohort; 36% were boys), assessed three times (in springs of 2021, 2022, and 2023) in their schools using computerized assessments. The Autonomous Career Motivation Scale, which measures the six motivational dimensions used to calculate the relative autonomy continuum, was applied. Our data confirmed the existence of a simplex structure of six motivational dimensions and their hypothesized positions on the RAC at all three time points. We examined changes in career motivation over time using ANOVA mixed models, including age and gender as between-group factors. We found a small but significant time effect on the autonomy continuum, indicating a moderate decrease in autonomous motivation over time ( $\eta^2=.016$ ). Specifically, this effect could be attributed to an increase in introjected-negative and external types of motivation, while other types of motivation remained stable. Gender differences were observed, with girls displaying somewhat higher levels of autonomous motivation, primarily manifested in higher identified and introjected-positive motivational types. No main effect of age group or interactional effect of age group was found, confirming the existence of the same pattern of motivational change and stability in both cohorts. The general decline in autonomous motivation for career construction and the increase in specific external motivational types could be attributed to the impending transition that adolescents face after high school, which they confront at the age of eighteen. Practical applications of these findings underscore the importance of personalized career counselling, wherein tailored guidance based on individual motivational patterns can empower adolescents to make informed and fulfilling career choices.

**Keywords:** *Career motivation, longitudinal, adolescence, career guidance, vocational choices.*

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### 1. Introduction

Autonomous Career Motivation is a recently developed construct defined as motivation for personal vocational development and career construction. It is best understood as an inherent, internal drive compelling individuals to actively participate in the process of career construction. People who exhibit autonomous motivation in choosing a career do so out of a genuine desire to engage, rather than feeling compelled by external factors such as social pressure or expectations (Šverko and Babarovic, 2023). This concept of autonomous career motivation serves as a valuable addition to existing career theories, which often lack an explicit focus on the motivational processes inherent in career development. By highlighting the intrinsic desire to shape one's own career path, autonomous career motivation contributes a nuanced perspective that underscores the importance of personal volition and self-driven engagement in career development. Sheldon and colleagues (2017) offered a broad definition of autonomous career motivation, within the Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017), seeing it as a Relative Autonomy Continuum (RAC). The continuum defines human motivation in levels of internality and was confirmed by testing the pattern of correlations between motivational types (Ryan & Connell, 1989; Sheldon et al., 2017). Sheldon and colleagues (2017) proposed six dimensions of motivation ordered on RAC: intrinsic, identified, positive introjected, negative introjected, external and

amotivation. Considering all six categories of motivation, spanning from intrinsic motivation to the four forms of externally regulated motivations and finally amotivation, a discernible continuum of autonomous motivation emerges.

During middle adolescence, typically marked by the age range of 14 to 18, we anticipate a nuanced shift in autonomous career motivation, particularly as older adolescents grapple with the imminent decision of selecting a university or choosing an employment. This phase is characterized by an intensified awareness of future career paths and the importance of educational choices. While intrinsic motivation may remain a driving force, external factors such as societal expectations, parental influence, and peer pressure might gain prominence. The approaching decision of university or job selection introduces a blend of excitement and pressure, potentially impacting the autonomous nature of motivation. Consequently, during middle adolescence, we may observe a dynamic interplay between intrinsic desires for career construction and the increasing influence of external factors, underscoring the need for targeted support and guidance to foster a balanced and autonomously motivated approach to the career choice process.

## **2. Objectives**

This paper focuses on the change in autonomous career motivation during middle adolescence by empirically exploring its contribution in career construction in adolescence and by discussing its potential practical implications.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1. Study design**

A cohort accelerated longitudinal design was employed, commencing with two cohorts of high school students from the 1st (15 years old) and the 2nd (16 years old) grade, and tracking them for three consecutive years.

### **3.2. Instruments**

The Autonomous Career Motivation Scale (ACMS, Sverko and Babarovic, 2023) assesses six distinct motivations influencing individuals' involvement in career construction: intrinsic, identified, positive introjected, negative introjected, external, and amotivation. It comprises 24 items, with each dimension represented by four statements. Respondents are required to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale for each statement. Results can be obtained for each motivational dimension and on the relative autonomy continuum (RAC) calculated from the dimensional results. Our previous research (Babarovic & Sverko, 2023) and this study data, in all three time points, confirmed the existence of a simplex structure of six motivational dimensions and their hypothesized positions on the RAC.

### **3.3. Sample**

The sample consisted of 688 adolescents. There were 329 students (15 years old in the first wave) in the younger cohort and 359 students (16 years old in the first wave) in the older cohort (36% were boys in complete sample). Respondents were assessed three times (in springs of 2021, 2022, and 2023) in their schools using computerized assessments.

## **4. Results**

Our data unequivocally substantiated the presence of a simplex structure comprising six distinct motivational dimensions, aligning with their hypothesized positions on the Relative Autonomy Continuum (RAC) across all three time points. To discern changes in career motivation over time, we employed ANOVA mixed models, incorporating age and gender as between-group factors. Notably, a modest, yet statistically significant, time effect on the autonomy continuum emerged, signifying a moderate decline in autonomous motivation over time ( $\eta^2=.016$ ). This decline was specifically attributed to an uptick in introjected-negative ( $\eta^2=.069$ ) and external ( $\eta^2=.074$ ) types of motivation, while other motivational categories demonstrated stability. Gender disparities were evident, with females exhibiting marginally higher levels of autonomous motivation, particularly evident in elevated identified and introjected-positive motivational types. The main effects of age group on career motivation were not observed, meaning that motivational patterns are similar in both age cohorts. Interaction effects of gender

or age on motivational change over time were both insignificant, affirming the persistence of the same motivational change and stability patterns across both cohorts, and for boys and girls.

Table 1. Longitudinal differences in autonomous career motivation during middle adolescence (N = 688).

Scales	M	SD	F	df1/df2	P	$\eta^2$	Contrasts
Internal T1	3.32	.89	0.54	2/1368	.580	.001	
Internal T2	3.27	.91					n.s.
Internal T3	3.26	.95					
Identified T1	4.25	.64	1.80	2/1368	.166	.003	
Identified T2	4.28	.66					n.s.
Identified T3	4.23	.74					
Introjected positive T1	3.57	.89	2.54	2/1368	.080	.004	
Introjected positive T2	3.62	.87					n.s.
Introjected positive T3	3.65	.85					
Introjected negative T1	2.29	.90	50.56	2/1368	.000	.069	T1 vs.
Introjected negative T2	2.45	1.02					T2 vs.
Introjected negative T3	2.71	1.02					T3
External T1	1.96	.78	54.56	2/1368	.000	.074	T1 vs.
External T2	2.16	.93					T2 vs.
External T3	2.33	.92					T3
Amotivation T1	2.10	.86	0.24	2/1368	.783	.000	
Amotivation T2	2.05	.88					n.s.
Amotivation T3	2.06	.92					
RAC T1	9.52	6.13	11.28	2/1368	.000	.016	T1 vs.
RAC T2	9.04	6.66					T2 vs.
RAC T3	8.36	7.02					T3

## 5. Discussion & conclusion

The observed decline in autonomous motivation for career construction, coupled with the rise in specific external motivational types, may be linked to the imminent transition that adolescents undergo post high school, typically around the age of eighteen. This transitional phase presents unique challenges that can impact motivational dynamics. It seems that external factors such as societal expectations, parental influence, teachers and peer pressure might gain prominence in motivational structure.

Practical applications of these findings emphasize the significance of personalized career counselling. By offering tailored guidance aligned with individual motivational patterns, adolescents can be empowered to navigate this critical juncture more effectively, ultimately making informed, but still internally motivated and fulfilling career choices. Recognizing and addressing the evolving nature of motivation during this transitional period can enhance the effectiveness of career interventions, fostering better alignment between personal aspirations and career trajectories.

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