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# The Effects of Peers' Career Goal Appraisals on School to Work Transition Outcomes

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## Abstract

Despite the growing body of research on the transition from school to work, an important aspect of young people's social realities in this phase has been largely overlooked: their peers. This study investigates to what extent peer networks in late adolescence, and particularly peers' appraisals of their own career goals, are related to young people's subjective early transition outcomes in a Finnish sample ( $N = 322$ ) between the ages 17 and 20. The results show that having peers who positively appraise their goals as attainable is associated with more positive transition outcomes as young people more often reported having reached a (temporarily) satisfactory transition outcome which they intended to maintain unchanged. Negative peer appraisals showed no associations with transition outcomes. The present study offers an important step toward a comprehensive understanding of the social lives of young people in career transitions and provides new directions for research and counseling.

## Keywords

school to work transition, peers, peer networks, career goals, goal appraisals

The transition from school to work is one of the most critical developmental tasks in young adulthood (Dietrich et al., 2012). How well this transition is navigated lays the groundwork for a successful adult working life and bears substantial implications for people's future careers and socioeconomic attainment (Kahn, 2010; Marshall & Symonds, 2021; Ranta et al., 2013). It is thus critical to understand what factors facilitate or hinder this transition, not only to gain a better understanding of the social dynamics during this developmental stage but also to identify potential leverage points for support.

On the individual level, one individual-level variable that has taken on a key role in this respect is career goals. Setting adequate career goals is a major challenge in the transition to work (Hu et al., 2017), and the appraisals of these goals are essential behavioral determinants for people's future goal pursuit and goal attainment (Gollwitzer, 1990). These appraisals can be both positive and negative and

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hence facilitate or hamper goal achievement (Hu et al., 2016). On a contextual level, research has strongly focused on socioeconomic antecedents of transition outcomes. For example, young people who transition to work in bad economies or who stem from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are found to be at greater risk of not finding and sustaining adequate employment (Kahn, 2010; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). More recently, research has increasingly addressed social contextual factors such as the role of parents or mentors (Kao et al., 2021; Marshall & Symonds, 2021; Neuenschwander & Hofmann, 2021). However, while research increasingly acknowledges the importance of social contexts and relationships in the transition to work, one type of relationship has so far received comparatively little attention: peer networks. Consequently, while there is a considerable body of research demonstrating the importance of relationships with adult advisors, little is known about their peer relationships in the transition to work. This is startling as peers constitute a major source of guidance and support during this life phase (Duriez et al., 2013). Those studies that do address peer relationships demonstrate that young people rely on their peers when making career decisions and benefit from these peer relationships in their goal striving and goal achievement (Dietrich et al., 2012). It is thus reasonable to expect that peer networks play a vital role in mastering the transition to work. Corresponding findings stem from a study conducted in the Netherlands which demonstrated that having efficacious peers stimulates engagement in job-search activities during the transition from school to work (Ruschoff et al., 2018).

In this study, we synthesize findings on the importance of career goals as an individual-level antecedent of transition outcomes with recent insights into the role of peers in goal striving and goal achievement. We argue that peer networks is a significant social-contextual variable and that the characteristics of the peers that comprise a network determine the extent to which peers affect young people's transition, laying an explicit focus on peers' goals and goal appraisals as a key characteristic. If peers' goal appraisals shape their behavior during the transition and young people draw on their peers as behavioral reference points (Dietrich et al., 2012), peers' goal appraisals might impact young people's transition outcomes. To address this issue, we investigate the association between peers' career goal appraisals and young people's transition outcomes among Finnish young adults over a 3-year timeframe between the ages 17 and 20.

This study makes two key contributions: First, the role of peer networks in the transition to work is currently understudied. It is crucial to gain more knowledge about the social contextual factors that facilitate or hinder the transition from school to work, as the outcomes of this transition are key predictors of a successful future career. The investigation of peer networks allows us to advance our understanding of the transition beyond individual, economic, and familial predictors and to consider the full social complexity of this transitional phase. Failure to consider this social reality would distort our picture of the full range of influences on a successful transition. By expanding contemporary approaches to the study of contextual factors in the transition to work, our results can lay the foundation for future research on the determinants of transition outcomes with a stronger social contextual perspective beyond the family context, giving leeway to additional research on the role of peer networks in early career pathways. For instance, while this study focuses on the characteristics of the peers that comprise a network, future research may also address structural characteristics of the networks such as their density or degree of centrality. Second, in addition to theoretical advancements, insights into the role of peers in the transition to work can open new avenues of practical support by incorporating peer contexts more explicitly in interventions or counseling.

### *Theoretical Conceptualizations of the School to Work Transition*

The transition to work describes a developmental phase that encompasses both the initial transition into employment and early career paths (De Vos et al., 2019; Vuolo et al., 2013). In a simplistic conceptualization, a successful transition might be defined by having attained employment. However,

merely finding employment is not an adequate indicator of a successful transition anymore in today's world of work. In the past decades, the transition has become increasingly diversified, with traditional markers of adulthood such as finishing school, leaving home, and finding work occurring later in life and not necessarily in traditional sequential order (De Vos et al., 2019; Vuolo et al., 2013). Especially early career paths are often characterized by instabilities, with people exploring different types of work (Vuolo et al., 2013) and proactively seeking to optimize their transition and career outcomes (De Vos et al., 2019). Due to this prolonged and dynamic character, investigating the transition is a complicated endeavor. Especially early transition outcomes may be temporary, which makes it difficult to pin down a successful transition to a single criterion at a given point in time. Accordingly, different approaches have been taken to the assessment of transition outcomes, focusing on employment status (Bynner & Parsons, 2002), the perceived correspondence between employment and career wishes (Hirschi, 2010; Vuolo et al., 2013), satisfaction with employment (Hirschi, 2010), or trajectories of life satisfaction (Ranta et al., 2013; Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2017).

Since the present study addresses early transition outcomes, it is appropriate to employ an approach that adequately captures the temporary nature of these outcomes. We, therefore, define transition outcomes in terms of a (temporary) satisfaction with the achieved transition outcome, that is, whether people have reached a state with which they are currently content and which they intend to maintain unchanged at present. This approach seems particularly appropriate for research on early transition outcomes as it does not necessitate the achievement of a permanent and stable employment relationship, but rather defines transition success in terms of satisfaction, and hence a subjective rather than an objective criterion. This subjective conceptualization of (temporarily) transition outcomes on a work-related level will be complemented by considering general life satisfaction as an additional indicator of transition success. Life satisfaction refers to people's subjective judgments of their quality of life (Diener et al., 1985) and is a key indicator of overall well-being. The consequences of life satisfaction are manifold including health-related benefits and improved academic achievements in adolescence (Proctor et al., 2009). In the work context, life satisfaction has been linked to increased performance, commitment, and lower turnover intentions (Erdogan et al., 2012). Accordingly, life satisfaction and overall well-being have been increasingly emphasized as key developmental achievements and focal outcomes of life transition in adolescence and young adulthood (Ranta et al., 2013; Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2017). Considering well-being as a desirable transition outcome acknowledges the importance of transition outcomes that go beyond the work context and thus emphasizes the nature of the transition as a developmental achievement with indicators of success not being constrained to work-related outcomes.

### *Career Goals During the Transition to Work*

Goals are crucial for self-regulatory motivation as they serve as reference points to effectively channel efforts and resources toward the achievement of these goals (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2004). Once career goals are set, people engage in various goal-directed behaviors that provide them with feedback on the attainability of their goals (Gollwitzer, 1990; Hu et al., 2016). The nature of this feedback, in turn, affects how they appraise their goals along with their future goal pursuit (Hu et al., 2016) and thus the likelihood of achieving their goals. Goal appraisals are thus both a consequence of prior experiences and determinants of future behaviors. For instance, positive appraisals of one's abilities to pursue and attain one's career goals have been associated with greater engagement in goal-directed behaviors and more favorable outcomes in terms of a greater number of job offers and a greater likelihood to receive job offers from preferred employers (Kanfer et al., 2001; Ruschoff et al., 2018). At the same time, apart from feedback, goals may already be influenced during initial goal setting and be developed conjointly with others or adopted from role models (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2004). Thus, there is considerable evidence that career goals and particularly goal appraisals are influenced by social contexts.

The importance of social contexts in career decision and behavior has likewise been highlighted by various theories of career development, of which social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is a prominent example (Lent & Brown, 2019).

*Career goals from a social cognitive perspective.* SCCT builds on Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory and draws on the distinguishing postulations of this theory. In its most fundamental form, Bandura's theory (2001, 2006) is a theory of human agency in social contexts that seeks to explain how social contexts shape decision making and behavior. As Bandura puts it, "social cognitive theory rejects a duality between human agency and social structure. People create social systems and these systems, in turn, organize and influence people's lives" (Bandura, 2006, p. 164). The key constructs of social cognitive theory are self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations of behavior, and goals, which contribute to intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness and form the tenets of human agency (Bandura, 2001). This agency is rooted in social contexts and within sociostructural networks, which provide resources but also constraints (Bandura, 2006). SCCT adopted Bandura's triadic framework of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals as core constructs in the explanation and prediction of career-related behavior and likewise emphasizes contextual, personal, and behavioral factors. A distinctive feature of SCCT is its effort to better understand the conditions that facilitate or constrain the exercise of agency to illuminate the nature and functions of contextual influences on professional behavior (Lent & Brown, 2019). The theory currently distinguishes between five different models, focusing on the explanation and prediction of educational or occupational (1) interests, (2) choices, and (3) performance along with (4) satisfaction/well-being in and (5) management of developmental challenges across careers (Brown & Lent, 2019). Contextual supports and barriers are represented as directly promoting goals and actions and as moderating the relationships between them (Lent & Brown, 2019).

*Peer networks in career-directed behavior.* Social contexts constitute an important element in SCCT. Yet, the idea that social networks can be an asset in career development is not new. Career research has long acknowledged the role of social networks in career trajectories and has shown that job seekers benefit from their social relationships through the provision of information about or referrals to potential employers (Van Hove et al., 2009). However, these benefits require the network to have access to information and experience in the labor market. Adolescents are therefore expected to turn to more experienced adults when seeking career advice (Neuenschwander & Hofmann, 2021). Correspondingly, research on adolescent career decisions and transitions has strongly focused on the role of adults such as parents as providers of support (Marshall & Symonds, 2021; Neuenschwander, & Hofmann, 2021). Aside from parents, peer networks constitute an important source of advice and support in this age group, shifting peers into focus as a potential facilitator in career transitions. However, peers are often likewise amid the transition to work and hence have little experience in the labor market and limited access to the practical resources often provided by adults advise relationships. Yet, this does not necessarily imply that peer networks cannot contribute to the transition. It does, however, raise the question of how these networks can be a resource and what characteristics of the peers make them an asset rather than a constraint.

SCCT postulates that social contexts provide modeling, feedback, and encouragement to promote people's goals and actions (Lent & Brown, 2008). As a form of self-regulatory behavior, goal-directed behavior draws on numerous psychological resources (Kanfer et al., 2001). Kao et al. (2021) argue that significant others who encourage and reassure job seekers to withstand difficulties prevent the depletion of such self-regulatory resources and support their perseverance through difficult times. In adolescence and young adulthood, these significant others are likely to be their peers whom they are known to draw on for guidance and support during this phase (Duriez et al., 2013). The self-regulatory resources that are necessary to expend during the transition to work may thus likewise

be replenished through social contextual factors, such as peer relationships, which help people sustain their self-regulation during the transition process through encouragement, acceptance, confirmation, and modeling (Kao et al., 2021).

*Peers' career goal appraisals in the transition to work.* We argue that peers' ability to act as social contextual resources in the transition to work is contingent on the extent to which they can provide the modeling, encouragement, and feedback assumed to be at the root of social contextual influences in SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2008) and to be a self-regulatory resource (Kao et al., 2021). Whether peers can fulfill these functions is expected to be dependent on their own characteristics and particularly on how they themselves appraise and approach their goals. These appraisals can be both positive and negative. On the positive level, certain types of appraisals stand out as particularly important. In research on how people approach and pursue their career goals effectively, self-efficacy has emerged as an important predictor and represents a key construct in SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2019). Self-efficacy can be defined as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to organize and execute behaviors to reach particular goals or to succeed in different activities" (Brown & Lent, 2019, p. 2) and has been linked to favorable outcomes in the transition to work (Kanfer et al., 2001; Neuenschwander & Hofmann, 2021; Ruschoff et al., 2018). In SCCT, and particularly its model of satisfaction and well-being, self-efficacy is expected to support people's progress toward their career goals, supported by different (social-) contextual resources (Brown & Lent, 2019, Neuenschwander & Hofmann, 2021). More efficacious people are expected to better organize their goal-directed behaviors and show greater persistence when facing obstacles (Lent & Brown, 2008). The resulting behavior is expected to foster favorable transition outcomes and hence greater satisfaction with these outcomes (Neuenschwander & Hofmann, 2021). We argue that self-efficacy not only represents an important characteristic on the individual level but can be meaningfully operationalized as a social contextual variable on the peer level. We, therefore, hypothesize that peers who feel more efficacious about their goals and their ability to achieve these goals will be more effective providers of role modeling, encouragement, and support than those who feel less efficacious about their ability to achieve their goals.

**Hypothesis 1:** Having a network of peers who positively appraise their career goals as attainable at age 17 is positively associated with (a) having reached a subjectively satisfactory transition outcome at age 20 and (b) life satisfaction at age 20.

However, whereas peers' positive goal appraisals are expected to support regulatory processes, peers' negative goal appraisals might hinder these processes. The forms of negative appraisals are manifold. Here, too, it is sensible to draw on the existing findings at the individual level to infer which negative appraisals might make peers a social contextual constraint in the transition to work. On the individual level, appraising goals as stressful has been shown to be particularly harmful, as it frequently goes along with a downward revision of one's goals (Hu et al., 2017) and potentially complete disengagement from them. Although a downward revision may sometimes be helpful to bring unrealistic goals back in line with one's possibilities, complete disengagement can be considered generally harmful to goal achievement. We argue that peers who perceive their goals as stressful or tiring, and who may even have disengaged from them, have limited or no capacity to provide positive role modeling and encouragement and hence to positively affect their peers' self-regulatory behavior, likely even sharing their doubts and negative emotions regarding the transition within the peer group. We, therefore, expect that peers who negatively appraise their goals as stressful represent a social contextual constraint rather than a resource in the transition to work.

**Hypothesis 2:** Having a network of peers who negatively appraise their career goals as stressful at age 17 is negatively associated with (a) having reached a subjectively satisfactory transition outcome at age 20 and (b) life satisfaction at age 20.

## The Present Study

This study investigates the role of peer networks in the transition from school to work. Using a sample of Finnish young adults during the transition, it is examined whether their peers' career goal appraisals at age 17 are associated with people's (temporary) transition outcomes and life satisfaction at age 20. Individual goal appraisals are considered as control variables as are respondents' socioeconomic background, which has been shown to significantly affect career development during the transition to work and in the long run (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). Lastly, as previous studies found females to experience greater difficulties during the transition to work (Bynner & Parsons, 2002), gender is likewise considered as the control variable.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The data used in the present study stem from the Finnish Educational Transitions Studies (FinEdu), a longitudinal study conducted in Central Finland aimed at monitoring educational and vocational transitions throughout adolescence and young adulthood. In the Finnish educational system, compulsory education starts in the year of the child's seventh birthday and finishes when 9-year comprehensive school education has been completed. The secondary level of education consists of postcomprehensive school education which usually lasts 3 years and gives eligibility to further education. The participants in the current study were approached at age 17 after having transitioned to postcomprehensive education and again 3 years later at age 20 after having completed postcomprehensive secondary education. Individual goal appraisals, peer networks, and peers' goal appraisals were assessed at Time 1 at age 17 ( $N = 818$ , 48.4% female) when respondents attended postcomprehensive education. Paper and pencil questionnaires were administered during regular class hours. Telephone interviews were conducted for respondents who were absent. Participants were informed of the goals and procedure of the data collection and confidentiality of the data was assured. Transition outcomes were assessed 3 years later at Time 2 at age 20 ( $N = 599$ , 54.8% female), roughly 1 year after respondents had graduated. As participants could no longer be contacted in school, questionnaires were sent to them by post. Participants who dropped out of the study between age 17 and 20 did not significantly differ with the exception that females were more likely to remain in the study ( $t(852) = 5.95, p < .001$ ). Participants who dropped out of the study had slightly smaller peer networks ( $t(739) = -2.46, p = .014; M = 2.23, SD = 1.05$  for those who dropped out and  $M = 2.43, SD = 0.94$  for those who remained) and peers who appraised their goals as less stressful ( $t(500) = -2.41, p = .016; M = 4.15, SD = 1.48$  for those who dropped out and  $M = 4.52, SD = 1.46$  for those who remained). The final sample consists of all respondents who provided data on all variables necessary to the present study ( $N = 322$ , 55.3% female).

### Measures

**Transition outcome.** At Time 2, respondents' transition outcomes were assessed by whether they reported to have reached a (vocational or educational) state with which they were currently satisfied and which they intended to maintain unchanged at present. Transition outcomes were coded as follows: 1 = (*temporary*) *completed* if respondents (a) had completed their degree and transitioned into working life with a job related to their degree and had no further study plans, (b) had completed their degree and transitioned into further education without currently applying elsewhere, or (c) had completed their degree with concrete prospects to do one of the above in the near future (i.e., having a job or study to return to after completing military service). Transition outcomes were coded as 0 = (*temporary*) *ongoing* if respondents had (a) completed their degree but had not transitioned into working life or further education and have no concrete prospects of doing so, (b) had completed their degree and

had transitioned into working life or further education but were dissatisfied with their current situation and still applying elsewhere, or (c) if they had failed to complete a degree.

**Life satisfaction.** Life satisfaction was measured at Time 2 using the Satisfaction of Life Scale by Diener et al. (1985), asking respondents to indicate their agreement to five items such as “For the most part my life is near my ideal” or “So far I have reached the important things in my life” on a scale from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*. The scale showed good internal consistency with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .88.

**Peer networks.** Peer networks were assessed at Time 1 using standard sociometric procedures for the assessment of peer nominations in classrooms (Cillessen & Marks, 2017), which have been shown to provide valid and reliable assessments of peer relationships in adolescence (Cillessen & Marks, 2017). Respondents were asked to nominate up to three schoolmates with whom they most liked to spend their time. Only within-school nominations could be considered in the networks. Nominations given to unknown peers were deleted as were self-nominations. In this study, peer nominations were used to gain access to the characteristics of the peers that comprise each respondent’s network. Peer networks had an average size of  $M = 2.54$  nominated peers ( $SD = 0.85$ ). This size is similar to peer network sizes found in previous studies using unlimited nominations (Ruschoff et al., 2018).

**Individual and peers’ goal appraisals.** Goal appraisals were assessed both at the individual level and at the peer level at Time 1 using Little’s (2007) Personal Project Analysis method. Respondents were asked to write down at least one goal relating to their future vocational plans and subsequently asked to rate their goal on different appraisal items on a 7-point scale from 1 = *very little* to 7 = *very much*. Negative appraisals were measured with two items asking them to rate how stressful and tiring their perceived their goals (“How stressful is this goal?” and “How tiring or loading is this goal?”). Both items correlated at,  $r(322) = .74, p < .001$ , and showed a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .85. Positive goals appraisal was measured by asking respondents to rate how attainable they perceived their goals to be (“How able do you think you are to fulfill your goal?”). Although this use of a single-item measure has several psychometric shortcomings as no estimates of reliability can be provided, single-item measures have been proven to possess sufficient validity when assessing cognitive readily-available constructs and represent time-effective yet accurate assessments, allowing respondents to consider all aspects of a construct without overburdening them (Nagy, 2002). Single-item measures have been successfully applied in previous studies to assess, for instance, the perceived success of the transition from school to work, overall satisfaction with youths’ currently found vocation or education (Hirschi, 2010), and efficacy beliefs in goal pursuit (Hoepfner et al., 2011).

In correspondence with methods applied in earlier research (Ruschoff et al., 2018), respondents’ previously assessed peer networks were used to measure their peers’ goal appraisals. For each respondent, their peers’ self-reported goal appraisals were retrieved. Mean scores were calculated across each respondent’s peer network, resulting in a score representing their peers’ goal stress and their peers’ perceived goal attainability.

**Socioeconomic Status (SES).** Respondents’ socioeconomic backgrounds were assessed based on their parents’ occupations. Using a standard occupational classification system for the Finnish labor market and in line with previous research on the FinEdu data (Ranta et al., 2013), parents were ascribed to socioeconomic categories based on their occupational status. Respondents were classified as stemming from 1 = *lower socioeconomic backgrounds* if their parents were unemployed or belonged to low-income households, 2 = *middle socioeconomic backgrounds* if their parents were in blue-collar occupations, and 3 = *higher socioeconomic backgrounds* if their parents were in white-collar occupations. In accordance with the definition of a household reference person (Statistics Finland, 2020), the parent with the highest ranking occupation has been used as a point of reference. Most respondents stem from



higher socioeconomic backgrounds (84.2%), whereas only 9% came from middle and 6.8% from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The relatively high number of respondents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds is likely due to an overall socioeconomically advantaged population in Finland compared with other OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. In previous studies, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), only about 2% of students were classified as coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and 50%–60% coming from high socioeconomic backgrounds (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019).

*Gender.* Respondents' gender was coded as 0 = *female* and 1 = *male*.

### **Analysis Strategy**

Partial least squares–path modeling (PLS-PM) was performed using R Statistical Software version 4.0.3 via the R package *plspm* (Sanchez, 2013) to estimate the associations between peers' goal appraisals and young people's transition outcomes and life satisfaction, controlled for individual goal appraisals, gender, and socioeconomic background. Other than covariance-based approaches to path modeling, PLS-PM quantifies connections between variables by considering the network of connections as a system of multiple interconnected linear regressions and seeks optimal linear predictive relationships rather than causal mechanisms. It specifies and evaluates the outer model (measurement model), consisting of the manifest variables which convey information on the latent variables, and the inner structure of the model (structural model), consisting of the relationships between latent variables. The advantages of PLS-PM lie in its flexibility regarding the distribution of the manifest indicators and the use of categorical data (Chin, 2010), its suitability for less well-established measures as it includes indices related to the validity of the manifest indicators and its unrestrained possibilities to use single-item measures (Hair et al., 2019), which make PLS-PM a well-suited analytical approach for the present study. In reporting the results, we follow the recommendations by Chin (2010), Sanchez (2013), and Hair et al. (2019), starting with the discussion of the measurement model, followed by the structural model.

### **Results**

Descriptive statistics and correlations are displayed in Table 1. The results show that 50.3% of the respondents had temporarily completed their transition. Individual perceptions of goal attainability were positively correlated with life satisfaction 3 years later,  $r(322) = .20, p < .001$ , and individual goal stress was positively correlated with peers' goal stress,  $r(322) = .16, p = .004$ , showing that respondents who perceived their goals as stressful also have peers who perceive their goals as stressful. Peers' perceptions of their goal attainability were marginally correlated with respondents' transition outcomes,  $r(322) = .10, p = .069$ . Respondents' transition outcomes and their life satisfaction were positively correlated,  $r(322) = .20, p < .001$ .

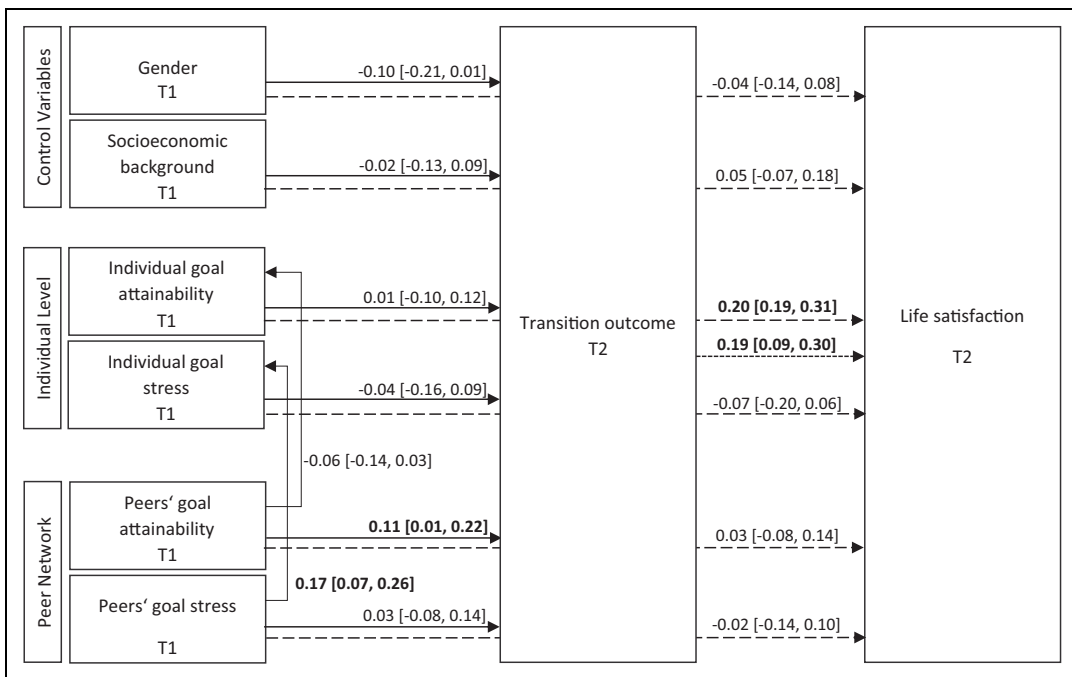
#### **Results of the Measurement Model**

Considering the measurement model, first, the unidimensionality of the indicators is examined for those latent variables that were assessed with more than one manifest indicator, hence, individual and peers' goal stress and life satisfaction. The results provide three indices of unidimensionality: Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , Dillon-Goldstein's  $\rho$ , and the eigenvalues of the indicators' correlation matrix. The results show that unidimensionality can be assumed for all three latent variables (individual goal stress, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ , Dillon-Goldstein's  $\rho = .93$ , first eigenvalue = 1.74, second eigenvalue = 0.25; peers' goal stress: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ , Dillon-Goldstein's  $\rho = .94$ , first eigenvalue = 1.76, second

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations.

| Study Variables                  | Mean | SD   | Range | 1                | 2    | 3     | 4     | 5                | 6    | 7     | 8    |
|----------------------------------|------|------|-------|------------------|------|-------|-------|------------------|------|-------|------|
| 1. Gender (1 = male)             | 0.45 | 0.50 | 0–1   | 1.00             |      |       |       |                  |      |       |      |
| 2. Socioeconomic background      | 2.72 | 0.75 | 1–3   | -.09             | 1.00 |       |       |                  |      |       |      |
| 3. Individual goal attainability | 5.75 | 1.15 | 1–7   | .01              | .01  | 1.00  |       |                  |      |       |      |
| 4. Individual goal stress        | 4.47 | 1.56 | 1–7   | .10 <sup>†</sup> | .01  | .01   | 1.00  |                  |      |       |      |
| 5. Peers' goal attainability     | 5.83 | 0.89 | 1–7   | .11*             | .07  | -.06  | .03   | 1.00             |      |       |      |
| 6. Peers' goal stress            | 4.56 | 1.34 | 1–7   | -.08             | .04  | .08   | .16** | .08              | 1.00 |       |      |
| 7. Transition outcome            | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0–1   | -.08             | -.01 | .10   | -.02  | .10 <sup>†</sup> | .05  | 1.00  |      |
| 8. Life satisfaction             | 4.76 | 1.25 | 1–7   | -.05             | .06  | .20** | -.07  | .04              | -.01 | .20** | 1.00 |

Note. Transition outcome coded as 0 = transition (temporarily) ongoing and 1 = transition (temporarily) completed; for gender 0 = female and 1 = male; socioeconomic background coded as 1 = low, 2 = middle, and 3 = high. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ .



**Figure 1.** Inner structural path model. Note. Solid lines depict direct effects on transition outcomes. Dashed lines depict direct effects on life satisfaction. The dotted line describes the direct effect of transition outcomes on life satisfaction. 95% confidence intervals are provided in square brackets.

eigenvalue = .24; life satisfaction: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ , Dillon-Goldstein's  $\rho = .92$ , first eigenvalue = 3.53, second eigenvalue = .58). Second, the loadings and cross-loadings are examined to provide information on how each manifest indicator relates to each latent construct. Ideally, each manifest indicator should be strongly related to the latent variable it attempts to reflect and weakly related to any other latent variables. In this case, discriminant validity can be assumed at the item level. The results are presented in Table 2, showing that all manifest indicators load highest on their respective latent variable, crossing the benchmark of .70 for acceptable loadings (Hair et al., 2019; Sanchez, 2013), and

**Table 2.** Outer Model Loadings and Cross-Loadings.

| Item   | Gender      | SES         | Individual Goal Attainability (IGA) | Peers' Goal Attainability (PGA) | Individual Goal Stress (IGS) | Peers' Goal Stress (PGS) | Transition Outcome (TO) | Life Satisfaction (LS) |
|--------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Gender | <b>1.00</b> | -.09        | .00                                 | .11                             | -.12                         | -.07                     | -.08                    | -.04                   |
| SES    | -.09        | <b>1.00</b> | .01                                 | .07                             | .01                          | .03                      | -.01                    | .06                    |
| IGA    | .00         | .01         | <b>1.00</b>                         | -.06                            | .01                          | .08                      | .00                     | .20                    |
| PGA    | .11         | .07         | -.06                                | <b>1.00</b>                     | .02                          | .08                      | .11                     | .04                    |
| IGS1   | -.04        | .02         | .01                                 | .05                             | <b>.87</b>                   | .15                      | .04                     | -.04                   |
| IGS2   | -.15        | .00         | -.01                                | .00                             | <b>.96</b>                   | .15                      | -.07                    | -.09                   |
| PGS1   | -.02        | .01         | .10                                 | .07                             | .11                          | <b>.95</b>               | .06                     | -.05                   |
| PGS2   | -.12        | .05         | .05                                 | .07                             | .19                          | <b>.93</b>               | .02                     | .03                    |
| TO     | -.08        | .00         | .01                                 | .10                             | -.04                         | .04                      | <b>1.00</b>             | .20                    |
| LS1    | -.07        | .06         | .16                                 | .02                             | -.03                         | .00                      | .19                     | <b>.90</b>             |
| LS2    | -.05        | .05         | .18                                 | .03                             | -.03                         | .01                      | .15                     | <b>.84</b>             |
| LS3    | .02         | .05         | .17                                 | .06                             | -.10                         | -.06                     | .17                     | <b>.91</b>             |
| LS4    | -.03        | .07         | .15                                 | .04                             | -.05                         | -.01                     | .21                     | <b>.83</b>             |
| LS5    | -.05        | .00         | .17                                 | .01                             | -.10                         | .02                      | .10                     | <b>.72</b>             |

Note. Bold numbers indicate the highest loading of each item. Transition outcome coded as 0 = transition (temporarily) ongoing and 1 = transition (temporarily) completed; for gender 0 = female and 1 = male; socioeconomic background coded as 1 = low, 2 = middle, 3 = high.

**Table 3.** Bootstrapped Results of the Inner Structural Model.

| Study Variables                     | Estimate | SE  | Lower 95 CI | Upper 95 CI | R <sup>2</sup> |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-----|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| Prediction of transition outcome    |          |     |             |             | .08            |
| Gender                              | -.10     | .06 | -.21        | .01         |                |
| SES                                 | -.02     | .06 | -.13        | .09         |                |
| Individual goal attainability (IGA) | .01      | .95 | -.10        | .12         |                |
| Individual goal stress (IGS)        | -.04     | .07 | -.16        | .09         |                |
| Peers' goal attainability (PGA)     | .11*     | .05 | .01         | .22         |                |
| Peers' goal stress (PGS)            | .03      | .06 | -.08        | .14         |                |
| Prediction of life satisfaction     |          |     |             |             | .18            |
| Gender                              | -.04     | .05 | -.14        | .08         |                |
| SES                                 | .05      | .06 | -.07        | .18         |                |
| Individual goal attainability (IGA) | .20*     | .05 | .19         | .31         |                |
| Individual goal stress (IGS)        | -.07     | .06 | -.20        | .06         |                |
| Peers' goal attainability (PGA)     | .03      | .06 | -.08        | .14         |                |
| Peers' goal stress (PGS)            | -.02     | .06 | -.14        | .10         |                |
| Transition outcome                  | .19*     | .05 | .09         | .30         |                |
| Prediction of IGA                   |          |     |             |             | .02            |
| Peers' goal attainability (PGA)     | -.06     | .04 | -.14        | .03         |                |
| Prediction of IGS                   |          |     |             |             | .07            |
| Peers' goal stress (PGS)            | .17*     | .05 | .07         | .26         |                |

Note. Partially least square path modeling does not provide p values. Bootstrapping has been applied using 5,000 samples. Transition outcome coded as 0 = transition (temporarily) ongoing and 1 = transition (temporarily) completed; for gender 0 = female and 1 = male; socioeconomic background coded as 1 = low, 2 = middle, 3 = high.

that all latent variables share more variance with their manifest indicators than with other constructs. In addition, the results concerning the loadings and cross-loadings speak in favor of the employed single-item measure to assess appraisals of goal attainability. Third, the convergent validity of each latent variable is evaluated based on the average variance extracted (AVE) for all manifest indicators on each

latent variable calculated as the square loading of each indicator on a latent variable and computing the mean value. AVE of .50 or higher is considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2019). The multi-item latent variables in this study all show a good AVE of .70 or higher (AVE = .86 for individual goal stress, AVE = .88 for peers' goal stress, and AVE = .71 for life satisfaction).

### Results of the Structural Model

The structural model presents the results of each regression in the structural equations. Given that PLS-PM does not rest on any distributional assumptions, significance levels for the parameter estimates are not appropriate, and bootstrapping is applied using 5,000 samples. Moreover, in PLS-PM, other than in approaches based on covariance structure analysis with maximum likelihood estimation, there is no single criterion to measure the overall quality of the model. The analyses do provide an  $R^2$  along with a pseudo goodness of fit index (GoF index), which assesses the overall prediction performance of the model. This index, however, provides no indication of significance and can best be considered as an average prediction of the model. The model shows a pseudo GoF of .166, which can be interpreted as a prediction power of 16.6%. The results are presented in Table 3. A graphic representation is presented in Figure 1.

The model predicting transition outcomes in terms of (temporary) completion of the transition at age 20 shows an  $R^2$  of .08. Peers' goal attainability was positively associated with transition outcomes ( $B = .11$ , 95% CI [.01, .22]), indicating that having peers appraised their goals as more attainable was positively associated with having (temporarily) completed the transition, supporting Hypothesis 1a. Peers' goal stress was not associated with transition outcomes ( $B = 0.13$ , 95% CI [-.08, .14]), rejecting Hypothesis 2a. Contradictive to earlier research, neither were individual goal appraisals. The prediction of life satisfaction shows an  $R^2$  of .18, explaining 18% in the variance of life satisfaction at age 20. The results show that respondents who appraised their goals as more attainable at age 17 experienced greater life satisfaction at age 20 ( $B = 0.20$ , 95% CI [.19, .31]). Contrary to the expectations, neither peers' goal stress nor their goal attainability was associated with respondents' life satisfaction 3 years later, rejecting Hypotheses 1b and 2b. A positive association between transition outcomes and life satisfaction indicates that respondents who considered their transition to be (temporarily) completed were more satisfied with their lives ( $B = 0.19$ , 95% CI [.09, .30]). The indirect effect of peers' goal attainability on life satisfaction through transition outcomes was explored but not significant. Further exploratory analyses show a significant association between individual and peers' goal stress ( $B = 0.17$ , 95% CI [.07, .26]).

### Discussion

This study addressed the relationship between peers' career goals appraisals at age 17 and young people's transition outcomes and life satisfaction 3 years later at age 20. Building on SCCT (Brown & Lent, 2019), it was hypothesized that peer networks constitute a social contextual resource in the transition to work, unfolding their effect through modeling, encouragement, and feedback (Lent & Brown, 2008). We argued that peers' capacity to provide these resources is contingent on their own career goal appraisals during the transition.

Consistent with our expectations, having peers who appraise their career goals as attainable at age 17 was positively associated with a (temporary) completion of the transition as indicated by having reached a subjectively satisfactory transition outcome at age 20. However, these effects were only evident for work-related subjective transition outcomes but not for life satisfaction. This finding is startling, as efficacy beliefs have been linked to both work-related satisfaction and well-being and life satisfaction (Brown & Lent, 2019; Lent & Brown, 2008). The precursors of life satisfaction might thus be more diverse and go beyond work-related predictors and the achievement of career goals, possibly

encompassing nonwork predictors such as people's personal or family lives (Hirschi et al., 2016). Contrary to our expectations, having peers who appraise their career goals as stressful was not associated with either outcome variable. While this finding is encouraging, indicating that peers who negatively appraisal their goals do not appear to hinder the transition to work, it raises questions regarding the reasons for a lack of effect. One mechanism by which peers are expected to affect transition outcomes is through role modeling (Gibson, 2004; Lent & Brown, 2008). In the social cognitive literature, role models exert their influence by conveying information about successful goal attainment and exposing adolescents to success experiences (Lent & Brown, 2008) and hence by providing a template for successful behavior that is adopted by observers through social learning (Gibson, 2004). However, the impact of role models appears to be less straightforward, showing that people select or reject role models based on their own regulatory focus. Individuals who are promotion-focused on the pursuit of their goals tend to be most affected by positive role models, whereas individuals who are prevention-focused by fear of failure are most affected by negative role models (Lockwood et al., 2002). Consequently, peers' impact, positive or negative, might depend on whether the modeled behavior falls on fertile ground.

Additionally, though not the primary focus of this study, it is surprising that individual goal appraisals were less consistently associated with the outcome variables than might have been expected, with individual appraisals of goal stress being related to neither outcome variable. This might be rooted in the use of subjective outcome measures. It is well-established that negative goal appraisals can lead to a downward revision of goals (Hu et al. 2017). It is possible that people who appraised their goals as stressful revised their goals to be less stressful. Although this adjustment may mean that the original goals were not objectively met, it does not preclude a subjective satisfaction with the achievement of the revised goals. Additional analyses further show that peers' goal stress was positively associated with individual goal stress. Previous research demonstrated that peer networks are highly influential and that peers tend to become more similar in their goal pursuit over time, with this similarity originating in both selection and influence effects (Duriez et al., 2013). It is thus worthwhile to address such dyadic effects in future research on goal appraisals in the transition to work. Regarding the control variables, gender and socioeconomic background were not associated with the outcome variables. For socioeconomic background, this may be due to little variance in respondents' backgrounds, with respondents stemming predominantly from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, which may be attributable to the overall economic conditions in Finland (Salmela-Aro & Chmielewski, 2019). For gender, previous studies suggested females to be at greater risk to experience difficulties in the transition to work (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). Our results do not suggest that females experience more difficulties. However, it is possible that difficulties do not become apparent until later transition stages or are more salient when using objective indicators of transition success.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

This study offers valuable insights into aspects of young people's lives that have long been overlooked in research on the transition to work. Despite the increasing focus on social contexts in theories of career development (Lent & Brown, 2019), peers have often received little consideration. However, to obtain a comprehensive picture of the social realities of young people in transition, this significant aspect of their social contexts must be considered. A major strength of this study thus lies in the explicit incorporation of peer networks in the investigation of the transition from school to work along with an innovative approach to the study of these peer networks, looking at peers' self-reported goal appraisals rather than respondents' perceptions of their peers' appraisals. The results demonstrate that career goal appraisals can be meaningfully operationalized as a social contextual variable and encourage this approach when investigating social contexts in the transition to work.

A possible limitation of this study lies in respondents' young age. However, this is not necessarily a constraint of the study, as the transition to work should be regarded as a developmental process that also encompasses early career paths (De Vos et al., 2019; Vuolo et al., 2013), which makes it reasonable and important to also look at intermediate steps in this process. In this study, two subjective indicators of transition success were used to account for a sample that is still in the early stages of the transition and for whom objective indicators such as employment duration and salary might not yet be appropriate. The approach of complementing the measure of (temporary) transition outcomes with a measure of life satisfaction helps to ensure that the operationalization of transition outcomes based on respondents' satisfaction with their current situation is meaningfully correlated with other indicators of satisfaction and likewise acknowledges life satisfaction as a crucial developmental achievement and transition outcome. Yet, there remains a potential issue of an unmeasured third variable that impacts both goal appraisals and transition outcomes. Although different third variables are conceivable, the regulatory focus could be a viable candidate as it has been associated with how people appraise themselves and objects around them (Shah & Higgins, 2001) and with susceptibility to the influence of role models (Lockwood et al., 2002). Finally, future studies might employ actor-based models of selection and influence effects across several time points (Duriez et al., 2013) to shed light on how networks and goals evolve over time.

### *Theoretical and Practical Implications*

Apart from methodological advancements, this study also contributes to theoretical and practical approaches to the school to work transition. Together, the results of this study lend partial support to the satisfaction and well-being model of SCCT (Brown & Lent, 2019). For work-related transition outcomes, the results underline the importance of peers as social contextual factors in the transition to work. This opens up new approaches as to how self-efficacy might be combined with SCCT's notion of social contextual support, conceptualizing efficacy not only as an individual-level variable but as a contextual variable, as well. Regarding the initial question of how peers' career goal appraisals relate to young people's school to work transition, it can thus be concluded that peers' positive career goal appraisals at age 17 are positively linked to subjective work-related transition outcomes at age 20, making efficacious peers a resource in the transition to work. However, peers' goals appraisals do not appear to be associated with young people's general life satisfaction at age 20. As life satisfaction is a key indicator of overall well-being and quality of life (Diener et al., 1985; Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2017), this finding is somewhat contradictory to the satisfaction and well-being model of SCCT (Brown & Lent, 2019). The results suggest that other than people's satisfaction with their work-related transition outcomes, determinants of life satisfaction might either be located at an individual rather than a social contextual level or, if located on a social contextual level, might be rooted in more general rather than career-related social contexts.

Negative career goal appraisals were related to neither outcome variable for individual and social contextual measures, again underlining the notion forwarded in SCCT that positive efficacy beliefs together with outcome expectations and social contextual factors are the key determinants of career decisions and outcomes (Brown & Lent, 2019; Lent & Brown, 2019). Previous research has provided considerable theorizing regarding the potential mechanisms by which peers may affect careers, discussing peers' capacity to replenish self-regulatory resources through encouragement or by serving as role models (Kao et al., 2021; Lent & Brown, 2008). As outlined above, the investigation of peers as potential role models may be particularly worthwhile and gives leeway for further theorizing regarding additional characteristics that make peers a potential facilitator during the transition. From a practitioner's perspective, it might be of interest how resources in the peer network can be effectively utilized. A comprehensive understanding of young people's social realities and the variety of their social relationships may open new routes to provide support. Just as social networks in adult samples

are explicitly utilized to access instrumental support (Van Hoye et al., 2009), new approaches to counseling might explicitly address resources rooted in peer networks.

To conclude, this study provides us with a more thorough understanding of people's lives during the transition to work and their social contexts during this process, contributing to our understating of the social dynamics that affect their transition and ultimately their transition success.

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