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Peer networks in the school-to-work transition

School-to-work
transition

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether young people's peer networks can be an asset in finding employment during the transition from school to work. It examines whether peer networks size and peers' self-efficacy regarding their own job search are associated with job seekers' career-relevant behaviors and outcomes, i.e., the number of applications completed and the number of job offers received.

Design/methodology/approach – Associations between job seekers' peer networks and their job search behaviors and outcomes were investigated during their final year of vocational training. Sociometric measures were used to assess young people's peer network size. Sociometric and self-report measures were used to establish the characteristics of the peers that comprise each job seekers' network, resulting in the overall self-efficacy across each job seekers' network.

Findings – The results show that peers' efficacy beliefs are positively associated with young people's engagement in job search activities (i.e. a greater number of applications completed) and indirectly associated with their job search outcomes (i.e. a greater number of job offers, which are mediated by the number of applications) that are independent of the peer network size.

Originality/value – The results underline that although peers might not provide instrumental support, encouraging interactions with (efficacious) peers may nonetheless be beneficial to young job seekers. Methodologically, the results demonstrate that the operationalization of self-efficacy as a network characteristic might provide us with valuable insights into the characteristics that turn social networks into beneficial social resources.

Keywords Self-efficacy, Social networks, Vocational education and training, Peers, School-to-work transition

Paper type Research paper

Young adulthood is a developmental phase characterized by substantial decisions and transitions in life and career. One of the most critical points in this phase of life is the transition from school to work (Jokisaari and Vuori, 2010; Mortimer *et al.*, 2016). Coping with this transition and seeking adequate employment is a crucial achievement during young adulthood, which has a lasting impact on the future socio-economic situation and well-being of individuals, as shown by the extensive literature on the negative consequences of unemployment or underemployment (Ashby and Schoon, 2010; Wanberg, 2012). However, young people entering the labor market for the first time often face difficulties in finding employment. They do not have the necessary access to professional networks and little or no prior experience concerning the labor market (Koen *et al.*, 2012). In these challenging times, young people often turn to their social networks for advice and support. While a substantial amount of research focuses on the role of parents and teachers as sources of support in the transition from school to work (Dietrich and Salmela-Aro, 2013; Dietrich *et al.*, 2011; Whiston and Keller, 2004), much less attention has been paid to the role of peers. This is startling, as we know that young people often refer to their peers as a source of guidance and social support in different life situations, including the transition to professional life (Flynn *et al.*, 2014; Jokisaari and Nurmi, 2005; Tynkkynen *et al.*, 2010). However, even though



young people turn to their peers for guidance and support, their peers often face the same challenges as them: They have little or no experience in the labor market and no professional networks to turn to. It, thus, remains unclear whether young people's peers can benefit them in managing transition to work and finding employment.

We aim to close this gap by examining the association between young people's peer networks and their job search behavior during the transition from vocational school to work in the Netherlands. Looking at previous research on career development, a key variable in the investigation of job search behavior is the job seekers' self-efficacy, which describes their perceived personal competence with regard to mastering their career goals and obtaining employment (Liu *et al.*, 2014; Saks *et al.*, 2015).

In this study, we examine the role of efficacy beliefs in young people's job search, both at the individual and network level. We argue that peers' efficacy beliefs positively affect young people's transition from school to work and make the peer network a valuable social resource in the transition to work, for example through greater capacity for social support. The contribution of this study is, thus, two-fold. First, we examined the potential benefits of peer networks as a social resource in the transition from school to work, aiming to contribute to the growing literature that on the factors facilitating or hindering a successful transition. Second, we aim to make a methodical contribution by investigating self-efficacy as a network characteristic, seeking to answer the question whether characteristics traditionally operationalized at the individual level can provide meaningful insights when operationalized at the network level. In detail, we examine the relationship between young job seekers' peer networks (network size and self-efficacy in the network) and their job search behavior along with the results of this search (the number of applications and the number of job offers).

Peer networks in the transition to work

The importance of social contacts for job search behavior has been widely recognized in prominent theories of career development, such as the social cognitive career theory (SCCT), founded in Bandura's (1977) General social cognitive theory. Originally, the SCCT intended to explain the content of career behavior, i.e., an individual's career choice (Lent *et al.*, 1994). Newer models also include the processes of career behavior and address the question of how individuals look for jobs, stressing that contextual support has a positive impact on the job seekers' career behavior (Lent and Brown, 2013; Lim *et al.*, 2016; Zikic and Saks, 2009). Similarly, career research has long recognized the role of social networks in job search and has shown that job seekers' relationships with others are an asset to the job seekers (Granovetter, 1995; Jokisaari and Nurmi, 2005; Van Hoye *et al.*, 2009). Research on adult job seekers has repeatedly shown that social networks benefit the job search process primarily through the provision of instrumental support, such as information on job offers and recommendations to potential employers (Granovetter, 1995; Van Hoye *et al.*, 2009). However, these advantages necessitate that a network tie has access to exclusive information regarding job offers or contacts in the labor market that are not readily available to the job seekers themselves. Moreover, as soon as a network tie becomes too "strong," i.e., if a network tie only has access to information that is equally available to the job seeker himself, the tie loses its benefit (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011; Flap and Boxman, 2000; Granovetter, 1973).

While previous research on social networks has often focused on adult job seekers returning to the labor market or changing jobs, we know very little about social networks among young job seekers. Young people rely on the support of their peers in their professional decisions; they share the same professional or educational goals with their peers and benefit from these social relationships in terms of goal striving and goal achievement (Dietrich *et al.*, 2012; Kiuru *et al.*, 2012). However, we do not yet know whether

peers can actually be useful in finding work. It is unlikely that the peer network will offer them the same benefits that the adult job seekers derive from their social networks, as neither the job entrants themselves nor their peers have the necessary experience or contacts in the labor market. Both young people and their peers, therefore, lack the connections within the labor market that form the basis for the benefit of social networks among adult job seekers. This does not necessarily mean that young people's peers cannot be of any use during this transition. However, the characteristics that qualify peer networks as a resource in young people's job search are likely to differ from those that are often encountered in adult job seekers' job search. It, thus, remains unclear whether peer networks can be beneficial in the transition from school to work and what characteristics qualify the peer network as a valuable resource.

Self-efficacy in job search behavior

Job search behavior is a form of self-regulatory behavior that is contingent on the task-relevant knowledge of job seekers and their motivation to engage in the task-relevant behaviors (Kanfer *et al.*, 2001; Lim *et al.*, 2016). To promote the employment opportunities available to job seekers, they must, therefore, develop both the necessary task-relevant skills and increase their motivation to put these skills into practice and engage in the required job search behaviors (Liu *et al.*, 2014). A key variable in the study of job search behavior and in SCCT is the concept of job search self-efficacy, which denotes the perceived personal competence to perform specific job search activities and to obtain employment (Saks *et al.*, 2015). According to SCCT, people are most likely to state and pursue career goals if they feel efficacious about finding work (Rogers and Creed, 2011; Zikic and Saks, 2009). For several decades, job search self-efficacy has played a prominent role in the investigation of job search processes and links to both job search behavior and job search outcomes (Saks *et al.*, 2015; Kanfer *et al.*, 2001). Positive efficacy beliefs are associated with greater engagement in job search activities, a greater number of job offers from preferred employers, and faster re-employment after losing a job (Kanfer *et al.*, 2001; Liu *et al.*, 2014). A meta-analysis conducted by Kanfer and colleagues (2001) found an effect size of 0.27 between self-efficacy and job search behavior, which underlines the prominent role of efficacy beliefs in the job search process. In younger job seekers, the belief that one possesses the abilities to attain certain career goals is associated with a more successful transition from school to work (Dietrich *et al.*, 2012). Looking at a broader timeframe, young job seekers who are more efficacious in adolescence show a lower risk of unemployment and higher job satisfaction in their young adulthood (Pinquart *et al.*, 2003). In summary, these studies show that job seekers who feel efficacious about their job search significantly benefit from these efficacy beliefs.

Self-efficacy as a network characteristic

Traditionally, self-efficacy is investigated as a characteristic at the individual level. While the impact of individual efficacy beliefs on the job search success has been consistently demonstrated throughout the last decades (Dietrich *et al.*, 2012; Kanfer *et al.*, 2001; Saks *et al.*, 2015), this study extends this approach by addressing self-efficacy not only on an individual level but primarily at a contextual level. For adult job seekers, it is not so much about the number of network ties that makes a network a valuable resource but rather about the characteristics of these network ties in terms of their access to information (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011; Flap and Boxman, 2000; Granovetter, 1973). We argue that the same is true for young job seekers' networks and the capacity of their peer network to be a valuable resource is contingent on the characteristics of the peers in the network. However, as already stated, these characteristics are different from those found among adult job seekers. While peers are unlikely to be providers of instrumental support, there are indications that peers act as

providers of social support, as young people turn to their peers for guidance and in making decisions with regard to their career and life (Flynn *et al.*, 2014; Jokisaari and Nurmi, 2005; Tynkkynen *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, research among young job seekers should focus on the characteristics of the network that enable job seekers' peers to provide social support. We expect peer group efficacy, a contextual variable that indicates the overall level of self-efficacy within a person's peer network, to be one such variable. Peer group efficacy indicates the extent to which peers feel efficacious about their own abilities to find employment. We expect more efficacious peers to have a greater ability to act as sources of social support and encouragement and, possibly, even function as role models, as young people are more likely to engage in job search behaviors once they observe their peers being confident about the pursuit of their own careers. For example, being embedded in a network of efficacious peers and being able to observe their progress toward employment could stimulate job seekers' own behavior. Conversely, being surrounded by less efficacious peers might raise doubts about job seekers' own abilities and opportunities and may discourage rather than encourage their motivation to engage in job search activities. In terms of young people's prospects of finding employment, the increased engagement in job search activities stimulated by an efficacious environment is expected to result in a higher number of job offers and, hence, a greater chance of obtaining employment:

- H1. A more efficacious peer network is associated with greater engagement in job search activities.
- H2. A more efficacious peer network is associated with a greater number of job offers, mediated by young people's greater engagement in job search activities.

Method

Participants and procedure

The data used in this study stem from a Dutch study examining young people's transition from vocational school to working life. In the Netherlands, vocational training is a school-based form of education that students usually enroll in at the age of 16 and attend it for two to four years. All respondents attended a form of training that consisted of a combination of regular and vocation-specific classes along with several internships (Dutch MBO-BOL). Students attend regular class hours in a fixed classroom structure throughout the duration of their education. They do not receive grades but are evaluated based on their attained vocational competences. Data collection took place during the final year of training in the first quarter of the school year (T1) and again approximately six months later, i.e., shortly before the end of the school year (T2). Measurements consisted of a self-report questionnaire and a sociometric survey using peer nominations to assess peer networks in the classroom. All measures were administered during regular class hours. Prior to administering the questionnaires, the respondents were informed of the procedure and goals of the study, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their answers. They were free to refrain from participation at any given moment during the study. No monetary incentives or course credits were offered to them.

The overall sample of the study consisted of $N = 472$ respondents at in T1 ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.02$, $SD = 2.64$; 51.2 percent females) and $N = 424$ respondents at T2 ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.26$, $SD = 2.86$; 56.8 percent females). For the analyses conducted in this study, a subsample of respondents was used, including those respondents who had provided information regarding their peer networks at in T1 ($N = 221$; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.82$, $SD = 3.11$ at T1; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.34$, $SD = 3.11$ at T2; 48.4 percent females). Classroom sizes ranged from 6 to 34 students ($M = 21.04$, $SD = 7.85$) with an average response rate of 81.1 percent in the study sample, which is a satisfactory response rate for the sample at hand and indicates a good participation rate for the

sociometric measures in adolescent samples. For a more detailed analysis of the impact of different response rates on sociometric measures in adolescent samples, we refer to Marks, Babcock, Cillessen, and Crick (2013). Respondents in the study sample did not significantly differ from the overall sample with the exception that at T2, the study sample contained more males than the overall sample ($\chi^2(1, N = 421) = 13.23, p < 0.05$) and they had a higher socio-economic background ($t(410) = -2.35, p < 0.05$). The samples did not significantly differ in terms of any of the focal variables.

Measures

Peer networks. Respondents' peer networks have been assessed at T1 using well-established sociometric methods for the assessment of peer networks in classrooms among adolescent samples (Cillessen and Bukowski, 2018; Ruschoff *et al.*, 2015; Veenstra *et al.*, 2018). Respondents received a list of names of their classmates and were asked to nominate those classmates who were their "friends in the classroom." No restrictions were imposed on the maximum number of nominations. Self-nominations were not allowed. In line with established methods, only reciprocated nominations, where two people mutually nominated each other, were considered as a network tie to validate that a respondent who identified a classmate as a friend had an actual relationship with this person. The total number of reciprocal nominations for each respondent indicates his/her peer network size.

Job search self-efficacy. Job search self-efficacy was measured using the validated Dutch translation of a job search self-efficacy scale that has been applied in previous job search research in both the Netherlands and internationally (Kanfer and Hulin, 1985; Van Hooft *et al.*, 2004). Each respondent was asked to indicate the extent to which each of the ten statements, such as "I am confident of my ability to make a good impression in job interviews" or "I know exactly how to find the kind of job I'm looking for" applied to them (1 = totally not applies to me, 5 = totally applies to me). The scale showed good internal consistency with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$. For each respondent, mean scores across all ten items have been formed to yield scores of Individual Job search Self-Efficacy.

Peer group efficacy scores were constructed based on these individual job search self-efficacy scores and the previously obtained peer network information. First, based on the sociometric survey, information was retrieved regarding the classroom members that are a part of each respondent's peer network. Second, individual self-efficacy scores were obtained for each member of a respondent's peer network. Third, a mean score of the self-efficacy scores of the entirety of each respondent's peers in his or her network was obtained, resulting in one mean score for each of the respondent's peer group efficacy. The resulting score represents the overall level of job search self-efficacy in each respondent's peer network.

Job search behavior and job search outcomes. At T2, the respondents were asked to report the number of job applications that they had completed to assess their engagement in job search activities and the number of job offers they had received to assess the outcomes of their job search activities. No restrictions were imposed on the number of job applications or job offers reported.

Control variables. All the analyses were controlled for respondents' access to instrumental social ties, their socio-economic background, and their gender.

Instrumental social ties. Instrumental social ties denote social contacts outside of the peer group that can provide respondents with practical support, such as information regarding job openings or referrals to potential employers. In line with previous research on social networks of adult job seekers (Granovetter, 1995; Van Hooft *et al.*, 2009), each respondent was asked whether he/she knew "people who could help them find a job." Those respondents who indicated to know at least one person received a follow-up question to

report the total number of people they knew who could help them find employment. No limitations were imposed on the number of people that could be named. The total number of people named indicates the respondent's number of instrumental social ties.

Socio-economic background. Socio-economic background was assessed using the Dutch version of the Family Affluence Scale (FAS; Boyce *et al.*, 2006; Busch *et al.*, 2015). The FAS was developed as a tool for the assessment of socio-economic status in adolescent samples, to overcome problems arising through adolescents' difficulties in accurately reporting their parents' educational levels, occupations, or income. The respondents were asked to report their families' wealth based on consumption indices that they are likely to know about. They replied to three questions asking them to indicate whether their family owns a car (1 = yes, 0 = no), whether they have a separate room in their family home or did have a separate room when they were still living at home (1 = yes, 0 = no), and how many computers their family has at home (0 = none, 1 = 1 computer, 2 = 2 computers, 3 = 3 computers). A point system ranging from 0 to 5 was applied to the afore-mentioned three questions. One point was assigned to each additional asset (i.e. a score of zero if the family had no car, no computers and the respondent did not have a separate room at home; a score of five if the family had a car, three computers and the respondent had a separate room at home). Investigations of the validity of the FAS in adolescent samples showed the FAS to be a valid measure of socio-economic status for this population (Boudreau and Poulin, 2009). The FAS has further been applied successfully as a measure of socio-economic status in samples of Dutch adolescents (Busch *et al.*, 2015).

Gender. Gender was coded as 0 = female and 1 = male.

Strategy of analysis

Due to the nested structure of the data with students nested in classrooms, it was first examined whether any of the two outcome variables showed significant variance at the group level (i.e. classrooms). As the two dependent variables were shown to significantly vary at the group level ($B = 0.02$, $p < 0.01$ for the number of applications and $B = 0.03$, $p < 0.01$ for the number of job offers), multilevel analysis was applied to account for the nested structure of the data. Since both the number of job applications and the number of job offers were measured in count data, standard ordinary least squares regression could not be applied as it might have produced biased results. Further inspection of the variables showed that the mean score and variance of the respondents' number of applications and the number of job offers were unequal ($M = 1.60$, Variance = 1.89 for job offers, $M = 2.70$, Variance = 7.10 for applications). To account for the nature of the data and this overdispersion in the number of applications, negative binomial regression models were calculated. Coefficients in binomial regression are interpreted as multiplicative changes: A change in the predictor variable results in a multiplicative change in the predicted count of the outcome variable. The exponentiated coefficient in a predictor variable represents the predicted multiplicative effect of a one-unit increase in the predictor on the outcome variable. These changes are expressed in terms of percentages.

Path analysis using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors was conducted using Mplus 6.0 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998/2010), to estimate the association of peer network characteristics with respondents' number of applications, their number of job offers, and the number of job offers mediated by the number of applications. All the analyses control for respondents' individual job search self-efficacy, their gender, their socio-economic background, and their number of instrumental social ties. Missing data were addressed using the full information maximum likelihood method (Muthén and Muthén, 1998/2010). Monte Carlo integration was used to address the missing data on the mediator variable.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are displayed in Table I. The results of the path analysis are displayed in Table II. A graphic depiction of the path analysis is shown in Figure 1.

As can be expected from previous research, individual job search self-efficacy is positively associated with the number of applications completed ($B = 0.27$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.32$, $p < 0.05$) and the number of job offers received ($B = 0.31$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.37$, $p < 0.05$). With every one-unit increase in the respondents' self-efficacy scores, their number of applications changed with the multiplicative factor 1.32 and their number of job offers changed with the multiplicative factor 1.37. The number of applications was significantly associated with the number of job offers that respondents had received. With every additional application, respondents' number of job offers changed with the multiplicative factor 1.15 ($B = 0.14$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.15$, $p < 0.01$).

Consistent with *H1*, peer group efficacy was positively associated with the respondents' number of applications, irrespective of their individual self-efficacy, the size of their peer

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| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Range | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|------------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|--------|-------|--------|---------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Job applications | 2.85 | 2.78 | 0–15 | | | | | | | |
| 2. Job offers | 1.72 | 1.75 | 0–11 | 0.46** | | | | | | |
| 3. Individual self-efficacy | 3.21 | 0.49 | 1.60–4.60 | 0.15* | 0.18* | | | | | |
| 4. Peer network size | 1.55 | 1.85 | 0–8 | –0.10 | –0.06 | 0.05 | | | | |
| 5. Peer group efficacy | 3.29 | 0.42 | 2.10–4.60 | 0.24* | 0.01 | 0.23** | –0.07 | | | |
| 6. Instrumental social ties | 0.94 | 0.84 | 0–6 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.01 | –0.11 | | |
| 7. Socio-economic background | 2.67 | 0.69 | 1–4 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.09 | |
| 8. Gender (1 = male) | | | 0–1 | 0.01 | 0.09 | 0.22** | –0.23** | 0.21* | –0.04 | 0.14* |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table I.
Descriptive statistics and correlations of the main study variables

| Variable | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>Exp(B)</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------|---------------|
| <i>Number of applications</i> | | | |
| Control | | | |
| Gender (1 = male) | –0.02 | 0.13 | |
| Socio-economic background | 0.09 | 0.09 | |
| Instrumental social ties | 0.03 | 0.09 | |
| Individual self-efficacy | 0.27* | 0.14 | 1.32 |
| Peer network | | | |
| Peer network size | –0.06 | 0.03 | |
| Peers' group efficacy | 0.44* | 0.20 | 1.56 |
| <i>Number of job offers</i> | | | |
| Control | | | |
| Gender (1 = male) | 0.07 | 0.19 | |
| Socio-economic background | 0.11 | 0.12 | |
| Instrumental social ties | 0.03 | 0.06 | |
| Number of applications | 0.14** | 0.02 | 1.15 |
| Individual self-efficacy | 0.31* | 0.13 | 1.37 |
| Peer network | | | |
| Peer network size | 0.01 | 0.04 | |
| Peer group efficacy | –0.22 | 0.19 | |

Indirect effects

PGE → Applications → Job offers 0.06* 0.03 1.07

Notes: Path model estimated by full information likelihood estimation with Monte Carlo integration; estimated coefficients are unstandardized coefficients; all continuous variables are mean-centered; PGE, peer group efficacy. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table II.
Path analysis of number of applications and job offers

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network, and their access to instrumental social ties. With every one-unit increase in peer group efficacy (on a five-point scale), the number of applications that the respondents had completed multiplied by the factor 1.56 ($B=0.44$, $\text{Exp}(B)=1.56$, $p < 0.05$) or, stated differently, increased by 56 percent. Peer network size was not significantly associated with the number of applications. The interaction between peer network size and peer group efficacy was not significant and, therefore, removed from the model.

Consistent with $H2$, the indirect effect of peer group efficacy on the number of job offers mediated by a higher number of applications showed a positive and significant association ($B=0.06$, $\text{Exp}(B)=1.07$, $p < 0.05$). Although no direct associations between peer group efficacy and the respondents' number of job offers could be established, these results suggest that the larger number of applications that is facilitated by a more efficacious peer network results in an increase in job offers by 7 percent.

Discussion

Inspired by research showing that young people in the transition from school to work frequently turn to their peers for support (Dietrich *et al.*, 2012; Jokisaari and Nurmi, 2005; Tynkkynen *et al.*, 2010), this study investigates the role of peer networks in this transition. The results showed significant positive associations between an efficacious peer network and young people's engagement in job search activities and the number of job offers they receive, mediated by the number of applications completed. These associations hold equally for respondents with larger and smaller peer groups, suggesting that the potential benefits of an efficacious peer network are not exclusive to those young people who are well connected with their peers. This is an important and promising finding for the less well-connected young people, as it underlines that it is the characteristics of their peers rather than their quantity that matters.

Treating efficacy as a network variable is a methodologically innovative approach and, as the results show, one that can provide us with worthwhile new insights into the role of peers in young people's transition to work. Besides demonstrating that the use of self-efficacy as a network characteristic is promising from a methodological standpoint, there are also several theoretical implications. Prominent theories of career development, such as SCCT (Lent and Brown, 2013; Lim *et al.*, 2016; Zikic and Saks, 2009), have long emphasized the role of self-efficacy in stimulating job search behavior along with the importance of contextual

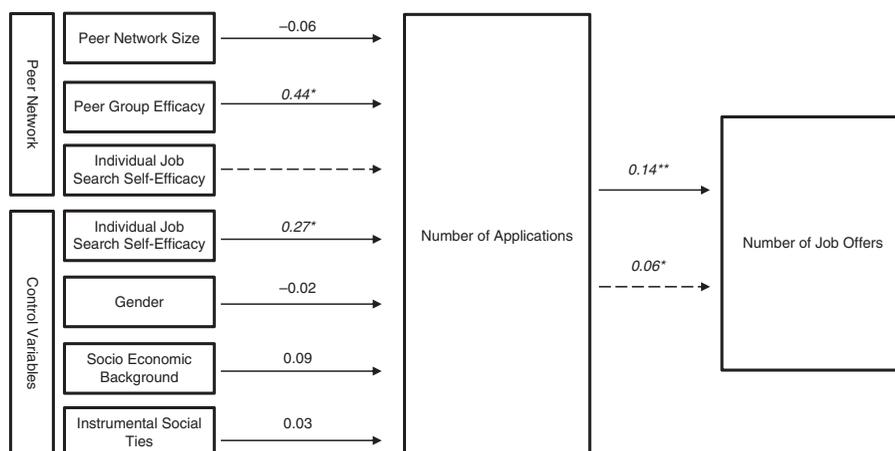


Figure 1. Path model of respondents' number of applications and number of job offers

Notes: Indirect association of peer group efficacy with respondents' number of job offers indicated by the dotted line. $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$

resources, such as social contacts (Lent and Brown, 2013; Lim *et al.*, 2016; Zikic and Saks, 2009). Demonstrating that efficacy matters beyond the individual level connects these two notions and bears important implications regarding how social contacts matter. To our knowledge, these two factors have never been studied in a combined manner. This provides us with interesting, new ideas on how contextual factors might affect job seekers' career behaviors and stimulates research regarding the SCCT to go beyond the investigation of the presence or absence of contextual resources, to include more information concerning the characteristics of these contextual resources. This gives leeway to promising future research on additional characteristics that turn a peer network into a supportive environment in the transition period.

Potential mechanisms of an efficacious peer group

While this study suggests that peer networks can be an asset to young people's transition from school to work, a question that remains is what the mechanisms that precisely drive these findings are. Based on SCCT (Lent and Brown, 2013), it is possible that peers function as role models who encourage self-regulatory behavior. Self-regulation refers to actions that occur within social contexts and that depend on whether people in an individual's immediate social environment engage in these self-regulatory behaviors as well, which is referred to as other-regulation (Sameroff, 2010). Young job seekers might be more likely to engage in job search behaviors and, thereby, increase their odds of finding employment once they observe their peers, who are similar to them in terms of education and employment prospects, being confident about the pursuit of their own goals. As for the role of peers, this underlines the assumption that young people's self-regulatory behavior during the transition might strongly depend on the self-regulatory behavior within their peer groups, with this behavior being contingent on their peers' self-efficacy beliefs. A similar argument has been presented by Salmela-Aro (2009), who proposed the concepts of co-agency and co-regulation, stating that the regulation of transitions occurs within young people's social contexts and their relationships with significant others, such as peers.

An alternative way in which the peers' self-efficacy can affect the transition to work is through mechanisms of social comparison and the promotion of a climate of competition and urgency within the peer group. Recent research has increasingly highlighted the emotional factors influencing job search among job starters (Bonaccio *et al.*, 2013). Employment opportunities are often scarce during the transition from school to work. Young people entering the labor market at the same time as their peers and with almost identical professional qualifications as their peers will compete with them for access to these opportunities. If individuals observe that their peers are successfully mastering the transition, they might feel the urge to intensify their own job search for the fear of being "left behind." With the aim of catching up with their peers, young people will become more actively involved in behavior aimed at finding employment. This competitiveness within the peer group as a trigger for career-directed behavior provides a plausible explanation for the results presented in this study and provides an interesting starting point for future research.

Strengths and limitations

This study takes a novel approach to investigating self-efficacy by treating it as a characteristic of individuals' social contexts rather than solely as an individual characteristic, allowing us to investigate whether self-efficacy is a potent psychological concept beyond the individual level. Our results show that self-efficacy can be operationalized as a network characteristic and provide valuable insights into the role of social networks during the transition to work. The use of peers' self-reported self-efficacy scores is a major strength of this research, as it avoids the bias that would have occurred if we had asked the respondents to rate their peers' efficacy beliefs. Moreover, investigating peers' efficacy beliefs and, therefore, their cognitions rather than their behavior allows us to consider the respondents'

peer networks irrespective of the peers' vocational plans. By focusing on peers' cognitions, we can also include those peers who are efficacious but not actively looking for a job, because they have decided to pursue further education, have already found a job, or have different plans altogether. This novel approach stimulates future research into the mechanisms that drive the associations found in this study and which additional characteristics that, up until now, have solely been treated as individual characteristics matter from a network perspective.

Unfortunately, there are certain shortcomings to this study as well. It is not possible to disentangle the selection and influence effects based on the current data, as both the respondents' and their peers' job search self-efficacy were assessed simultaneously. Previous research has demonstrated that young people resemble each other in several personal characteristics and behaviors, such as their levels of delinquency (Weerman, 2011) and their career-related plans (Dietrich *et al.*, 2012). This resemblance can be the result of selection effects, where young people befriend others who are similar to them, or influence effects, where peers who are already friends become more alike over time, or a combination of both. It is possible that having efficacious peers affects the job seekers' own efficacy beliefs. Even though selection and influence effects were not the focus of this study, it might be a worthwhile topic for future studies.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into young people's transition from school to work from a practical, methodological, and theoretical point of view and raises interesting topics for future research that reach beyond the study of the school-to-work transition. First, addressing self-efficacy as a characteristic of individuals' social contexts is an interesting and, as shown in the current research, promising approach that deserves more attention in future research. The results especially raise the question whether there are other characteristics at the network level that are associated with young people's behaviors and outcomes during this transition. From a practical point of view, this research suggests that practitioners who seek to support young people in the transition to work can be advised to expand their focus beyond the individual to include individuals' immediate social contexts. Practitioners could broaden their focus by stimulating interactions with efficacious peers, considering that besides providing young people with practical instrumental support, activating sources of social support such as the peer group might be equally beneficial. Together, these findings provide a new perspective on the role of peers in vocational transitions and bear substantial implications both for future research and for practitioners who seek to support young people's school-to-work transition.

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