THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CAREER ANXIETY AND LIFE SATISFACTION: THE MODERATING ROLE OF A FIXED MINDSET

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Abstract Research suggests that teacher students are at particular risk for experiencing career anxiety compared to other professions (Daniels et al., 2006). The purpose of this study was to investigate the presence of career anxiety in students in their final years of studies and the moderating role of a fixed mindset in the relationship between career anxiety and life satisfaction. The study examined 192 students in their final years of the Preschool Education and Primary Teacher Education study programs. Besides basic demographic information, the mindset questionnaire, the career anxiety scale, the SWLS life satisfaction questionnaire, and the STAI-X2 anxiety scale were used to obtain the data. The findings showed that the majority of students reported being satisfied with their life and that higher life satisfaction was positively connected with less trait anxiety and career anxiety, as well as a less fixed mindset. Furthermore, the results showed that a fixed mindset was an important moderator of the relationship between career anxiety and life satisfaction in future preschool and primary education teachers. Based on the obtained results, their implications were summarised for teacher education programs and counselling at university career centres.

1   Introduction

The transition from secondary to higher education, one's university years, and entering the job market represent an important developmental phase in the life of a young adult in which they are confronted with many requirements as well as challenges across different areas of their life. From a developmental perspective, the age group of young adult students (aged 18-24) has been described as "emerging adulthood", which represents a transitional developmental stage between late adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2004). This transition requires developing skills for maintaining the independence and self-sufficiency a person gains through adolescence, and for managing new tasks with regard to developing and maintaining intimate relationships, new educational tasks, and career choices. Failure to accomplish these developmental tasks may result in life dissatisfaction (Newman & Newman, 2008). As such, the developmental stage of "emerging adulthood" is considered stress-arousing and anxiety-provoking (Meadows et al., 2006).

During their university years, students try to gather the knowledge, skills, and practical experiences that would allow them a more successful entry into the job market. Preparing for their future profession is often connected with experiencing stress and anxiety, which can decrease their sense of subjective well-being and life satisfaction (Tsitsas et al., 2019). However, personal characteristics like personality traits and mindset can act as moderators in this process. To determine the purposes of this study, the authors will briefly introduce the constructs of (career) anxiety, life satisfaction, and fixed mindset.

1.1   Career Anxiety

Anxiety is defined as a negative emotional state in response to an uncertain threat (Rachman, 2013). Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental disorders. According to large population-based surveys, up to 33.7% of the population are affected by an anxiety disorder during their lifetime (Bandelow & Michaelis, 2015). Unlike in human species history, wherein a threat was commonly connected with life-threatening events, one of the biggest concerns people have nowadays is having a decent life in the future. This mostly relies on finding a good job that fulfils their needs (Takil & Sari, 2021). Therefore, one of the biggest sources of anxiety today is career anxiety.

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Career anxiety can be defined as negative emotions experienced before or during various stages of the career decision-making process and job performance (Fouad, 2007). While a certain amount of anxiety can help individuals prepare for career-related tasks, an overwhelming amount of anxiety is no longer beneficial. Most university students report experiencing some amount of career-related anxiety, especially in their senior year before they graduate and enter a competitive job market (Gallagher, 1992). However, regardless of developmental stage, individuals often experience anxiety about their career paths (Shin & Lee, 2019).

Research suggests that teacher students are at particular risk of experiencing career anxiety compared to other professions (Daniels et al., 2006). The reasons that make them more susceptible to career anxiety are mostly connected with their perceived lack of competence, financial issues, and the relatively low prestigious status of being a teacher (Daniels et al., 2006; Su, 1997). Especially in transition periods, such as the first year in the study program and the beginning of their teaching career, teacher students may experience anxiety and a decrease in their sense of control (Daniels et al., 2006). Past studies show that anxiety has large and negative effects on teacher students' competence and career certainty (Daniels et al., 2006). Student teachers who experience high levels of anxiety tend to perceive their capacities for effectively filling their professional roles as being significantly lower. Also, they express less confidence in their decision to become professional teachers.

Having an anxious personality trait may be associated with the inefficient use of attentional resources. However, although anxiety is defined as a negative emotional state, it is not necessarily harmful to the organism. Anxious feelings typically arise in response to an anticipated threat; thus, they can help the organism to be prepared in advance (Eysenck, 2013). When the threat is real and likely to be harmful, anxiety may indeed help one to be prepared to cope with the source of the threat. This latter case may be the situation with prospective teachers. Teacher students must deal with many obstacles in order to have a decent job and life, such as competitive exams that they need to pass after graduation, financial problems (low salary), issues relating to job prestige, etc. (Daniels et al. 2006; Su, 1997). Hence, to be able to come to grips with these "career threats", being concerned about them in advance and preparing accordingly can be a good strategy to successfully develop their career. Therefore, feeling anxious is not necessarily a maladaptive phase for teacher students. In their case, the "threat" value of the situation (i.e., not being able to find a job) that they

are experiencing is realistically high. In this case, devoting cognitive and attentional resources to career-related concerns can be seen as productive and beneficial (Takil & Sari, 2021).

1.2   Life Satisfaction

How an individual evaluates their life is defined in psychology as an individual's subjective well-being. A component of this multidimensional construct of subjective well-being is life satisfaction. It is defined as a person's conscious, cognitive, and affective evaluation of life quality (Bradley et al., 2014). Pavot and Diener (2008) describe it as "a judgemental process, in which individuals assess the quality of their lives on the basis of their own unique criteria (p. 164)".

Higher levels of life satisfaction have been associated with several positive psychological and physical benefits, e.g., lower levels of depression, improved physical health, as well as more effective responses to stressful life events (for a review, see Bradley et al., 2014). People with higher life satisfaction tend to respond more effectively to stressful life events, since life satisfaction mediates changes in adaptive coping with stress (Gilman & Barry, 2003). It is therefore not surprising that many authors (e.g., Diener, 2000) relate life satisfaction closely to positive mental health. In this essence, assessment of life satisfaction is considered to be one of the most important indicators of an individual's mental health (Huebner & Gilman, 2002).

Studies in which researchers assessed individuals' life satisfaction report that people are generally satisfied with their lives. However, certain variables, such as gender, socio-economic status, and self-esteem seem to be important factors in relation to life satisfaction (for a review, see Moksnes & Espnes, 2013), as well as complex cultural, personality, and environmental relationships (Diener et al., 1999). Research suggests that life satisfaction is determined to a considerable extent by personality traits and one's level of self-acceptance (Diener et al., 2003).

Over the past decade, academic interest in life satisfaction among young adults has increased (see Huebner et al., 2004 for a review). Most studies (e.g., Kruczek & Janicka, 2019) report on the average level of young adults' satisfaction with their lives, however, differences among individuals seem to exist. Considering the ever-changing world with increasingly complicated life situations and, in particular, one's

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university years, in which students constantly think about their future professional careers, it is, therefore, important to understand the characteristics of young adults' satisfaction with life as well as how it is connected to other psychological constructs.

1.3   Fixed Mindset

To orient themselves more easily within their social environment, individuals rely on guiding cognitions, which help them interpret and respond to social interactions and experiences. These cognitions can be more or less accurate and serve as more or less adaptive in times of adversity (Beck, 2002; Starr & Davila, 2012; Stuijfzand et al., 2018). Since the transition to university and later the transition to the job market represent a time of challenges for a young person, these guiding conditions can play an important role in how effectively they will face these adversities and adapt to the situation.

A type of guiding condition that received increased attention within the past decade is implicit theories or mindsets (for a review, see Schleider et al., 2015). Mindsets represent a person's core beliefs about the plasticity of their self-attributes, such as personality and intelligence (Molden & Dweck, 2006). These beliefs lie along a continuum ranging from the growth mindset or incremental theory to the fixed mindset or entity theory (Schroder et al., 2019). People with a growth mindset, in general, perceive their personal traits as inherently malleable and therefore changeable through learning and effort. On the other hand, people with a fixed mindset view their personal traits as fixed and therefore unchangeable through effort (Molden & Dweck, 2006). Individuals with more of a growth mindset tend to attribute failures to a lack of effort. Their motivation seems to be a never-ending development of their mastery; therefore, they view themselves as a work in progress (Schroeder et al., 2015). On the contrary, individuals with more of a fixed mindset tend to attribute failure to a lack of ability. Rather than developing mastery of the task, they are motivated by outperforming others, and view their abilities as fixed (Schroeder et al., 2015).

Studies report on several psychological outcomes when a person displays either a growth or a fixed mindset. In general, a growth mindset has been related to several positive outcomes for individuals, such as more adaptive coping with stress and faster recovery after experiencing setbacks (for a review, see Mullarkey & Schleider,

2020). Also, a growth mindset is negatively correlated with psychopathology (Schleider et al., 2015) and negative effects (Burnette et al., 2013). A fixed mindset, on the other hand, correlates with and predicts higher levels of depression and anxiety in young people and adults (for a review, see Schleider & Schroder, 2018) and is in general perceived as a possible cognitive vulnerability factor for these internalizing problems (Alloy et al., 2017, Miranda & Mennin, 2007). However, the degree to which a fixed mindset independently explains variance in these problems remains unclear. This is mostly because a fixed mindset correlates with other cognitive risk factors for internalizing problems, e.g., perfectionism (Mullarkey & Schleider, 2020). Also, research shows that a fixed mindset in students does not predict low self-confidence, meaning that students can have a fixed mindset and high confidence for learning accounting (Beatson et al., 2019).

The Present Study

Previous research has shown that students in various study programs experience career anxiety in their final year of study, owing to fear of academic failure and lack of employment opportunities (Hammad, 2016; Karayagiz, 2020). Although it is well known that increasing anxiety in college students is associated with lower levels of subjective well-being and life satisfaction (e.g., Paschali & Tsitsas, 2010; Tsitsas et al., 2019), much less research examined the moderating role of certain individual characteristics (e.g., mindset) in the relationship between students' career anxiety and life satisfaction. The present study explores the degree and direction of the relationship between fixed mindset, trait anxiety, career anxiety, and life satisfaction. In addition, the relationship between these constructs and students' beliefs and confidence in obtaining employment was examined. For a more in-depth understanding of the relationships between these variables, the authors hypothesized that a fixed mindset would moderate the indirect effects of career anxiety on life satisfaction. The above hypothesis is presented in the conceptual model shown in Figure 1.

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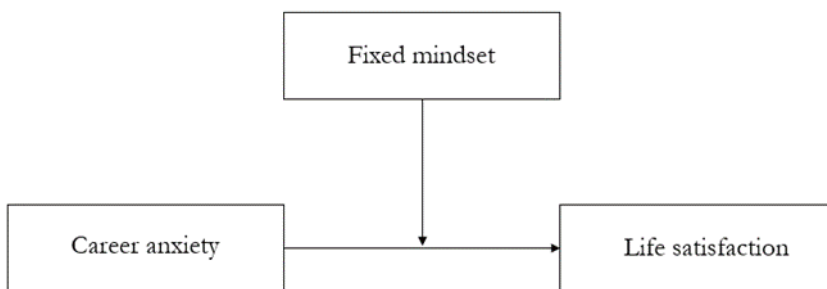
Figure 1: A conceptual model of a simple moderation.
Source: own

2   Method

2.1   Participants

The present study is based on a sample of 192 participants (men = 9, women = 183). All participants were in the 3rd or 4th year of the first study cycle (69.8%) or in the 1st year of the second study cycle (29.7%) in two different educational disciplines (i.e., Preschool Education and Elementary Education) at three pedagogical faculties in Slovenia. The mean age of the sample was 23.93 years (SD = 4.24).

2.2   Instruments

The Implicit Theories of Intelligence (Self-Theory) scale (De Castella & Byrne, 2015) assesses students' general beliefs about the stability or variability of their intelligence, that is, their beliefs about their ability to modify their mental abilities. The questionnaire contained eight items divided into two subscales: The Entity Self Beliefs subscale (e.g., "My intelligence is something about me that I personally cannot change very much.") and the Incremental Self Beliefs subscale (e.g., "With enough time and effort I think I could significantly improve my intelligence level."). Using the 6-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, 6 – strongly agree), participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements. Previous studies have reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .90 (De Castella & Byrne, 2015) and .95 (Polh Budja & Košir, 2019). Internal consistency was acceptable in our sample, i.e., .81 for the Entity Self Beliefs subscale and .91 for the Incremental

Self Beliefs subscale. For the purpose of our study only the Entity Self Beliefs subscale was used.

Career Anxiety items (Daniels et al, 2011). Students' career anxiety was assessed with nine items, including "How worried or concerned are you about finding out later that you do not like the career you choose?" and "How worried or concerned are you about not being able to find a job or position in the field you choose?". Participants answered the items on a 5-point scale (1 – not worried, 5 – very worried) with a higher score indicating greater levels of career anxiety. The items used were not yet adapted to the Slovenian cultural and linguistic environment. The reliability coefficient obtained for our data is .88.

The Satisfaction with Life scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). As one of the two major components of subjective well-being, this scale is narrowly focused on measuring overall life satisfaction and does not refer to similar constructs, such as positive affect and loneliness. It represents the evaluative or cognitive component of life satisfaction. The scale score can be described as an individual's global assessment of their quality of life according to their personal criteria. The SWLS includes five items (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal.") to which participants respond on a 7-point scale (1 − strongly disagree, 7 – strongly agree). The resulting scale score for an individual is the sum of the individual item scores with a possible range of 5 to 35. The results of the SWLS can be interpreted in terms of both absolute and relative life satisfaction. A score of 20 represents the neutral point on the scale (i.e., the participant is equally satisfied and dissatisfied), while scores between 5 and 9 represent extreme dissatisfaction and scores between 31 and 35 represent extreme satisfaction (Pavot & Diener, 1993). The SWLS has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of life satisfaction (Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87; Diener et al, 1985). The internal reliability coefficient for our sample is .86.

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory – X2 (STAI-X2; Spielberger et al., 1983). The STAI-X2 is one of the most common measures of anxiety as a personality trait, that is, the tendency to react anxiously in most situations, as opposed to the STAI-X1, which measures anxiety as a current state. The STAI-X2 consists of 20 statements (e.g., "I have problems that accumulate so that I cannot cope with them."). All items are rated on a 4-point scale (1 − almost never, 2 − sometimes, 3 − often, and 4 − almost

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always). The range of possible scores for STAI-X2 varies from a minimum score of 20 to a maximum score of 80. A high score indicates the presence of high levels of anxiety. Internal consistency coefficients for the original scale have ranged from .86 to .95 (Spielberger et al., 1983). The reliability coefficient obtained for our data is .92.

Demographic information. Before completing the questionnaires, the participants provided information on their gender and age, faculty and study program, reasons for choosing a particular study program, and level of belief and confidence in obtaining employment in the profession for which they were being trained. The belief in obtaining employment was assessed by the participants on a 5-point scale (1 − I do not believe that I will obtain regular employment, 5 − I absolutely believe that I will obtain regular employment), as well as confidence (I do not trust that I will obtain regular employment, 5 − I absolutely trust that I will obtain regular employment).

2.3 Procedure

Preparations for the study took place in February 2021. The application of the questionnaires was carried out in March 2021. The participants completed the questionnaires in an online form created using the 1KA application. An online version of the questionnaires was sent to participants during online lectures or classes, or a link was posted on the Moodle learning platform. The participants completed the questionnaires in approximately ten minutes. The information collected was kept confidential and used only for the purposes for which it had been provided. The students were not compensated for their participation.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 27.0. The descriptive analysis was performed to obtain a preliminary description of the sample. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to find the correlation between the scores of the Career anxiety scale, The Implicit Theories of Intelligence (Self-Theory) scale, and the Satisfaction with Life scale. Then, based on our hypothesis, the moderation model was examined using the SPSS PROCESS macro v3.5 software (Hayes, 2013). In PROCESS, Model 1 was applied for simple moderation, with career anxiety as an

independent variable and life satisfaction as a dependent variable. The covariate (i.e., a variable that explains part of the variability in the outcome) of trait anxiety was also included in the model. Two values of the fixed mindset were defined – low fixed mindset (one standard deviation below the mean) and high fixed mindset (one standard deviation above the mean) – to test for significant moderating effects.

3   Results

3.1   Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the study variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Belief	3.45	1.04	–				
2. Confidence	3.41	1.09	.72**	–			
3. CA	20.96	7.42	-.32**	-.35**	–		
4. F-MIN	2.22	0.88	.00	.00	.29**	–	
5. SWLS	23.84	6.08	.27**	.27**	-.37**	-.26**	–
6. STAI-X2	38.91	9.93	-.30**	-.29**	.53**	.31**	-.53**

Note. $N = 192$. Belief: belief in obtaining regular employment; Confidence: confidence in obtaining regular employment; CA: the average career anxiety score; F-MIN: the average fixed mindset score (the Entity Self Beliefs subscale); SWLS: the average life satisfaction score; STAI-X2: the average trait anxiety score. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

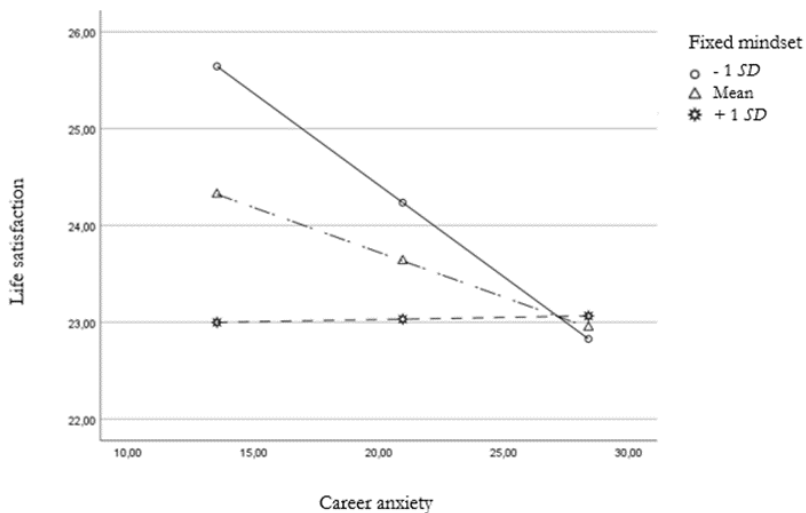### 3.2   Moderation Analysis

Consistent with the aim of the present study, the moderating role of a fixed mindset in the relationship between career anxiety and life satisfaction were further explored. The results of the moderation analysis are presented in Table 2. For life satisfaction, the overall model was statistically significant, $R = .561$, $F (4, 187) = 21.439$, $p < .001$. Career anxiety and fixed mindset were predictive of life satisfaction, as was STAI, with the significance of STAI as a covariate meaning that there were differences in mean life satisfaction scores between students with low and high trait anxiety. Consistent with our prediction, there was a significant interaction effect between career anxiety and fixed mindset in predicting life satisfaction (see Table 2).

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Table 2. The linear model of predictors of life satisfaction

	b	SE B	t	p
Constant	42.58 [36.90, 48.26]	2.877	14.80	< .01
Career anxiety (centred)	-.34 [-.61, -.67]	.137	-2.46	< .05
Fixed mindset (centred)	-2.98 [-5.39, -.57]	1.223	-2.44	< .05
Fixed mindset x Career anxiety	.11 [.00, .22]	.054	2.04	< .05
STAI-X2 (covariate)	-.26 [-.35, -.18]	.045	-5.98	< .01

Note. R^2 = .31.

To interpret the moderation effect, the simple slopes were examined. The results
showed the following: (1) when fixed mindset is low, there is a significant negative
relationship between career anxiety and satisfaction with life, $b = -.190$, 95% CI
$[-.344, -.035]$, $t = -2.42$, $p = .016$; (2) at the mean value of fixed mindset, there is
a non-significant negative relationship between career anxiety and satisfaction with
life, $b = -.093$, 95% CI $[-.210, -.242]$, $t = -1.56$, $p = .120$; (3) when fixed mindset
is high, there is a non-significant positive relationship between career anxiety and
satisfaction with life, $b = -.005$, 95% CI $[-.141, -.150]$, $t = .06$, $p = .951$. These
results tell us that students with a higher fixed mindset reported lower life
satisfaction than students with an average score and students with a lower fixed
mindset. As career anxiety increases, students' life satisfaction with a higher or
average fixed mindset does not change significantly, while the life satisfaction of
students with a lower fixed mindset decreases. The simple slope graph is shown in
Figure 2.

Figure 2: Simple regression slopes for moderation analysis
Source: own.

4   Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate the level of fixed mindset, trait anxiety, career anxiety, and life satisfaction among teacher students, as well as to explore the relationship between all these constructs, especially the moderator role of a fixed mindset in the relationship between career anxiety and life satisfaction. Considering the latter, the authors predicted that a fixed mindset would moderate the indirect effects of career anxiety on life satisfaction.

The findings of this study show that the majority of teacher students appear to be satisfied with their lives. Most of the participants in this study reported being slightly satisfied or satisfied with their lives, which confirms previous findings (for a review, see Moksnes & Espnes, 2013), stating that most people are in general satisfied with their lives. Since the life satisfaction of young adults is an important factor that influences their subjective well-being and mental health, it is important to examine the factors that impact their life satisfaction. Previous research shows that the self-efficacy of young adults significantly predicts their life satisfaction (Çakar, 2012) and that life satisfaction was related to optimism and positive thinking (Caprara & Steca, 2006). Our findings confirm this, since teacher students who hold higher beliefs and confidence in obtaining regular employment were found to be more satisfied with their lives as well as reported experiencing lower levels of both trait and career anxiety. It seems that in the final years of their studies, which relate to their upcoming entrance into the job market, making occupational decisions, becoming independent from their family, etc., their trust and self-confidence in their abilities to succeed in finding a job as a teacher contribute to their satisfaction with life.

Besides being more self-confident and holding more optimistic beliefs about their future occupation, our research findings suggest that students with higher life satisfaction could, in general, be characterized as holding a more adaptive mindset about the plasticity of their self-attributes. The results of this study show that teacher students who are more satisfied with their life experience hold more of a growth mindset and experience less trait anxiety and career anxiety. This is in line with previous findings, indicating that a growth mindset relates to better mental health (Schleider et al., 2015) and fewer negative effects (Burnette et al., 2013). Similarly, a positive correlation in our study was found between trait anxiety, career anxiety, and fixed mindset, suggesting that students with fixed mindsets experience higher levels

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of trait anxiety and career anxiety. This confirms the notion that having a predominantly fixed mindset can be a possible risk factor for several internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression (e.g., Alloy et al., 2016; Miranda & Mennin, 2007). It seems, therefore, that teacher students who tend to attribute failures to a lack of effort are constantly motivated by developing mastery and view themselves as a work in progress (i.e., express a growth mindset), experience less anxiety in general as well in terms of their future profession, and perceive their life as more satisfying.

In terms of the moderation effect of a fixed mindset in the relationship between career anxiety and life satisfaction, the authors found that teacher students with a higher fixed mindset report being less satisfied with their lives compared to students with an average score on fixed mindset and students with a lower fixed mindset. As career anxiety increases, students' life satisfaction with a higher or average fixed mindset does not change significantly, while the life satisfaction of students with a lower fixed mindset decreases. A fixed mindset appears to be connected with students' life satisfaction only when their level of career anxiety is low, with students with lower levels of fixed mindset expressing higher levels of life satisfaction. However, when career anxiety is high, all students experience a comparable level of low life satisfaction. One can assume that when young adults with more of a growth mindset experience high levels of trait and career anxiety, their constructive cognitive styles no longer prevent them from experiencing lower satisfaction with life. This notion stresses the importance of managing students' anxiety and enhancing their perceptions of control. Since research suggests that most university students experience at least some amount of career anxiety (Gallagher, 1992), and that teacher students are at particular risk for that in comparison to other professions, it seems necessary to address career anxiety in this population and intervene. Interventions that target students' trait and career anxiety seem a possible solution, as well as incorporating these topics in teacher education study programs. As Daniels et al. (2006) suggest, teacher education programs should be created in a way that helps student teachers to overcome their anxiety and learn to manage unpredictable environments. One of the options for how to tackle anxiety in teacher students is incorporating the concept of mindfulness and mindfulness techniques in the study program, which the students found to be useful and well-accepted content (Tekavc, 2021). Another solution to help students successfully deal with their anxiety could be professional support at university career centres implemented as individual

support (e.g., counselling, career coaching) or group workshops aimed to teach students to effectively cope with anxiety and plan their careers.

The moderation effect found in the relationship between fixed mindset, career anxiety, and life satisfaction could also suggest an adaptive response in people with a growth mindset when experiencing anxiety. When their anxiety increases, teacher students with the lowest levels of fixed mindset seem to experience the highest drop in their life satisfaction. Anxiety typically represents a negative emotional state for a person and can be perceived as decreased satisfaction with life. However, negative emotions and not being satisfied with one's life call for action and can act as an important motivator for creating a change. While students with a higher fixed mindset do not experience this drop in their life satisfaction when their anxiety increases, students with more of a growth mindset do, and could therefore feel more willing to think about an adaptive way to respond or change. As Eysenck (2013) suggests, anxiety is an adaptive emotional response for survival and serves the purpose of being prepared to cope with the source of the threat. Teacher students face several potential threats, e.g., exams, financial problems, issues relating to job prestige, etc. (Daniels et al. 2006; Su, 1997). To deal effectively with these threats, being concerned about them in advance and preparing accordingly can be a coping strategy to successfully carry on with their career.

Conclusion

The results of our study confirmed our hypothesis that a fixed mindset would moderate the indirect effects of career anxiety on life satisfaction. When career anxiety is low, teacher students with a lower fixed mindset seem to be more satisfied with their life than students with a higher fixed mindset. However, when career anxiety is high, the life satisfaction of students with a lower fixed mindset decreases, while for students with a higher fixed mindset, it does not change. Despite the somewhat motivational role of anxiety, which has the potential to stimulate the person into responsive action, our results call for interventions aimed at reducing student teachers' anxiety and supporting their sense of control. Future studies should explore the moderator role of a fixed mindset between career anxiety and life satisfaction within the general student population. Also, investigating the content of career anxiety (by conducting e.g., in-depth interviews with teacher students) would enable us to define the most important domains wherein to intervene.

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