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To cite this article: Xuebing Su, Victor Wong & Kun Liang (2023) Effects of contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on decent work conditions among young adult social workers: a moderated mediation model, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 28:1, 2245451, DOI: [10.1080/02673843.2023.2245451](https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2023.2245451)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2023.2245451>



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Published online: 12 Aug 2023.



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Effects of contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on decent work conditions among young adult social workers: a moderated mediation model

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ABSTRACT

Using cross-sectional data collected from 974 young adult social workers aged 21–29 from three metropolitan cities in China, namely, Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, this study examined the effects of contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on decent work conditions and tests a moderated mediation model. Results showed that work volition mediated the relationship between contextual constraints and decent work conditions and that career adaptability moderated the link between work volition and decent work conditions. The indirect effect of contextual constraints on decent work conditions via work volition varied based on career adaptability, that is, the indirect effect was weaker for individuals with a higher level of career adaptability. The results of this study will inform the application and adaptation of the psychology of working theory with the lens of decent work to further promote the well-being and career development of young adult social workers.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 April 2023
Accepted 2 August 2023

KEYWORDS

Contextual constraints; work volition; career adaptability; decent work conditions; young adult social workers

Decent work, an idea initially proposed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1999, has nowadays become one of the sustainable development goals and been promoted around the world at both national and organizational levels for improving working conditions (International Labor Organization, 2012). Other than focusing on a macro perspective for reviewing working conditions, a psychological notion of decent work denoting the subjective perceptions, experience, and aspiration of workers in five areas of their working conditions, namely, safe working conditions, access to health care, adequate compensation, free time and rest, and complementary values (Duffy et al., 2017), has sparked a keen academic interest on studying a psychological explication of employees' well-being and self-fulfilment at work (Su & Chan, 2023). As human helping professionals, social workers' subjective, experiential, and aspirational working conditions are a pronounced concern, which is not only related to the personal development of social workers but also to the sustainable development of social service organizations in delivering quality service (Su et al., 2022). As the future hope of the profession, young adult social workers are undertaking most of the demanding job tasks of delivering frontline services (i.e. case work, group work, and any other intervention programmes) targeting people with vulnerabilities in particular, including disadvantaged children

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and youth, older adults with chronic illness, and people with disability or mental health challenges, etc., in diverse settings, such as schools, communities, families, and hospitals, etc. (Su, 2020; Su & Wong, 2023), and they have encountered some contextual constraints manifested in economic constraints (Agnimitra & Sharma, 2022), work insecurity (Zhang, 2022), and work injustice (Dai et al., 2022) in particular, which may compromise their decent work conditions. A theoretical framework is urgently needed for explicating how these contextual constraints may co-occur to harm young adult social workers' decent work conditions and how they may exercise their own agency in negotiating the effects of these contextual constraints.

The psychology of working theory (Blustein et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2016) as one of the most forefront theories for explaining employees' decent work conditions may shed new light for the social work profession. According to this theory, employees' subjective, experiential, and aspirational decent work conditions are unavoidably harmed by various contextual constraints, and their own psychological resources such as work volition denoting one's perceived ability to make a career decision despite encountering constraints and barriers (Duffy et al., 2012) and career adaptability defined as a kind of psychological resource used by people to cope with various tasks, transitions, and traumas as fostered by the changing conditions with growing awareness and information seeking, and decision-making capability (Savickas, 2005, 2013) may be mechanisms that can link up the effects of contextual constraints on their decent work conditions (Autin & Duffy, 2019; Blustein et al., 2016, 2019; Duffy et al., 2016). Moreover, the capability approach, which highlights that young people will be able to aspire for more and feel empowered to achieve more given that they are supported by an enabling environment manifested in the availability of and accessibility to more psychosocial resources (Su & Chan, 2023; Su et al., 2022; Su & Wong, 2022), sheds new lights on a potential moderator role played by career adaptability as career capability or psychosocial resources in the path elaborating the associations among contextual constraints, work volition, and decent work conditions. This study aims to examine how the psychology of working theory can be applied in the social work context to explicate young adult social workers' decent work conditions and more specifically to explain the roles played by contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on their decent work conditions.

Structural and psychological perspectives on decent work conditions

The term decent work was developed to serve two purposes: first, as a lens to guide the assessment of working conditions at the structural level that can be counted as decent including, but not limited to, union density, occupational safety, legal protection for workers, availability of social security, etc. (International Labor Organization, 2012), and second, as one of the important goals for promoting global sustainable development and for calling for collective actions to implement the Decent Work Agenda around the world and realize four main values underlying the ILO's actions, namely freedom, equity, security, and human dignity (International Labour Organization, 1999, p. 3). Rather than solely emphasizing the macro characteristics of the decent work notion, Duffy et al. (2017) reconceptualized the concept with a psychological perspective and proposed five decent work dimensions, namely, safe working conditions, access to health care, adequate compensation, free time and rest, and complementary values. This psychological conceptualization of decent work highlights employees' subjective perceptions, experiences, and aspirations in relation to their decent work conditions (Duffy et al., 2016). Such a psychological notion of decent work has sparked a keen academic interest in studying the influence of decent work conditions on employees' present well-being as well as their longer-term work fulfilment (Duffy et al., 2016; Su et al., 2022).

The power of the decent work notion detailed by Duffy et al. (2016) has been growing since it is incorporated into the psychology of working theory (Blustein et al., 2016, Blustein et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2016) which centralizes the role played by decent work in the relationship between contextual constraints and employees' workplace well-being and work fulfilment. According to the psychology of working theory, contextual constraints faced by people, including economic constraints and

encounters of discrimination and marginalization, are harming people's satisfaction of needs and achievement of well-being and self-fulfilment by means of depriving their decent work conditions (e.g. Autin et al., 2021; Masdonati et al., 2021; Pires et al., 2020). Furthermore, apart from conceptualizing the psychological harms caused by contextual constraints, the psychology of working theory also highlights the importance of two types of psychological resources deemed favourable for enhancing people's decent work conditions, namely, work volition and career adaptability (Duffy et al., 2016). Work volition refers to one's perceived ability to make a career decision despite encountering constraints and barriers (Duffy et al., 2012). Career adaptability is defined as a kind of psychological resource used by people to cope with various tasks, transitions, and traumas as fostered by the changing conditions with growing awareness and information seeking, and decision-making capability (Savickas, 2005, 2013). Generally speaking, the psychology of working theory conceptualizes the effects of contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on people's decent work conditions as follows: a) contextual constraints are negatively associated with decent work, whereas work volition and career adaptability are positively associated with decent work; b) work volition and career adaptability play important roles in the relationship between contextual constraints and decent work; and c) work volition and career adaptability may counteract the negative effects of contextual constraints and thus enable workers to access to decent work despite facing multiple sources of constraints (Autin & Duffy, 2019; Blustein et al., 2016, 2019; Duffy et al., 2016).

In the past few years since 2017, on the basis of the psychology of working theory, Duffy's decent work notion has been applied to review the working conditions of various occupations and subjective work experiences for different population groups, including knowledge workers and teachers (Ferraro et al., 2021), domestic workers (Vollenhoven, 2020), university students (Ma et al., 2020), and low-skilled workers (Vihjalsdottir, 2021). However, very few studies have applied the psychology of working theory and/or the decent work notion in reviewing the development of the social work profession or evaluating the working conditions of social workers. Such a psychological explication of social workers' decent work conditions may provide alternative mechanisms for improving the working conditions, and enhancing the well-being and career development of social workers by promoting the Decent Work Agenda in this profession (Su & Wong, 2023; Su et al., 2022). That being said, when applying the psychology of working theory to the social work profession, it may be necessary to adapt the theory to contexts, especially considering the psychosocial dynamics that social workers experience during their daily interactions with service users, colleagues, employer organizations, and funders and considering how they manage to negotiate the effects of contextual constraints with their psychosocial resources (Su & Wong, 2023; Su et al., 2020). Moreover, empirical studies are also lacking to examine the functions of the co-occurrence of various contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability and the interplay of these factors in affecting social workers' decent work conditions.

Social workers' decent work conditions: a lens of psychology of working theory

Previous relevant studies on social workers' well-being were largely informed by the conventional perspective of vocational health psychology, which emphasized a person-job-fit paradigm (Autin & Duffy, 2019). Such a perspective assumed that employees can find a job in accordance with their own characteristics, and those who are working in a job that fits their attributes are more likely to enjoy better well-being and self-fulfilment (Autin & Duffy, 2019). Despite taking into consideration the influences of job conditions such as job demands and job resources on workers' well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014), this approach still underestimated the constraining effects of contextual and structural factors (Autin & Duffy, 2019). The rise of the psychology of working theory fills in this gap, as it addresses how contextual constraints are harming workers' subjective, experiential, and aspirational decent work conditions and how they may negotiate the constraints by exercising their agency (Blustein et al., 2019). Against the backdrop that social workers serve as

human helping professionals, their decent work conditions are not only important for caring about their own well-being and career development but also for assuring the quality of service delivered to service users and supporting the sustainable development of the whole profession (Su et al., 2022). In addition, the workplace well-being of young adult social workers was under-addressed in the conventional perspective of vocational health psychology, as this perspective opted to take social workers of all ages as a holistic group and overlooked the challenges faced by young adult social workers (Su et al., 2022).

The concern about young adult social workers' decent work conditions is perceived as exceptionally urgent, as these young helping professionals in their beginning career have a strong desire for achievement through excelling at work and yet their decent work conditions may be compromised due to various contextual constraints such as injustice at work (Su et al., 2022). In the existing international dialogue on developing decent work for constructing inclusionary employment, young people are considered to be in a less privileged position in view that they have relatively lower chances to take up a higher rank of job positions, and they are encountering more challenges in maintaining positive well-being and striving for career development as compared with their senior counterparts due to a relative lack of resources, opportunities, networks, and work experiences (Masdonati et al., 2020; Rosas & Rossignotti, 2005; Su et al., 2022). In China, prior studies have found that young adult social workers earn less, undertake more frontline work, deliver more challenging direct service, and they are less likely to be engaged in organizational decision-making (Su & Ng, 2019; Su et al., 2020; Su, Wong, et al., 2021). Relevant research studies also revealed that although working in some relatively more developed locations such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen, two southern coastal cities in mainland China, where more resources are available to support the professional development of social work than other places in this country, young frontline social workers' working conditions are also complicated by economic constraints and work insecurity, as they receive low monthly incomes, and the government has a dominating role in controlling the availability of resources for professional development (Gao & Yan, 2015; Su, 2020; Su et al., 2020). Even in Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China, where the average incomes of young adult social workers are much higher than their counterparts working in other places of China, they are still experiencing contextual constraints manifested in different forms such as work injustice when compared with their senior counterparts and work insecurity linked to the unstable funding support from the government (Dai et al., 2022; Su et al., 2022). Considering the negative impact of individual contextual constraints on the well-being of young adult social workers, it is important to recognize that the combined psychosocial effects of these various constraints, such as economic constraints, work injustice, and work insecurity, may be amplified. However, this aspect remains insufficiently examined. Despite confronting more contextual constraints, young adult social workers are required to satisfy diverse needs of service users at the frontline, such as families, schools, communities, and hospitals, etc., characterized by increasing social problems such as economic recession, unemployment, and health issues.

So far there are very few studies examining young adult social workers' working conditions and well-being, and a research gap remains to be filled in by reviewing their working conditions through the lens of decent work and the perspective of psychology of working theory. Based on the theoretical assumptions of the psychology of working theory and the characteristics of the social work profession, to review social workers' decent work conditions through the lens of the psychology of working theory has the following strengths. First, the psychology of working theory holds the assumption that employees confronting individual and social constraints are inevitable (Autin & Duffy, 2019; Blustein et al., 2019), which is consistent with the reality faced by social workers (e.g. Agnimitra & Sharma, 2022). Like other human helping professions, young adult social workers in particular are undertaking demanding job tasks of delivering frontline services, but simultaneously they are encountering multiple sources of contextual constraints mentioned beforehand (Guild, 2012; Su, Wong, et al., 2021; Whitaker, 2012). Second, this theory highlights a strong psychological sense which denotes that some psychological resources of employees such as work volition and

career adaptability may explain how employees negotiate the contextual constraints and navigate their career development (Duffy et al., 2016). In this connection, this theory may provide pathways for enhancing social workers' decent work conditions. Third, this theory presumes that it is essential to exercise employees' agency to enjoy decent work conditions in a sustainable manner (Blustein et al., 2019). Last but not least, this theory takes employees' decent work conditions as an important mechanism for enhancing their well-being and self-fulfilment (Autin & Duffy, 2019; Blustein et al., 2019). Thus, studying social workers' decent work conditions through the lens of psychology of working theory may inform the enhancement of well-being and self-fulfilment among social workers.

Effects of contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on young adult social workers' decent work conditions

Informed by the psychology of working theory and existing literature, this study aims to test the effects of contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on decent work conditions among young adult social workers. Most existing studies revealed that contextual constraints are negatively associated with employees' decent work conditions (Su & Chan, 2023); work volition and career adaptability are positively associated with their decent work conditions (Su & Chan, 2023). Therefore, this study formulated the following hypotheses regarding the associations among these variables among young adult social workers:

H1a: *Contextual constraints faced by young adult social workers (i.e. economic constraints, work insecurity, and work injustice) are negatively associated with their decent work conditions*

H1b: *Work volition of young adult social workers is positively associated with their to decent work conditions*

H1c: *Career adaptability of young adult social workers is positively associated with their decent work conditions*

In terms of the interplay of economic constraints, work volition, and career adaptability in influencing employees' decent work conditions, the conceptual models used in prior studies showed their inconsistency in relation to the exact roles played by work volition and career adaptability in the relationship between contextual constraints and decent work. According to our best knowledge, most existing empirical studies supported the mediating role played by work volition in the relationship between contextual constraints and decent work (Allan et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Rossier & Ouedraogo, 2021). Considering that contextual constraints faced by young adult social workers, such as their economic status, and their encounters of work injustice and work insecurity may harm their perceived ability to make a career decision despite confronting constraints and barriers, we proposed the following hypothesis about the role played by work volition:

H2: *Work volition acts as a mediator in the relationship between contextual constraints and decent work among young adult social workers.*

Although the psychology of working theory theorized career adaptability to mediate the influence of contextual constraints on decent work (Duffy et al., 2016), existing empirical evidences showed mixed results regarding the role played by career adaptability as some studies supported the mediating effect of career adaptability and some did not (Douglass et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2018; England et al., 2020; Kozan et al., 2019; Tokar & Kaut, 2018). This study hypothesized the association

of career adaptability with work-related outcomes informed by the capability approach (Krishnakumar, 2007; Sen, 1993), which highlights that young people aspire for more and feel empowered to achieve more given that they are supported by an enabling environment manifested in the availability of and accessibility to more psychosocial resources and less psychosocial constraints (Su & Chan, 2023; Su et al., 2022; Su & Wong, 2022). The capability approach takes a critical examination of the measures for enhancing people's psychosocial resources and counteracting the effects of psychosocial constraints for the purpose of sustaining their own career development (Robertson, 2015; Su & Chan, 2023; Su & Wong, 2022). The original psychology of working theory conceptualized career adaptability as psychological resources (Duffy et al., 2016). However, this perspective may not fully capture the potential of career adaptability as psychosocial resources (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), which can be cultivated in an enabling environment and can further function to empower employees to exercise their agency and counteract the negative effects of contextual constraints on individuals. By understanding career adaptability as a psychosocial resource, we may better appreciate its potential to empower young adult social workers working at the frontline, especially in the midst of challenging psychosocial contexts and dynamics. Conceptually speaking, career adaptability as psychosocial resources emphasizes the process regarding how people use their concern, curiosity, control, and confidence to cope with their negative or traumatic experiences, manage fast-changing conditions, and enhance their decision-making capabilities. Following the logic of capability approach, young adults' psychosocial resources as their career adaptability may change how the contexts influence them (Su & Chan, 2023), for example, their concern to address their circumstances and experiences, curiosity to seek for alternative pathway out, sense of control to manage their career development, and confidence to handle what they encounter may change the triangle presenting the relationships among contextual constraints, work volition, and decent work. In other words, those young adult social workers with a higher level of career adaptability may be more capable of escaping from the trap of 'high constraints leading to low work volition and further leading to low decent work conditions'. However, it remains uncertain how career adaptability as psychosocial resources may interact with work volition to influence the psychosocial effects of contextual constraints among social workers. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis about the moderating role played by career adaptability in the path that denotes the influence of contextual constraints on decent work through the mechanism of reducing work volition:

H3: *Career adaptability interacting with work volition on influencing young adult social workers' decent work conditions, and the influence of contextual constraints on their decent work conditions through the mechanism of reducing work volition varies depending on their level of career adaptability.*

Based on the hypotheses, [Figure 1](#) presents the conceptual framework of this study.

Method

Sample

[Table 1](#) presents the sociodemographic information of all participants, as well as the respective information for participants from three metropolitan cities in China, including Hong Kong (a special administrative region of China), as well as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, two coastal cities in southern China. As compared with other urban and rural regions in China, the development of the social work profession in these three metropolitan cities has benefited from a much wider network of accessible and available resources although there are some differences among them. Specifically, as one of the most developed societies in Asia, Hong Kong has a much longer history of social work development and professionalization that can be traced back to the 1960s. In contrast, the social work profession

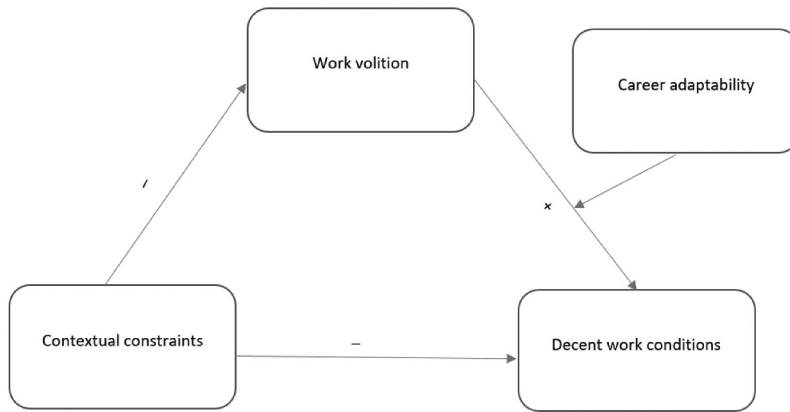


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants (N = 974).

| | ALL participants N = 974 | Participants from Hong Kong n=382 | Participants from Shenzhen n=288 | Participants from Guangzhou n =304 |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Gender | | | | |
| Female | 787 (80.8) | 279 (73.3) | 235 (81.6) | 273 (89.8) |
| Male | 187 (19.2) | 103 (27.0) | 53 (18.4) | 31 (10.2) |
| Age | | | | |
| 21 | 34 (3.5) | 6 (1.6) | 15 (5.2) | 13 (4.3) |
| 22 | 51 (5.2) | 11 (2.9) | 20 (6.9) | 20 (6.6) |
| 23 | 87 (8.9) | 28 (7.3) | 30 (10.4) | 29 (9.5) |
| 24 | 100 (10.3) | 36 (9.4) | 27 (9.4) | 37 (12.2) |
| 25 | 157 (16.1) | 62 (16.2) | 46 (16.0) | 49 (16.1) |
| 26 | 120 (12.3) | 40 (10.5) | 35 (12.2) | 45 (14.8) |
| 27 | 113 (11.6) | 42 (11.0) | 39 (13.5) | 32 (10.5) |
| 28 | 147 (15.1) | 74 (19.4) | 40 (13.9) | 33 (10.9) |
| 29 | 165 (16.9) | 83 (21.7) | 36 (12.5) | 46 (15.1) |
| Educational attainment | | | | |
| Secondary school or below | 12 (1.2) | 1 (.3) | 2 (.7) | 9 (3.0) |
| Associate degree | 377 (38.7) | 99 (25.9) | 108 (37.5) | 170 (55.9) |
| Bachelor's degree | 489 (50.2) | 201 (52.6) | 169 (58.7) | 119 (39.1) |
| Master's degree | 96 (9.9) | 81 (21.2) | 9 (3.1) | 6 (2.0) |
| Marital status | | | | |
| Single or unmarried | 752 (77.2) | 324 (84.8) | 227 (78.8) | 201 (66.1) |
| Married or co-living | 216 (22.2) | 58 (15.2) | 60 (20.8) | 98 (32.2) |
| Divorced | 6 (.6) | 0 | 1 (.3) | 5 (1.6) |
| Position rank | | | | |
| Junior | 667 (68.5) | 207 (54.2) | 231 (80.2) | 229 (75.3) |
| Middle | 293 (30.1) | 170 (44.5) | 52 (18.1) | 71 (23.4) |
| Senior | 8 (.8) | 4 (1.0) | 0 | 4 (1.3) |
| CEO | 6 (.6) | 1 (.3) | 5 (1.7) | 0 |

^aThere are more large-sized social service organizations in Shenzhen, therefore many more questionnaires were collected from this category of organizations in Shenzhen.

in Shenzhen and Guangzhou experienced rapid growth starting from the early 2000s. To include participants from these three places is favourable for supporting the application of the conceptual framework in different Chinese metropolitan contexts. In total, we had 974 participants, who were all social workers aged 21–29 and 80.8% were women and 19.2% were men. The gender imbalance of both studies was consistent with the fact revealed by a nationally representative sample of social workers in China, which suggested that 21% of the social workers were male and 79% were females (Su et al., 2020). Regarding the size of their employer organizations, 27.4% participants were from small-sized organizations, 28.6% from medium-sized organizations and 44% from large-sized organizations. The mean age for all participants was 25.91 ($SD = 2.31$). Regarding educational attainment, 60.1% of the participants held a Bachelor's or Master's degree, and most of the participants were single or unmarried (77.2%). Regarding the rank of their job positions, 68.5% of the participants reported their job positions as junior rank and 30.1% middle rank.

Data collection

A pilot study was conducted in three Chinese metropolitan cities before formal data collection, including Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China, and Guangzhou and Shenzhen, two southern coastal cities in mainland China. These three places accommodate social workers whose mother tongue is largely Cantonese or Putonghua. While traditional Chinese characters were adopted for the questionnaire survey used in Hong Kong, simplified Chinese characters were used for surveys conducted in Shenzhen and Guangzhou. Pilot studies are therefore needed to ensure that the questionnaires designed in both types of Chinese characters are understandable and appropriate for use in the respective cities. The research team invited 10 young adult social workers from each of these three places through our network with social service organizations. These participants were instructed to submit a report after filling in a questionnaire available in hard copy. They answered a few questions in the report to verify their understanding about the items, including whether the items in the questionnaires were understandable and clear, any items that should be modified, and making suggestions to fine-tune any items as necessary. The research team had a discussion based on the collected reports and slightly revised the questionnaire accordingly. Using random sampling procedures, a cross-sectional study was conducted from June to December in 2021 to collect data from Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. In Hong Kong, there are two types of organizations employing social workers to provide social work services, namely non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Social Welfare Department, one of the government departments of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government. Based on the membership list of NGOs available from the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, we categorized all NGOs into three types in accordance to the number of social workers employed, i.e. small- (1–30), medium- (31–99), and large- (≥ 100) size organizations. Through random sampling, 40% of each category of NGOs was sampled as a pool for invitation for joining the study. At the same time, with the support of the biggest social workers association of the Social Welfare Department, social worker members aged 21–29 of the association were invited to join the study. With the consent of sampled organizations, all their young adult social workers aged 21–29 were invited to fill in an online questionnaire survey via the Qualtrics system, an online survey platform widely used in Hong Kong, on an individual and voluntary basis.

In Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the organizations employing social workers to provide services are called social service organizations. By the end of 2018, we retrieved the lists of social service organizations in Guangzhou and Shenzhen from the government website using the software called Python. In June 2021, we reviewed the lists by deleting those organizations which had been closed down and adding newly enlisted organizations accordingly. Unlike Hong Kong, the size of social workers employed by social service organizations in these two mainland cities is not available. We could only categorize three types of social service organizations in terms of overall manpower size,

namely, small- (1–30), medium- (31–99), and large- (≥ 100) sized organizations. Through random sampling, 40% of each category of social service organizations was sampled as a pool for invitation for joining the study. With the consent of the organizations, all young adult social workers aged 21–29 were invited to fill in an online questionnaire survey on an online survey platform widely used in Mainland China called *Wenjuanxing* on an individual and voluntary basis.

To ensure that the data collected from any specific NGO would not dominate the results, a ceiling of 20 completed questionnaires at most was set for each of those selected NGOs. In total, we received 382 questionnaires in Hong Kong and 592 questionnaires from Guangzhou and Shenzhen. As there were no missing data in the items measuring decent work and thus all 974 questionnaires collected were valid questionnaires for this study. Prior ethical approval for both studies was granted by the research ethics committee of the university where the corresponding author is affiliated with. Voluntary participation was ensured throughout both studies, and written informed consent was collected from each participant in the Qualtrics/*Wenjuanxing* system in a confidential manner. As an incentive for each of the participants for filling in an online questionnaire, a supermarket coupon worth HK\$50 was given in Hong Kong and that worth CNY40 was given in Shenzhen and Guangzhou.

Instrument

Contextual constraints were conceptualized to be the co-occurrence of multiple types of contextual constraints consisting of three components, namely economic constraints, work injustice, and work insecurity. Economic constraints were measured by a single item which invited the participants to evaluate their economic status by selecting one option from 1 = very well-off, 2 = well-off, 3 = neutral, 4 = poor, and 5 = very poor. Work injustice was measured by two items of 'At work, I often encountered unfair treatment' and 'It is the policies rather than one's job performance that decide one's promotion at work', whereas work insecurity was measured by two items of 'My job is not that stable' and 'I am worried that I will lose my job soon'. These four items were extracted from the Job Demands Scale developed and validated among Chinese social workers (Su, Wong, et al., 2021). Responses to these four items were collected by a 7-point Likert-type scale scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The sum of the scores of the five items measuring economic constraints, work injustice, and work insecurity was counted as the score of contextual constraints. The Cronbach's alpha of these five items was .80 in the original study and .74 in the current study.

Work volition was measured by the 4-item volition subscale of the Work Volition Scale (WVS; Duffy et al., 2012). Responses to these four items were collected by 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), slightly disagree (3), neutral (4), slightly agree (5), agree (6), to strongly agree (7). The sum score of the four items was counted as the work volition of the participants. The Cronbach's alpha of these four items was .86 in the study of Duffy et al. (2012) and .74 in the current study.

Career adaptability was measured by a 12-item short-form of Career Adapt-Abilities Scale extracted from the 24-item Career Adapt-Abilities Scale-China Form which was originally developed by Savickas and Porfeli (2012) and was later on validated by Hou et al. (2012) in China. These 12 items measure the four dimensions of career adaptability (i.e. concern, curiosity, control, and confidence) with three items measuring one dimension and these 12 items were validated by Yu et al. (2020) in China. For each of these 12 items, the participants were asked to indicate how strongly they have developed each of their abilities. Responses to these items were collected by a 5-point Likert-type scale with options ranging from not strong (1), somewhat strong (2), strong (3), very strong (4), to strongest (5). The mean score of the 12 items was counted as the career adaptability of the participants. The Cronbach's alpha of these 12 items ranged from .91 to .94 in the study of Yu et al. (2020) and .91 in the current study.

Decent work was measured by the 15-item Decent Work Scale developed by Duffy's (Duffy et al., 2017), which consists of five factors (i.e. safe working conditions, access to health care, adequate

compensation, free time and rest, and complementary values), and each factor was measured by three items. Responses to these 15 items were collected by a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), slightly disagree (3), neutral (4), slightly agree (5), agree (6), to strongly agree (7). The sum score of the 15 items was counted as the participants' perceived decent work conditions. The Cronbach's alpha of these 15 items was .86 in the study of Duffy et al. (2016) and .84 in the current study.

In view that the Chinese version of the Work Volition Scale and that of the Decent Work Scale were not available when we designed this study, the translation and back-translation procedures were adopted for the purpose of cultural adaptation. The original scales in English were translated into Chinese by two bilingual researchers of the project for producing an initial translation, one is the co-investigator of the project and the other is a postgraduate research student. A back-translation of all the initial translations was produced by two native bilingual translators. A committee of all researchers chaired by the principal investigator of the project, who is the corresponding author of this article, reviewed all the translations and reached a consensus on all identified discrepancies. The pre-final version worked out by the committee was piloted with 20 social workers, who went through the items reported their understanding about the meaning of the items before collecting data for the study. We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) for these two translated scales using the Hong Kong sample ($n = 382$) and the results were both good, as shown in the one-factor model of the Work Volition Scale, $df = 2$, $X^2/df = 2.89$; CFI = .99, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .04, 90% CI = [.04, .05], SRMR = .02 and in the bi-factor model of the Decent Work Scale, $df = 77$, $X^2/df = 3.00$, CFI = .94, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .07, 90% CI = [.06, .07], SRMR = .04. In addition, informed by previous studies (Su & Wong, 2023; Su, Wong, et al., 2021) which suggested that gender, age, educational attainment, and job rank may influence social workers' well-being in Chinese contexts, we also built in these variables as covariates in this study. Gender was reported by the participants as 0 = female or 1 = male. Age was reported by the participants ranging from 21 to 29. Educational attainment was classified as four options from secondary school or below to master's degree. Job rank was classified to include four ranks, namely junior rank, middle rank, senior rank, and chief executive officer.

Data analysis

First of all, Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) was adopted to statistically assess the extent to which common method variance may be a problem. Bivariate Pearson correlations were then conducted to test the preliminary associations among the study variables. Third, variance inflation factors (VIFs) were then tested for collinearity diagnostics. Finally, we tested the moderated mediation model using the PROCESS macro in SPSS developed by Hayes (2017). Following the procedures outlined by Hayes (2017), Model 14 was chosen and the 10,000 bootstrapping resamples were used to test the effects of contextual constraints on decent work conditions, both directly and indirectly through work volition and to test the moderating effects of career adaptability in the conceptual model. According to Hayes (2017), the indirect and moderating effects are considered significant if the 95% bias corrected and accelerated CI do not include zero.

Results

The results of Harman's single-factor test showed no problem with common method bias in this data since the total variance extracted by one factor was 23.51% and it was less than the recommended threshold of 50%. The variance inflation factors for three predictive variables were all below 10, with 1.35, 1.44, and 1.08 for contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability, respectively. Therefore, there was no concern about multicollinearity among the variables. Table 2 presents the bivariate correlations among the study variables. Decent work was positively associated with work volition and career adaptability and negatively associated with contextual constraints as a holistic concept and negatively associated with economic constraints, work injustice, and work insecurity as

Table 2. Associations among the study variables (N = 974).

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| 1.Decent work conditions | 66.14 | 11.32 | (.84) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2.Gender (male=1) | .19 | .39 | -.02 | - | | | | | | | | | |
| 3.Age | 25.91 | 2.31 | .01 | .04 | - | | | | | | | | |
| 4.Education | 2.69 | .66 | -.02 | -.03 | .27** | - | | | | | | | |
| 5.Job rank | 1.34 | .53 | .05 | .05 | .27** | .21** | - | | | | | | |
| 6.Contextual constraints | 33.0 | 17.60 | -.38** | .10** | -.09** | -.16** | -.12** | (.74) | | | | | |
| 7.Economic constraints | 3.40 | .81 | -.15** | .00 | -.11** | -.24** | -.22** | .40** | - | | | | |
| 8.Work injustice | 7.58 | 2.55 | -.46** | .09** | -.04 | -.03 | -.06 | .84** | .18** | - | | | |
| 9.Work insecurity | 6.60 | 2.79 | -.21** | .08** | -.08** | -.19** | -.10** | .87** | .24** | .50** | - | | |
| 10.Work volition | 17.28 | 4.07 | .39** | -.09** | .12** | .12** | .10** | -.51** | -.27** | -.44** | -.42** | (.84) | |
| 11.Career adaptability | 3.88 | .52 | .26** | .05 | .02 | .03 | .07* | -.11** | -.04 | -.07* | -.10** | .27** | (.91) |

Cronbach alpha (on diagonal) for those scales and Pearson correlations (below diagonal) for all study variables; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

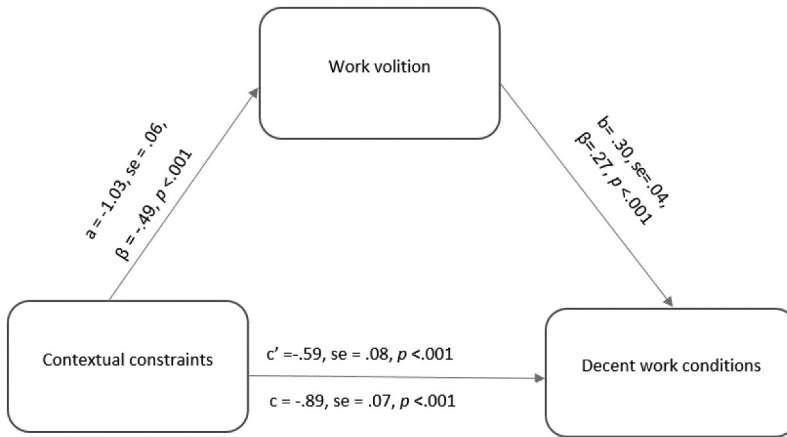


Figure 2. The mediation model with both standardized and unstandardized values for indirect effect.

separate concepts. Contextual constraints were negatively and moderately associated with work volition and weakly associated with career adaptability. Work volition was positively and moderately associated with career adaptability. Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c were supported.

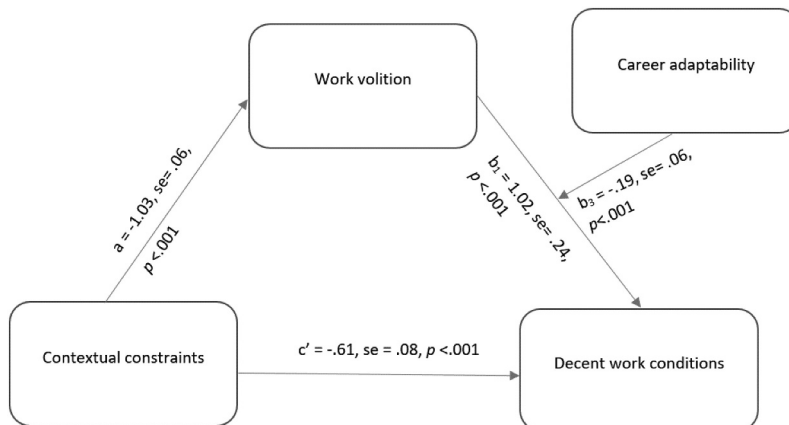
Figure 2 presents the bootstrap test results for the mediation model with both standardized and unstandardized values for the indirect effect. The variable of contextual constraints was a significant predictor of work volition ($a = -1.03$, $SE = .06$, $\beta = -.49$, $p < .001$) after controlling for the effects of gender, age, educational attainment, and the job rank. In the pathway process, both contextual constraints and work volition were significant predictors of decent work conditions after controlling for gender, age, educational attainment, and job rank. The coefficient c' reflected the direct effect of contextual constraints ($c' = -.59$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$) and b reflected the direct effect of work volition ($b = .30$, $SE = .04$, $\beta = .27$, $p < .001$). The total effects of contextual constraints on decent work conditions are reflected by the coefficient c ($c = -.89$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$).

Table 3 and Figure 3 present the bootstrap test results for the moderated mediation model with unstandardized values (the standardized values were not available with moderators in the model). The variable of contextual constraints was a significant predictor of work volition ($a = -1.03$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) after controlling for the effects of gender, age, educational

Table 3. Model coefficients for the moderated mediation model ($N = 974$).

| Antecedent variables | Path | Consequent variables | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|------|------------------------------------|-----|----------|-----------------|------------------------------------|------|----------|
| | | M (work volition) | | | Y (decent work) | | | |
| | | Coeff. | SE | <i>p</i> | Path | Coeff. | SE | <i>p</i> |
| X (contextual constraints) | a | -1.03 | .06 | <.000 | c' | -.61 | .08 | <.000 |
| M (work volition) | | - | - | - | b ₁ | 1.02 | .24 | <.000 |
| W (career adaptability) | | - | - | - | b ₂ | 15.66 | 3.58 | <.000 |
| M*W | | - | - | - | b ₃ | -.19 | .06 | <.000 |
| Gender | | -.92 | .73 | .21 | | .59 | .83 | .49 |
| Age | | .30 | .13 | <.05 | | -.06 | .15 | .68 |
| Education | | .38 | .46 | .41 | | -1.50 | .52 | <.01 |
| Job rank | | .25 | .57 | .66 | | -.03 | .65 | .96 |
| | | R ² = .27 | | | | R ² = .24 | | |
| | | F(5, 942) = 68.38, <i>p</i> < .001 | | | | F(8, 939) = 36.17, <i>p</i> < .001 | | |

Path a refers to direct effect of contextual constraints on work volition. Path c' refers to the direct effect of contextual constraints on decent work. Path b₁ refers to the direct effect of work volition on decent work, b₂ refers to the direct effect of career adaptability on decent work, b₃ refers to the moderating effect of adaptability within the path from work volition to decent work, co-eff. refers to path coefficient, SE refers to standard error. Analyses were also run without covariates per best practice (e.g. Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016) and results remained the same in terms of significance level and direction.

**Figure 3.** The moderated mediation model with unstandardized values.

attainment, and the job rank. In the pathway process, both contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability were significant predictors of decent work after controlling for gender, age, educational attainment, and job rank. The coefficient c' reflected the direct effect of contextual constraints ($c' = -.61$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$) and b_1 reflected the direct effect of work volition ($b_1 = 1.02$, $SE = .24$, $p < .001$), and b_2 reflected the direct effect of career adaptability on decent work ($b_2 = 15.66$, $SE = 3.58$, $p < .001$) and b_3 was the moderating effect of career adaptability within the path model ($b_3 = -.19$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$). What is worth noting is that the effects of career adaptability on decent work in the conceptual model were much larger than contextual constraints and work volition.

The indirect effect of constraints on decent work through the mechanism of work volition was moderated by career adaptability, which was supported by the bootstrap standard errors and confidence intervals (CI). The index of moderated mediation showed that zero does not fall between the lower and upper bound of the 95% CI (lower 95% CI = .05 and upper 95% CI = .35). The effects of contextual constraints on decent work through the mechanism of work volition were mitigated by the level of career adaptability. When the level of career adaptability increased from a lower level ($-1SD = 3.37$), to a medium level ($Mean = 3.88$), and to a higher level ($+1SD = 4.39$), the mediating

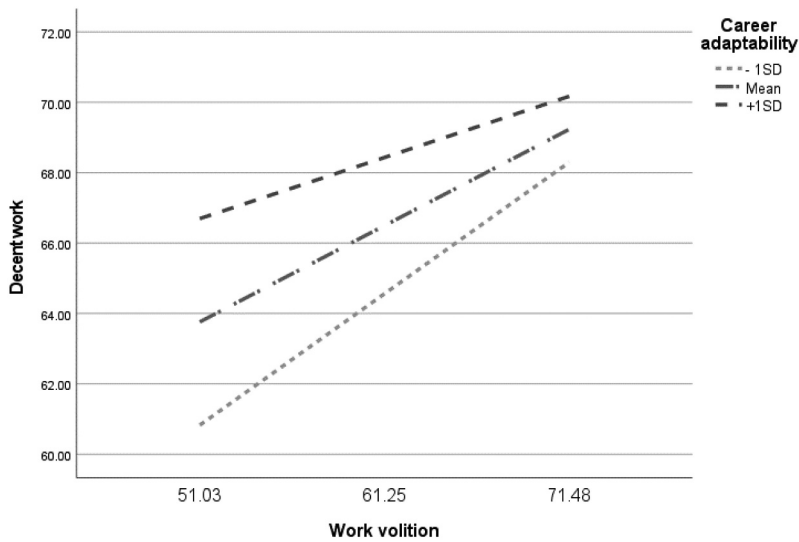


Figure 4. Moderating effects of career adaptability in the link between work volition and decent work conditions.

effects of work volition dropped down significantly from $-.37$ to $-.27$, and then to $-.17$. Zero did not fall between the lower and upper bound of the 95% CI for the three levels of career adaptability at $-1SD$, *Mean*, and $+1SD$. Collectively, the results supported Hypotheses 2 and 3 regarding the indirect effect of the contextual constraints on decent work through the mechanism of work volition and the indirect effect varies depending on the level of career adaptability of the participants. Specifically, a higher level of their career adaptability led to lower indirect effect. Analyses were also run without covariates per best practice (e.g. Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016) and results remained the same in terms of significance level and direction. The simple slopes for the moderating effects of career adaptability are presented in Figure 4.

Discussion

Using the data collected from a cross-sectional study conducted in Chinese metropolitan contexts with random sampling procedures, this study examined a moderated mediation model informed by the psychology of working theory with respect to explaining the effects of contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on young adult social workers' decent work conditions. The findings of this study will inform the promotion of decent work in the social work profession, the sustainable development of social service organizations, and the career development of the young adult social workers under the conceptual framework of psychology of working theory.

First of all, this is the first empirical study reviewing the subjective, experiential, and aspirational working conditions in the social work profession through the decent work notion and the perspective of psychology of working theory. The findings of this study are deemed important to inform the promotion of decent work as a sustainable development goal in the social work profession. In line with the findings of existing studies informed by the same theory (Allan et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Douglass et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2018; England et al., 2020; Kozan et al., 2019; Rossier & Ouedraogo, 2021; Tokar & Kaut, 2018), this study revealed that contextual constraints encompassing economic constraints, work injustice, and work insecurity were unfavourable working conditions that are harming young adult social workers' decent work conditions. These findings may advance the discussions about the combined psychosocial effects of various contextual factors on social workers' decent work conditions by means of transitioning from a conventional perspective with an emphasis

on the person-job-fit paradigm to a perspective presuming the inevitable influence of structural and contextual factors (Autin & Duffy, 2019). These findings may inform the promotion of decent work conditions in the social work profession by advocating making changes at structural and contextual levels. In recent years, there has been an increase of studies (e.g. An & Chapman, 2014; Wu & Chen, 2022; Zeng et al., 2015) suggesting that the social work profession in mainland China has encountered structural and contextual challenges which are against its sustainable development, including the immature regulation systems imposed by local authorities, the dominating roles played by higher levels of government, and the low level of social recognition experienced by social workers. However, a theoretical framework is still lacking for explicating how the co-occurrence of contextual constraints can cause harmful effects on the development of the profession. The findings of this study may suggest making contextual changes in relation to the social work profession and to social service organizations for reducing the respective effect of contextual constraints in terms of economic constraints, work injustice, and work insecurity, but also the combined effects of these contextual factors. Moreover, the findings of this study also inform the design and implementation of more research studies to fully address the influence of multiple structural and contextual factors on the sustainable development of the social work profession and facilitate the promotion of decent work conditions in the social work profession.

Second, this study provides empirical evidence to reveal the psychological mechanisms that explain how contextual constraints affect young adult social workers' decent work conditions. This study supports the indirect effect of contextual constraints on young adult social workers' decent work conditions through the mechanism of harming their work volition, which is consistent with relevant findings among other target groups (Allan et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Rossier & Ouedraogo, 2021). This finding provides a direction to reduce the negative effects of contextual constraints imposed on young adult social workers. Su, Wong, et al. (2021, 2021, 2021) found that some social workers are more capable of making informed decisions or joining in shared decision-making in their organizations even in tough times. Informed by the findings of this study, social service organizations may provide trainings to their social worker employees and social work education institutions may provide trainings to their social work students for enhancing their work volition, which may prepare them to face the risks caused by structural factors and enable them to make their informed decisions even when encountering constraints and barriers at work.

Another important finding of this study relates to the fitness of the moderated mediation model for explicating young adult social workers' decent work conditions, which highlights the moderating effects of career adaptability as psychosocial resources in the link between work volition and decent work, and suggests that the indirect effect of contextual constraints on decent work via work volition varies depending on their levels of career adaptability. As informed by the capability approach (Robertson, 2015; Sen, 1993; Su & Chan, 2023; Su & Wong, 2022), these findings enrich existing understanding on the psychology of working theory regarding the role played by career adaptability on employees' decent work conditions. Some studies revealed that career adaptability mediated the influences of economic constraints on decent work (e.g. England et al., 2020; Kozan et al., 2019; Tokar & Kaut, 2018), whereas some studies rejected such kind of mediating effects (Douglass et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2018), leading to a space for more discussions regarding the effects of cultural backgrounds and population groups on the specific roles played by career adaptability (Autin & Duffy, 2019). This is the first study supporting the moderating effects of career adaptability as psychosocial resources in the association between work volition and decent work. Moreover, the effects of career adaptability in the moderated mediation model appeared to be much larger than that of contextual constraints and work volition, and the incorporation of career adaptability into the model as a moderator significantly mitigated the indirect effect of work volition in the relationship between contextual constraints and decent work. These findings may draw implications in terms of highlighting the roles played by the psychosocial resources consisting of four domains, namely concern, curiosity, control, and confidence on young adult social

workers' decent work conditions. It seems that young adult social workers with a high level of career adaptability may be more capable of escaping from the trap that denotes a higher level of contextual constraints leading to lower level of work volition, and thus depriving one's decent work conditions. These findings may suggest a path to adapt the psychology of working theory to the contexts of the social work profession in a way of recognizing the psychosocial dynamics and processes experienced by frontline workers in particular and emphasizing their agency in proactively negotiating the effects of uncertainty and negative impact caused by the co-occurring contextual constraints. These findings may inform the improvement of organizational practice for supporting the career development of young adult social workers with an emphasis on enhancing their adaptability. For example, the social service organizations may develop organizational policies conducive to cultivating and recognizing the career adaptability of young adult social workers, and the human resources management of social service organizations may provide ongoing support and training favourable for enhancing the career adaptability of young adult social workers. According to the capability approach, the term psychosocial resources covers a wide range of psychosocial characteristics that are enabling for people's sustainable career development (Su & Chan, 2023), the findings of the present study may inform future studies to examine the effects of other types of psychosocial resources such as proactivity (Bateman & Crant, 1993), and psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007) on improving young adult social workers' decent work conditions.

Limitations

First, the scales used to measure the major variables in the study were self-reported tools, which may lead to common method bias in the findings. Although Harman's single-factor test was adopted to assess the extent of common method variance of the study, yet the sensitivity of the test is still doubted (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, the empirical data of this study are limited to young adult social workers from three Chinese metropolitan cities. We cannot thus generalize the findings to their Western counterparts. Future studies are also suggested to validate the moderated mediation model among social workers of different age groups and verify the model in different human helping professions such as nurses, career practitioners, and counsellors, etc., which may share some common characteristics of serving people in need in other societies of diverse cultural backgrounds. Third, as the variance explained by the moderated mediation model for work volition and decent work conditions was 27% and 24%, respectively, there remain other factors according to the psychology of working theory which may explain these two variables. For example, marginalization, social support, or personality of workers, and their critical consciousness, etc. (Duffy et al., 2016), which may be taken into consideration in future studies subject to an in-depth understanding regarding the adaptation of the theory for the social work profession. Finally, this study did not examine the differential effects of contextual constraints, work volition, and career adaptability on decent work conditions among young adult social workers across different Chinese contexts, including both urban and rural areas. Future studies may consider working towards this direction.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of this study support that a) work volition mediated the relationship between contextual constraints and decent work, b) career adaptability as psychosocial resources moderated the link between work volition and decent work, and c) the indirect effect of co-occurrence of multiple types of contextual constraints on decent work via work volition varied depending on the level of career adaptability, that is, the indirect effect of contextual constraints was weaker for individuals with a higher level of career adaptability. These results of this study support the application and adaptation of the psychology of

working theory informed by the capability approach among the population group of young adult social workers, enrich our understanding about this theory, and draw implications for promoting decent work in the social work profession, the sustainable development of social service organizations, and the career development of young adult social workers through the adapted perspective of the psychology of working theory. Future studies are suggested to test the conceptual framework by taking into consideration the effects of other associates of decent work and compare the results across different Chinese contexts.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong [Grant Number #HKBU/GRF/12600819], the China National Social Science Fund [Grant Number: 19CSH063], and Shanghai Social Science Foundation [Grant Number: 2018BSH011].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Shanghai Social Science Foundation [2018BSH011]; Research Grants Council of Hong Kong [HKBU/GRF/12600819]; the China National Social Science Fund [19CSH063].

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Authorship

Xuebing Su was responsible for designing the study, conducting data collection and data analysis, drafting and revising the article.

Victor Wong was responsible for supervising the study, conducting data collection, and drafting and revising the article.

Kun Liang was responsible for co-designing the study, data collection, and co-drafting the article.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval statement & consent form

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Hong Kong Baptist University (project code HASC/18–19/0183 approved on 25 October 2018). All participants were well informed about the objectives of the research and signed a consent form before joining the research.

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