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## Career Discrepancy, Burnout, and Well-Being in Psychology and Educational Sciences Students: A Mediation Model

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### Abstract

The present study examined the associations between career discrepancy, burnout, and well-being among undergraduate students in psychology and educational sciences and tested whether burnout mediates the relationship between career discrepancy and well-being. The sample included 997 students (19% men, 81% women; M age = 21.37, SD = 3.71) enrolled at the University of Bucharest and the University of Craiova. Participants completed measures of career discrepancy, burnout, and well-being. Results showed that of the four discrepancy dimensions, only ability discrepancy showed a significant direct negative association with well-being. However, burnout significantly mediated the relationship between three of the four dimensions - achievement, standards, and ability discrepancy - and well-being, indicating that perceived misalignment between career expectations and current capabilities or progress contributes to reduced well-being primarily through increased burnout. Effort discrepancy did not demonstrate a mediating effect. These findings underscore the psychological impact of career-related misalignments in students preparing for highly regulated professional fields. The results highlight burnout as a key mechanism linking career discrepancy to diminished well-being and point to the need for targeted career counseling and institutional interventions aimed at expectation management, resilience building, and support during the university-to-work transition.

**Keywords:** career discrepancy, well-being, burnout, psychology and educational sciences students

### Introduction

In the transition from university training to the labor market, psychology and educational sciences students frequently encounter psychological tensions stemming from the gap between their professional aspirations and the realities of the occupational landscape. These gaps are conceptualized in the literature as career discrepancy, defined as the perceived mismatch between desired career goals and one's current progress or available opportunities (Creed & Hughes, 2013). Such discrepancies are important predictors of career-related distress, reduced well-being, and increased risk of burnout.

From the perspective of vocational development psychology, students in psychology-related fields are typically driven by strong prosocial ideals and aspirations to enter specialized professional roles (e.g., clinical psychologist, school counselor, psychoeducator). However, access to these positions is often constrained by strict regulation, postgraduate training requirements, and

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high competition, which may lead to the perception that professional goals are more difficult to achieve than initially anticipated (Hirschi, 2011; Savickas, 2013). Under these conditions, career discrepancy emerges as a form of dissonance between the ideal professional identity and one's current or anticipated occupational status.

European data show that Romania continues to face major vulnerabilities among young people, particularly at the transition from education to employment. In 2024, the share of youth aged 15–29 who were not in employment, education, or training (NEET) remained among the highest in the European Union, significantly above the EU average (European Commission, 2024). At the same time, the employment rate for young adults aged 20–29 in Romania has remained relatively modest, around 50–55% in recent years, indicating persistent barriers to early labor-market integration, even for youth with higher levels of education (Trading Economics, 2024). This suggests that while a university degree remains advantageous, it does not necessarily ensure alignment between one's field of study and the job obtained, reopening long-standing debates on underemployment, overqualification, and career mismatch.

Across Europe, reports on the employability of psychology graduates reveal a heterogeneous picture. On the one hand, there is a growing societal need for psychological and psycho-pedagogical competencies; on the other hand, the number of psychology graduates often exceeds the availability of strictly defined “psychologist” positions. As a result, many graduates transition toward adjacent professional areas such as human resources, training, social services, education, and NGO work (Aqu Catalunya, 2020). Longitudinal graduate-tracking studies show that career trajectories in psychology tend to be non-linear, frequently marked by periods of transition, temporary employment, or jobs outside the original field of study before eventual stabilization in a role perceived as professionally “congruent” (Jezek et al., 2012).

Although several institutional reports indicate favorable medium-term outcomes, such as competitive average earnings and relatively high employment rates five years after graduation, these indicators do not clearly capture the degree of alignment between academic specialization and the occupations obtained (Dănăciță et al., 2013). Research on overqualification suggest that not all graduates enter positions directly related to their formal training; a significant proportion work in entry-level roles in service sectors, administration, or commercial–organizational contexts, despite holding specialized degrees (Creed & Gagliardi, 2014). Such findings highlight a structural context in which many psychology and educational sciences graduates experience career misalignment, uncertainty, or delays in entering preferred professional roles, conditions that are conducive to the emergence of career discrepancy.

### **The Concept of Career Discrepancy and Its Role in the School-to-Work Transition**

The concept of career discrepancy, also referred to as career goal–performance discrepancy, describes the perceived gap between young adults' career aspirations (e.g., desired occupation, level of responsibility, professional recognition) and the realities of their current situation (e.g., job obtained, employment status, nature of assigned tasks). Career discrepancy was defined as the subjective difference between the “ideal career” and one's “current career position,” showing that greater discrepancies are associated with higher career-related distress, lower self-perceived employability, and less adaptive coping behaviors (Creed & Hood, 2015; Creed & Macpherson, 2022).

Recent models differentiate several forms of career goal discrepancy. Progress discrepancy refers to the perception of insufficient advancement toward one's career goal; fit discrepancy

reflects difficulty obtaining positions perceived as aligned with one's training; and contextual discrepancy describes the conflict between professional aspirations and contextual constraints such as labor-market conditions or family pressures (van Hooft et al., 2021). Empirical evidence links these discrepancies with reduced perceived career control, increased intentions to leave one's chosen field, and lower engagement in proactive career behaviors such as career exploration, networking, and additional training (Creed & Hood, 2015).

Parallel research on career adaptability and vocational identity development among university students shows that a well-defined professional identity, together with adaptive career resources (e.g., optimism, self-efficacy, perceived control), can buffer the negative effects of career discrepancies on psychological well-being and academic or professional engagement (Hirschi, 2009; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). These findings suggest that career discrepancy is not inherently detrimental; rather, its impact depends on students' capacity to regulate expectations, mobilize adaptive coping strategies, and maintain a coherent sense of vocational direction.

Creed and Hood (2015) identified four dimensions of career discrepancy:

1. **Achievement Discrepancy.** It refers to the perceived gap between one's current career accomplishments and the level of achievement one believes should have been reached by this stage. Students experiencing this form of discrepancy feel that their progress, such as internships, job offers, relevant experience, or academic performance, falls short of their expectations. This dimension emphasizes outcomes and tangible milestones that individuals believe they "ought to" have achieved.

2. **Effort Discrepancy.** It captures the perceived mismatch between the amount of effort a person invests in their career development and the results they obtain. Individuals may feel they are working hard, seeking opportunities, studying intensely, applying for roles, yet their efforts do not translate into the expected advancement. This discrepancy highlights frustration stemming from the belief that effort is not adequately rewarded.

3. **Standards Discrepancy.** It reflects the difference between one's internal standards or ideal expectations for career success and the actual career circumstances. These standards may concern job prestige, autonomy, meaningfulness of work, or alignment with personal values. When current roles or opportunities fail to meet these internal benchmarks, individuals experience a sense of incongruence between "what should be" and "what is."

4. **Ability Discrepancy.** It refers to the perceived gap between one's skills or competencies and the abilities required to reach desired career goals. Students may feel underqualified or insufficiently prepared for the roles they aspire to, even if they are performing adequately. This form of discrepancy often involves self-doubt, low career self-efficacy, or concerns about not being capable enough to succeed in a chosen field.

### **Psychology and Educational Sciences Students as a "At-Risk" Group for Career Discrepancy**

Students in psychology and educational sciences represent a particularly vulnerable group in discussions of career discrepancy. First, many target professions, such as clinical psychology, school counseling, special education, or organizational psychology, which are highly regulated and require substantial postgraduate training, supervised practice, and professional accreditation. This extended pathway often delays entry into roles perceived as "legitimate" and increases the likelihood of mismatch between expectations and early career realities (Creed & Hood, 2015).

Second, the rapid expansion of undergraduate programs in psychology and education across Europe and Romania has not been matched by a proportional growth in specialized job openings. Consequently, many graduates enter peripheral or loosely related roles, including administrative positions, customer service, or entry-level HR jobs that use only part of their training. Such contexts heighten the risk of underemployment and overqualification, creating fertile ground for perceived career discrepancy (CEDEFOP, 2018).

Third, psychology students in particular tend to report high prosocial aspirations and strong vocational commitments to helping professions. Research shows that when early job experiences fall short of these ideals, students may experience frustration, diminished motivation, and greater difficulty adjusting their career expectations (Bartram & Roe, 2008). Without structured career counseling and realistic information about professional pathways, the gap between the “imagined career” and the “possible career” can become a significant source of stress and disengagement (Lent et al., 1994).

### **Gaps in the Literature and the Relevance of the Present Study**

Although the literature on graduate employability and career discrepancies is growing, research specifically addressing Romanian psychology and educational sciences students is scarce. Existing studies often examine employability at a macro level, focus on other academic domains, or describe labor-market outcomes without operationalizing key psychological constructs such as career discrepancy, career adaptability, or vocational identity (Marelli et al., 2014).

A targeted investigation of career discrepancy among Romanian psychology and educational sciences students responds to two essential needs. First, it advances theoretical understanding of how young adults negotiate professional identity in a volatile and segmented labor market. Second, it provides actionable data for universities and career counseling services, supporting the development of interventions aimed at expectation management, strengthening adaptability resources, and facilitating smoother transitions into roles aligned with their academic training.

### **Career Discrepancy and Well-Being**

Career discrepancy has been consistently linked to lower levels of psychological well-being. Research shows that when young adults experience misalignment between their aspirations (e.g., securing a specialized professional role) and their actual career situation, they are more likely to report heightened distress, reduced life satisfaction, and increased emotional exhaustion (Creed & Hughes, 2013; Creed & Hood, 2015).

From a vocational development perspective, unmet or blocked career goals threaten an individual’s sense of competence, autonomy, and purpose, three core psychological needs associated with well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When students perceive that they are not progressing adequately toward their envisioned professional identity, they are more likely to experience frustration, self-doubt, and diminished motivation. Empirical evidence indicates that such discrepancies predict higher levels of career distress, including rumination, anxiety about the future, and feelings of stagnation (Creed et al., 2020).

Moreover, longitudinal studies show that individuals with greater career goal–performance discrepancy report lower subjective well-being, including lower positive affect and life satisfaction ((Creed & Hood, 2015; Creed & Hughes, 2013). This effect is often explained through mechanisms such as reduced self-efficacy, weakened career optimism, and a diminished sense of

personal agency (Hirschi, 2011). When people repeatedly experience obstacles that prevent them from achieving meaningful goals, their overall psychological functioning tends to deteriorate.

Taken together, these findings indicate a clear negative correlation between career discrepancy and well-being: higher levels of discrepancy are reliably associated with lower psychological health, reduced satisfaction, and greater distress. Conversely, reducing discrepancy, through realistic goal-setting, career counseling, or increased opportunities for mastery, tends to enhance well-being by restoring a sense of direction, competence, and control.

### **The Mediating Role of Burnout in the Relationship between Career Discrepancy and Well-Being**

Students in psychology and educational sciences programs represent a group particularly vulnerable to burnout due to the emotionally demanding nature of their training, high levels of academic pressure, and strong prosocial motivations. Research shows that these students often engage deeply in their studies, internalize high expectations about becoming competent practitioners, and experience elevated emotional involvement in coursework and practicum activities (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014). Such characteristics, while beneficial for professional development, also increase susceptibility to emotional exhaustion, academic stress, and burnout.

Burnout in university students is typically conceptualized through three dimensions - emotional exhaustion, cynicism or disengagement, and reduced academic efficacy (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Studies consistently show that psychology and educational sciences programs report higher levels of emotional exhaustion than students in technical or business programs, partly due to the interpersonal and emotionally charged content of their training (Jacobs & Dodd, 2003). When students feel overwhelmed or unable to meet their internal or external expectations, burnout develops and negatively affects their motivation, well-being, and ability to sustain academic performance.

Career discrepancy has been identified as a strong predictor of academic and emotional distress (Creed & Hughes, 2013). The long and highly regulated path to „psy” professions can create a sense of stagnation or discouragement. When students believe they are not advancing quickly enough or that opportunities in their field are limited, they may experience frustration, hopelessness, and decreased motivation.

Burnout provides a theoretical and empirical bridge between career discrepancy and well-being. Several studies indicate that unmet career expectations lead to increased emotional exhaustion and disengagement from academic tasks (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2018). This occurs because the discrepancy threatens students’ sense of competence and purpose, core elements that sustain their academic persistence and emotional balance.

Burnout, in turn, has well-documented negative effects on psychological well-being, including increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, reduced life satisfaction, and diminished academic self-efficacy (Madigan & Curran, 2021). Therefore, burnout functions as a mediator: career discrepancy generates emotional strain and reduced motivation, which heighten burnout, and the resulting burnout contributes to lower well-being.

Empirical work supports this mediating model. Studies on university populations show that burnout mediates the relationship between stressors (including academic and career-related discrepancies) and well-being outcomes (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014). In sum, the literature suggests that career discrepancy - burnout - reduced well-being is a plausible and theoretically grounded pathway. This mediating mechanism highlights the importance of career counseling,

realistic professional guidance, and targeted interventions to reduce burnout and support students in navigating the uncertainties of their future careers.

### **The Present Study**

In the current study, we aim to examine the relationships among these variables and propose the following hypotheses:

H1. *Career discrepancy is negatively associated with well-being in psychology and educational sciences students.*

H2. *Career discrepancy is positively associated with burnout in psychology and educational sciences students.*

H3. *Burnout mediates the relationship between career discrepancy and well-being in psychology and educational sciences students.*

## **Method**

### **Participants and procedure**

The present study included 997 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences and at University of Craiova, Department for Teacher Education. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 37 years ( $M = 21.37$ ,  $SD = 3.71$ ). The sample consisted of 194 men (19%) and 803 women (81%). Regarding year of study, 521 were first-year students (52%), 118 were second-year students (12%), and 358 were third-year students (36%). In terms of academic major, 521 students (52%) were enrolled in psychology programs, while 476 students (48%) were enrolled in educational sciences programs. With respect to marital status, 735 students (74%) identified as single, whereas 262 (26%) reported being in a relationship.

A convenience sampling method was used. Data were collected via a Google Forms questionnaire administered between October 2023 and June 2024. All ethical requirements were met: participants provided informed consent, agreed to take part in the study, and authorized the processing of personal data in accordance with GDPR regulations. Students received no compensation for participation. Completion time for the survey was approximately 15 minutes.

### **Instruments**

*Demographics* were collected through a list of questions regarding participants' age, gender, faculty, study year, and marital status.

*Career discrepancy* was measured with Career Discrepancy Scale (Creed & Hood, 2015), translated in Romanian by the authors of the present study in accordance with specific current standards. The instrument comprises 12 items and measures four dimensions of career discrepancy: achievement discrepancy, effort discrepancy, standards discrepancy, and ability discrepancy. Responses are given on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 - total disagreement and 5 - total agreement. Scores are obtained by summing up the points for each item corresponding to the respective subscales. High scores indicate a greater degree of discrepancy. Examples of items: "My plans are not working out to get the career I really want", "I doubt I can meet the standards of entry to my ideal career". Scores on each dimension can range from 3 to 15, with higher scores indicating a greater discrepancy on that specific dimension.

*Burnout* was measured using the Academic Burnout Scale developed by Zhang et al. (2015), a validated instrument designed to assess study-related burnout in university populations. The scale conceptualizes academic burnout as a multifaceted construct reflecting students'

emotional, cognitive, and motivational depletion resulting from prolonged academic demands. The instrument includes 15 items that assess three core components of academic burnout: emotional exhaustion (feelings of fatigue, depletion, and being overwhelmed by academic requirements), cynicism (academic disengagement, a detached or negative attitude toward one's studies, including loss of interest and reduced motivation), reduced academic efficacy (diminished perceptions of competence, achievement, and effectiveness in academic tasks). Item examples: „I feel emotionally drained by my studies”, „I doubt the significance of my studies”. Students rate each item on a Likert-type scale indicating the extent to which they experience each symptom, where 1 – total disagree and 5 – total agree. Higher scores reflect higher levels of academic burnout. The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency and construct validity across university samples and has been widely used in research examining health outcomes, academic performance, and motivational processes (Zhang et al., 2015).

*Well-being* was assessed using the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener et al. (1985). The SWLS is one of the most widely used instruments for measuring global cognitive evaluations of one's life satisfaction, representing the cognitive component of subjective well-being. The scale consists of 5 items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 - strongly disagree to 7 - strongly agree. Items capture individuals' judgments about the extent to which their life circumstances match their ideal standards (e.g., “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.”). Higher scores indicate higher overall life satisfaction. The SWLS has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties across cultures and populations, including university students, showing strong internal consistency, temporal stability, and convergent validity with other well-being indicators. It is considered a brief yet robust measure for assessing subjective well-being in survey research. In the present study, we used the global burnout score.

### **Design**

The present study employed a cross-sectional design, in which all variables were measured at a single point in time. This approach allowed us to examine the associations among career discrepancy, burnout, and well-being in psychology and educational sciences students, as well as to test the proposed mediation model. Although cross-sectional designs do not permit causal inferences, they are effective for identifying patterns of relationships between psychological constructs and for providing an initial empirical foundation for future longitudinal research. All data were collected through self-report measures administered online.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 24) (IBM. Corp, 2016) to examine the distributions of the variables and the bivariate associations among career discrepancy, burnout, and well-being. To test the hypothesized mediation model, we used the medmod (General Linear Model) module implemented in jamovi (The jamovi project, 2022). Career discrepancy was specified as the predictor, burnout as the mediator, and well-being as the outcome variable. Indirect effects were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals, with mediation considered significant when the confidence interval did not include zero. All analyses used two-tailed significance testing with an alpha level of .05.

## Findings and discussion

### Descriptive statistics

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach Alpha coefficients and correlations among variables are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

	M	SD	$\alpha$	DCAC	DCEF	DCST	DCAB	BU	WB
DCAC	6.70	2.91	.79	1					
DCEF	5.93	3.08	.82	.74**	1				
DCST	5.93	3.22	.85	.74**	.88**	1			
DCAB	6.17	3.38	.90	.74**	.84**	.90**	1		
BU	51.83	16.35	.90	.45**	.41**	.46**	.48**	1	
WB	24.47	6.70	.88	-.39**	-.39**	-.43**	-.44**	-.45**	1

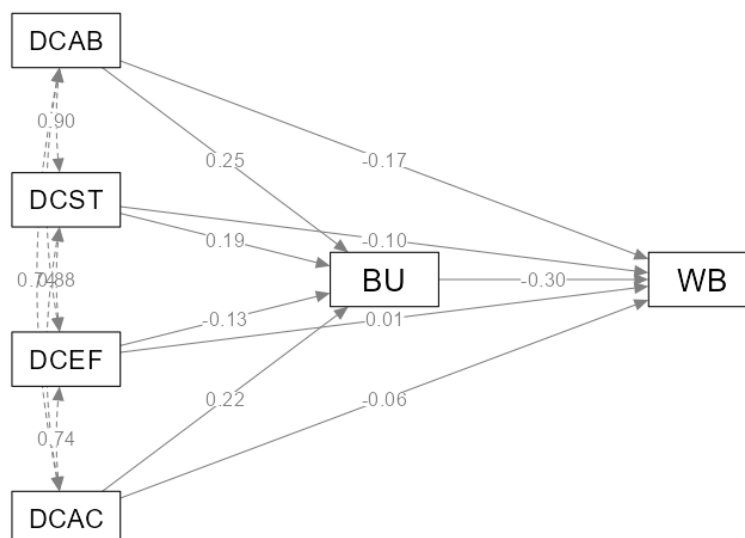
Note: \*\*.  $p < .01$ ; DCAC – achievement discrepancy, DCEF – effort discrepancy, DCST – standards discrepancy, DCAB – ability discrepancy, BU – burnout, WB – well-being

Skewness and kurtosis ranged between (-1, 1), reflecting a normal data distribution.

The descriptive data show that participants obtained the highest score on achievement discrepancy,  $M = 6.70$ ,  $SD = 2.91$ , followed by ability discrepancy,  $M = 6.17$ ,  $SD = 3.38$ , and, lastly, effort discrepancy,  $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 3.08$ , and standards discrepancy,  $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 3.22$ . The level of burnout is slightly above average,  $M = 51.83$ ,  $SD = 16.35$ , while the level of well-being is relatively high,  $M = 24.47$ ,  $SD = 6.70$ .

### Hypotheses testing

**Figure 1. The mediation model for burnout in the relationship between career discrepancy dimensions and well-being**



Note: DCAC – achievement discrepancy, DCEF – effort discrepancy, DCST – standards discrepancy, DCAB – ability discrepancy,

BU – burnout, WB – well-being

**Table 2. Indirect, direct and total effects of career discrepancy dimensions on well-being**

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	95% C.I. (a)		$\beta$	z	p
				Lower	Upper			
Indirect	DCAC $\Rightarrow$ BU $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.15	.03	-.22	-.09	-.07	-4.49	.00
	DCEF $\Rightarrow$ BU $\Rightarrow$ WB	.09	.04	.00	.17	.04	2.05	.05
	DCST $\Rightarrow$ BU $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.12	.05	-.22	-.03	-.06	-2.47	.01
	DCAB $\Rightarrow$ BU $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.15	.04	-.23	-.07	-.08	-3.50	.00
Component	DCAC $\Rightarrow$ BU	1.23	.24	.75	1.71	.22	5.05	.00
	BU $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.12	.01	-.15	-.10	-.30	-9.76	.00
	DCEF $\Rightarrow$ BU	-.68	.32	-1.32	-.05	-.13	-2.10	.04
	DCST $\Rightarrow$ BU	.97	.38	.23	1.72	.19	2.55	.01
	DCAB $\Rightarrow$ BU	1.20	.32	.58	1.83	.25	3.75	.00
Direct	DCAC $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.13	.10	-.33	.06	-.06	-1.32	.19
	DCEF $\Rightarrow$ WB	.01	.13	-.25	.27	.01	.09	.93
	DCST $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.20	.15	-.51	.10	-.10	-1.31	.19
	DCAB $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.33	.13	-.59	-.07	-.17	-2.52	.01
Total	DCAC $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.29	.10	-.49	-.08	-.12	-2.77	.01
	DCEF $\Rightarrow$ WB	.10	.14	-.17	.37	.04	.71	.48
	DCST $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.32	.16	-.64	-.01	-.16	-2.01	.04
	DCAB $\Rightarrow$ WB	-.48	.14	-.75	-.21	-.24	-3.53	.00

*Note:* DCAC – achievement discrepancy, DCEF – effort discrepancy, DCST – standards discrepancy, DCAB – ability discrepancy, BU – burnout, WB – well-being

### Indirect effects

The results show that burnout mediates the relationship between three of the four career discrepancy dimensions and well-being, with significant indirect effects, but it does not mediate the relationship between effort discrepancy and well-being. Specifically, for achievement discrepancy,  $b = -.15$ ,  $CI_{95\%}(-.22, -.09)$ ,  $\beta = -.07$ ,  $z = -4.49$ ,  $p < .01$ ; for standards discrepancy,  $b = -.12$ ,  $CI_{95\%}(-.22, -.03)$ ,  $\beta = -.06$ ,  $z = -2.47$ ,  $p < .05$ ; for ability discrepancy,  $b = -.15$ ,  $CI_{95\%}(-.23, -.07)$ ,  $\beta = -.08$ ,  $z = -3.50$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and for effort discrepancy,  $b = .09$ ,  $CI_{95\%}(.00, .17)$ ,  $\beta = .04$ ,  $z = 2.05$ ,  $p = .05$ .

### Direct effects of career discrepancy dimensions on well-being

Ability discrepancy is significantly and negatively associated with well-being,  $b = -.33$ ,  $CI_{95\%}(-.59, -.07)$ ,  $\beta = -.17$ ,  $z = -2.52$ ,  $p < .05$ . The other three career discrepancy dimensions do not show significant associations with well-being. For achievement discrepancy,  $b = -.13$ ,  $CI_{95\%}(-.33, .06)$ ,  $\beta = -.06$ ,  $z = -1.32$ ,  $p = .19$ ; for effort discrepancy,  $b = .01$ ,  $CI_{95\%}(-.25, .27)$ ,

$\beta = .01$ ,  $z = .09$ ,  $p = .93$ ; and for standards discrepancy,  $b = -.20$ ,  $CI95\%(-.51, .10)$ ,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $z = -1.31$ ,  $p = .19$ .

### **Direct effects of career discrepancy dimensions on burnout**

Achievement discrepancy is significantly and positively associated with burnout,  $b = 1.23$ ,  $CI95\%(.75, 1.71)$ ,  $\beta = .22$ ,  $z = 5.05$ ,  $p < .01$ , standards discrepancy is significantly and positively associated with burnout,  $b = .97$ ,  $CI95\%(.23, 1.72)$ ,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $z = 2.55$ ,  $p < .05$ , ability discrepancy is significantly and positively associated with burnout,  $b = 1.20$ ,  $CI95\%(.58, 1.83)$ ,  $\beta = .25$ ,  $z = 3.75$ ,  $p < .01$ , but effort discrepancy is significantly and negatively associated with burnout,  $b = -.68$ ,  $CI95\%(-1.32, -.05)$ ,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $z = -2.10$ ,  $p < .05$ .

At the same time, burnout is negatively associated with well-being,  $b = -.12$ ,  $CI95\%(-1.53, -.10)$ ,  $\beta = -.30$ ,  $z = -9.76$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### **Total effects**

Except for effort discrepancy, it can be observed that through the mediation of burnout, the other three dimensions of career discrepancy are significantly and negatively associated with well-being. Thus, for achievement discrepancy, the total effect is  $b = -.29$ ,  $CI95\%(-.49, -.08)$ ,  $\beta = -.12$ ,  $z = -2.77$ ,  $p < .05$ , for standards discrepancy, the total effect is  $b = -.32$ ,  $CI95\%(-.64, -.01)$ ,  $\beta = -.16$ ,  $z = -2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ , and for ability discrepancy, the total effect is  $b = -.48$ ,  $CI95\%(-.75, -.21)$ ,  $\beta = -.24$ ,  $z = -3.53$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Considering these results, we can conclude that hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 are largely supported by the analyzed data.

### **Discussions**

The descriptive results indicate that participants reported the highest levels of achievement discrepancy, followed closely by ability discrepancy, while effort discrepancy and standards discrepancy showed lower mean levels. This pattern suggests that students in psychology and educational sciences perceive a stronger mismatch between their desired career accomplishments and their current progress, as well as between the abilities they believe they should possess and those they perceive themselves to have. Several contextual and psychological factors may explain these elevated scores.

First, achievement discrepancy is likely amplified in fields such as psychology and education, where students typically enter university with strong prosocial motivations, clear vocational ideals, and high expectations regarding future professional roles. These roles are highly regulated, require postgraduate training, and often involve competitive access routes. As a result, students may feel that their current academic stage does not yet align with the level of professional accomplishment they envision, leading to higher perceived achievement gaps.

Second, the elevated ability discrepancy suggests that many students feel they have not yet developed the competencies they believe are necessary for successful entry into their desired professions. This is consistent with research showing that psychology and education students often hold idealized views of professional competence, which may not match their early-stage academic experiences. Limited practical exposure, lack of supervised practice, and uncertainty about skill acquisition may reinforce the perception that their current abilities fall short of professional expectations.

In contrast, effort discrepancy, the perceived mismatch between the effort students believe they should invest and the effort they actually invest, appears lower. This may reflect the fact that students generally perceive themselves as making a reasonable effort in their studies, even if they doubt their progress or abilities. University students, especially in these fields, often report high levels of academic motivation and emotional investment, which may reduce feelings of insufficient effort relative to their goals.

Similarly, standards discrepancy, reflecting perceived differences between one's current performance and the standards set by significant others (e.g., parents, teachers, societal expectations), may be lower because psychology and education programs typically emphasize self-reflection, personal growth, and intrinsic motivation, rather than external benchmarks. Students may therefore experience less pressure from external evaluative standards relative to the internal standards driving their achievement and ability discrepancies.

Overall, the pattern of results suggests that students primarily struggle with internalized discrepancies, their own expectations about what they should achieve and who they should become professionally, rather than with external expectations or perceived lack of effort. This aligns with existing evidence that career-related stress in emerging adults often stems from internal goal-performance mismatches, especially in fields with strong vocational identity components.

Although hypothesis H1 proposed that all forms of career discrepancy would be negatively associated with well-being, our findings show that only ability discrepancy demonstrated a significant direct effect. This pattern suggests that discrepancies related to students' perceived abilities may be psychologically more salient and personally threatening than discrepancies related to effort, standards, or achievement.

Ability discrepancy reflects the perception that one's internal capabilities are insufficient to meet the demands of a desired career. For psychology and educational sciences students, whose professional trajectories rely heavily on self-efficacy, interpersonal competence, and emotional resilience, feeling unable or inadequately skilled may undermine their core sense of vocational identity. Prior research shows that perceived deficits in competence are strongly linked to lower self-esteem, reduced optimism, and compromised psychological well-being (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Lent & Brown, 2013). When students believe that they lack the abilities required for their future profession, the discrepancy is internalized as a personal inadequacy rather than a contextual or structural barrier, making its emotional impact more profound.

In contrast, discrepancies related to effort, achievement, or standards are easier for students to externalize or rationalize. Effort discrepancy may be interpreted as a temporary state - students may feel they could "try harder" in the future, which reduces its negative emotional impact. Achievement discrepancy can be attributed to situational constraints such as academic workload or limited learning opportunities, rather than to personal shortcomings. Standards discrepancy often reflects overly high expectations rather than genuine barriers to success, and students may adjust these standards without experiencing significant distress.

Thus, while these discrepancies may contribute indirectly to well-being through burnout (as shown in our mediation analyses), they do not directly undermine students' subjective well-being. Ability discrepancy, however, threatens a fundamental psychological need - the belief in one's competence - which is central to both academic functioning and mental health. This may explain why only this facet of career discrepancy shows a robust, direct negative association with well-being.

Hypothesis H2 proposed that higher levels of career discrepancy would be associated with greater burnout among psychology and educational sciences students. Our findings partially support this hypothesis: achievement discrepancy, standards discrepancy, and ability discrepancy were all positively related to burnout, aligning with previous research suggesting that perceived misalignment between career aspirations and actual progress increases emotional exhaustion and reduces psychological resources (Creed & Hughes, 2013; Hirschi, 2011). However, effort discrepancy was unexpectedly negatively associated with burnout.

The positive associations for the first three dimensions can be understood through the lens of stress and self-regulation theories. Achievement discrepancy reflects the feeling that one is not progressing quickly enough toward career goals. Such perceptions may heighten feelings of stagnation, failure, or uncertainty, all of which are known predictors of academic and emotional exhaustion (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014). Standards discrepancy occurs when students believe they are not meeting their own professional expectations. High personal standards are often tied to perfectionistic tendencies, which strongly predict burnout in student populations (Curran & Hill, 2019). Ability discrepancy, the perception of lacking the skills or competence needed for a desired career, is particularly destabilizing. When students doubt their core professional abilities, they experience a chronic threat to self-efficacy, which amplifies stress responses and increases vulnerability to burnout (Bandura, 1997; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). These findings are consistent with evidence showing that career-related incongruence undermines motivation, increases strain, and contributes to burnout symptoms such as exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced academic engagement (Liu et al., 2020; Robotham & Julian, 2006).

In contrast, the negative association between effort discrepancy and burnout suggests a different psychological process. Effort discrepancy reflects the belief that one's effort does not match what is expected or needed. Students who report higher effort discrepancy may actually perceive that they could invest more effort, if necessary, which paradoxically preserves a sense of control and prevents emotional exhaustion. In other words, effort discrepancy may be interpreted as a modifiable aspect of their current situation. Unlike ability, which feels fixed, effort can be adjusted - students may think, "I'm not working hard enough yet, but I could." This perception may buffer the emotional strain typically associated with other discrepancies.

A similar pattern appears in research on controllable stressors: when individuals believe that change is possible through personal action, burnout levels tend to be lower (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Skinner & Brewer, 2002). For psychology and educational sciences students, who are trained to value effort, perseverance, and self-regulation, effort discrepancy may function as a motivational signal rather than a source of depletion. Moreover, the academic context may reinforce this interpretation. Students who believe they can increase their effort might experience a sense of agency that counteracts exhaustion. By contrast, discrepancies related to ability, standards, or actual achievements are more likely to feel immutable or overwhelming, thereby contributing to burnout.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the emotional impact of career discrepancy depends on how controllable or threatening the discrepancy is perceived to be. Discrepancies tied to competence or expectations are experienced as more psychologically taxing, while effort discrepancy may reflect a belief in the potential for improvement, which buffers students against burnout.

Hypothesis H3 proposed that burnout mediates the relationship between career discrepancy and well-being in psychology and educational sciences students. The results provide substantial

support for this hypothesis: achievement discrepancy, standards discrepancy, and ability discrepancy all predicted lower well-being through increased burnout. Only effort discrepancy failed to show this indirect effect.

The mediating role of burnout can be understood by considering how discrepancies function as chronic psychological stressors. When students perceive a gap between their desired career trajectory and their actual progress, they experience sustained cognitive dissonance and emotional strain. According to stress-strain models, persistent discrepancies trigger a process of resource depletion, whereby emotional and motivational resources are gradually exhausted, ultimately affecting well-being (Hobfoll, 1989; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014). Burnout thus acts as the mechanism through which career-related misalignment translates into reduced life satisfaction, lower positive affect, and diminished psychological functioning.

Achievement, standards, and ability discrepancy reflect a perceived threat to students' core vocational identity, the sense of who they are becoming professionally. Achievement discrepancy signals insufficient progress toward valued career goals, which undermines feelings of competence and future control. Standards discrepancy indicates a mismatch between internal expectations and current performance standards, creating persistent self-evaluative pressure. Ability discrepancy reflects doubts about meeting the competence requirements of one's desired profession, directly challenging vocational self-concept. These forms of discrepancy generate sustained emotional load, making burnout a predictable consequence. Burnout, in turn, has been repeatedly shown to impair global well-being, reducing life satisfaction and increasing psychological distress (Salmela-Aro & Read, 2017; Maslach et al., 2001). As such, students with higher levels of these discrepancies are more likely to experience burnout, which then diminishes their well-being.

The absence of mediation for effort discrepancy suggests that perceiving a mismatch between one's effort and expected effort does not necessarily elicit the emotional erosion typical of burnout. Unlike the other discrepancies, effort discrepancy concerns a controllable and adjustable component of student behavior. Students who feel they are "not trying hard enough yet" may not internalize this as a fundamental threat to their vocational identity or competence. Instead, effort discrepancy may be interpreted as a temporary, improvable state, which does not accumulate into the chronic strain required to produce burnout.

This pattern aligns with research indicating that discrepancies perceived as changeable or effort-based are less likely to induce stress reactions and do not typically predict emotional exhaustion (Daniels et al., 2013; Flett et al., 2016). Because burnout does not increase in response to effort discrepancy, the pathway to lowered well-being remains absent, explaining the lack of mediation.

Overall, the mediating effect of burnout demonstrates that it is not the career discrepancies themselves that diminish well-being, but the emotional exhaustion and reduced vitality they generate. Burnout functions as the emotional conduit through which vocational misalignment affects students' psychological health. However, discrepancies perceived as controllable, such as effort discrepancy, do not activate this mechanism.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings of the present study provide several important practical implications for universities, career services, and educators working with psychology and educational sciences students. First, the elevated levels of achievement and ability discrepancy, combined with the central mediating role of burnout, suggest that students often experience their early career

development as a mismatch between what they hope to achieve and what they currently perceive as possible or attainable. This highlights an urgent need for early, structured, and realistic career guidance within university programs. Interventions that help students clarify their career goals, understand labor market expectations, and gain realistic information about pathways to professional roles may help reduce the initial formation of career discrepancies.

Second, because burnout is the key mechanism linking most types of career discrepancy to diminished well-being, universities should prioritize prevention and management of study-related burnout. Evidence-based interventions, such as resilience training, stress management workshops, group counseling programs, and strategies that promote academic self-regulation, can buffer students from the emotional strain associated with perceived misalignment between goals and opportunities. Embedding psychoeducation about burnout into mandatory first-year courses may also help students recognize early warning signs and seek support proactively.

Third, the results underscore the importance of fostering students' sense of competence, particularly for psychology and education students whose vocational identities are strongly tied to perceived ability and professional readiness. Opportunities for mastery experiences, such as supervised practica, skill-based workshops, peer-teaching activities, and authentic assessments, may reduce ability discrepancy by offering concrete evidence of progress. Structured feedback from instructors or supervisors can play a protective role by reinforcing students' competence beliefs, which are known to predict both lower burnout and higher well-being.

Fourth, the fact that effort discrepancy did not operate through burnout suggests that some discrepancies may be adaptive rather than harmful. Career services can leverage this insight by helping students distinguish between discrepancies that signal genuine structural or identity-related misalignment (e.g., ability or standards discrepancy) and those that reflect changeable behaviors (e.g., time investment or learning strategies). Such differentiation can guide students to respond with constructive adjustments rather than self-blame or emotional exhaustion.

Finally, given the highly regulated nature of psychology and educational professions, universities should strengthen career development ecosystems that integrate academic advising, professional mentoring, alumni networks, and partnerships with employers. Providing clearer information about postgraduate requirements, accreditation pathways, and alternative career trajectories can reduce unrealistic expectations - thereby decreasing the likelihood of large discrepancy gaps. Career discrepancy is often a byproduct of inadequate information and insufficient support; therefore, systematically improving institutional guidance can meaningfully promote students' well-being and persistence in their chosen fields.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study relied exclusively on self-report measures, which may introduce biases such as social desirability, mood effects, or inaccurate self-assessment. Students might have over- or underestimated their levels of career discrepancy, burnout, or well-being, which could influence the strength of the observed associations. Future research would benefit from incorporating multi-informant assessments, behavioral indicators (e.g., academic performance, internship evaluations), or longitudinal diary methods to capture more nuanced fluctuations in career-related experiences.

Second, the research design was cross-sectional, which limits our ability to draw causal conclusions. Although the mediation model is theoretically grounded, the temporal ordering of

variables cannot be firmly established. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether career discrepancies precede burnout and subsequent reductions in well-being, or whether the relationships may be reciprocal, as suggested by some models of career development and strain (e.g., Hirschi, 2011). A multi-wave design would provide stronger evidence for the proposed mechanisms.

Third, the sample consisted of students from only two universities and two related fields - psychology and educational sciences - which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Students in these disciplines may experience particularly strong professional identity commitments and regulated career paths, which could amplify perceptions of discrepancy. Future research should examine whether similar patterns emerge in other academic domains or across multiple institutions in Romania and beyond.

Fourth, the burnout measure used captures emotional and cognitive exhaustion related to academic demands, but it does not fully disentangle domain-specific burnout (e.g., burnout related to career planning, job search pressures, or practicum experiences). Future studies might assess multiple forms of burnout or include additional constructs such as career stress, vocational identity distress, or anxiety about employability to obtain a more granular understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved.

Furthermore, while the study examined four dimensions of career discrepancy, additional contextual variables, not measured here, may influence the development of discrepancies, such as family expectations, socioeconomic constraints, availability of internships, or perceived employability. Including these variables in future models may clarify how structural and psychological factors interact in shaping student outcomes.

Finally, future research should aim to test intervention-based approaches designed to reduce career discrepancy or mitigate its negative impact. Career counseling programs, mentoring networks, structured practicum experiences, and psychoeducational workshops focused on realistic career planning may serve as promising avenues for reducing discrepancy and fostering resilience. Evaluating the effectiveness of such interventions through experimental or quasi-experimental designs would contribute substantially to applied knowledge in this field.

### **Conclusion**

The present study contributes to a growing body of literature on students' vocational development by examining how different dimensions of career discrepancy relate to burnout and well-being among psychology and educational sciences students. Overall, the findings indicate that discrepancies between students' career aspirations and their perceived progress or capabilities are meaningfully linked to their psychological functioning. Specifically, ability discrepancy emerged as the most consequential form of discrepancy, demonstrating both a direct negative association with well-being and an indirect effect through increased burnout. These results highlight the central role of perceived capability in shaping students' emotional adjustment during the transition from academic training to future professional roles.

The study also shows that burnout is a key mechanism through which most forms of career discrepancy undermine well-being, underscoring burnout's position as a psychological pathway that transforms unmet expectations into reduced life satisfaction and diminished emotional resources. Notably, effort discrepancy did not follow this pattern, suggesting that perceiving oneself as investing insufficient effort may operate differently, possibly as a motivational cue rather than a strain-inducing discrepancy.

Taken together, the findings reinforce the idea that students' subjective appraisals of their career trajectory play a decisive role in their mental health and academic persistence. Career discrepancy is not merely a cognitive evaluation but a psychological stressor with tangible emotional consequences. As such, universities and counseling services have a critical role in addressing unrealistic expectations, strengthening students' adaptive coping resources, and supporting their development of a coherent and realistic professional identity.

Ultimately, the study provides empirical evidence that managing career-related expectations and reducing burnout may be essential steps in promoting the well-being of psychology and educational sciences students, a group facing uniquely high pressures and prolonged pathways toward professional qualification. These insights offer a foundation for future research and for designing targeted interventions to support students' long-term growth, resilience, and career satisfaction.

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