



Sources of self-efficacy and outcome expectations for career exploration and decision-making: A test of the social cognitive model of career self-management

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ABSTRACT

In an application of the social cognitive model of career self-management (Lent & Brown, 2013), we assessed the primary experiential sources of self-efficacy and outcome expectations relative to career exploration and decision-making activities. These sources included personal mastery, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, and affect (both positive and negative) experienced in relation to career exploration and decision-making. Participants were 324 college students, who completed an experiential sources measure along with domain-correspondent measures of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, and level of career decidedness. A confirmatory factor analysis offered support for a 5-factor representation of the experiential sources, though the personal mastery and verbal persuasion sources were substantially interrelated. As a set, the source variables accounted for a larger portion of the variance in self-efficacy than outcome expectations, with much of their relation to outcome expectations being mediated by self-efficacy. Good support was also found for a path model including the source variables in the prediction of career exploration goals and level of career decidedness. Though the sources were generally linked to goals indirectly, mastery and positive affect both produced significant direct paths to level of decidedness. The findings are interpreted in light of social cognitive career theory and their implications for further research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A social cognitive model of career self-management (CSM) was developed recently to help explain processes through which people contribute to their own educational and career development throughout the lifespan (Lent & Brown, 2013). Designed to complement earlier social cognitive models that focus on *content* aspects of career development (e.g., the type of fields people wish to pursue), the CSM model is aimed at *process* aspects of career behavior that transcend particular career fields – for instance, the mechanisms involved in exploring and deciding on career options, searching for work, balancing work and non-work roles, managing sexual identity in the workplace, and negotiating a variety of work transitions. A few recent studies have been designed specifically to test the model's predictions in the context of job searching (Lim, Lent, & Penn, 2016), multiple role planning (Roche, Daskalova, & Brown, in press), managing sexual identity (Tatum, Formica, & Brown, in press), and making career decisions (Lent, Ezeofor, Morrison, Penn, & Ireland, 2016).

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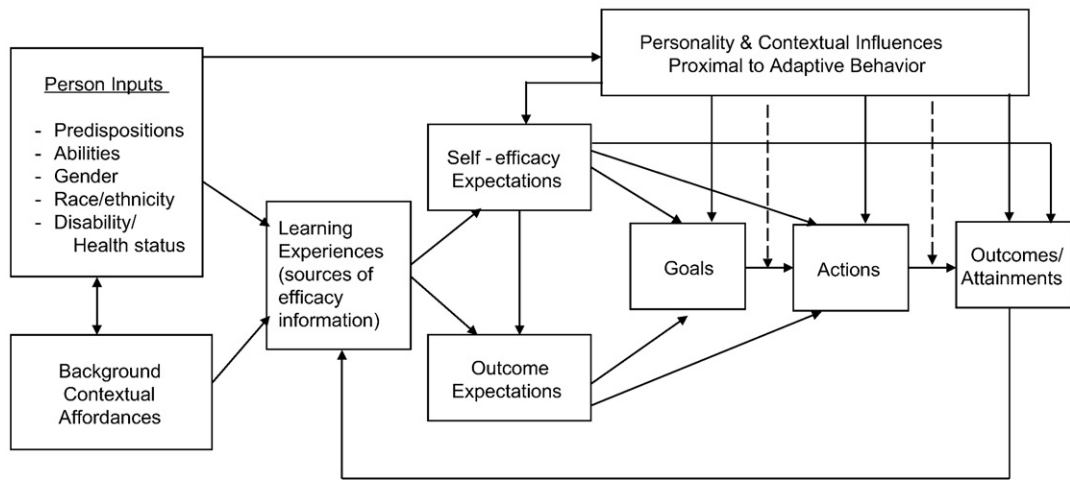


Fig. 1. Model of career self-management. Adapted from “Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance,” by R.W. Lent, S.D. Brown, & G. Hackett, 1994, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45, p. 93. Copyright 1993 by R.W. Lent, S.D. Brown, & G. Hackett. Reprinted with permission.

The general goal of the present study was to expand examination of the CSM model in relation to career exploration and decision-making. Fig. 1 displays the general classes of variables that are assumed to predict enactment of adaptive career behaviors and the positive outcomes that may result from them. These predictors include the social cognitive variables of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals; person inputs, such as personality traits; and both distal and proximal contextual influences on adaptive career behaviors. Within this model, self-efficacy refers to individuals' perceived ability to perform specific tasks necessary for career preparation, entry, or adjustment (Lent & Brown, 2013). Outcome expectations refer to the anticipated (positive or negative) consequences of engaging in adaptive behaviors, and goals involve people's intentions to perform these behaviors (e.g., to engage in career exploration).

In the context of career exploration and decision-making, self-efficacy is hypothesized to contribute to goals and actions, both directly and through outcome expectations. For example, those with stronger career decision-making self-efficacy are more likely to develop positive expectations about the outcomes of engaging in career planning. Together, self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations are seen as promoting goals to pursue career exploration and decision-making activities. These goals, in turn, motivate goal-consonant actions. In addition, both goal-setting and implementation are aided by favorable traits (e.g., conscientiousness) and environmental supports, such as the availability of necessary resources. Positive decisional outcomes (e.g., lessened decisional anxiety, increased decidedness) are seen as likely to result from active engagement in career exploration and decision-making, facilitative traits and environmental factors, and self-efficacy, which enhances the performance of adaptive career behavior (e.g., by helping to regulate skill use and promote persistence).

Many of the paths in Fig. 1 have received prior study in the career development literature. Beginning with the research of Taylor and Betz (1983), career decision self-efficacy (CDSE), in particular, has been a popular topic, with much research focused on its measurement, correlates, and outcomes. Meta-analytic research has shown that CDSE produces theory-consistent bivariate relations with outcome expectations, peer support, and career indecision (Choi et al., 2012). In addition, several studies have found support for multivariate linkages between CDSE and other elements in the CSM model. For example, career exploration goals and actions have been predicted by combinations of CSM variables, such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations, facilitative personality traits, and contextual supports (e.g., Betz & Vuyten, 1997; Lent et al., 2016; Rogers, Creed, & Glendon, 2008).

1.1. Experiential sources of self-efficacy and outcome expectations

One important gap in the literature on career exploration and decision-making (and on adaptive career behaviors, more generally) involves the theoretical antecedents of self-efficacy and outcome expectations. As shown in Fig. 1, self-efficacy and outcome expectations are conceived as central cognitive motivators that enable the goal-action-outcome process, yet relatively little research has focused on the origins of these beliefs. Labeled as “learning experiences” in the figure (we will henceforth use the terms learning experiences and sources of efficacy interchangeably), these antecedents of self-efficacy and outcome expectations may be represented by the same four primary variables that are featured in general self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997): personal mastery experiences (e.g., successes and failures), verbal persuasion (e.g., social encouragement or discouragement), vicarious learning (i.e., observation of models), and physiological and affective states and reactions (e.g., positive and negative emotions associated with performance of particular tasks).

While Bandura had conceived of these four variables as the primary sources of self-efficacy beliefs, social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) maintains that they also serve to inform outcome expectations, both directly and via self-efficacy. That is, favorable levels of all four source, or learning experience, variables (e.g., a preponderance of personal

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