

Applying the social cognitive model of career self-management to career exploration and decision-making



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ABSTRACT

We present two studies applying the social cognitive model of career self-management (Lent & Brown, 2013) to career exploration and decision-making outcomes in college students. In the first study ($N = 180$ college students), we developed a new, brief measure of career exploration and decision-making self-efficacy for use in subsequent model testing. The measure yielded two factors, decisional self-efficacy and coping efficacy, with adequate internal consistency reliability estimates. The decisional self-efficacy factor related strongly to an established measure of career decision self-efficacy and produced theory consistent relations with measures of outcome expectations, social support, conscientiousness, exploration goals, prior engagement in career exploration, decisional anxiety, and level of career decidedness. In the second study ($N = 215$ college students), we re-examined the factor structure of the new self-efficacy measure and used it to assess the tenability of the self-management model in a path analysis predicting exploration goals, decisional anxiety, and career decidedness. The model fit the data well overall, though certain predictors were linked to the criterion variables only indirectly via mediated pathways. Implications of the findings for the social cognitive model as well as for future research and practice are considered.

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1. Introduction

As originally conceived, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) consisted of interconnected models of career and academic interest, choice, and performance (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 2000). These models emphasized *content* aspects of career development, that is, the types of activity domains toward which people are drawn, and at which they are likely to succeed and persist, in educational and occupational settings. More recent SCCT models have complemented this content emphasis with an increasing focus on *process* aspects of career development, such as the means by which people help to regulate their affect, adapt to changing circumstances, and direct their own goal-relevant behavior at school and work. For example, the SCCT satisfaction model highlights the processes that promote well-being outcomes at work, regardless of the specific type of work they perform (Lent & Brown, 2006a, 2008).

The new SCCT model of career self-management (CSM) focuses on a wide array of adaptive career behaviors that people employ to adjust to and thrive within educational and work environments across the career lifespan (Lent & Brown, 2013). These behaviors are considered mechanisms of personal agency in that they allow individuals to take part in their own career development, adaptation, and renewal. Examples of such adaptive behaviors include career exploration, decision-making, job-searching, identity management, and navigation of normative (e.g., work entry, retirement) and unpredictable (e.g., job loss) transitions.

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Although the earlier SCCT models have attracted a good deal of inquiry (e.g., see [Brown & Lent, in press](#); [Lent, 2013](#); [Sheu et al., 2010](#)), few studies have been designed specifically to test the predictions of the self-management model given its recent formulation ([Lim, Lent, & Penn, 2015](#); [Tatum, Formica, & Brown, 2015](#)).

1.1. CSM predictors of career exploration goals and decisional status

The primary goal of the present set of studies was to apply the CSM model to the process of career decision-making. As with previous SCCT models, the CSM model includes the core social cognitive variables of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals; person inputs, such as personality traits; and contextual supports and barriers. Within this model, self-efficacy refers to beliefs about one's ability “to manage specific tasks necessary for career preparation, entry, adjustment, or change across diverse occupational paths” ([Lent & Brown, 2013](#), p. 561). Outcome expectations involve the anticipated consequences of particular courses of action. These include positively or negatively valenced social (e.g., peer approval), material (e.g., monetary gain), and self-evaluative (e.g., pride) outcomes. Goals refer to people's intentions to perform particular adaptive career behaviors (e.g., to engage in career exploration).

Personality traits are assumed to “influence career adaptation by facilitating (or deterring) behavioral performances or by engaging emotional coping tendencies” ([Lent & Brown, 2013](#), p. 563). The specific emotional traits or behavioral tendencies that are relevant to a particular application of the model depend on the behavior of interest. For instance, the Big Five trait of conscientiousness may be especially useful to career exploration and decision-making in that persons with relatively high levels of this trait may be inclined to take an organized and persistent approach to gathering and weighing career and self-information prior to arriving at career decisions. In addition, environmental supports (e.g., access to mentors) may aid, and barriers may inhibit, individuals' capabilities to engage in adaptive career behaviors.

[Fig. 1](#) illustrates how the variables in the CSM are posited to interrelate in the context of career exploration and decision-making. Self-efficacy is hypothesized to contribute to goals and actions, both directly and via outcome expectations. Those with more confidence at engaging in career exploration and decisional behaviors are more likely to expect such behaviors to produce positive payoffs. Together, self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations promote goals to engage in exploration/decisional behaviors and, along with goals, motivate enactment of goal-relevant behaviors (e.g., follow-through at career exploration).

Conscientiousness may also facilitate goal-setting and implementation, with more conscientious persons being more likely to formulate and pursue goals related to career exploration and decision-making. Persons high in this trait may also be more likely to develop self-efficacy at career planning tasks because their organization and persistence tendencies have enabled them to successfully navigate prior life decisions. Environmental supports and barriers are assumed to play important roles in the exploration and decisional process, both directly and via self-efficacy and outcome expectations. For instance, those with greater access to career information resources may be likely to approach the exploration process with greater confidence and optimism about its outcomes.

The current test of the CSM model builds on prior research that has examined relations among model-relevant variables in the context of career exploration and decision-making. For example, [Choi et al.'s \(2012\)](#) meta-analysis found that career decision self-efficacy (CDSE) yields moderate to large bivariate correlations with outcome expectations, peer support, and career indecision. In a multivariate test, [Betz and Vuyten \(1997\)](#) found that career outcome expectations, but not self-efficacy, explained significant variance in exploration intentions, or goals. However, self-efficacy alone accounted for significant variance in career indecision.

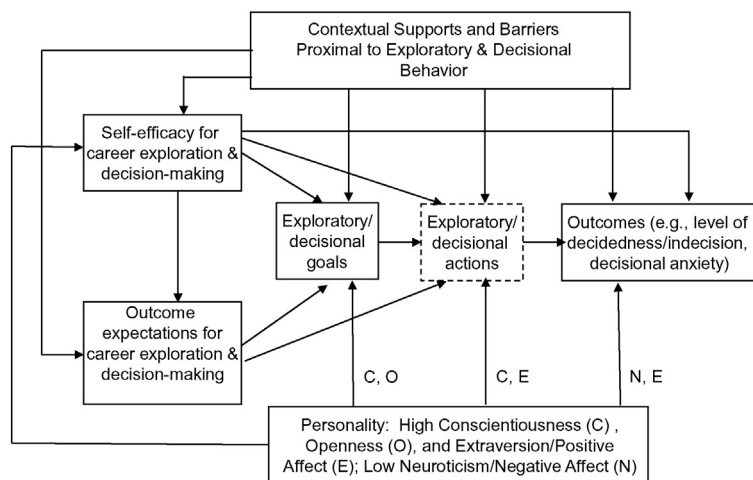


Fig. 1. Model of career self-management as applied to career exploration and decision-making behavior. Adapted from [Lent and Brown \(2013\)](#) with permission. Note. Exploratory/decisional actions, openness, and neuroticism/negative affect were not included in the current studies.

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