



A longitudinal examination of adolescent career planning and exploration using a social cognitive career theory framework

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A B S T R A C T

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This study used social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), as a framework to investigate predictors of career choice actions, operationalised as career planning and career exploration. The model was tested cross-sectionally and longitudinally with 631 high school students enrolled in Grades 10–12. Students completed measures of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, supports and personality. Results of the hierarchical regression analyses indicated strong support for self-efficacy and goals predicting career planning and exploration across all grades at T1, and predicting change in career planning and exploration from T1 to T2. Whilst support for pathways among other predictor variables (personality, contextual influences and biographic variables) to choice actions was found, these pathways varied across grades at T1, and also from T1 to T2. Implications for social cognitive career theory, career counselling practice and future research are discussed.

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Significant career development takes place during adolescence. Adolescents begin to clarify their career identity (Erikson, 1963), develop an awareness of vocational interests and realities, and undertake career-related tasks, such as career planning and career exploration, as they increasingly think about their future career (Super, 1990). According to social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), a variety of person, environmental and behavioural variables influence the career choice process. Self-efficacy (beliefs about capabilities to organise and execute courses of action) promotes favourable outcome expectations (expected consequences of actions), and both, individually and in concert, reinforce and foster career interests (liking) and career goals (intentions to engage in a certain activity). In turn, these social cognitive variables stimulate career choice actions, or career behaviours, such as career planning and career exploration, which are necessary for the young person to make progress towards identified career goals.

In addition to these variables, SCCT proposes that career choice behaviours are also shaped by contextual variables, such as supports (e.g., financial support from the family) and barriers (e.g., having to leave home for further education). Contextual influences facilitate or impede the development and pursuit of an individual's career path as they have a direct influence on choice goals and choice actions, and they can also influence (i.e., moderate) the relationship between choice goals and choice actions (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT also proposes that person inputs, such as predispositions, can affect the career choice process. For example, individuals who are more likely to experience negative affect (e.g., anxiety or anger) may be more sensitive to

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environmental conditions, and perceive more barriers and fewer supports than those low on negative affectivity (Lent et al., 1994).

In the current study, we utilised SCCT as a framework to examine adolescent career development by investigating the influence of the three main social cognitive variables of self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals, together with person inputs and contextual influences on the career choice behaviours of career planning and career exploration, and to test the utility of this model for explaining career planning and career exploration over time. SCCT has been tested widely cross-sectionally, although much of this work has focused on motivation for specific occupational areas such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (e.g., Fouad & Smith, 1996; Gainor & Lent, 1998; Lapan, Shaughnessy, & Boggs, 1996; Lent, Brown, Schmidt, et al., 2003; Lent, Lopez, & Bieschke, 1993; Lopez, Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997; Nauta & Epperson, 2003). Few studies have tested the model longitudinally (see Lent et al., 2008 for exception), or applied it to explain the career development behaviours of planning and exploration (exceptions are Betz & Voyten, 1997; Patton, Bartrum, & Creed, 2004; Rogers, Creed, & Glendon, 2008). Further, most studies have collected data from university samples (exceptions are Lent, Brown, Nota, & Soresi, 2003; Rogers et al., 2008) whereas the current study investigated the career action behaviours of high school students.

Career planning and exploration are actions or behaviours that are integral to the career development process. Career planning is associated with career decision self-efficacy and high levels of goal-setting (Rogers et al., 2008), work experience (Creed, Patton, & Prideaux, 2007), career expectations and goals (Patton et al., 2004), while career exploration is associated with career decision self-efficacy (Betz & Voyten, 1997; Blustein, 1989; Brown, Darden, Shelton, & Dipoto, 1999; Creed et al., 2007). However, despite the importance placed on career planning and exploration by both Super (1957) and Crites (1973), these career preparation tasks have received little attention in the empirical and theoretical literature.

Person inputs, such as predispositions, are important components of career choice theories (e.g., Holland, 1997; Lent et al., 1994), with research showing that neuroticism, extraversion, openness and conscientiousness all influence the career choice process (see review by Tokar, Fischer, & Subich, 1998). Extraversion, for example, has been associated with planning and exploration (Savickas, Briddick, & Watkins, 2002), conscientiousness with self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals (Judge, 2002), neuroticism, extraversion and conscientiousness with exploration (Reed, Bruch, & Haase, 2004), and conscientiousness and openness with planning (Rogers et al., 2008). However, while career theorists (Osipow, 1990; Roe, 1956; Super, 1990) emphasise that personality is an important factor in career development, research that combines personality and career choice is limited (Tokar et al., 1998), and particularly limited in the context of the SCCT framework (for exceptions see Rogers et al., 2008; Schaub & Tokar, 2005).

Career supports also have been identified as influential factors in career development (Wall, Covell, & Macintyre, 1999). For example, parents play a major role in developing children's aspirations and supporting their career exploration and planning (Astin, 1984; Eccles, 1994; Farmer, 1985; Lent et al., 2002; Young, 1994), as do teachers (Farmer, 1985; Sewell & Hauser, 1975) and friends (Furman & Buhrmeister, 1992). Rogers et al. (2008) found a direct relationship between career supports (parents, teachers, friends) and career exploration and career planning; whereas other researchers have found indirect relationships between supports and choice action behaviours, with the support influence operating mainly through self-efficacy (e.g., Lent, Brown, Schmidt, et al., 2003; Lent, Brown, Nota, et al., 2003; Lent et al., 2001). However, while career research investigating the effect of supports on choice goals and behaviour is growing, no study has tested the relationship between career supports and career action behaviours in the context of SCCT.

The current study fills a number of gaps in the literature by testing the correlates of career planning and exploration, first, using cross-sectional data, and second, by using longitudinal data, obtained from high school students from three year levels (Grades 10–12) across multiple sites (two high schools). As the last three years of school have been shown to be a time when students are actively contemplating educational options, career paths and part-time work, examining the career attitudes of students in Grades 10–12 over a period of six months was expected to provide evidence of developmental changes in career choice actions. The longitudinal design allowed the measurement of differences or change in a variable from one time to another to provide a description of patterns of change (Menard, 2002).

Propositions underlying SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) which are relevant to this study are that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals and contextual influences will be associated with the choice actions of career planning and exploration. Based on the literature, we tested an additional pathway between person inputs and choice actions; that is, that personality will be associated with choice actions. We also controlled for age, gender, work experience and school achievement as these variables have been shown to be related to career maturity (Creed et al., 2007; Luzzo, 1993; Patton & Creed, 2001). Consequently, the variables tested include career decision self-efficacy, career outcome expectations, career goals, contextual influences (career supports), person inputs (personality), biographical variables (age, gender, work experience, school achievement) and choice actions (career planning and career exploration). The main research question posed was: What are the most important variables that predict changes in choice actions over time? To answer this question, we were interested in testing two propositions:

- (1) Will the T1 predictor variables explain the outcome variables at T1, and
- (2) Will changes in the predictor variables from T1 to T2, explain changes in the outcome variables from T1 to T2?

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