



Perceived social status and learning experiences in Social Cognitive Career Theory

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test a model based on Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) that placed perceived social status as an antecedent of career-related learning experiences, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations. Gender was included in the present model and results indicated that gender related as expected to differential exposure to career-related learning experiences in Holland's (1997) RIASEC domains. After controlling for the effects of gender, results demonstrated that perceived social status related positively to learning experiences in the Investigative, Enterprising, and Conventional areas among 380 college students. Further, these enhanced learning experiences mediated the relationships between perceived social status and self-efficacy, and between perceived social status and outcome expectations, for the Investigative, Enterprising, and Conventional areas. These findings highlight the importance of perceived social status as a predictor of exposure to different types of career-related learning experiences that subsequently shape students' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and (presumably) interests in particular RIASEC areas. Results are discussed in terms of exposure to career-related learning experiences in RIASEC domains with differing levels of prestige and implications of these results for developing interventions to enhance the learning experiences of students who report lower levels of perceived social status are presented.

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1. Introduction

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT: Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 2000) provides a theoretical framework for understanding vocational interest and decision-making processes. Central to SCCT is the concept that person inputs (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, health status) and background contextual affordances (e.g., access to social networks) contribute to career-related learning experiences (Lent et al.). Learning experiences (defined as social persuasion, vicarious learning, physiological arousal, and performance accomplishments) are subsequently direct sources of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, and distal sources of interests, goals, and actions. As such, SCCT focuses on the reciprocity and interactions between individuals' cognitive processes and their environment (Lent et al.).

SCCT has garnered substantial empirical support for the relations of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations to vocational interests and goal formation for career-related pursuits (e.g., Fouad & Smith, 1996; Gainor & Lent, 1998; Lent, Brown, Nota, & Soresi, 2003; Lent, Lopez, & Bieschke, 1991). However, less is known about the specific factors that contribute to career-related learning experiences (Tokar, Thompson, Plaufcan, & Williams, 2007). As a result, researchers have begun to focus on understanding the antecedents of learning experiences. For example, Williams and Subich (2006) demonstrated gender differences in career-related learning

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experiences within Holland's (1997) RIASEC typology. Tokar et al. (2007) extended this work to focus on the relation of three person inputs (i.e., gender, conformity to gender role norms, and personality) to reported learning experiences. Navarro, Flores, and Worthington (2007) focused on the effects of other person inputs (e.g., race/ethnicity) and background contextual affordances (e.g., social class) on specific types of learning experiences.

To date, no empirical evidence exists documenting the relations among perceived social status (PSS) and learning experiences. This is a noteworthy omission because an individual's PSS (i.e., her or his access to economic resources, social prestige, and social power) is proposed to shape that individual's opportunity structure, thereby influencing her or his exposure to different types of career-related learning experiences (e.g., Fouad & Brown, 2000) and subsequently impacting interest in specific career areas (e.g., Lent et al., 1994, 2000). The purposes of this study are, therefore, to (1) examine the direct effect of PSS on career-related learning experiences according to Holland's (1997) RIASEC typology, and (2) test the indirect effects of PSS on outcome expectations and self-efficacy via learning experiences as proposed by SCCT in each RIASEC interest domain for a sample of undergraduate students.

2. Social class-related constructs within SCCT

Although their original conceptualization of SCCT did not specifically include social class-related constructs, Lent et al. (1994) acknowledged the existence of a variety of person factors and contextual affordances proposed to impact self-efficacy and outcome expectations via exposure to learning experiences. In their discussion of contextual affordances, Lent et al. (2000) later noted the importance of attending to the influences of environmental experiences on the individual. In particular, they highlighted the need to consider one's access to opportunity structures within society (e.g., differential opportunities for vicarious learning and role modeling, differential access to financial and emotional support, structural barriers). As such, they pointed to the importance of attending to both objective (e.g., type of school attended, actual household income) and subjective (e.g., appraisal) components of contextual affordances to better understand their impact on career development.

The inclusion of social class and SES within an SCCT framework has, however, been examined only minimally (Diemer & Ali, 2009). Lower SES has been demonstrated to predict lower career aspirations for diverse adolescents and postsecondary students (e.g., Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Ali & Saunders, 2009). Research also has demonstrated that SES and social class are related to particular types of learning experiences (e.g., verbal encouragement and support from others [Ali, McWhirter, & Chronister, 2005; Ali & Saunders, 2006]; and past performance accomplishments [Navarro et al., 2007]). Taken together, there is evidence that objective social class relates to one's learning experiences.

A growing body of literature has supported Fouad and Brown's (2000) proposition that an individual's *perceived* (or subjective) social status relates to career development (e.g., Metz, Fouad, & Ihle-Helledy, 2009; Thompson & Subich, 2006). Perceived social status (PSS) is purported to capture person and contextual inputs (e.g., experiences related to race/ethnicity and social class) that are shaped by one's cultural context and socialization experiences (Fouad & Brown, 2000). PSS has been conceptualized as an assessment of one's internalized social status identity that allows researchers to move beyond categorical and sociological indicators of social class and SES (Fouad & Brown, 2000; Thompson & Subich, 2011).

Perceived social status has been demonstrated to relate to a variety of career outcomes with college student samples, even after taking into account traditional measures of social class. For example, PSS has been demonstrated to account for unique variance in the prediction of career-decision self efficacy, career choice certainty, and comfort with career decisions after controlling for objective social class (Thompson & Subich, 2006). In another investigation, PSS was significantly and negatively related to factors impacting the discrepancy between college students' career aspirations and expectations. Specifically, college students who reported higher PSS reported smaller differences between their career aspirations and expectations (Metz et al., 2009). Results from another investigation demonstrated support for a path model in which PSS mediated several race- and class-based socialization experiences (e.g., objective measure of social class, race/ethnicity, experiences with discrimination) and career decision self-efficacy and career choice anxiety (Thompson & Subich, 2011).

Taken together, this research (e.g., Metz et al., 2009; Navarro et al., 2007; Thompson & Subich, 2006) has documented the important relations of social class, SES, and PSS to several career outcomes. These findings support Lent et al.'s (1994) conceptualization of person inputs and background contextual affordances as critical factors that influence career development even though authors have differed in their conceptualization of social class-related constructs as person inputs (e.g., Ali & Saunders, 2009) versus background contextual affordances (e.g., Navarro et al.; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999) within SCCT. Given Fouad and Brown's (2000) conceptualization of PSS as a mechanism for examining how individuals understand and internalize environmental experiences, we suggest that PSS is best positioned as a background contextual affordance (rather than a person input). We expect that the previously documented relationships of PSS to career outcomes for college students (e.g., Metz et al., 2009; Thompson & Subich, 2011) are a reflection of its earlier and direct effect on career-relevant learning experiences (see Fig. 1). Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 1. PSS will have a direct and positive effect on learning experiences within each RIASEC domain.

3. Indirect effects of perceived social status on self-efficacy and outcome expectations

Lent et al. (1994) posited that learning experiences mediate the pathways between (a) person inputs and contextual affordances and (b) the cognitive processes (i.e., self-efficacy and outcome expectations) that people develop in specific career domains. A growing body of research with undergraduate samples demonstrates support for the paths between learning experiences and self-efficacy

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