



# Perceived career barriers and coping among youth in Israel: Ethnic and gender differences<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated gender and ethnic differences in the perception of different types of career barriers among young adults in relation to their views of themselves as individuals (Personal Career Barriers) and their views of their gender and ethnic group (Group Career Barriers). This study also explored gender and ethnic differences in the sense of efficacy in coping with career barriers. The participants were 406 university students: 156 Israeli-born Jews, 133 Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union and 117 Arab-Israelis. The results indicated that their perceptions of the different types of career barriers and their sense of coping efficacy differ according to gender and ethnic group and that there are also joint effects of gender and ethnicity. The results showed that participants rated group barriers higher than personal career barriers. However, the discrepancies were different in each of the three ethnic groups. Perceived career barriers were negatively associated with the sense of coping efficacy and positively associated with non-productive coping strategies. The implications for future research and counseling for minority groups are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of studies focusing on the role of barriers in career development (e.g., Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001; Swanson & Woitke, 1997). Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994, 2000) suggested that barriers may be better understood through the framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which highlights the interplay among cognitive-personal variables (i.e., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals) and contextual variables (i.e., barriers and supports). Lent et al. (2000) defined barriers as negative contextual affordances that may inhibit career progress. In the context of SCCT, perceptions of barriers interfere with the process of turning career interests into choice goals and these goals into actions (Lent et al., 1994).

Most of the research in the field of career barriers focused on the role of barriers in career development for discriminated groups (e.g., women and ethnic minorities). Research has found that women tend to anticipate more career barriers than men in topics such as gender discrimination (e.g., Cardoso & Marques, 2008; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001), work–family balance concerns (e.g., Cardoso & Marques, 2008; Luzzo, 1995) and financial barriers (e.g., Perrone, Sedlacek, & Alexander, 2001). Coogan and Chen (2007) concluded that women's career development is more complex than that of men because of the barriers they face, such as early gender-role orientation, employment inequities, and family responsibilities. These barriers complicate and restrict women's career advancement. The influence of ethnicity on the perception of career barriers has been examined in several studies that included various samples of ethnic minority groups. Research has found that ethnic minority members tend to anticipate more career barriers than members of the ethnic majority, especially in topics such as financial difficulties (e.g., Perrone et al., 2001), ethnic discrimination (e.g., Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001), and gender discrimination (e.g., Cardoso & Marques, 2008). Lent et al.

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(1994) suggested that cultural socialization processes may have a significant impact on the career behavior and experiences of ethnic minorities. The main goal of the present study is to analyze gender and ethnic differences in Israeli young adults' career barrier perceptions.

Israel's demographic composition provides a rare opportunity to investigate perceptions of career barriers in a mosaic of ethnic groups. Our sample included three different cultural groups: Israeli-born Jews, Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU), and Arabs, who are members of the largest minority in the State of Israel. Among these groups, the Arab-Israelis have limited employment opportunities as well as high unemployment rates and are subject to job discrimination (Al-Haj, 2003; King, Naon, Wolde-Tsadick, & Habib, 2009). Although the employment rates of immigrants from the FSU exceed those of the overall Jewish population, their work integration does not match their level of education and professional experience and many are employed in low-level positions (King & Wolde-Tsadick, 2006). Moreover, the gender gap among immigrants is greater than that among Israeli-born Jews. Immigrant women are more likely to have part-time jobs than either immigrant men or Israeli-born Jewish women (King & Wolde-Tsadick, 2006). A similar tendency is found among Arab women. Their participation rate in Israel's labor force is about a third that of Jewish women (22.5% compared to 71.3%; King et al., 2009). The low participation rate of Arab women in the labor market is usually explained in the literature by two factors: (a) traditional Arab socio-cultural norms regarding gender roles that emphasize the role of women in the household and child rearing or in stereotypical female professions (e.g., social work, teaching, nursing) along with those that allow them to combine work and family obligations (e.g., part-time jobs, working in their place of residence) (e.g., Abu-Baker, 2002; Arar & Mustapha, 2009); and (b) structural factors such as the lack of employment opportunities in the Arab sector, attitudes of employers (i.e., discrimination and stereotypes), government policies toward the Arab population with respect to infrastructure, education, training and employment assistance including childcare arrangements (e.g., Khattab, 2002). King et al. (2009) indicated that cultural barriers still play a role and that structural factors are of significance. Based upon the data presented above, it seems that Arab and immigrant women operate in a complex environment characterized by structural and cultural disadvantages and may experience a sense of *double jeopardy* (Beale, 1970). They may suffer from a double disadvantage, first as women and then as members of ethnic minorities. However, very little attention has been paid to the interaction between ethnicity and gender in the perceptions of career barriers.

In the context of SCCT, individuals are affected by aspects of the larger societal context (e.g., institutional racism and sexism). Lent et al. (2000) have noted that people's expectations about encountering particular barriers are likely to reflect (a) barriers they have been personally experienced, (b) those that they have been learned vicariously from other people's experiences with particular barriers, and (c) beliefs about whether they could cope with these barriers (i.e., coping efficacy). Lent et al. (2000) have also suggested that individuals tend to distinguish between beliefs about whether certain career barriers exist in society in general and beliefs about how these barriers affect them directly. Several studies on prejudice and discrimination have shown that disadvantaged group members (e.g., ethnic minorities and women) perceive a higher level of discrimination directed at their group as a whole than at themselves as individual members of that group (Dion & Kawakami, 1996; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990; Taylor, Wright, & Porter, 1994). This phenomenon was labeled the personal/group discrimination discrepancy, or PGDD (Taylor et al., 1990). Numerous mechanisms have been offered to account for the PGDD (see Taylor et al., 1994, for a review). It has been proposed that disadvantaged group members may deny or minimize personal experiences with discrimination to justify inaction against the injustice or maintain their sense of control over their own outcomes. They may also exaggerate discrimination against their group because they are exposed to repeated media presentations highlighting the discrimination directed at their group. It is important to investigate whether the personal/group discrimination discrepancy extends beyond perceived general ethnic and gender discrimination to the perception of discrimination as related to the career domain.

Thus, our study investigated gender and ethnic differences across different types of personal and group career barriers, such as gender discrimination, ethnic discrimination and childcare and family issues. We also investigated whether the personal/group career barrier discrepancy (i.e., the tendency of individuals to rate the difficulty of a career barrier as lower for themselves individually than for their group) prevails among women more so than among men or ethnic minorities (Arabs and immigrants versus Israeli-born Jews). Finally, we investigated whether there is an interaction effect between gender and ethnicity in perceptions of personal and group career barriers.

Several researchers (e.g., Lent et al., 2000, 2002) have claimed that individuals' career choices and plans often rely on their sense of coping efficacy as well as on their actual coping responses to career barriers. In the context of SCCT, coping efficacy refers to an individual's perception of his/her ability to overcome obstacles. Lent et al. (2000) have suggested that when confronted with adverse contextual conditions, individuals with a high sense of coping efficacy may be more likely to persevere toward their goals than those holding a low sense of coping efficacy. They have also claimed that coping efficacy may not only influence the perception of barriers but may also mediate or moderate the relationships between barriers and choice behavior. Research that has examined coping efficacy has found a negative relationship between coping efficacy and perceived career barriers (Perrone, Civileto, Webb, & Fitch, 2004). Subsequently, Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) found that ethnic minorities in the United States exhibited lower self-efficacy for coping with perceived career barriers than their European-American counterparts. Lent et al. (2002) investigated students' methods of coping with career barriers and found that they utilize problem-focused strategies and seek social support. However, there has been little research investigating the sense of coping efficacy and specific coping strategies vis-à-vis specific types of career barriers. Thus, the present study also investigated the relationships between different types of perceived career barriers, the individual's sense of coping efficacy, and the strategies of coping with those career barriers.

To summarize, we hypothesized the following: (a) ethnic minorities (Arabs and immigrants) and women, compared to Israeli-born Jews and men, would perceive more personal and group career barriers (of various types); (b) an interaction effect would be found between gender and ethnicity in perceptions of personal and group career barriers, specifically that Arab and immigrant

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