

Constructing the search for a job in academia from the perspectives of self-regulated learning strategies and social cognitive career theory

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Abstract

Four international doctoral graduates who found jobs in American academia wrote narratives about their job search process and were interviewed afterwards for this descriptive qualitative study. Retrospective narratives, responses to open-ended questions, and discussions in focus groups supported the integration of the self-regulated learning strategies into the social cognitive career theory to explain the learning aspect of the job search process. The strategies used by the participants during the job search process were identified with most categories of the self-regulated learning strategies in the literature, and the participants' self-oriented cultural perspectives and how these cultural perspectives interacted with perceptions about the job search process in the academic world of work were examined. The findings of this study contribute to the social cognitive career theory by introducing the job candidates' self-regulated learning procedure and could be resources for doctoral students who plan to make a successful transition from students to professors and/or researchers.

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1. Introduction

Securing a faculty position in the academia is an immediate goal of many graduating or graduated doctoral students. While it can be exciting, the job search process is time consuming, demanding, stressful, and challenging. In order to identify essential determinants that lead to a successful job offer in higher education, the fields of psychology and sociology experienced a growth in research exploring the academic job search process in recent years. Collectively, these studies offered useful analyses and implications on two broad aspects of the job search process. First, researchers identified several contributing determinants that were likely to result in an on-campus interview invitation, including evidence of a good fit between the candidate's credentials and the requirements of the department (Demaray, Carlson, & Hodgson, 2003; Sheehan, McDevitt, & Ross, 1998), outstanding research and teaching experiences and agenda (Adams, 2002), and well established scholarly activities (Sheehan & Haselhorst, 1999). Second, researchers suggested that some important factors predicting a job offer included organized, inspiring, and timely delivery of research or teaching presentation during the colloquium (Demaray et al., 2003; Wilbur, 1995) and a well-perceived interpersonal performance throughout the on-campus interview process (Demaray et al., 2003; Mertz & McNeely, 1990). Despite the insights that these studies offered to academic job applicants, the current literature has limitations.

In order to advance our knowledge in bridging the theory and practice gap, we must explore and interpret the job search process from an expanded theoretical model. A few studies have employed a circumscribed theoretical model to systematically and empirically examine the job search process (Cotten, Price, Keeton, Burton, & Wittekind, 2001; Sheehan & Haselhorst, 1999). To our knowledge, however, no studies presented and examined the entire process to address the potential influences of cultural or social contexts on an applicant's job search process in higher education. Research has shown that cultural or social contexts (e.g., cultural values, personal identity) play critical roles in determining how candidates approach each aspect of the job search process to reach a career decision (Adams, Cahill, & Ackerlind, 2005; Gushue, 2006; Schaub & Tokar, 2005). According to career construction theory, individuals in today's turbulent society adapt themselves to the social and cultural environment through self-regulation and play an active role in making meaning out of their experience, creating their work lives, and building their careers (Savickas, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe the learning process of the candidates while securing positions in American academia from the perspectives of self-regulated learning strategies and social cognitive career theory within a particular cultural frame.

2. Theoretical foundation

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory emphasizes one's competency in exercising self-observation, self-judgment, and self-reaction. According to Bandura (1986), self-observation refers to the deliberate attention to observe one's own behavior. Self-judgment is a comparison between one's performance relative to a standard or goal, whereas self-reaction is the evaluative response to self-judgment. Thus, following personal observations, people make a judgment of their progress toward their self-set goals and then alter their behaviors accordingly to attain these goals.

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