



Interests, self-efficacy, and choice goals: An experimental manipulation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 September 2009

Available online 18 September 2009

Keywords:

Interests

Self-efficacy beliefs

Social cognitive career theory

Career goals

Work values

Experimental manipulation

Science and technology

ABSTRACT

An experimental design was used to test the hypothesis that vocational interests can be a precursor to the development of self-efficacy. Participants ($n = 180$) rated job descriptions for careers in the domains of information technology, sales, and teaching that contained information on activities and work values. Participants rated those job descriptions in terms of their interest, confidence, and choice intentions. An experimental manipulation of information on work values for each of the three work domains was used to create two levels of interests in each area. Participants expressed significantly more interest in job descriptions that contained desirable work value information in each of the three occupational domains relative to the corresponding descriptions that contained information on less desirable values. Obtained results suggest that this manipulation of level of expressed interests in each occupational domain had both a direct effect on self-efficacy ratings and also an indirect effect on self-efficacy through choice goals. These findings have theoretical implications concerning the relation between interests and self-efficacy specified by social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

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1. Introduction

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) is an expansion of Bandura's (1982, 1986) social cognitive theory that provides a model for different aspects of vocational behavior. More specifically, SCCT addresses the questions of how career interests develop from self-efficacy, how career related choices are made, and how performance outcomes are achieved. The theory postulates a direct causal link between self-efficacy and interests, where changes in confidence lead to changes in interests. Although there is ample evidence that these two constructs are related (Rottinghaus, Larson, & Borgen, 2003), this correlational research does not address the underlying issue of causality, that is, whether changes in self-efficacy effect changes in interests, whether the reverse is true, or whether the relation is bidirectional. Experimental manipulations of confidence have resulted in changes in interests, providing some support for the SCCT model's causal links (e.g., Betz & Schifano, 2000; Campbell & Hackett, 1986; Luzzo, Hasper, Albert, Bibby, & Martinelli, 1999). However, alternatives to the SCCT model, including the possibility that changes in interests may produce changes in confidence, have not been investigated. The present study will use an experimental manipulation of interests to evaluate causal links between interests and self-efficacy.

1.1. Key constructs in the SCCT model

Career-related self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interests, and choice goals are among the key constructs hypothesized to play a major role in guiding vocational behavior in SCCT. Self-efficacy, which is defined as "people's judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura,

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1986, p. 391), is the mechanism emphasized the most in SCCT-based research. Self-efficacy is linked to the perception of having the power to produce effects based on one's actions.

Outcome expectations are defined in SCCT as a person's beliefs about the probability of response outcomes, or the imagined consequences of a particular behavior. These expectations can be tangible (e.g., monetary rewards), but they can also be intrinsic or self-evaluative (e.g., work-related needs and values). From this perspective, values are seen as preferences for certain reinforcers in the environment that serve as personal standards of behavior a person acquires over time through basic social learning mechanisms. If the environment provides the kinds of reinforcers that are congruent with what a person values most, this leads to self-satisfaction. The anticipated outcome of self-satisfaction in turn is a powerful intrinsic motivating force toward the development of interests and the choice of activities. In the present study the focus was on self-evaluative outcomes in the form of work values.

Vocational interests are defined in SCCT as "patterns of likes, dislikes, and indifferences regarding career-relevant activities and occupations" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 88). Although many conceptualizations and determinants of interests have been identified in the literature (see e.g., Silvia, 2006, for an overview), SCCT primarily focuses on the role of learning experiences, other environmental influences, and cognitive factors in the development of vocational interests.

The last key SCCT construct relevant to the present research is choice goals, defined as "the determination to engage in a particular activity or to effect a particular future outcome" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 85). Examples of goals are career plans and choice actions. Goals help people to organize and guide behavior, and to sustain it over extended time periods without the need for external reinforcement.

1.2. SCCT link between self-efficacy and interests

Much of the empirical research effort to validate the SCCT model has been devoted to the construct of self-efficacy. In particular, the link between self-efficacy and interests has been the focus of numerous studies. Based on a meta-analysis of 60 independent samples, Rottinghaus et al. (2003) concluded that self-efficacy and interests are distinct, albeit correlated constructs. SCCT postulates a direct link between self-efficacy and interests, where changes in self-efficacy lead to changes in interests. SCCT does not, however, explicitly specify a scenario in which changes in interests could directly cause changes in self-efficacy. Nevertheless, the model allows for an indirect causal path between the two constructs: interests in a particular domain lead to approach behavior and the intention to engage in an activity. Repeated engagement can lead to success experiences and goal attainment, which then influences the development of self-efficacy. This hypothesized indirect path is also congruent with theories that view interest as an emotional "approach urge" that promotes the continuous development of knowledge and skills necessary for survival (Silvia, 2006).

A number of studies have focused on the experimental manipulation of self-efficacy (e.g., Betz & Schifano, 2000; Campbell & Hackett, 1986; Hackett & Campbell, 1987; Luzzo et al., 1999). Early studies were based on the manipulation of the level of difficulty of tasks such as the solving of anagrams or incomplete number series (Campbell & Hackett, 1986; Hackett & Campbell, 1987). As predicted by SCCT, performance success in these studies was associated with higher self-efficacy and task-related interest ratings, while performance failure lowered the participants' rating of their level of self-efficacy and interest in the task. Another approach to the manipulation of self-efficacy was based on providing mastery and vicarious learning experiences as part of an intervention to raise self-efficacy in a specific academic domain. For example, Betz and Schifano (2000) developed an intervention designed to raise self-efficacy related to building, repair, and construction activities in women; participants randomly assigned to the intervention condition showed higher self-efficacy and an increase in interest in these types of activities compared to the control group. A similar study has been conducted by Luzzo et al. (1999) who investigated the separate and combined effects of performance mastery and vicarious learning on the mathematics and science self-efficacy, interests, and academic choices of a sample of college students. At a follow-up assessment four weeks later, the authors found that the largest increase in self-efficacy and subsequently interests had occurred in the participants in the combined mastery/vicarious learning condition.

1.3. Interests as a self-efficacy precursor

Experimental studies have primarily focused on the manipulation of sources of self-efficacy to demonstrate that changes in self-efficacy based on performance attainment can effect changes in interests, hereby supporting the SCCT prediction with regard to a directional link between self-efficacy and interests. However, this support for the SCCT model is somewhat limited because researchers have not explicitly tested alternative models by using manipulations of interests to produce changes in self-efficacy. One challenge is the relative stability of the construct. Interests have been shown to be partially determined by genetics (e.g., Betsworth et al., 1994), they have been shown to correlate with stable personality traits (e.g., Barrick, Mount, & Gupta, 2003; Larson, Rottinghaus, & Borgen, 2002), and they tend to fluctuate little over time (Low & Rounds, 2007; Rottinghaus, Coon, Gaffey, & Zytowski, 2007).

Despite the lack of true experimental evidence to support a causal interests–self-efficacy link, recent longitudinal studies found preliminary evidence that vocational interests can lead to the development of self-efficacy (Nauta, Kahn, Angell, & Cantarelli, 2002; Tracey, 2002). For example, in a study by Tracey (2002), school children in fifth and eighth grade were assessed twice during a one-year period in terms of their interests and confidence in different RIASEC (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional) domains. The results indicated that a reciprocal model with equally strong

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