**Career Development: Social Cognitive Career Theory**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to examine the career development of first-generation college students and their adjustments utilizing the social cognitive career theory framework. First-generation college students face unique challenges related to their education compared to their second-generation counterparts. The social cognitive career theory has been recommended as effective for helping individuals during the early stages of their careers. Additionally, the study explored the basic building blocks of the social cognitive career theory, such as self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectation, and goals. Finally, the paper presents how the social cognitive career theory can be useful in providing counseling services to first-generation college graduates.

*Keywords:* first-generation college students, social cognitive career theory, perceived barriers, support systems

**Career Development: Social Cognitive Career Theory**

The number of people who enroll in college and earn a bachelor’s degree has increased from 21% in 1990 to 33% in 2015 (Snyder et al., 2016). Despite this increase, only 26% of first-generation college students completed their degrees compared to 70% of students who are not first-generation college students (Pew Research, 2021). First-generation college students (FGCS) are students whose parents or guardians have not attended college (Jehangir, 2010). As such, individuals who do not have the benefit of having parents who either attended or graduated from college are less likely to complete their degree. Given the importance of post-secondary education on the career development of individuals, it is important to examine the factors that can explain the differences in retention between FGCS and those students who have one or more parents who attended college. The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors that explain the career development of FGCS using Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT).

First Generation College Students

First-generation college students face unique challenges that negatively impact college adjustments, including poorer academic preparation, less awareness of college funding opportunities, culture shock, low self-esteem, and poor time-management skills (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Gibbons et al., 2016; Hamilton, 2016; Ingels et al., 2014; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Nichols & Islas, 2016; Perna, 2015; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Other studies by (Gonzales et al., 2015; Storlie et al., 2016) indicated that first-generation college students might be less likely to take advantage of on-campus support systems than their counterpart multiple-generation students.

Previous meta-analyses present first-generation challenges when assessing higher education. For example, prior to attending college, prospective first-generation students (i.e., high school students whose parents did not attend college) aspiring to college are less likely to complete college preparatory coursework (Hines et al., 2019). Prospective FGCS are more likely to score lower on standardized tests (Riehl, 1994). In effect, prospective first-generation college students perceive less support from their families than those whose parents attended college (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). In addition, Gibbons and Border (2010) discussed barriers prospective first-generation college students faced, including financial and school stress, discrimination, lack of or negative role models, lack of guidance, lack of preparation, and less confidence compared to their counterparts. Moreover, these barriers can adversely affect academic career choice, aspirations, goals, and academic development (Gibbons & Border, 2010).

**Contextual Factors in the Career Development of FGCS**

Studies indicate that families and parents play critical roles in high school students’ academic and career decisions. For example, family involvement and support contribute to the overall success in college, particularly first-generation students (Coffman, 2011; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Moreover, previous studies found evidence that support from teachers and families can predict the academic and career-related outcomes for students from low-income families (Ali et al., 2005; Kenny et al., 2003).

Moreover, a body of studies indicates that students who perceived that they would receive support from their families had higher vocational/educational self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Kantamneni et al., 2018). Likewise, Kenny et al. (2003) found that urban high school students who perceive a higher level of family support have higher attitudes about their education and schools. In essence, the likelihood of prospective first-generation college students to possess knowledge related to college admissions processes, scholarship and financial aid procedures, and educational requirements is quite low (Vargas, 2004). To sum up, the research thus far indicates that the first generation experiences unique challenges and barriers that negatively impact their academic development.

Career researchers indicated that using the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) model shows evidence that peers and siblings support and predict academic and career self-efficacy beliefs (Ali et al, 2005),) in a sample of ninth graders from low socioeconomic backgrounds. By examining the roles of self-efficacy and outcome expectations, career counselors and educators to develop effective interventions that focus on first-generation students’ academic success.

**Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Social cognitive career theory has three core constructs: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and interests. The theory contains five models, all derived from Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory. The underlying principle of the theory is to help predict how people develop their interest, type of job or career, the educational pursuit of their dreams, performance, and satisfaction, and ways they navigate through challenges in their academic and work lives (Lent et al., 2002). Self-efficacy is people’s belief about their capabilities to organize and execute their abilities to reach personal goals. Self-efficacy determines whether people will take action or avoid them and includes the effort they are willing to put into a particular activity, persistence level, and overall performance. On the other hand, outcome expectation is about peoples’ beliefs about the consequences, be it positive or negative. Outcome expectation helps to empower one’s motivation and one’s effort to fight through challenges.

Lent et al. (2002) illustrated the choice model to pursue a math major is determined by one’s ability to meet the requirements(self-efficacy) of a math degree. However, the beliefs one has about the outcome of their effort in pursuing a math major are determined by outcome expectation (Lent et al., 2002). Finally, goals within the SCCT refer to one’s intentions to engage in a specific activity, the motivation to sustain an effort

**Performance Model**

The SCCT performance model focuses more on predicting and explaining (a) the level of success that people attain in educational and occupational pursuits and (b) their ability to persist in the face of obstacles. Within the performance model, past success gained through past achievements is believed to affect performance in two primary ways: first, performance and resistance are affected or influenced by ability. For example, students who have high aptitude levels in certain areas can persist longer in those subjects than those with lesser aptitude (Lent et al., 2002). Secondly, hypothetically, aptitude or ability impacts performance and persistence indirectly through the intervening paths of self-efficacy and outcome expectation (Lent et al., 2002).

The SCCT theory presents that self-efficacy and outcome expectation work in harmony with ability. Hence, students and workers with higher levels of ability, higher self-efficacy, and higher positive outcomes will perform higher performance goals, and they will be more organized in their skills and persist longer amid challenges (Lent et al., 2002). In essence, these students will achieve a higher level of success than those with less positive outcome expectations.

Thus, when people have high self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals, they make the best possible use of their ability. Also, it is important to note that self-efficacy does not substitute for ability. SCCT presents that overestimating self-efficacy can lead to self-defeating. For example, when people depend exclusively on their self-efficacy for a job, they can set high, unrealistic goals for themselves, leading to failure and discouragement. Goals also help sustain effort and influence self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2002)

**Social Cognitive Career Theory Choice Model**

The SCCT also presents that choice goals are sometimes influenced more directly and potently by self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, or environmental variables than by interest (Lent et al., 2002). Interest plays a critical role in career choice, particularly under supportive environments and conditions, when people are free to follow their interests. However, as is always the case, many adolescents are unable to follow their interests either because of the lack of support from their caregivers or opposition from them. Under such circumstances, they are left to choose whatever is available to them. Thus, SCCT indicates that people will be more apt to follow their interests in a supportive environment

**Social Cognitive Career Theory Interests Model**

The core SCCT elements that work together to aid in understanding career development are the personal factors (e.g., personality, ability, gender, race/ethnicity), contextual (e.g., supports, barriers, socioeconomic resources), and behavioral (e.g., choice action) variables (Lent et al., 2002). The SCCT model presents that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals play a critical role in educational and vocational interest development, choice-making, and performance. Moreover, the theory emphasizes that interest development may be fluid until late adolescence, the stage in life where (e.g., in art, science, social, or mechanical activities) students tend to become fairly stable. However, SCCT presents that interest changes do occur during their post-adolescent years. Furthermore, according to SCCT, when changes do occur in interest, they can be explained by changes in self-efficacy beliefs or outcome expectations. In summary, people develop an interest in an activity when they view themselves as competent and believe that the activity can lead to valued outcomes (Lent et al., 2002).

**Theoretical Framework**

The SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2006, 2008, 2013; Lent et al., 1994, 2000) is useful to explain career and vocational choices. Moreover, the SCCT is the preferred choice in exploring the career development process of people from diverse backgrounds (Kantamneni et al., 2018). SCCT derived from Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, emphasizing multi-complex ways that people, their behavior, and environment are impacted. The fundamental principle behind SCCT is that individual and contextual factors impact the development of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals.

Gibbons and Borders (2010) and Tate et al. (2015) argued that the SCCT model is effective in predicting career development for a diverse population such as first-generation college students, students from low-income families (Hsieh & Huang, 2014; Metheny & McWhirter, 2013), and students of color (Gonzalez, 2012; Navarro et al., 2014). SCCT is also beneficial for understanding college adjustments for first-generation college students. Therefore, it is a useful framework for gaining a greater understanding of academic persistence and achievement (Brown et al., 2008). Moreover, Lent et al. (1994) asserted that the SCCT model depicts background contextual as a predictor of learning experiences such as performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, and physiological arousal.

In essence, a personal experience in a certain task, watching others performing successfully, encouragement received from others on one’s performance, coupled with the absence of anxiety during a performance, can positively promote self-efficacy and outcome expectations. For example, a study by Garriott et al. (2014) showed that parental support predicts both math and science-related performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion, and vicarious influence, but not physiological arousal. Within the SCCT model, studies indicated that learning experiences are also suggested to predict self-efficacy and outcome expectation (Lent et al., 1994). As such, exploring the relationship between contextual factors and academic outcomes could expound further on ways that first-generation college students could make academic and vocational decisions (Kantamneni et al., 2018).

**Efficacy of Social Cognitive Career Theory**

A substantial body of studies focusing on person-cognitive variables confirms the overall support of the SCCT model (Lent et al., 1994), authenticating the mutual interplay between interests, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations (Sheu et al., 2010). Moreover, a relationship between self-efficacy and interests was also confirmed by the study of Rottinghaus et al. (2003). Research literature has presented the efficacy of the satisfaction in an academic setting, model nationally and internationally, in particular, the model’s ability to college major (e.g., STEM) satisfaction among diverse samples of U.S. college students), and students from diverse countries (e.g., Ezeofor & Lent, 2014; Hui et al., 2013; Isik et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2016; Lent et al., 2005; Lent et al., 2012; Lent et al., 2009; Ojeda et al., 2011; Sheu et al., 2014; Sheu et al., 2016; Sheu et al., 2017; Singley et al., 2010; Truong & Miller, 2018).

The work satisfaction model has also been tested by other studies of employed adults in the United States (e.g., Duffy & Lent, 2009; Fouad et al., 2016), and the satisfaction model has also been tested in other countries (e.g., Buyukgoze-Kavas et al., 2014; Lee & Shin, 2017; Lent et al., 2011).

**Meta-Analytic Findings**

An ongoing meta-analysis by Sheu et al. (2018) highlighted that the SCCT model works well under various conditions. For example, the hypothesis produced statistically significant path coefficients when the model was tested in both the academic and work domains. Shei et al. (2018) found that 54% of the variance in academic satisfaction was accounted for as predicted; in terms of work satisfaction, 43% was accounted for. Additionally, when Shei et al. (2018) tested models relating to life satisfaction, there were significant results, with 34% in the academic domain and 28% in the work domain. Although they also found that while they fit well across two domains, relatively, the strength of many of the paths was domain-specific. To illustrate, Sheu et al. (2018) also tested the model across gender, racial/ethnic group (in the United States), and nationality. Sheu et al. (2018) found that while multigroup tests suggest some group-specific, there was no sign of inconsistency difference across the analysis. Collectively, the predictors accounted for 54% of the variance in academic satisfaction and 43% of the variance in work satisfaction. The model tests also explained large portions of the variance in life satisfaction (34% in the academic domain and 28% in the work domain).

**Clinical Implications for Practice and Summary**

Researchers such as Gibbons and Border (2010) discussed barriers prospective first-generation college students faced and noted these barriers can adversely affect academic career choice, aspirations, goals, and academic development. The findings covered within this review indicate the importance of SCCT in explaining and understanding factors that career choice, work satisfaction, self-efficacy, outcomes expectation in the academic and work domain. The SCCT presents that one’s interests, choices, and performance are impacted by each other directly or directly or both, through contextual factors throughout the entire academic development (Lent et al., 2000). A such, considering the barriers and issues that first generation college students face including poorer academic preparation, the lack of family support, less awareness of college funding or opportunities, culture shock. Low self esteem and time management skills, which can adversely affect educational and career development, further research needs to be done to fill the gap and create awareness and solutions to the problems facing first generation students. Studies can examine current university programs, their effectiveness and ways to improve it to optimize the success of first-generation students.

Using the SCCT model helping professional can may encourage students to explore new ideas to examine these challengers and better means to prepare for both academic and career development (Gibbons, Rhinehart & Hardin 2019). Furthermore, students support programs can be evaluated to see where it needs improvements to ensure that first generation students access programs to make college adjustments easier.

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