

# The role of personality in adolescent career planning and exploration: A social cognitive perspective

Mary E. Rogers<sup>a,\*</sup>, Peter A. Creed<sup>b</sup>, A. Ian Glendon<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Griffith University, School of Medicine, Gold Coast Campus, Qld, 4222, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Griffith University, School of Psychology, Gold Coast Campus, Qld, 4222, Australia

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## Abstract

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) recognises the importance of individual differences and contextual influences in the career decision-making process. In extending the SCCT choice model, this study tested the role of personality, social supports, and the SCCT variables of self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals in explaining the career readiness actions of career planning and exploration. The authors surveyed 414 Australian high school students in Years 10, 11 and 12. Career exploration was associated with goals and social supports, whereas career planning was associated with self-efficacy, goals, personality and an interaction term for goals and social support that indicated that levels of planning were highest when social support and goals were highest. Implications for parents, teachers and guidance counsellors as well as recommendations for future research directions are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Personality; Social supports; Career planning; Career exploration; Self-efficacy; Outcome expectations; Goals; Social cognitive career theory

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## 1. Introduction

The final school years are critical in the career decision-making process, as this is when students typically begin to plan, explore and make decisions about employment or further education. The contemporary generation of school seniors have multiple career options available, and factors such as individual personality and contextual influences add complexity to the career decision-making process.

Whilst personality, social cognitive career theory (SCCT), and career readiness variables such as planning and exploration are all areas of importance that have generated investigation, little research has examined all three areas of career development together. Moreover, studies using University or college-aged American or European samples prevail, while research involving career choice behaviour within high school settings is lacking. In an effort to incorporate a multidimensional approach using conceptually related constructs, the present study examined the career decision-making process of high school students.

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\* Corresponding author. Fax: +61 7 5678 0708.

E-mail address: [mary.rogers@griffith.edu.au](mailto:mary.rogers@griffith.edu.au) (M.E. Rogers).

Based on a review of the literature, and with an aim to extend the SCCT choice model (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) to explore the career decision-making process, we expected that personality would predict planning and exploration and that this relationship would be mediated by the SCCT variables of self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals. Specifically, based on the review by Tokar, Fischer, and Subich (1998), recent studies by Savickas, Briddick, and Watkins (2002), Judge and Ilies (2002) and Blustein and Flum (1999), and Super's (1980) characterisation of exploration, we expected individuals who were high on conscientiousness, extraversion and openness to engage in more career planning and exploration behaviours, and individuals who were high on neuroticism to engage in fewer such behaviours. As there was no past research on agreeableness, we did not have a prediction for this variable.

We expected self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals to be associated with career planning and exploration, and that goals would mediate the relationship between the explanatory variables of self-efficacy and outcome expectations and the outcome variables of planning and exploration. That is, career confident individuals with higher career outcome expectations would be more likely to set higher career-related goals and engage in more career planning and exploration. It was further predicted that the relationships between goals and career planning, and between goals and career exploration, would vary under different conditions of social support; specifically, we expected a stronger relationship between goals and behaviours in the presence of higher social support. Fig. 1 depicts the career decision-making model under investigation. The model, based on a portion of the SCCT choice model developed by Lent et al. (1994), extends the choice model to the domain of career decision-making by incorporating direct pathways between person inputs and choice goals, and between person inputs and choice actions. The five-factor model of personality is used to operationalise person inputs, and career planning and career exploration are used to operationalise choice actions.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

We surveyed 540 high school students who were in Years 10, 11 and 12. Of these, 126 surveys were not usable, which left 414 participants in the sample. Unusable surveys resulted primarily because some students had to leave the testing session early due to other school commitments. A small number were unusable due to missing data. Over 90% of the students were Caucasian, which is typical of schools in Australia. One-hundred-and-sixty-six students (40%) were in Year 10, 133 (32%) were in Year 11, and 115 (28%) were in Year 12. The sample comprised 226 females (55%) and 188 males (45%), whose mean age was 15.86 years ( $SD = 0.99$ ; range = 14.15–19.72). On a six-point self-report measure of school achievement (of 1 = LA+, 2 = SA,

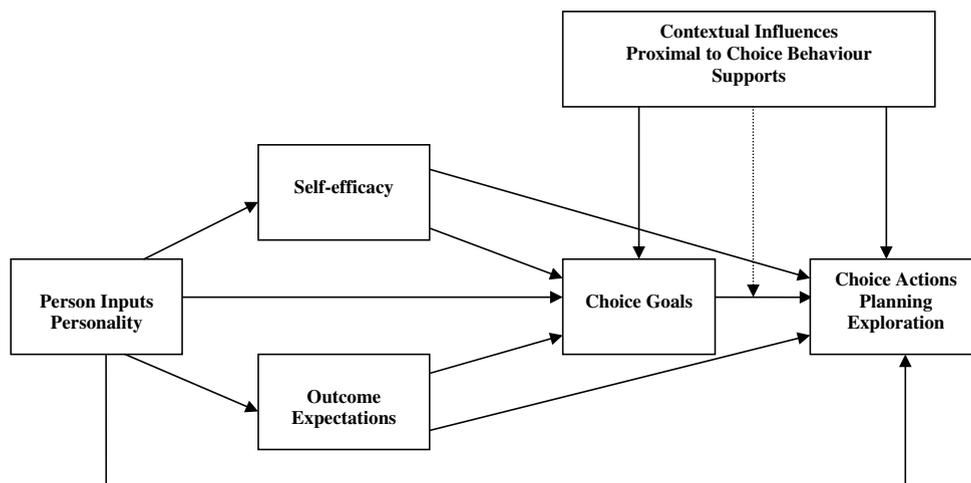


Fig. 1. Proposed paths from person and contextual inputs to career planning and exploration. Adapted from the model of person, contextual and experiential factors affecting career-related choice behaviour (Lent et al., 1994).

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