The mediating roles of career self-efficacy and career decidedness in the relationship between contextual support and persistence[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from Social cognitive career theory, we examined how types of contextual support (e.g., parental support and number of career counseling sessions received) influence persistence. In addition, we test the roles of career self-efficacy and career decidedness as mediating mechanisms in the relationship between these types of contextual support and persistence. One hundred forty-six undergraduate students were surveyed over three measurement periods. Data were collected from multiple sources: surveys from students and parents and students' archival data. Results provided support for our hypothesized mediated model. Time 1 student and parent ratings of support and Time 1 number of counseling sessions received were related to greater Time 2 career self-efficacy and Time 2 career decidedness. This in turn was associated with Time 3 persistence (i.e., reduced academic program turnover). Theoretical and applied implications are discussed.

The declining persistence of students in academic programs is a current problem faced by tertiary institutions worldwide. In the United States, the National Center for Education Statistics (2005) reported that between 20% and 33% of students leave the university without completing their degree. In Canada, approximately 16% of those that commence their university studies drop out (Statistics Canada, 2007), while in the UK there are approximately 14.1% of students who fail to graduate with any degree and 22.6% who fall short of the degree they initially enrolled in (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2008). This trend is mirrored in even higher proportions in non-western countries. For example in both South Africa and the Philippines, 40% of students drop out of university in their first year or fail to graduate (Commission on Higher Education, 2008; Human Sciences Research Council, 2007).

Given the staggering drop out rates of students in tertiary academic programs, an empirical examination of how to reduce its occurrence is of critical importance (Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007). Indeed, a number of variables have been found to be related to increased student persistence, such as the educational attainment of parents and performance in an academic program (Araque, Roldan, & Salguero, 2009), informal interaction with other students and tutors (Lowis & Castley, 2008), learned industriousness (Eisenberger, Kuhlman, & Cotterell, 1992); social support and educational self-efficacy (Rayle, Kurpius, & Arredondo, 2006), and university support services (Moriarty et al., 2009 ; Rayle et al., 2006). Collectively, these studies have enhanced our understanding of the need for these support variables to be present very early on in the students' university experience; this early engagement or adjustment is a reliable predictor of academic persistence (Lowis & Castley, 2008; Moriarty et al., 2009). The current study fits into this research stream and aims to contribute to the literature by examining the mediating roles of career self-efficacy and career

decidedness in the relationships between parental support and number of career counseling sessions received and persistence. In the sections that follow, we delineate the constructs in our model and discuss the expected relationships among them.

Social cognitive career theory as an overarching framework

The social cognitive career theory (SCCT, Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) is a well-established theory for investigating the variables that predict student persistence in an academic program. It postulates that an individual's academic and career development outcomes, such as interests, choices, and performance (including persistence), are affected by contextual variables (Lent et al., 1994). Contextual variables, or support and barriers, are those variables in an individual's background or environment that either promote or hinder academic and career development outcomes, including persistence. The person-cognitive variables of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals (borrowed from Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, 1999) are also postulated to mediate between contextual variables and career development outcomes. Persistence has not been a widely studied outcome compared to interest and choice (Lent, Brown, Schmidt, et al., 2003; Lent, Brown, Sheu, et al., 2003). It has been operationalized in two ways; continuation, reflecting the length of time a student remains enrolled in an academic program over a period of time (Lent, Brown, Schmidt, et al., 2003; Lent, Brown, Sheu, et al., 2003) or academic program turnover, which is simply whether a student is enrolled or has dropped out at a particular point in time (Schaefers, Epperson, & Nauta, 1997).

While the effects of supports and barriers on career development outcomes are almost always investigated together, as though they are mirror reflections of each other, there is evidence to suggest that this may not be the case (Lent et al., 2001, 2005). Although supports and barriers were found to be inversely related, the magnitude of the correlation suggests that these factors should not be treated merely as polar opposites (Lent et al., 2001). The implication of this is that types of support can be examined separately from barriers if there are sound theoretical reasons to do so. We have identified two types of support, one originating from the family (i.e., parental support) and the other from the educational institution (i.e., career counseling). Both of these types of support are relevant to a student population and could be expected to predict persistence.

The importance of parents in the career development of their children has long been recognized in the literature (Bryant, Zvonkovic, & Reynolds, 2006). Indeed, it has been noted that parental involvement is a critical factor in predicting children's career-task related confidence especially during early adolescence (Turner & Lapan, 2002). In a similar vein, career counseling, which generally aims to assist students make career-related decisions, has been shown to positively affect students' career-related exploration, planning, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations (Hirschi & Lage, 2008; McWhirter, Rasheed, & Crothers, 2000).

Parental support and career counseling as types of contextual support

Parental support is defined as a parent or guardian's emotional (i.e., "Dad and Mom show understanding and encouragement"), informational (i.e., "Dad and Mom give me ideas and advice"), and practical (e.g., financial) support of a child's academic or career endeavors (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). It has been shown to predict children's career development across a range of samples, from predominantly White or European-American students to Asian Americans, Black-Americans, and Hispanic Americans (Ferry, Fouad, & Smith, 2000; Fouad et al., 2008; Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003; Navarro, Flores, & Worthington, 2007; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). Evidence also shows that individuals from disadvantaged or rural backgrounds are positively affected by parental support in terms of greater engagement in school (e.g., greater class attendance, doing homework more frequently, etc.) and higher career aspirations (Kenny et al., 2003; Wettersten et al., 2005). According to SCCT, types of support would either have direct effects on career decidedness or indirect effects via self-efficacy (Lent et al., 1994). We propose that parental support will influence career decidedness through the mediated route, as has been shown in the literature (Ferry et al., 2000; Fouad et al., 2008; Kenny et al., 2003; Tang et al., 1999), facilitating the development of self-efficacy through increasing learning experiences and accomplishments, social persuasion, and increasing positive affective reactions (Bandura, 1982). In support for this, Turner and Lapan (2002) found that perceived parental support uniquely and differentially accounted for 29% to 43% of the total variance in vocational self-efficacy for Holland themed careers. Based on these theoretical and empirical considerations, we predict that career self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between parental support and career decidedness. To obtain a more accurate picture of parental support, we obtained both student ratings of support and parent ratings of support.

Aside from parents, schools also provide contextual support to help students with academic difficulties and concerns. One type of support service offered in schools is career counseling. It is a service that is often provided by an educational institution that aims to assist its students to select an appropriate academic program or career. As individuals begin to consider career possibilities as well as how realistic these are at a very early age, part of the counseling process involves re-evaluating options that may have been pre-maturely discarded (Brown & Lent, 1996). It generally involves helping students through a process of self-discovery (i.e., knowing ones interests, abilities, etc), presenting career relevant information (i.e., researching suitable occupations and options), and finally comparing these options and creating plans (Osipow, 1999). However, although these are examples of typical components, there is a great deal of variability in counseling due to differing counselor styles, expectations of intervention duration, and so forth (Hanson, Claiborn, & Kerr, 1997; June & Smith, 1983). In line with SCCT, career counseling may act either directly or indirectly on career decidedness. It is postulated that one of the most important functions of career counseling is to alter an individual's faulty beliefs about their self-efficacy, thus suggesting an indirect route to decidedness (Brown & Lent, 1996). Indeed, career counseling has been shown to increase self-efficacy related to career decision-making and vocational skills