

Examining Contextual Factors in the Career Decision Status of African American Adolescents

Madonna G. Constantine

Barbara C. Wallace

Mai M. Kindaichi

Teachers College, Columbia University

This study examined the extent to which perceived occupational barriers and perceived parental support predicted career certainty and career indecision in a sample of African American adolescents. Perceived occupational barriers were positively predictive of career indecision, and perceived parental support was positively associated with career certainty. The results provided support for the importance of considering contextual variables, such as perceived occupational barriers and perceived parental support, in the career decision-making processes of African American adolescents. The results also highlighted the salience of social cognitive career theory in conceptualizing career-related issues in African American high school students. Future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: African American adolescents, career decision making, career indecision, occupational barriers, parental support

Over the past couple of decades, there have been increased writings discussing the application of various career counseling theories, models, and interventions to African Americans (e.g., Brown, 1995; Cheatham, 1990; Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998; Gainor & Lent, 1998; Hackett & Byars, 1996). Exploring career-related issues in this population is vital to understanding how the career development process might occur in the context of perceived occupational facilitators and barriers and salient cultural factors (Luzzo, 1992; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001; McCollum, 1998). In particular, the career development of African American adolescents has been of major concern in light of literature delineating numerous challenges that affect their personal, educational, and career development (Cheatham, 1990; Constantine et al., 1998).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Madonna G. Constantine, Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th St., Box 92, New York, NY 10027; e-mail: mc816@columbia.edu.

JOURNAL OF CAREER ASSESSMENT, Vol. 13 No. 3, August 2005 307-319

DOI: 10.1177/1069072705274960

© 2005 Sage Publications

Because individuals' cognitive and intellectual development have been thought to occur alongside their psychosocial and identity development (Blustein, Prezioso, & Palladino Schultheiss, 1995; Cheatham, Slaney, & Coleman, 1990), the field of vocational psychology has been encouraged to explore more fully how contextual and individual factors affect the career development processes of African American youth (Gainor & Lent, 1998; Hackett & Byars, 1996). Few studies to date, however, have addressed the relationship of perceived career barriers and parental influences in career decision-making outcomes related to African American adolescents (Ladany, Melincoff, C & Love, 1997; Otto, 2000). It may be informative to pair research on the perception of stymied career options with helpful factors (i.e., perceived support) that could promote optimal career development processes in relation. As such, the present study examined the degree to which African American adolescents' perceptions of career barriers and parental support predicted their career certainty and career indecision. In our investigation, social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 2000) framed the discussion of contextual factors (i.e., perceived career barriers and perceived parental support) in relation to African American adolescents' career decision processes.

Authors name the theory that they used

Social Cognitive Career Theory and Perceived Career Barriers

SCCT (Lent et al., 1994, 2000) maintains that career development is a combination of personal, contextual, and cognitive factors that influence career interest formation, goal development, and performance. This theory emphasizes three social-cognitive processes that are believed to operate with regard to career behaviors: self-efficacy beliefs (i.e., the degree to which individuals feel confident about their abilities to perform tasks as informed by personal and vicarious experiences and exposure); outcome expectations (i.e., the expected consequences of actions); and career goals or intentions. SCCT discusses how these components are shaped by factors such as race, gender, social support, and perceived and systemic career barriers. Personal and vicarious learning experiences, which include demographic, psychosocial, and performance feedback mechanisms, enhance or detract from career self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Through career-related activity participation, modeling experiences, and feedback from important others (e.g., parents, teachers, and peers), children and adolescents develop skills, mastery, and expectations about the outcomes of their performance. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations contribute to the development of career interests, which, in turn, cultivate career choices, actions based on career choices, and performance. Such performance then influences self-appraisals and self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, career development is conceptualized in SCCT as a confluence of

dynamic and cyclic interactions of cognitive, psychosocial, and behavioral factors (Lent et al., 1994).

According to SCCT (Lent et al., 1994), perceptions of career barriers influence the relationship between career interests and goals. Perceptions of barriers to educational and career goals represent an interaction between objective environmental factors and individuals' active identification of exposure to those factors (Lent et al., 2000; Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996). The specific outcomes that stem from the influence of certain contextual factors on career choice depend, in part, on individuals' personal appraisals of and responses to these factors (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Swanson & Woitke, 1997). Many African American youths encounter myriad environmental challenges that could affect their career decision-making process and overall career development (Constantine et al., 1998). For example, some African American adolescents may have few opportunities to develop self-efficacy for careers that require long-term education, are financially rewarding, and have high status (Speight, Rosenthal, Jones, & Gastenveld, 1995). External barriers that may affect some African American adolescents' opportunities to develop a sense of mastery in various careers include a lack of employment opportunities, limited exposure to vocational options and information, limited job skills, low economic resources, and employment and educational discrimination (Luzzo, 1992; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001; McCollum, 1998; Swanson et al., 1996). Additionally, African Americans often are overrepresented in non-college-bound vocational education tracks, thereby stymieing their opportunities to explore careers that entail postsecondary education (Constantine et al., 1998).

Several studies have examined perceptions of career barriers with respect to the career-related attitudes and behaviors of African American adolescents. In a predominantly African American sample of at-risk high school students in an urban environment, Ladany and his colleagues (1997) found that greater perceived career barriers were related to lower vocational exploration and commitment to career choices. Additionally, the aforementioned study reported that at-risk urban high school students who had fewer intentions to pursue college were less likely to exhibit commitment to career choices and more likely to perceive career barriers. Evans and Herr (1994), however, found that perceptions of discrimination against African Americans or women (i.e., potential perceived career barriers to some African Americans and/or women) were not significantly related to the career aspirations of African American college males or females. Furthermore, Rollins (2001) reported that African American adolescents who perceived greater racial discrimination toward African Americans also indicated greater self-efficacy for various career decision-making tasks. Thus, it appears that even in the face of perceived barriers to occupational achievement, some African American adolescents still possess high career goals and feel confident in their ability to attend to career decision tasks. Such an orientation could translate

directly into occupational achievement and could be influenced by the degree of support for their vocational choices as expressed by their parents.

Perceived Parental Support and Career Decision-Making Processes

Early adolescence can be a critical time in which parental and familial influences shape adolescents' career development (Blustein et al., 1995; Middleton & Loughhead, 1993; Otto, 2000; Rush, 2002; Turner & Lapan, 2002). Some researchers have speculated that parental influences on African American youths' career development may be stronger than those of their white counterparts (Dillard & Campbell, 1981; Lee, 1984). In line with cultural values that emphasize familialism and communalism, African American adolescents who are in the process of making career decisions might place greater priority on familial goals and community needs (e.g., staying close to their family to provide or obtain emotional or financial support) over individual goals (e.g., moving far away from home to attend college to establish "emotional autonomy" from parents; Cheatham, 1990; McWhirter, 1997). Moreover, consistent with the Africentric values of affiliation, interdependence, and respect for elders (Cheatham, 1990), African American adolescents may rely strongly on parental influences and support throughout their career development. Such connectedness with familial support may run counter to career development models that derive from a Eurocentric framework (e.g., Middleton & Loughhead, 1993) and emphasize autonomy and individuation from parents (Hardin, Leong, & Osipow, 2001).

Perceived supports and support systems are considered to be facilitative environmental variables for African American adolescents (Lent et al., 2000). Previous studies have reported that perceived parental support positively predicted learning experiences, career self-esteem, and outcome expectations among adolescents and college students (Ferry, Fouad, & Smith, 2000; Lapan, Hinkelman, Adams, & Turner, 1999; Turner & Lapan, 2002). These findings may suggest that the absence of such support could negatively affect some African American adolescents' career decision-making processes, resulting in career-related challenges such as uncertainty and indecision (McWhirter, 1997). In particular, career indecision has been defined as the inability to select and devote oneself to a career choice (Tokar, Withrow, Hall, & Moradi, 2003). Career indecision has been conceptualized to consist of various interrelated components, including lacking career-related information, needing more career-related information, trait indecision (i.e., a chronic and pervasive difficulty in making decisions), disagreement with others about career decisions, identity diffusion (i.e., a struggle to crystallize a consistent sense of self), and choice anxiety (i.e., difficulty in processing and acting on career-related information; Kelly & Lee, 2002). It is possible that some African American adolescents' experiences of career indecision reflect their ambivalence about pursuing careers that are perceived to be fraught with systemic barriers or are otherwise unattainable.

Independent variables:

Perceived occupation barriers
Perceived parental support

Dependent variables:

Career certainty
Career indecision

ing internal and external barriers to be a component of career indecision (Stetler, 1988), and because perceiving facilitate career certainty (McWhirter, 1997), the present study explored the extent to which perceived occupational barriers and perceived parental support were predictive of both career certainty and career indecision in a sample of African American adolescents. We hypothesized that perceived occupational barriers would be negatively predictive of career certainty and positively predictive of career indecision. We also hypothesized that perceived parental support would be positively predictive of career certainty and negatively predictive of career indecision.

METHOD**Participants**

The participants (88 girls and 63 boys) were from a northeastern region and had a mean age of 16.67 years ($SD = 0.85$), high school grade level, 59 (59.1%) of the participants were juniors and 92 (60.9%) were seniors. All of the respondents indicated that they had been born and reared in the United States.

These students were asked to participate in an anonymous study examining their attitudes and perceptions about various career-related issues by completing a questionnaire packet consisting of (a) a brief demographic questionnaire, (b) the Perceptions of Barriers Scale (POBS; McWhirter, 1997), (c) the Career Support Scale (CSS; Binen, Franda, & Thye, 1995), and (d) the Career Decision Scale (CDS; Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico, & Koschier, 1976). Trained research assistants distributed and collected these surveys during specified class times. Appropriate informed consent procedures (i.e., obtaining both parents' and students' permission to participate in the study) were followed in collecting data. The respondents did not receive any compensation for participating in the study.

Instruments

Demographic questionnaire. A short demographic questionnaire was administered to participants requesting information such as their age, race or ethnicity, gender, and educational level.

Expectations about the relationships among variables:
Perceived occupation barriers negatively related to career certainty.
Perceived occupation barriers positively related to career indecision.
Perceived parental support positively related to career certainty.
Perceived parental support negatively related to career indecision.