

Self-Efficacy, Perceptions of Barriers, Vocational Identity, and the Career Exploration Behavior of Latino/a High School Students

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This study explored the potential relationship between the social cognitive variables of career decision-making self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers and the outcome variables of vocational identity and career exploration behaviors in a sample of 128 urban Latino/a high school students. The results indicated that higher levels of career decision-making self-efficacy were related to both a more differentiated vocational identity and a greater engagement with career exploration tasks. Perception of fewer barriers was also found to be related to a more integrated vocational identity. Implications for career counseling and future research are discussed.

The term *Latinos/as* is a socioracial categorization, representing an aggregation of a number of distinct national subgroups (e.g., Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican, Cuban), based on supposed differences in cultural practices (e.g., language, religion) as compared with the Anglo-Saxon Protestant norm in the United States (Chapa & Valencia, 1993; Comaz-Diaz, 2001; Eamon & Mulder, 2005; Helms & Cooke, 1999). In 2002, 38.2 million Latinos/as resided in the United States, constituting 12% of the total U.S. population (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003). Although Latinos/as represent the fastest growing sector of the U.S. labor market, their levels of educational and occupational attainment remain significantly below that of non-Hispanic Whites (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003; Tsai, Pole, Levenson, & Munoz, 2003). Given the youthfulness of the Latino/a community as

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compared with other demographic groups (Eamon & Mulder, 2005; Hobbs & Stoops, 2002; Zayas, Lester, Cabassa, & Fortuna, 2005), Latinos/as constitute not only a growing proportion of the U.S. population but also a segment of the population likely to be making career-related decisions in the coming years.

Despite the occupational and educational discrepancies just noted, relatively little is known about the factors affecting the career development of Latino/a adolescents (Arbona, 1995; Fouad, 1995). Some authors have found support for the potential usefulness of the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) model of career development with Latino/a adolescents (e.g., Flores & O'Brien, 2002; McWhirter, 1997; McWhirter, Hackett, & Bandalos, 1998). The SCCT model highlights the role of cognitive factors such as self-efficacy beliefs and perceptions of barriers in career development (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 2002). According to Lent et al. (1994, 2002), interests are not simply expressions of personality. Rather, people's perceptions and appraisals of themselves and their environments play an important role. From this perspective, vocational inclinations can only become career interests to the extent that people believe they can perform the tasks required in a given occupation (i.e., self-efficacy) and do not perceive any overwhelming obstacles (i.e., barriers) to their success. The present study explored the relationship among perceptions of barriers, career decision-making self-efficacy, vocational identity, and engagement in career-related activities in a sample of Latino/a adolescents.

Decision-making self-efficacy has been identified as an important variable in the career development of high school students. Career decision-making self-efficacy refers to the degree to which individuals feel confident in their ability to successfully engage in tasks associated with making a career choice and with commitment to a career (Taylor & Betz, 1983). It has also been observed that career-related self-efficacy in general may prove to be an important element in formulating a model of career development for Latinos/as (Arbona, 1995; Fouad, 1995). Research has shown support for the relationship between career self-efficacy and career interests, as well as careers considered among young adult Latino/a students studying for high school equivalency degrees (Bores-Rangel, Church, Szendre, & Reeves, 1990; Church, Teresa, Rosebrook, & Szendre, 1992). Flores and O'Brien (2002) found that self-efficacy for nontraditional careers was negatively related to traditional career choices and positively related to prestige for a group of female Mexican American high school students. Research has not yet examined the role that career decision-making self-efficacy may play among Latino/a adolescents.

Latino/a adolescents may be affected not only by the sociocultural context in which they live but also by the meaning they attribute to that context (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003). According to SCCT, the number of barriers one perceives may be one way in which systemic factors shape an adolescent's career-related attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. Several vocational researchers have noted the potential influence that perceptions of barriers may have on the career decision-making process for people who face systemic factors (e.g., racial/ethnic discrimination, institutionalized racism) that have traditionally limited educational attainment and career advancement (Arbona, 1990; Lent et al., 1994). Brown and Lent (1996) observed that perceived educational

and occupational barriers might negatively affect career development by limiting the translation of interests into goals and goals into actions. McWhirter (1997) noted that Mexican American high school students reported more perceived barriers than did their European American counterparts. However, in another sample of Mexican American adolescents, McWhirter et al. (1998) did not find a direct effect between perceptions of barriers and career expectations.

This study considers the potential influence of career decision-making self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers on vocational identity. One of the central tasks of adolescence is identity development (Erikson, 1963). In an effort to solidify a self-image, adolescents struggle to gain a better understanding of their own emotions, beliefs, and values. Additionally, they are likely to seek a sense of meaning or purpose in their lives and have a greater tendency to look toward the future in the conceptualization of an adult identity. An integral component of this process of identity formation is the establishment of a vocational identity, including a clearer and more stable sense of one's interests, abilities, and talents, as well as the ability to establish goals and make career-related decisions (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980). Super, Savickas, and Super (1996) observed that the establishment of a vocational identity—the assessment and knowledge of a person's objective vocational traits—serves as the basis for making occupation choices that are a good fit, consequently ensuring optimal adjustment outcomes. To our knowledge, no empirical studies have directly examined the construct of vocational identity in Latino/a high school students.

The present study also examined the potential impact of career decision-making self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers on career exploration behaviors. Specifically, activities related to career exploration (e.g., participating in a mock interview, conducting research on a specific career) provide students with the opportunity to explore their interests and therefore enhance their career development. Previous researchers have examined the potential impact of career exploration behaviors within the context of career development as well as the factors that may, in turn, influence the type and number of career activities in which an individual chooses to engage (Blustein, 1989; Luzzo, James, & Luna, 1996; Nevill & Schleckler, 1988; Solberg, Good, Fischer, Brown, & Nord, 1995). In particular, Solberg et al. found that in a study of 426 college men and women, the degree to which individuals believed that they could successfully perform a variety of career exploration tasks was related to the number of career-related activities performed. Blustein also found evidence that suggests that college students with higher levels of career decision-making self-efficacy were more inclined to engage in career exploration behavior than were college students with lower levels of career decision-making self-efficacy. These results suggest that career exploration behavior is an important construct to consider in the context of student career development. However, researchers have yet to examine this variable as it relates to a Latino/a high school population.

Some authors have noted gender differences in career achievement for Latino/as (e.g., Flores & O'Brien, 2002), whereas others have highlighted differences in gender socialization within various Latino cultures (e.g., Gomez et al., 2001; McWhirter, 1997). The few studies that have examined gender differences in the career development of Latino/a ado-

lescents from an SCCT perspective have reported mixed results. For instance, McWhirter found that Mexican American high school male adolescents reported fewer perceived barriers to career development than did Mexican American female adolescents. However, in another study, a structural model featuring a number of social cognitive variables (including perceived barriers) that predicted career expectations fit samples of Mexican American male and female adolescents equally well (McWhirter et al., 1998). Thus, McWhirter et al. found no significant gender differences in how these variables influenced Latino/a career development.

The present study examined the ways in which the social cognitive variables of career decision-making self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers may be related to the vocational identity and number of career-related activities undertaken in a sample of Latino/a adolescents. On the basis of the aforementioned literature, it was expected that lower levels of perceived barriers and a greater sense of career decision-making self-efficacy would predict a more integrated vocational identity and increased engagement in career exploration tasks. In addition, because of inconsistent study findings in the literature noted earlier, gender was included in the model to assess any potential gender differences. The present study used both psychological (vocational identity) and behavioral (career search activities) outcome measures to assess the influence of career decision-making self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers within this understudied population.

Method

Participants

Participants were 128 high school students at an urban high school in a large northeastern city in the United States who self-identified as Latino/Hispanic on the demographic questionnaire accompanying this study. Some 66.4% of participants were male adolescents ($n = 85$), and 33.6% were female adolescents ($n = 43$). All participants self-identified as Latino/a. The students' ages ranged from 15 to 18 years, with a mean age of 16.12 years ($SD = 0.91$). Most students indicated that they were in 10th grade (46.9%), followed by 11th grade (44.5%) and 12th grade (7.8%). (A total of 0.8% of the responses for the question about grade were missing.) The majority of students (85.9%) reported that they were born in the United States, followed by a small percentage of students who reported that they were born in the Dominican Republic (4.7%), Mexico (3.1%), various other countries in South and Central America (4.8%), or Puerto Rico (0.8%; percentages do not equal 100% because of rounding). Some 75.3% of the students attending this high school were eligible for participation in the U.S. Department of Agriculture free lunch program. Eligibility is determined by multiplying the year's federal income poverty guidelines by 1.30. The present study had a 95% response rate, suggesting that the sample was representative of the high school's Latino/a population.

Procedure

Packets of instruments were distributed throughout the day by the researchers (the authors of this article and a team of research assistants) to participants in the classrooms of teachers who had agreed to participate.

Students were asked to complete the instruments during class time and were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept anonymous. The packets were counterbalanced and included the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale-Short Form (CDMSES-SF; Betz, Klein, & Taylor, 1996), the My Vocational Situation (MVS; Holland, Daiger, et al., 1980), the Career Search Activities Index (Solberg et al., 1995), and a demographic questionnaire. The study was approved by the institutional review boards at the local board of education and at our home institution. Parental consent was obtained prior to administration.

Instruments

CDMSES-SF. The CDMSES-SF is a 25-item short form of the original CDMSES developed by Taylor and Betz (1983; see Betz et al., 1996). The scale measures respondents' self-efficacy expectations in relation to career decision-making tasks. Individuals rate their degree of confidence in successfully completing a variety of career-related tasks on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*no confidence*) to 5 (*complete confidence*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of career decision-making self-efficacy. Validity of the CDMSES-SF has been established such that scores from the CDMSES-SF have been linked to career indecision (Betz et al., 1996). Internal consistencies ranging from .92 to .97 have been reported for the short form (Nilsson, Schmidt, & Meek, 2002). Reliability analyses for the present sample indicated an alpha of .89.

Career Search Activities Index. The Career Search Activities Index is a list of 24 career search activities developed by Solberg et al. (1995). Respondents are asked to indicate whether they had participated in each of the activities within the past 6 months. Items include such activities as "done a mock interview" and "made a list about what you want in a career." The total number of the activities completed is used as the score for this index. Using their sample of 426 college men and women, Solberg et al. reported an internal consistency coefficient of .73 using the Kuder-Richardson (K-R) 20 formula. The internal consistency coefficient for the sample used in this study was .73. Because the index is simply a checklist of behaviors, not a measure of a presumed psychological construct, no validity information is reported. Students either performed or did not perform the actions listed.

MVS. The MVS was designed to identify potential types of difficulties that people encounter in vocational decision making. The present study used subscales that assessed difficulties with vocational identity and perceived environmental or personal barriers.

The Vocational Identity subscale of the MVS consists of 18 true/false items intended to measure the extent to which respondents have a clear picture of their goals, strengths, and interests. Holland, Daiger, et al. (1980) reported an internal consistency of .86, using the K-R 20 formula, for a sample of 185 male high school students and 311 female high school students. The internal consistency coefficient for the sample used in this study was .81. Leong and Morris (1989) found that vocational identity was negatively related to social avoidance, distress, and intolerance of ambiguity and positively related to a high level of career maturity and the tendency to use a rational decision-making style. Holland, Daiger, et al. found substantial evidence for construct validity using a sample of

824 people from high schools, colleges, and businesses. Holland, Daiger, et al. found that the Vocational Identity subscale was positively correlated with age and negatively correlated with the quantity and variety of vocational aspirations that an individual lists on the MVS, suggesting that a more defined vocational identity is related to a smaller number and range of career aspirations. Furthermore, a subsample of participants who scored high on the Vocational Identity subscale was rated to be "well-organized," "self-confident," "not at loose ends," and "competent to handle their lives well" (Holland, Daiger, et al., 1980, p. 4). Finally, a survey of 2,343 high school students found that Vocational Identity scores were negatively correlated with the amount of career and personal help desired by the participants (Holland, Gottfredson, & Power, 1980).

The Barriers subscale of the MVS is composed of four yes/no items and is intended to measure the respondents' perceived external obstacles to occupational goals. The score for the Barriers subscale is the total number of no responses. Higher scores on the Barriers subscale indicated more perceived barriers. Holland, Daiger, et al. (1980) reported an internal consistency coefficient of .23 for both men and women using the K-R 20 formula. Holland, Daiger, et al. argued that the Barriers subscale is similar to a checklist; it does not often function as a homogeneous subscale but is useful in understanding this aspect of students' career development. It is also likely that the low number of items (four) adversely affects its reliability. However, this measure of perceptions of barriers was chosen to accommodate the time constraints and attention span of the sample. The internal consistency coefficient for the present sample was .42.

Results

The data were examined using a multivariate multiple regression. Career decision-making self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers were the predictor variables and vocational identity and career search activities were the criterion variables. Participant gender was dummy coded and included as a predictor in the analysis. Correlations, means, and standard deviations for the variables are noted in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Career Search Activities, Vocational Identity, Perceptions of Barriers, and Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Career search activities	—			
2. Vocational identity	.28**	—		
3. Perceptions of barriers	.18*	.48**	—	
4. Career decision-making self-efficacy	.43**	.37**	.25**	—
<i>M</i>	14.23	9.61	2.91	3.91
<i>SD</i>	4.19	4.22	1.05	0.43

Note. *N* = 128.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

No main effect was found for gender, Wilks's $\Lambda = .97$, $F(2, 123) = 2.20$, *ns*. However, both career decision-making self-efficacy, Wilks's $\Lambda = .81$, $F(2, 123) = 14.33$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .19$, where η^2 represents the multivariate effect size, and perceptions of barriers, Wilks's $\Lambda = .82$, $F(2, 123) = 13.57$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .18$, were found to be significant overall. Because multivariate significance was reached for these two predictor variables, univariate analyses were examined. These analyses indicated that career decision-making self-efficacy had a significant positive relationship with vocational identity, $F(1, 127) = 12.08$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .09$) where η represents the univariate effect size, and with career search activities, $F(1, 127) = 20.40$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .14$. Perceptions of barriers was significantly positively correlated with vocational identity, $F(1, 127) = 27.22$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .18$, but did not have a significant relationship with career search activities in this sample.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship among career decision-making self-efficacy, perceptions of barriers, vocational identity, and career exploration activities in a sample of Latino/a high school students. Results showed that career decision-making self-efficacy was related to students' vocational identity and career exploration activities. Additionally, the results indicated that perceptions of barriers for this sample was significantly related to vocational identity but not to career exploration activities. These results offer some support for the recent literature highlighting the importance of social cognition in career development (e.g., Lent et al., 2002). As with other studies that have found various types of self-efficacy to be related to Latino/a career development (Bores-Rangel et al., 1990; Church et al., 1992; Flores & O'Brien, 2002), students in the present study who were more confident in their ability to accomplish tasks related to career decision making were also more likely to have a clear vision of their goals, strengths, and interests. These students also reported more career exploration activity. On the other hand, consistent with predictions based on the SCCT model (Lent et al., 2002; McWhirter et al., 1998), the perception of a greater number of obstacles among students in the present sample was related to a less defined career identity. The lack of relationship between perceptions of barriers and career search activities may be an artifact of the low reliability of the four-item Barriers subscale. It is also possible that the influence of perceptions of barriers is mediated by another variable not included in this model, such as parent or teacher support.

Implications

These results have theoretical implications for current models of career development. Although the entire SCCT model was not tested in this study, these results support the model's assertions that social cognitive variables such as career decision-making self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers may be relevant for Latino/a populations. This emphasis on cognition may be seen to complement, rather than supplant, existing models of career development. For instance, Gottfredson (2002) has noted the phenomenon of circumscription of career choice. Self-efficacy and perceptions of barriers may be part of the mechanism by which that premature elimina-

tion of occupational alternatives occurs. If so, these constructs may indicate an important focus for counselors seeking to counteract gender and ethnic bias. Similarly, these results illuminate the potential contribution of cognitive factors to Holland's idea of a stable and consistent "vocational identity" (Holland, 1997; Holland, Daiger, et al., 1980) and Super's construct of "career maturity" (Super et al., 1996). In the latter case, for instance, part of what may be impeding a student from engaging with developmentally appropriate tasks may be low levels of self-efficacy or a greater number of perceived barriers. Thus, the findings of the present study suggest that the social cognitive perspective may enhance the heuristic value of existing career theories when applied to Latino/a students.

In addition, these results have practical implications for teachers and counselors involved in career education with Latino/a high school students. The findings indicate that career decision-making self-efficacy may significantly influence their career development, not only in relation to vocational identity but also in relation to concrete career exploration behaviors. Thus, counselors may work with students by inquiring about their self-efficacy beliefs and by working to enhance their career decision-making self-efficacy. For instance, counselors may wish to assess Latino/a students' confidence in their ability to undertake tasks associated with career exploration as a part of career-related interviews. Career educators might incorporate strategies designed to help these students gain a sense of mastery and increasing self-confidence in specific career-related tasks as they endeavor to guide students in exploring their interests and in obtaining more information about the world of work. In addition, as suggested earlier, counselors may want to explore, or at least consider, social cognitive factors when working with students on areas of potential difficulty specified by traditional career theories (e.g., vocational identity, vocational maturity, career commitment, knowledge of the world of work) or when trying to help students broaden the scope of their interests (i.e., working to counter circumscription).

Similarly, the findings suggest the importance of gathering information regarding Latino/a students' perceptions of barriers in discussions about career interests, goals, and plans. As numerous authors have recently observed, if students perceive barriers to a career as insurmountable, there will be little motivation for them to engage in career exploration (e.g., Brown & Lent, 1996; Lent et al., 1994). A counselor or teacher who is aware of a Latino/a student's perceptions could begin to help the student assess the accuracy of those perceptions and to identify goals the student perceives as realistic. Thus, counselors and teachers should strive to help students manage their perceptions of barriers while simultaneously becoming aware of actual barriers as they enact their career plans. Training for career educators and counselors should emphasize the relevance of these variables and should focus on helping trainees become aware of how to address issues related to perceptions of obstacles and self-efficacy with these students.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Given the paucity of empirical research on the career development of Latino/a adolescents, this initial exploratory study deliberately tested a simple model. Thus, it is possible that some other superordinate variable not included in the

design may account for the variance reported previously. Additional research is needed to gather more information about the variables included in this study (e.g., differences in the types of barriers perceived, antecedents to self-efficacy) as well as other factors affecting the career development of Latinos/as. There are also limitations with the measures used. For instance, the low reliability associated with the Barriers subscale may have affected the results. Similarly, although the measures used in this study are commonly used by career researchers, their validity with Latino/a students has not yet been demonstrated, in part because of the dearth of career-related research with the Latino/a community. Do Latino/a students interpret and respond to the questions asked in these instruments in the same way as the Anglo American students with whom the instruments were originally used? Thus, the results reported must be interpreted with caution until additional research confirms or disconfirms the utility and appropriateness of these measures for Latino/a students.

Further inquiry is needed to explore the complexities of Latino/a career development. For instance, a limitation of the present study is that it did not examine within-group differences by ethnicity. Because the Latino/a population in the United States is composed of a variety of ethnic subgroups, it would be important for future research to investigate the differences between these groups and how these differences might play a role in high school career development. Differences in racial or ethnic identity or perceived social support may also have important implications for career development. Because the study used a correlational design, no causal inferences may be drawn. Finally, this study did not account for the influence that real-world barriers such as poverty and racism may have on the career development of the participants surveyed. For some of these students, economic necessity or denial of opportunity may play a greater role than self-efficacy or vocational identity in determining an initial occupational choice.

Summary and Conclusion

Given the growth and relative youthfulness of the Latino/a population, understanding factors that affect the career development of Latino/a adolescents is vital for career counselors and educators. For this sample of Latino/a high school students, the results indicated that greater career decision-making self-efficacy was related to a more defined vocational identity and greater engagement in career exploration tasks. In addition, perception of more career obstacles was related to a less defined vocational identity. On the basis of these findings, it seems paramount to assess and address the beliefs of Latino/a students about their capacity for career exploration and their perceived barriers to potential careers as an integral part of vocational guidance and career education.

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