10

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Introductory Review

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The theoretical approaches we have examined thus far have been well-established theories that have shaped vocational psychology for several decades. However, the theory we discuss in this chapter was developed about two decades ago. The concepts were first introduced in 1981 (Hackett & Betz, 1981), and a complete description of the theory wasn't published until 1994 (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). We include this theory because of its utility and because of the impact this theory has had on the field. It differs from the other theories in its focus on the personal constructions that people place on events related to career decision making (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002; Lent, 2013).

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997) has been recently applied in vocational psychology to help explain how individuals' career interests develop, how they make career choices, and how they determine their level of performance. Bandura hypothesizes that individuals' conception of their confidence to perform tasks (self-efficacy) mediates between what they know and how they act and that people's beliefs in their ability to accomplish things helps to determine the actions they will take. Self-efficacy comes from individuals' previous performance accomplishments, vicariously by observing others, from verbal persuasion, and from physiological states and arousal.

Bandura also postulates that self-efficacy is distinct from outcome expectancies, or the expectations one has of the result of behavior. Bandura (1986) notes that self-efficacy and "outcome expectancies judgments are differentiated because individuals can believe that a particular course of action will produce certain outcomes, but they do not act on that outcome belief because they question whether they can actually execute the necessary activities" (p. 392). The constructs of self-efficacy and outcome expectancies are an individual's perceptions of reality; as such, those perceptions may or may not be realistic. It

is important to note that in decision making, individuals' perceptions of reality are hypothesized to be greater determinants of their behavior than objective reality.

Hackett and Betz (1981) were the first to apply Bandura's social cognitive theory, with its emphasis on the role of self-efficacy, to career choices. They focused on self-efficacy theory to explain women's traditional career choices, suggesting that low self-efficacy may explain the restricted range of women's career options. Their work led to investigations of the role self-efficacy may play in a variety of career-related behaviors, and the constructs of self-efficacy and outcome expectancies were then incorporated into a theoretical framework related to career decisions. Lent et al. (1994, 2002) developed a social cognitive framework to explain and predict career behavior. Specifically, their three-part model links interests, choices, and performance based on Bandura's social cognitive model.

Basic to all three of the segments of the model, Lent et al. (1994, 2002; Lent, 2013) propose that performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, and physiological states and arousal forge an individual's self-efficacy expectations. For example, a young woman who does well in French class, is persuaded by others that she could be mistaken for a native French speaker, observes others speaking French, and is mildly anxious about performing well would be expected to have high self-efficacy beliefs for speaking French. It is important to note that Bandura's conceptualization of self-efficacy is situation-specific. In the example above, the young woman may have high self-efficacy for speaking French but lower self-efficacy beliefs for speaking German or Russian.
Lent et al. (1994, 2002; Lent, 2013) also propose that demographic and individual difference variables (such as sex, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) interact with background and contextual variables to influence learning experiences that play a role in forming self-efficacy beliefs. Those self-efficacy expectations, in turn, are related to outcome expectations that individuals have about the outcomes of behavior. In the earlier example of the young, French-speaking woman, a high socioeconomic status may have provided her with opportunities to learn French and may lead to her outcome expectations of speaking French, such as opportunities to travel or live in France.

In the *interest* segment (see Figure 10.1), outcome expectancies and self-efficacy beliefs both predict interests (Lent, 2013). Interests (together with self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectancies) predict goals, which in turn lead to behaviors related to choosing

and practicing activities, which then lead to performance attainments. For example, a young man may have developed an interest in playing the drums based on his self-efficacy beliefs that he is competent as a drum player. He also expects positive outcomes out of playing the drums, such as social interaction with friends or enjoying the music, as well as verbal reinforcement from his family. He then is predicted to intend to continue to play the drums and perhaps to form a goal to join a band. This leads to his increased choice to practice the drums and eventually to his skill development in drum playing.

Figure 10.1: Predicting Interest Development in Social Cognitive Career Theory

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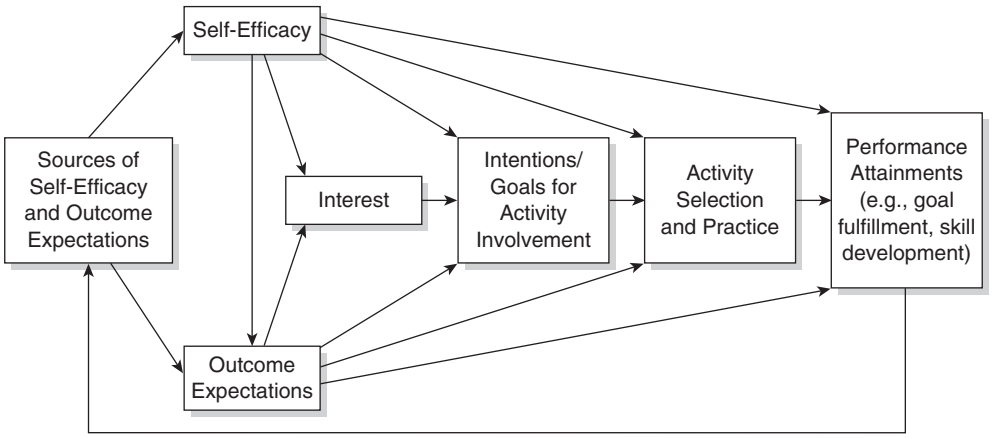

Figure 10.1 Predicting Interest Development in Social Cognitive Career Theory
SOURCE: Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994).

Lent et al. (2000, 2002; 2013) also propose that background and contextual variables, termed *contextual affordances,* help to explain why an individual does not pursue an area in which he or she has strong interest. Background and contextual variables may serve as perceived barriers, or supports, to entry or to outcome expectations. For example, a young man with high interests in helping others and in medical fields may not go into nursing because of his perception that nursing is not an appropriate occupation for a man. He may further perceive weak support from others to enter that occupation, support that might have helped him to overcome that barrier. Similarly, a young woman who has strong

parental and teacher support to achieve in math courses may choose to major in engineering.

Lent et al. (2000, 2002; Lent, 2013) conceptualize two types of contextual affordances, those that are much earlier (distal) than the choice and those that are closer in time (proximal) to the choice. Examples of distal influences may be factors that either constrict or facilitate the development of self-efficacy and outcome expectations (e.g., gender-role socialization, impoverished learning environments), while proximal barriers and supports affect the implementation of choices (e.g., anxiety about moving, financial support to go to college). Barriers may be objective or subjective; what is important is an individual's perception of the barrier (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003; McWhirter, 1997; Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996).

Figure 10.2: Predicting Vocational Choice in Social Cognitive Career Theory

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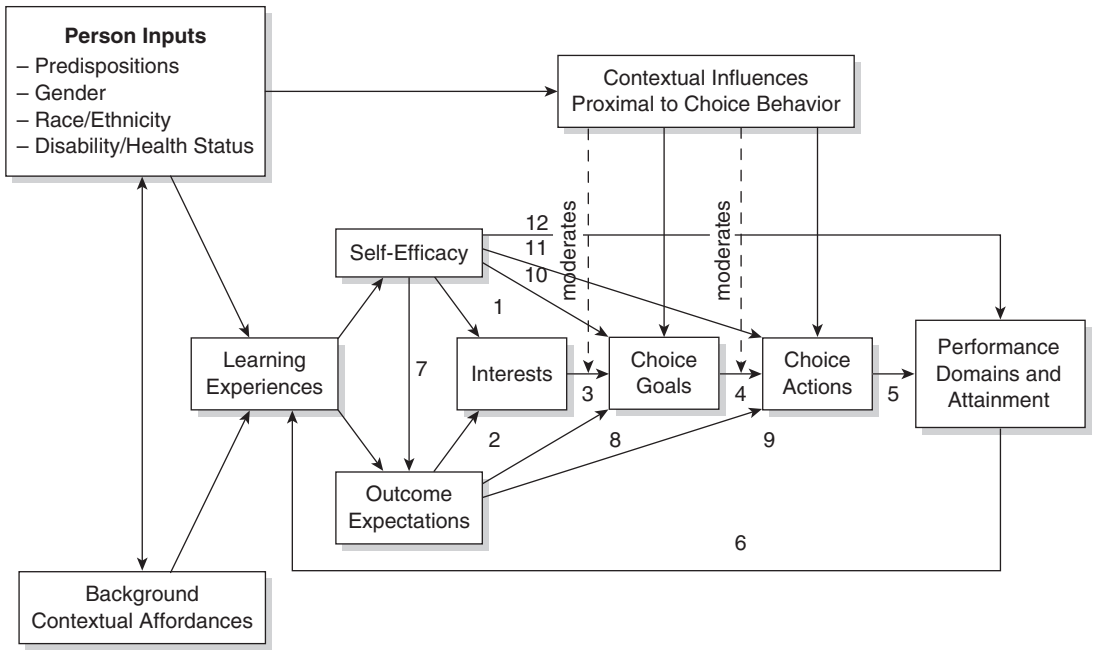

Figure 10.2 Predicting Vocational Choice in Social Cognitive Career Theory

SOURCE: Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994).

The *choice* model (Lent et al., 2002; Lent, 2013) proposes that person inputs (e.g., gender, race, disability, personality, and predispositions) and background context together influence learning experiences, which influence self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectancies (see Figure 10.2). As already described, these influence interests, which influence choice goals; goals influence actions, and actions influence performance attainments. For example, a young girl from an affluent background is taken to science museums, encouraged to read and learn about science and famous scientists, and given opportunities to take science classes and to attend summer science camp. These learning experiences, afforded by her socioeconomic status, influence the development of her beliefs in her ability to do well in science. Her performance in science and her knowledge that doing well in science will lead to positive outcomes, such as good grades, parental approval, and time spent with friends, lead to the development of her interest in science. She believes she can do well in science in college, she learns that science is a field that is well compensated and one that is not typical for women, and she develops an intention to enter a science major in college. Lent (2013) notes that the process of making a career choice involves choosing a goal (e.g., becoming a scientist), taking action to implement that goal (completing courses in a biology major), and the subsequent consequences of those actions (successful graduation in biology).

The *performance* model predicts the level of performance as well as the persistence an individual has in pursuing goals (Lent et al., 2002; Lent, 2013). This segment (see Figure 10.3) proposes that past performance accomplishments influence self-efficacy and outcome expectancies, which in turn influence performance goals; these lead to performance attainment level. In other words, past performance influences self-efficacy beliefs along with the expectations individuals have about the outcomes of their future behavior. These expectations affect the goals that people set for themselves. These goals then affect the level of performance they may attain. Thus, a woman who did well in basketball while in high school has confidence in her ability to play and decides to try out for the basketball team in college. After making the team, she sets challenging goals for her offensive and defensive performance (e.g., averaging at least 12 points a game), based on her past successes and current self-efficacy and outcome beliefs. Lent et al. differentiate their choice and interest models from the performance model. The former involve the content of career

choices, such as the field or specific occupation in which one would like to work, while the performance model predicts the level of performance toward which one aspires within one's chosen field.

Figure 10.3: Predicting Task Performance in Social Cognitive Career Theory

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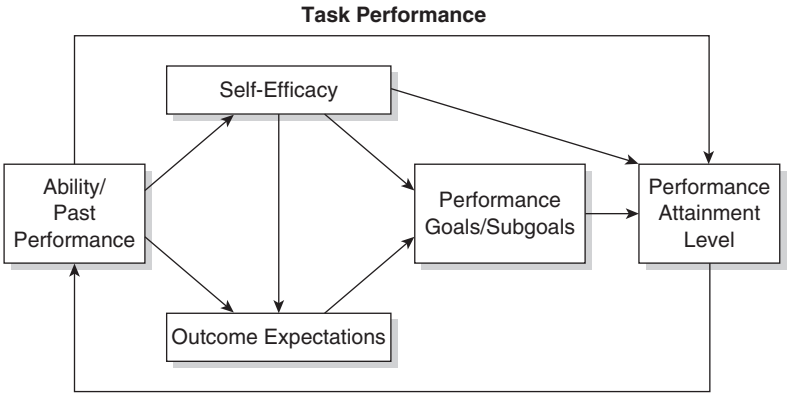

Figure 10.3 Predicting Task Performance in Social Cognitive Career Theory
SOURCE: Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994).

Bandura (1997) comments that "in making career decisions, people must come to grips with uncertainties about their capabilities, the stability of their interests, . . . the prospects of alternative occupations, . . . and the type of identity they seek to construct for themselves" (p. 422). Individuals' perceptions of their own efficacy in mastering various skills and tasks play an important role in predicting their choices as well as their perseverance to accomplish their goals. Social cognitive theory thus is readily applicable to development of interventions targeted at increasing individuals' self-efficacy in a variety of areas (Betz & Schifano, 2000). Other areas for intervention include promoting aspirations and interests in children and adolescents, expanding career choice options, fostering positive and realistic outcome expectations, setting specific goals, coping with barriers and building supports, and increasing coping self-efficacy and strong performance skills (Lent, 2013). Interventions may be targeted at expanding vocational interests, at increasing decision-making skills and exploratory behavior, at helping clients explore various careers, and at increasing consideration of nontraditional careers.

The social cognitive career model has generated a great deal of interest among researchers in vocational psychology. Roughly 20% of the articles published in vocational psychology in the past 10 years have emphasized some aspect of the social cognitive career theory (SCCT). Research has demonstrated support for the relationship between self-efficacy and interests, between self-efficacy and outcome expectations, and the influence of the model in predicting occupational choices (Betz, 2008; Juntenun & Even, 2013; Lent, 2013; Lent et al., 2002). Donnay and Borgen (1999) demonstrated that self-efficacy helps to explain vocational choice over and above vocational interests, and Sheu, Lent, Brown, Miller, Hennessy and Duffy (2010) found that self-efficacy, interests, and outcome expectations predicted choices across Holland themes . Finally, performance accomplishments have been shown to be the most powerful influence on self-efficacy (Williams & Subich, 2006). Research on SCCT has also supported the model across racial/ethnic groups, across many developmental levels, and for both men and women (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2013). Betz concludes her review of the research on SCCT by noting that "the theory has relevance for understanding a wide range of vocational behaviors relevant to both career choice and adjustment" (p. 365).