Encyclopedia of Counseling

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) seeks to explain three interrelated aspects of career development: (1) how basic academic and career interests develop, (2) how educational and career choices are made, and (3) how academic and career success is obtained. Developed by Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett in 1994, SCCT incorporates a variety of concepts (e.g., interests, abilities, values, environmental factors) from earlier career development theories, employing Albert Bandura's general social cognitive theory as a unifying framework.

Three intricately linked variables—self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals—serve as the basic building blocks of SCCT. *Self-efficacy* refers to an individual's personal beliefs about his or her capabilities to perform particular behaviors or courses of action. Unlike global confidence or self-esteem, self-efficacy beliefs are relatively dynamic (i.e., changeable) and are specific to particular activity domains. For example, people vary in their self-efficacy regarding the behaviors required in different occupational fields. One person might feel very confident of being able to accomplish tasks for successful entry into and performance in scientific fields, but feel much less confident about his or her abilities in social or enterprising fields, such as sales.

Outcome expectations refer to beliefs about the consequences or outcomes of performing particular behaviors (e.g., what will happen if I do this?). The choices that people make about the activities in which they will engage, and their effort and persistence at these activities, entail consideration of outcome as well as self-efficacy beliefs. For example, people are more likely to choose to engage in an activity to the extent that they see their involvement as leading to valued, positive outcomes (e.g., social and self-approval, tangible rewards, attractive work conditions).

Personal goals may be defined as one's intentions to engage in a particular activity (e.g., to pursue a given academic major) or to attain a certain level of performance (e.g., to receive an A in a particular course). By setting goals, people help organize and guide their own behavior and sustain it in the absence of more immediate positive feedback and despite inevitable setbacks. Social cognitive theory posits that goals are importantly tied to both self-efficacy and outcome expectations: People tend to set goals that are consistent with their views of their personal capabilities and of the outcomes they expect to attain from pursuing a particular course of action. Success or failure in reaching

personal goals, in turn, becomes important information that helps alter or confirm self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations.

Interest Model

As shown in Figure 1 (center), interests in career-relevant activities are seen as the outgrowth of self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Over the course of childhood and adolescence, people are exposed, directly and vicariously, to a variety of occupationally relevant activities in school, at home, and in their communities. They are also differentially reinforced for continuing their engagement, and for developing their skills, in different activity domains. The types and variety of activities to which children and adolescents are exposed are partly a function of the context and culture in which they grow up.

Through continued activity exposure, practice, and feedback, people refine their skills, develop personal performance standards, form a sense of their efficacy in particular tasks, and acquire certain expectations about the outcomes of activity engagement. People are most likely to develop interest in activities at which they both feel efficacious and expect positive outcomes. As people develop interest in an activity, they are likely to develop goals for sustaining or increasing their involvement in it. Further activity involvement leads to subsequent mastery or failure experiences that in turn help revise self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and ultimately interests within an ongoing feedback loop.

In sum, people are likely to form enduring interest in an activity when they view themselves as competent at performing it and when they expect the activity to produce valued outcomes. Conversely, interests are unlikely to develop in activities for which people doubt their competence and expect negative outcomes. **[p. 1628 ↓] [p. 1629 ↓]** Furthermore, SCCT posits that for interests to blossom in areas for which people have talent, their environments must expose them to the types of direct, vicarious, and persuasive experiences that can give rise to robust efficacy beliefs and positive outcome expectations.
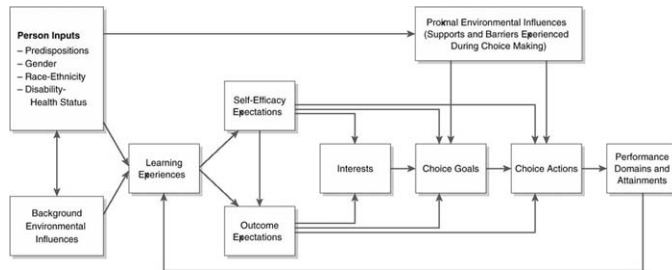
Figure 1 A simplified view of how career-related interests and choices develop over time, according to social cognitive career theory

Source: Adapted from R. W. Lent, S. D. Brown, and G. Hackett (1994).

Choice Model

SCCT's model of the career choice process, which builds on the interests model, is also embedded in Figure 1. Arising largely through self-efficacy and outcome expectations, career-related interests foster particular educational and occupational choice goals (e.g., intentions to pursue a particular career path). Especially to the extent that they are clear, specific, strongly held, stated publicly, and supported by significant others, choice goals make it more likely that people will take actions to achieve their goals (e.g., seek to gain entry into a particular academic major, training program, or job). Their subsequent performance attainments (e.g., successes, failures) provide valuable feedback that can strengthen or weaken self-efficacy and outcome expectations and ultimately help to revise or confirm choices.

As illustrated in Figure 1, SCCT also emphasizes that choice goals are sometimes influenced more directly and potently by self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, or environmental variables than they are by interests. Interests are expected to exert their greatest impact on academic and occupational choice under supportive environmental conditions, which enable people to pursue their interests. However, many adolescents and adults are not able to follow their interests either unfettered by obstacles or with the full support of important others. The choice making of these persons is constrained by such experiences as economic need, family pressures, or educational limitations.

In such instances, people may need to compromise their interests and instead make their choices on the basis of such pragmatic considerations as the type of work that is available to them, their self-efficacy beliefs ("Can I do this type of work?"), and outcome expectations ("Will the job pay enough to make it worthwhile?"). Cultural values (e.g., the degree to which one's choices may be guided by elder family members) may also limit the role of personal interests in career choice.

SCCT posits conditions that increase the probability that people will be able to pursue their interests as well as conditions where interests may need to be compromised in making career-related choices. Collectively labeled environmental influences in Figure 1, these conditions refer to the levels of support (e.g., family financial and emotional support), barriers (e.g., lack of finances, inadequate levels of education), and opportunities available to the individual. Simply put, SCCT hypothesizes that interests will be a more potent predictor of the types of choices people make under supportive rather than under more restrictive environmental conditions. Under the latter conditions, one's interests may need to be bypassed or compromised in favor of more pragmatic, pressing, or culturally acceptable considerations.

Performance Model

SCCT's performance model is concerned with predicting and explaining two primary aspects of performance: the level of success that people attain in educational and occupational pursuits and the degree to which they persist in the face of obstacles. SCCT focuses on the influences of ability, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and performance goals on success and persistence. Ability (as reflected by past achievement and aptitudes) is assumed to affect performance via two primary pathways. First, ability influences performance and persistence directly. For example, students with higher aptitude in a particular subject tend to do better and persist longer in that subject than do students with lesser aptitude. Second, ability is hypothesized to influence performance and persistence indirectly through the intervening paths of self-efficacy and outcome expectations.

In other words, performance involves both ability and motivation. SCCT emphasizes the motivational roles of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and performance goals.

Encyclopedia of Counseling: Social Cognitive Career Theory

Specifically, SCCT suggests that self-efficacy and outcome expectations work in concert with ability, in part by influencing the types of performance goals that people set for themselves. Controlling for level of ability, students and workers with higher self-efficacy and more positive outcome expectations will be more likely to establish higher performance goals for themselves (i.e., aim for more challenging attainments), to organize their skills more effectively, and to persist longer in the face of setbacks. As a result, they may achieve higher levels of success than those with lower self-efficacy and less positive outcome expectations. Thus, favorable **[p. 1630 ↓]** self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals help people to make the best possible use of their ability.

Research and Practical Applications

A substantial body of research has accumulated suggesting that SCCT is a useful framework for explaining various aspects of educational and vocational interest development, choice making, and performance. The theory has also recently been extended to the understanding of academic and work satisfaction. SCCT has sparked a number of efforts to design and test interventions aimed at various facets of career development. It has also been applied to the study of career behavior in a number of countries and cultural contexts.

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See also

- Bandura, Albert (v2)
- Brown's Values-Based Career Theory (v4)
- Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (v4)
- Expressed, Manifest, Tested, and Inventoried Interests (v4)
- Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments (v4)
- Job Satisfaction and General Well-Being (v4)
- Krumboltz Happenstance Learning Theory (v4)
- Roe's Theory of Personality Development and Career Choice (v4)
- Self-Efficacy/Perceived Competence (v2)

- Self-Esteem (v2)
- Theory of Work Adjustment (v4)

Further Readings

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