

## Gender and Ethnic Differences in Career Goal Attainment

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The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to and facilitators of career goals among college students in the framework of the Social Cognitive Career Theory (R. W. Lent, S. D. Brown, & G. Hackett, 1994). Questionnaires were completed by 2,743 college freshmen. Chi-square tests and MANOVA were used to analyze the data. The authors found gender and ethnic differences in perceptions of barriers to career goals. Differences were found by ethnicity, but not by gender, in perceptions of facilitators of career goals. The authors examined factors influencing career choice goals and specific barriers and facilitators. They discuss implications for career counselors.

The changing composition of college campuses and the workforce requires career counselors to increase their understanding of racial, ethnic, and cultural factors that influence career development (Allen, 1992; Krumboltz & Coon, 1995; Leong & Brown, 1995). In addition, as the number of women pursuing higher education and careers outside the home continues to increase, it is important for counselors to be aware of the role of gender in career development (Blustein, 1997; Cook, 1993). Women and members of minority racial or ethnic groups often encounter employment discrimination, harassment, and barriers to information sources and social networks (Ancis & Phillips, 1996; Gutek & Koss, 1993; McWhirter, 1997; Swanson & Tokar, 1991). Studies of academic success and retention among college students report lower success rates for ethnic minority students than for Caucasian students (Fuertes & Sedlacek, 1995; Sedlacek, 1998). In many cases, high ability does not lead to high achievement for women and ethnic minorities. This phenomenon has been referred to as the "ability-attainment gap" (McWhirter, 1997, p. 124), and its cause has been linked to barriers and differential opportunities for these groups (Ladany, Melincoff, Constantine, & Love, 1997; Luzzo & Hutcheson, 1996).

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Brown & Lent, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 1996, 2000) provides a framework for

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understanding gender and ethnic differences regarding barriers to and facilitators of career development. The SCCT emphasizes the role of contextual factors in determining career choice goals and actions. Setting a career goal involves making a decision about what one wants to do and determining a plan to accomplish that objective (Lent et al., 1996). The barriers and facilitators that exist and an individual's perception of these variables interact with self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal-setting behavior to shape the individual's career-related actions and performance. Career barriers interfere with the process of turning career interests into choice goals and goal-directed behavior (Brown & Lent, 1996). The SCCT suggests that gender and ethnic differences in perceived barriers and facilitative variables (e.g., opportunity structure, support systems) affect the congruence of career interests with career goals, as well as the congruence between ability and actions toward goals (Lent et al., 1996, 2000). Specifically, individuals are affected by aspects of the larger environment, and they learn from observation the demographic features of occupations and the barriers experienced by others in those occupations. In one example provided by Lent and colleagues (Lent et al., 2000), the authors stated that "individuals are likely to differentiate beliefs about whether certain barriers exist in society generally, from their beliefs about how barriers will affect the self, should they be encountered directly" (p. 45).

Recent research has examined gender and ethnic differences in barriers to career development. McWhirter (1997) examined gender and ethnic differences in perceived educational and career barriers among 1,139 Mexican American and European American high school juniors and seniors. Results of this investigation demonstrated that female participants anticipated more barriers than did male participants and that Mexican American participants anticipated more barriers than did European American participants. These differences were also found within ethnic and gender groups. Another investigation by Swanson and Tokar (1991) found that, among a sample of college students, participants perceived the existence of barriers in a variety of career-related topics although no gender differences were apparent.

There has, however, been a crucial deficit in this literature because facilitating factors have not been given adequate attention or study. Lent et al. (2000) stated "if one is interested in restoring previously blocked or discarded options, it also seems essential to study those aspects of the environment . . . that can *facilitate* career choice and development" (p. 42). They called for researchers to examine conditions that support or enable women and ethnic minority individuals to achieve their career goals, which would complement research on barriers to attainment of career goals (Lent et al., 2000). Few studies have examined both barriers to and facilitators of career goal attainment. In this study, we sought to examine facilitative *person inputs* (i.e., career-related help-seeking behavior and academic resilience) that may counteract the negative impact of environmental barriers. Environmental career supports are not always readily available and must often be actively sought out by college students. Thus, career-related help-seeking behavior precedes the receipt of support.

Seeking help with academic and career issues is a way for students to increase their chances of achieving career goals. Low usage of formal resources in help seeking was cited by Kenkel (1986) as a barrier to success in coping with stressors. Adequate help-seeking behavior can

facilitate successful performance when students face academic stress or discrimination due to gender or race (Hackett & Byars, 1996; Sedlacek, 1998; Wills, 1987). Career research has shown that help seeking at work is important to career enhancement, especially at the point of entry into a new organization (Feij, Whitely, Peiro, & Taris, 1995; Miller & Jablin, 1991). An additional consideration is that gender and ethnicity may affect the level of help-seeking behavior that is exhibited. Specifically, help-seeking behavior tends to be more common among women than among men and more common among Caucasians than among other racial groups (Mau, 1995; Padesky & Hammen, 1981; Pliner & Brown, 1985).

The second facilitative *person factor* addressed is academic resilience. Person factors highlighted in the SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) include individual predispositions. Lent and colleagues hypothesized that person factors, such as predispositions, gender, and ethnicity, interact with background and contextual factors to influence career choice goals and actions (Lent et al., 1994). In this study, we highlighted the predispositional factor of academic resilience. We chose this factor because of substantial research support for its importance. *Academic resilience* is defined here as the ability to adapt, to stay positive, and to persevere in the academic setting. This definition follows the thinking of earlier studies on resilience in education (e.g., Finn & Rock, 1997; Winfield, 1991). Academic resilience is a key factor in promoting academic and career success (Finn & Rock, 1997; Wang & Gordon, 1994). Persistence and perseverance have been linked with career achievement for both African American and Caucasian women (Richie et al., 1997). For students at risk of academic failure (e.g., women, ethnic minorities, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds), academic resilience is one variable that distinguishes successful from unsuccessful individuals (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Floyd, 1996).

The purpose of this study was to examine variables influencing career goal setting, as well as barriers to and facilitators of meeting career goals, among college students. Examination of the gender and ethnic differences in these career development variables helps counselors and university staff to identify the special needs of these groups and enhances their ability to help all students achieve academic success and meet career goals. Gender and ethnic differences regarding two facilitating variables, academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behavior, were explored in the present study.

On the basis of SCCT (Lent et al., 1994, 1996, 2000), we expected to find significant gender and ethnic differences on all variables. The more that is known about the barriers to and facilitators of career goals among college students, the more counselors and educators will be able to serve these groups. Specific hypotheses are as follows:

- Hypothesis 1: Gender differences exist among factors influencing career choice goals.
- Hypothesis 2: Ethnic differences exist among factors influencing career choice goals.
- Hypothesis 3: There are gender differences in perceived barriers to attaining career goals.
- Hypothesis 4: There are ethnic differences in perceived barriers to attaining career goals.

Hypothesis 5: There are gender differences in academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behaviors.

Hypothesis 6: There are ethnic differences in academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behaviors.

## Method

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### Participants and Procedure

Participants in this study were 2,743 incoming freshmen at a large eastern state university. Approximately one half of the participants were male ( $n = 1,426$ ) and one half were female ( $n = 1,317$ ). The ethnic composition of the sample was 64% Caucasian ( $n = 1,754$ ), 13% African American ( $n = 358$ ), 13% Asian American ( $n = 357$ ), 4% Latino/a American ( $n = 110$ ), 1% Native American ( $n = 27$ ), and 5% other ( $n = 137$ ). Most participants (approximately 95%) were traditional-aged college freshmen. The mean age of participants was 18 years ( $SD = 1.6$ ).

Participants were attending a summer orientation program for incoming freshmen at a large eastern state university. All incoming freshman at the orientation were asked to fill out questionnaires. Participants were given informed consent forms to read and sign before completing the survey. It was explained that the purpose of the survey was to gather information about incoming students to help university counselors and advisers better serve students' career and academic needs. More than 90% of all incoming freshmen completed the questionnaire.

### Instrument

The staff of the university counseling center designed a questionnaire to survey the academic- and career-related goals, the perceived barriers to goals, and the potential facilitators of goals for incoming college freshmen. Survey items were generated by asking the faculty, staff, and students of the university what they believed would be useful information for departments such as academic affairs, student affairs, the university counseling center, the career advising center, and residential communities in guiding students toward academic and career goals. Students were asked about factors important to their long-term career choice and perceived barriers to meeting their career goals. Items were grouped for analyses based on judgments of content validity. The coefficient alpha reliability estimate for the overall questionnaire was .83.

Information on gender and ethnicity was obtained from the demographic section of the survey. Information regarding the other variables in this study was collected using the instruments that are described in the following paragraphs.

*Factors influencing career choice goals.* Participants were given a list of factors to choose from and asked which were important in their long-term career goals. The list of factors was generated from the literature (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Leong, 1991; Rounds, 1990) and from consultation with students and staff. Responses were grouped into 10 general categories of factors: (a) job openings usually available, (b) rapid career advancement possible, (c) high anticipated earnings, (d) well-respected or prestigious occupation, (e) great deal of independence, (f) make an important contribution to society, (g) avoid pressure, (h) work with ideas,

(i) work with people, and (j) intrinsic interest in the field. Participants were asked to choose which one of the 10 factors was *most* important to them in determining their long-term career goal.

**Barriers to achieving career goals.** Participants were given a list of possible barriers to achieving career goals and asked, "What do you perceive is the *one* major barrier to your meeting your career goals?" The listed barriers were (a) personal finances, (b) managing time, (c) discrimination, (d) family conflicts, (e) lack of direction, (f) lack of ability, (g) lack of motivation, and (h) limited job availability. The barriers listed were derived from previous literature on barriers (Luzzo, 1996; McWhirter, 1997; Parasuraman, Purohit, & Godshalk, 1996) and from responses generated by students and university staff.

**Facilitators of achieving career goals.** Two variables were measured that were believed to be important facilitators of career goals: academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behavior (Feij et al., 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997; Sedlacek, 1998). Academic resilience was measured by a two-item, Likert-type scale consisting of the following questions: "When I don't do well, I take it as a challenge to improve myself" and (reverse scored) "Getting a low grade makes me feel like giving up." Participants rated each item on a 5-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Coefficient alpha reliability was estimated at .79 for this scale. Career-related help-seeking behavior was assessed using four items: "I would consider seeking counseling regarding my career plans," "I would consider seeking time management training," "I prefer to handle my academic problems on my own" (reverse scored), and "I would consider seeking study skills training." Participants rated each item on a 5-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Coefficient alpha reliability was estimated at .82 for this scale.

### Analyses

Chi-square tests were used to examine Gender  $\times$  Career Choice Goals, Ethnicity  $\times$  Career Choice Goals, Gender  $\times$  Perceived Barriers, and Ethnicity  $\times$  Perceived Barriers. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with gender as a main effect and academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behavior as dependent variables. A second MANOVA was conducted with ethnicity as a main effect and academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behavior as dependent variables.

## Results

Our first hypothesis stated that gender differences exist for factors influencing career choice goals. The chi-square test for gender and career choice goals was significant ( $\chi^2 = 125.04$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting differences by gender on career choice goals. When asked which variable was most important in their long-term career choice, the most frequent answer given by both men (25%) and women (29%) was an intrinsic interest in the field. The second most frequently endorsed item was high anticipated earnings for men (25%) and a well-respected or prestigious occupation for women (16%).

The second hypothesis stated that ethnic differences would be found for factors influencing career choice goals. The chi-square test for ethnicity

and career choice goals was significant ( $\chi^2 = 119.74$ ,  $df = 54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Intrinsic interest in the field was the most frequently chosen variable influencing career choice goals among Caucasians (31%). High anticipated earnings was the most frequently chosen variable influencing career choice goals among African Americans (24%), Asian Americans (24%), and Native Americans (43%).

The third hypothesis stated that gender differences would be found for perceived barriers to attaining career goals. The chi-square test for gender and perceived barriers to attaining career goals was significant ( $\chi^2 = 116.97$ ,  $df = 16$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the third hypothesis. Men most frequently cited time management (33%), and women most frequently cited personal finances (25%).

The fourth hypothesis stated that ethnic differences would be found for perceived barriers to attaining career goals. This hypothesis was also supported. The chi-square test for ethnicity and perceived barriers to attaining career goals was significant ( $\chi^2 = 202.06$ ,  $df = 48$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Time management was the most frequently cited barrier by Caucasians (30%) and Asian Americans (31%). Personal finances was the most frequently cited barrier by African Americans (30%), Latino/a Americans (31%), and Native Americans (43%).

The fifth hypothesis stated that there are gender differences in academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behaviors. A MANOVA was conducted to examine the main effect of gender with academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behavior as dependent variables. The multivariate effect was not significant (Wilks's lambda = .99,  $F = 2.09$ ,  $p = .099$ ). This result shows that men and women in this sample do not differ in terms of academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behavior; thus, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

The sixth hypothesis stated that there are ethnic differences in academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behaviors. A MANOVA was conducted to examine the multivariate effect of ethnicity on academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behavior. The multivariate effect was significant (Wilks's lambda = .929,  $F = 11.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This result supports Hypothesis 6 and shows that ethnic differences exist on one or more of the facilitator variables. Examination of univariate tests was needed for further information. The univariate  $F$  test for academic resilience ( $F = 6.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was significant, as was the univariate  $F$  test for career-related help-seeking behavior ( $F = 18.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, we know there were differences in academic resilience and help-seeking behavior among various ethnic groups in this sample. Means on the academic resilience scale (from highest to lowest) were Native Americans ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 2.14$ ), Asian Americans ( $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ), Latino/a Americans ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ), Caucasians ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), and African Americans ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ). African Americans were significantly less likely than Native Americans to show academic resilience (Tukey's HSD  $< .05$ ). Furthermore, Caucasians ( $M = 10.41$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ), Asian Americans ( $M = 10.38$ ,  $SD = 2.58$ ), and Native Americans ( $M = 10.29$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ ) were more likely to exhibit help-seeking behaviors than were African Americans ( $M = 8.83$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ ) or Latino/a Americans ( $M = 9.50$ ,  $SD = 2.62$ ; LSD  $< .05$ ).

## Discussion

This study sought to examine gender and ethnic differences in barriers and facilitators to career goals within the framework of the SCCT (Lent

et al., 1994, 1996, 2000). Both differences and similarities were found among men and women in terms of career choice goals, barriers, and facilitators to goals. Men indicated that their career goals were based on both intrinsic interest and high anticipated earnings, whereas women based career goals on intrinsic interest and prestige of the occupation. When asked about barriers to attaining career goals, men cited time management, whereas women cited personal finances. The gender differences in career choice goals and barriers support the SCCT's assertion that contextual factors, such as gender, influence goal-setting behavior and the perception of barriers (Lent et al., 1994, 1996, 2000). The finding that women were more likely than were men to cite personal finances as a barrier to career goals may be related to women's overall lower salaries relative to men's (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). Men and women in this sample did not differ in terms of facilitating variables (i.e., academic resilience and career-related help-seeking behavior). The lack of gender differences in facilitating variables does not support our hypotheses. Although women and men did not differ in these facilitating variables in this study, there still exist greater barriers for women that have an effect on the gap between their ability and their achievements (Richie et al., 1997; Rubenfield & Gilroy, 1991).

Significant ethnic differences were found for career choice goals, barriers, and facilitators, thus lending support to the SCCT's assumption of ethnic differences in these variables (Lent et al., 1994) and also supporting past research (Arbona & Novy, 1991). Members of ethnic minority groups emphasized financial considerations in both their career goals and perceived barriers to goal attainment. Caucasians cited intrinsic interest as important in career goals and time management as a barrier to attaining goals. This is consistent with past research, which has found that financial issues are more often cited as barriers by ethnic minority participants than by Caucasian participants (e.g., Luzzo, 1993; Slaney, 1980). At this time in the United States, Caucasians are more likely than are members of ethnic minority groups to come from high socioeconomic backgrounds (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). Perhaps because of this, Caucasians are not as concerned with financial considerations and have the luxury of choosing a career based on intrinsic interest (Prelow & Guarnaccia, 1997).

Ethnic differences were also found in academic resilience and help-seeking behavior. The highest level of academic resilience was found among Native Americans in this sample, followed by Asian Americans and Latino/a Americans, with Caucasians and African Americans having the lowest level of academic resilience. Academic resilience has been linked to academic and career success (Finn & Rock, 1997); however, little is known about ethnic differences on this variable. In this sample of college students, Caucasians, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were more likely to exhibit help-seeking behaviors than were African Americans or Latino/a Americans. This result supports past research, which has also found ethnic differences in help-seeking behavior (Mau, 1995; Pliner & Brown, 1985). Perhaps individuals in a position to provide help could find ways to meet students halfway and could make sure that help-seeking efforts are rewarded. Specific suggestions for career counselors are provided in the following section.

### **Implications for Practice**

Vocational and academic counselors should make efforts to reach out to populations who are less likely to seek career-related assistance. The re-

sults of this and prior studies suggest that African Americans and Latino/a Americans are least likely to seek help or services. It is important for vocational and academic counselors to establish environments on college campuses that are welcoming to students of color. Efforts to ensure that students see themselves reflected in the environment could aid in improving help-seeking behavior among these populations (Alexander, Rivera, & Collins, 2000). It is not only important to let college students know what resources are available and where to go to get various needs met, but the physical environment should also reflect the diversity of the college population. Furthermore, university counseling center and career center staff should advertise their services and should be visible on campus (e.g., distribute brochures, host campus events, make classroom visits or presentations). In addition to traditional academic and career counseling, other types of career assistance should be made available (e.g., career fairs, workshops, career-related computer programs).

Sedlacek (1998) has identified self-concept and the ability to handle institutional racism or sexism as key correlates of success for students of color and women. Therefore, working with women and ethnic minority students to find ways to overcome career barriers should prove valuable. Helping students work with the system should be a primary goal for career and academic counselors. Luzzo and Hutcheson (1996) suggested methods for career counselors to use in addressing students' perceived barriers. Their suggestions include helping the student identify past barriers that they have successfully overcome and assisting the student in developing ways to cope with potential barriers (Luzzo & Hutcheson, 1996).

In an effort to improve the campus climate for ethnic minorities, campus programs that address cultural awareness, overall health, stress relief, and related topics could be offered to students, faculty, and staff (Bowman, 1993). Furthermore, the ethnic composition of the faculty and staff should reflect the diversity of campus communities (Floyd, 1996) and should be made up of caring and competent professionals who can serve as role models for students. Finally, counselors must make sure that their interventions are appropriate for the individuals whom they are serving, especially ethnic minority students (Hawks & Muha, 1991). Providing links with the financial aid office on campus would be helpful in addressing the issues of personal finances that were identified by women and students of color. Outcome evaluation research for career and academic counseling is necessary to determine the effectiveness of current interventions and to identify areas for improvement.

### **Limitations of This Study**

The results of this study are limited in the following ways. First, only freshmen entering college were included in this sample. Therefore, some caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings of this study to college students at more advanced stages of their studies or to a non-college sample of individuals who may have more diverse career experiences. Second, the majority of the participants in this study were Caucasian. Efforts to sample larger ethnic minority populations would be helpful in future investigations. Third, weaknesses in the measurement of academic resilience and help-seeking behavior may account for the lack of gender differences found in facilitating variables.

## Directions for Future Research

Further research is needed to explore the effects of academic resilience, career-related help-seeking behavior, and other potential facilitating variables for achieving career goals. More sophisticated measures could be developed to assess facilitators. A deeper understanding of the process of career goal setting within the framework of the SCCT (Lent et al., 1996) would be useful. A longitudinal study that examines the variables that influence career choice goals, barriers, and facilitators and looks at the outcome (i.e., whether participants achieve career goals and to what variables they attribute their success or failure) over the years would be particularly helpful in increasing knowledge of this important topic.

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