Women Pursuing Nontraditional Careers: A Social Cognitive Career Theory Perspective

Occupational segregation is a prime factor contributing to women’s poverty and low earnings (Bayard, Hellerstein, Neumark, & Troske, 2003). Families maintained by single women with children under 18 years old had a working-poor rate of 28.2% while similar men had a working-poor rate of 18% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Gender nontraditional occupations for females are feasible pathways out of poverty for single mothers, female welfare recipients transitioning from welfare to work, and other working women (Mastracci, 2003; Padavic, 1991).

Women pursuing gender nontraditional careers, defined here as occupations with less than 25% of membership being female such as construction, trades, and technical fields, have long been faced with challenges and obstacles that have impeded or deterred their career aspirations. Gender role socialization, stereotyping, discrimination, and sexual harassment are some of the cultural and institutional impediments to the choice of a nontraditional occupation for women.

Interest and jobs in the trades and construction, referred to as Realistic in Holland’s (1985) theory of person-environment fit proposes that career choice is an expression of one’s personality. Specifically, a Realistic personality type would possess competencies related to mechanical ability, problem-solving with tools and/or psychomotor skills, and physical strength. Typical work activities include fixing, building, and repairing (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships of Realistic self-efficacy beliefs, Realistic learning experiences, and Realistic outcome expectations to the development of Realistic interests for women pursuing trades and construction occupations.

Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) proposed a social cognitive framework for explaining three aspects of career development: the formation and explication of career-relevant interests, the selection of academic and career choice options, and performance and persistence in educational and occupational goals. The framers of Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994) focused their attention on three social cognitive mechanisms that
they deemed relevant to career development, particularly the development of career interests. They include self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goal representations (Lent et al., 1994).

The research hypothesis proposed for this study is that there would be a positive relation between occupationally relevant Realistic self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and learning experiences, and Realistic vocational interests, for a sample of women with expressed Realistic interests. Moreover, it was hypothesized that self-efficacy and outcome expectations would mediate the relationship between learning experiences and interests.

Overall, the results of the present study confirm the relations among variables proposed by SCCT. The results further adhere to the suggested pathways between variables in the interest development model of SCCT. Additionally, Realistic self-efficacy was a statistically significant mediator between Realistic learning experiences and Realistic interests for this sample. (Table 1). Sobel’s test was not conducted with Realistic outcome expectations because it was not found to be a significant mediator between Realistic learning experiences and Realistic interests.

Table 1

*Multiple Regressions Analyzing Mediated Effect*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Sum of df</th>
<th>Mean F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Unstd. Std.</th>
<th>Std. Std.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Square</td>
<td>Square</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Realistic Int. c Regression Learning Exp.  
| c | 331.02 | 1 | 331.02 | 15.89 | .000 | .156 | .039 | .43 | 3.99 | .000 |

2. Self-efficacy a Regression Learning Exp.  
| a | 1779.76 | 1 | 1779.76 | 20.14 | .000 | .362 | .081 | .47 | 4.49 | .000 |
3. Realistic Int.          458.68     2     229.340    11.88  .000

Regression

Learning Exp.  c’             .104       .043  .29        2.45     .017
Self-efficacy   b       .143      .055.   .30       2.57     .012

4. Outcome Exp. a 3597.80     1    3597.80     12.05  .001      .542    .156   .40          3.47     .001

Regression

Learning Exp.

5. Realistic Interests 293.65    2    146.82       6.80    .002

Regression

Learning Exp.  c’             .117  .046   .32         2.57     .013
Outcome Exp. b          .047      .033   .18          1.42      .16

SCCT’s attention to a number of career development factors (e.g. person inputs and contextual factors), pertinent to women’s occupational choices, warrants a more thoughtful consideration of the applicability of the theory’s constructs, for women, generally, and for women with some interest in nontraditional occupations like trades and construction.