

SOURCES OF TRANSITION-TO-WORK SELF-EFFICACY: CAREER EXPLORATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

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Abstract

Success in the transition from higher education to work is influenced by an array of factors associated with the individual, his/her context, as well as their interaction. The Social Cognitive Transition-to-Work (SCTW) Model conceptually organizes the complexity of this transition and provides directions for research in this area. Previous longitudinal studies based on SCTW Model have shown that transition-to-work self-efficacy predicts several career success indicators. Among these, career satisfaction, salary and job satisfaction may be identified. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory identifies self-efficacy sources. When the transition-to-work process is considered, career exploration and social support are identified as potential self-efficacy sources. The present study aims to assess if career exploration and social support are associated with transition-to-work self-efficacy. Three-hundred and thirty-seven final year undergraduate students from a Public Higher Education in Northern Portugal participated in the study (67% female; median age = 23; standard deviation = ± 7). Career Exploration was measured with a 7-items Likert-type scale. Social Support was measured with a 22-items Likert-type scale distributed in three dimensions: family, teachers and peers. Transition-to-Work Self-efficacy was measured with a 28-items Likert-type scale that includes three dimensions: job-search behaviours, job-search emotional regulation and adaptation-to-work. All measures presented adequate reliability values. As expected, results showed moderate to large positive associations among career exploration, social support and transition-to-work self-efficacy. The regression analysis model explained 32% of the variance. The strongest transition-to-work self-efficacy predictors were family social support and career exploration. These results highlight key transition-to-work contextual factors that have implications for both intervention and research in the career domain. Higher education institutions may plan and implement psycho-educational interventions to develop transition-to-work self-efficacy among higher education students. Namely, considering that career exploration may act as a self-efficacy source, creating ways to improve career exploration probably will enhance students' transition-to-work self-efficacy. In terms of research, results gave support to the Social Cognitive Transition-to-Work (SCTW) Model as a useful conceptual tool to further guide future research.

Keywords: *Self-efficacy, transition-to-work, job search, career exploration, social support.*

1. Introduction

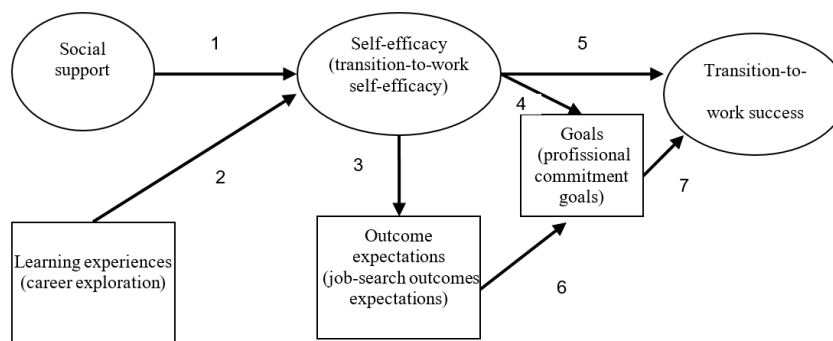
The challenges that young people face to succeed in professional life have never been so demanding. In the dialectic processes between what a young person can do to succeed in transitioning from education to work, and the contextual structure of work opportunities, self-efficacy has been identified as a useful construct associated with personal agency, that is, with the individual's ability to influence his environment and his own future (Bandura, 1997). Bandura defines self-efficacy as beliefs about personal abilities to successfully perform a certain behavior, proposing that these influence the way people think, feel, motivate themselves and behave (Bandura, 1986, 1991). Therefore, self-efficacy encompasses personal beliefs about the abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action necessary to exert control over events throughout life (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Thus, personal efficacy is a dynamic aspect of the "self" that interacts in a complex way with the context, as well as with other motivational and self-regulatory mechanisms.

Success in the transition from higher education to work is influenced by an array of factors associated with the individual, his/her context, as well as their interaction. The Social Cognitive Transition-to-Work Model (SCTW; Vieira, 2012) conceptually organizes the complexity of this transition and provides directions for research and intervention in this area. Based on Social Cognitive Theory

(Bandura, 1986) and, more specifically, on the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994), the Transition-to-Work Model (Vieira, 2012) presents as an original contribution in the realm of transition to work (Figure 1).

The SCTW advocates that the process of psychological experience of the transition to work is influenced by a set of individual and contextual factors that interact and exert their influence on the dynamics of this transition. The arrows in Figure 1 are identified by the numbers 1 to 8, corresponding to the hypotheses about the relationships between their constituent elements. The importance of social support during life transitions in general (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995) as well as in transition-to-work has been documented (Blustein et al., 1997; Flum, 2001). Social support consists of the process of interaction in relationships which improve coping, esteem, belonging, and competence through actual or perceived exchanges of physical or psychosocial resources (Gottlieb, 2000). In SCTW model the influence of contextual factors depends on the personal perception of the context, that is, “the context offers, provides and/or provides something to the organism, as long as it is able to perceive it as such” (Vondracek, Lerner & Schulenberg, 1986, p.38). Career exploration encompasses a set of activities that promotes greater knowledge about the self and the work and/or training environment (Blustein et al., 1997), representing, in the SCTW, the relevant vocational learning for the transition-to-work. SCTW arrows 1 and 2 represent the hypotheses that both social support and career exploration function as sources of self-efficacy.

Figure 1. Social Cognitive Transition-to-Work Model (SCTW; Adapt. from Vieira, 2008).



Self-efficacy contributes to the expectations of results in the job search (arrow 3) as well as to the career goals (arrow 4) and the goals people sets for themselves, as well as the progress in his pursuit, also influenced by outcome expectations (arrow 6). The Social Cognitive Career Theory and, more precisely, the Performance Model proposed by Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994) advocates a positive relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and academic/professional performance. That is, positive self-efficacy beliefs promote performance quality. Therefore, arrow 5 represents that self-efficacy in transition-to-work plays a leading role in the success of this transition. It should be noted that, in the SCTW, performance is broadly addressed as success in the transition to work. In this way, to evaluate this success, several indicators can be used, such as, for example, the employment situation (employed vs. unemployed), salary, job satisfaction, among others. Finally, taking into account the recommended relationships between goals and performance (Bandura, 1986, 1989; Locke & Latham, 2002; Schunk, 1989; Wood & Bandura, 1989), the SCTW proposes that goals in the transition to work have an effect direct and positive effect on the success of this transition (arrow 7). In conclusion, the SCTW serves as a comprehensive conceptual basis and guide for research on the process of transition from training to work, from a Social Cognitive perspective. Since the concepts and respective vectors represent eight hypotheses, SCTW studies that are total (if all concepts and relationships are considered) or partial (if only some of their parts are considered) can be carried out

2. Objectives

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986; 1997) identifies verbal persuasion as one of the sources of self-efficacy and, in the MSTT this source is framed in social support (arrow 1). Additionally, as career exploration activities provide learning experiences - either direct or by observation - they may be considered as sources of self-efficacy (arrow 2) insofar as they may allow the development of mastery

in certain activities, as well as access to models whose experiences of success may have an impact on the individual's self-efficacy. Therefore, the present study aims to assess if career exploration and social support are associated with transition-to-work self-efficacy.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Three-hundred and thirty-seven final year undergraduate students from a Public Higher Education in Northern Portugal participated in the study (67% female; median age = 23; standard deviation = ± 7).

3.2. Instruments

Social Support. Social support was accessed by Portuguese version of SSA (Social Support Appraisals) from Vaux et al. (1986). This instrument was designed to measure the degree to which a person feels cared for, respected and involved. The Portuguese version, adapted by Antunes and Fontaine (1994/5; 2000; 2005), is composed by 22 items distributed in three subscales, assessing perceived social support from family, peers and teachers.

Career exploration. Career exploration was accessed by 7 items that measure the degree to which a person has career specific knowledge about the self and the context.

Transition-to-Work Self-Efficacy. To assess self-efficacy, we used the Transition-to-Work Self-Efficacy Scale (TWSE; Vieira & Coimbra, 2005) that consists of 28 items addressing common tasks that are necessary to find work after finishing university, and to adjust to the work role such as “searching for jobs in the newspaper”, and, “being responsible for the accomplishment of job-tasks”. The following instructions are given to subjects: “Below there is a list of different activities. Rate the extent to which you feel confident in your ability to do each of them, circling the correspondent number in the column CONFIDENCE”. Items are scored on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from “no confidence at all” (1) to “complete confidence” (6). Results from exploratory factor analysis showed that this scale is subdivided in three sub-scales: Adaptation to Work Self-Efficacy (12 items explaining 41 % of the variance, alpha .94), Emotional Regulation Self-Efficacy (9 items that accounted for 9 % of the variance, alpha .94), and, Job-Search Self-Efficacy (7 items that accounted for 6 % of the variance, alpha .84). Subscales are scored by adding item responses and dividing the total by the number of items in each sub-scale. For each TWSE sub-scales, self-efficacy indexes ranged from 1 to 6, with higher scores indicating stronger confidence in one’s transition-to-work capabilities. Several studies have shown adequate psychometric characteristics of this instrument, both in terms of its construct validity (Vieira, 2012) and its factor structure (Vieira, Maia & Coimbra, 2007). In the present study the total scale’s coefficient alpha was .95.

4. Results

Results showed moderate to large positive associations among career exploration, social support and transition-to-work self-efficacy. The regression analysis model explained 32% of the variance. The strongest transition-to-work self-efficacy predictors were family social support and career exploration.

5. Conclusions

The present study highlights key transition-to-work contextual factors that have implications for both intervention and research in the career domain. Educational institutions may plan and implement psycho-educational interventions to develop transition-to-work self-efficacy among higher education students. Namely, considering that career exploration may act as a self-efficacy source, creating ways to improve career exploration probably will enhance students’ transition-to-work self-efficacy. In terms of research, results gave support to the Social Cognitive Transition-to-Work (SCTW) Model as a useful conceptual tool to further guide future research and practice.

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