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Abstract

Students' professional decision-making and exploration behaviors are significantly influenced by their career self-efficacy, especially when they move from higher education to the workforce. This study examined the connection between career self-efficacy and career exploration among University of Fort Hare, South Africa final-year management and commerce students. Under the guidance of Social Cognitive Theory, the study also looked at the impact of certain biographical factors and the four sources of self-efficacy mastery experiences, physiological states, verbal persuasion, and vicarious learning on career exploration. A self-administered questionnaire was used in a quantitative, descriptive study design. A convenience sample of 182 final-year students provided the data. Standardized tools were employed, such as the Career Exploration Survey-Revised (CES-R), the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale–Short Form (CDMSE-SF), and the Career Self-Efficacy Source Scale (CSESS). Reliability testing, correlation analysis, regression analysis, ANOVA, and MANOVA were among the statistical analyses. The results showed that career self-efficacy and career exploration were significantly predicted by the sources of career self-efficacy. Stronger self-efficacy views were associated with higher levels of participation in job exploration activities. Significant correlations between career exploration and some demographic factors, including socioeconomic status and course of study, were also found in the data. All things considered, career self-efficacy turned out to be a significant element affecting students' preparedness to investigate job options and make wise career judgments. To improve graduates' employability and enable smooth transitions into the workforce, universities are urged to establish career counseling programs, mentorship programs, and career exploration seminars.

Keywords: Career self-efficacy, Career exploration, Final-year students, Graduate employability, Social Cognitive Career Theory

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1.0 Introduction

University students go through a crucial developmental stage as they go from higher education to the workforce. Students are expected to assess employment options, make significant career decisions, and get ready to enter increasingly competitive labor markets at this time. According to Stumpf, Colarelli and Hartman (1983) and Zikic and Klehe (2006), career exploration is essential to this process because it allows people to learn more about themselves and the workplace, which helps them make well-informed professional decisions and grow their careers.

Career self-efficacy is one element that has been repeatedly connected to career-related behaviors. Career self-efficacy, which is based on Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory, is a person's confidence in their capacity to carry out tasks related to career planning, decision-making, and achieving professional goals. People who have high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to actively participate in career exploration activities, show perseverance in the face of difficulties, and approach difficult career-related tasks with confidence (Bandura, 1997; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). On the other hand, people with lower levels of career self-efficacy could find it challenging to investigate employment options and make wise career choices.

The importance of career self-efficacy is especially clear for college students who are about to graduate. There is growing pressure on final-year students to find appropriate career options, get jobs, and deal with unstable labor market conditions. According to research, students with higher career self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to participate in job-search activities, look for information about careers, and show more confidence in their ability to make career decisions (Betz & Taylor, 2012; Gushue, Scanlan, Pantzer & Clarke, 2006). As a result, career self-efficacy has become a crucial factor in determining how well students transition from school to the workplace.

The connection between career self-efficacy and career exploration deserves special consideration in the South African context. High rates of youth unemployment persist in South Africa, and graduates frequently face substantial obstacles upon entering the workforce (Statistics South Africa, 2024). These difficulties could reduce chances for productive job exploration and increase ambiguity about potential career paths. Additionally, students' confidence in their capacity to seek and achieve desired professional outcomes may be impacted by socioeconomic disparities, differences in educational options, and disparities in career assistance (Coetzee, 2014; Maree, 2017).

Career self-efficacy has been found to positively correlate with a number of professional outcomes, such as career flexibility, career decision-making, occupational identity, and career exploration behavior (Lent et al., 1994; Nauta, 2007;). Nevertheless, little empirical study has looked at the connection between career self-efficacy and career exploration among South African university students, especially in the fields of management and commerce, despite the growing interest in these constructs on a global scale. Furthermore, it is still unclear how much demographic factors like age, gender, socioeconomic background, and subject of study affect this association (Rogers & Creed, 2011).

This study examines the relationship between career self-efficacy and career exploration among final-year Management and Commerce students at a particular South African university, guided by Social Cognitive professional Theory (Lent et al., 1994). In particular, the study investigates the impact of certain biographical factors on the link between career exploration behaviors and

sources of career self-efficacy. The study adds to the body of knowledge on career development and offers useful insights for higher education institutions looking to improve career counseling, employability initiatives, and graduate transition programs by deepening our understanding of the elements that encourage career exploration among graduating students.

2.0 Methods

Participants

Final-year undergraduate students at the University of Fort Hare's Faculty of Management and Commerce in South Africa participated in the study. The study had 182 pupils in all. Students who were accessible and willing to participate were invited to fill out the study questionnaire as part of a non-probability convenience sampling technique. Because final-year students were getting close to graduation and getting ready to enter the workforce, career-related decision-making and career exploration were very important to them. Male and female students from a variety of management and commerce programs made up the sample. Gender, age, socioeconomic position (SES), and course of study were among the demographic data gathered. These variables were examined to determine their potential influence on career self-efficacy and career exploration.

Research Design

The association between career self-efficacy and career exploration among final-year university students was examined using a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research methodology. The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which holds that self-efficacy beliefs are crucial in determining career-related behaviors and outcomes, served as the study's compass (Lent et al., 1994).

Because it allowed the researcher to look at correlations between variables and evaluate the predictive impact of career self-efficacy and its sources on career exploration, the design was suitable. Additionally, the design made it possible to investigate demographic variations in career exploration and career self-efficacy.

Measures and Materials

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire comprising four sections.

Career Self-Efficacy Source Scale (CSESS)

The professional Self-Efficacy Source Scale (CSESS), which was first created by Hackett and Betz (1981), was used to measure the sources of career self-efficacy. The 20-item test evaluates the four sources of self-efficacy that Bandura (1997) identified: verbal persuasion, mastery experiences, vicarious learning, and physiological or emotional arousal. A five-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree," was used to gauge responses. In the current study, the scale showed satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .70$), and prior research has confirmed adequate reliability for the measure.

Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale- Short Form (CDMSE-SF)

The Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale – Short Form (CDMSE-SF), created by Taylor and Betz (1983), was used to measure career self-efficacy. The 20 items on the scale gauge a person's confidence in carrying out tasks associated with making professional decisions, such as goal selection, planning, problem-solving, self-evaluation, and acquiring occupational information. A

five-point Likert scale was used by participants to rate their responses. In the current investigation, the scale showed outstanding reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

Career Exploration Survey- Revised (CES-R)

The Career Exploration Survey-Revised (CES-R), created by Stumpf et al. (1983), was used to gauge career exploration behavior. Thirteen items make up the test, which evaluates the degree to which individuals engage in job exploration activities, such as looking for occupational information, talking about career opportunities, and weighing career options. A five-point Likert scale was used to capture the responses. In the current investigation, the scale showed strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$).

Demographic Questionnaire

In order to gather data on gender, age, socioeconomic situation, and course of study, participants also filled out a demographic component. In order to investigate their possible impact on career self-efficacy and career exploration, these variables were included.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the project. Additionally, permission was acquired from the appropriate faculty authorities. The objective of the study was explained to participants when they were approached on campus. All participants gave their informed consent prior to the delivery of the questionnaire, and participation was entirely voluntary. No identifying information was gathered, and respondents were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. It was made clear to participants that they might leave the research at any time without incurring any fees. Self-administered paper-based questionnaires were used to gather data throughout predetermined academic semesters. Each person filled out a questionnaire, which they then sent back to the researcher.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 was used to code, clean, and analyze the data. Means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages are examples of descriptive statistics that were computed to characterize the study variables and sample characteristics. To evaluate the measurement tools' dependability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. Relationships between career self-efficacy, sources of self-efficacy, and career exploration were investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation analysis. To ascertain the predictive impact of career self-efficacy and its sources on career exploration behavior, multiple regression analyses were conducted. Additionally, differences between demographic groups were evaluated, and the impact of gender, age, socioeconomic position, and course of study on career self-efficacy and career exploration was investigated using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

3.0 Findings and Discussion

Data Analysis Procedure

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 was used to analyze the data. To guarantee correctness and completeness, the data were cleaned, coded, and checked before analysis. To summarize study factors and participant characteristics, descriptive statistics were

calculated. The internal consistency of the measurement tools was evaluated by reliability analyses utilizing Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Relationships between career self-efficacy, career exploration, and the sources of career self-efficacy were investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation analysis. The predictive impact of the sources of career self-efficacy and career self-efficacy on career exploration was then ascertained by multiple regression analyses. To determine whether biographical factors affected the association between career self-efficacy and career exploration, more regression analyses were carried out.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 250 final-year students studying management and commerce received questionnaires. A response rate of 72.8% was obtained from the 182 valid surveys that were returned. There were 88 female students (48.4%) and 94 male students (51.6%) in the final sample. Most of the responders were in the 20–24 age range.

Reliability of Measurement Instruments

For every study measure, the reliability analysis showed good to exceptional internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the Career Self-Efficacy Source Scale, Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale, and Career Exploration Survey were .739, .860, and .885, respectively. The tools were appropriate for further analysis, as evidenced by the entire questionnaire's satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .744$).

3.1 Inferential Statistics

Regression Analysis

To find out if the five sources of career self-efficacy beliefs affected job exploration behavior, a multiple regression analysis was performed. Vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, positive and negative emotional arousal, and performance accomplishments were the predictor variables in Table 1.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis of Sources of Career Self-Efficacy Predicting Career Exploration

Predictor Variable	b	β	Partial Correlation	Semi-partial Correlation	p-value
Constant	19.136	—	—	—	< .001
Vicarious Learning	0.529	.067	.067	.066	.381
Verbal Persuasion	0.917	.093	.076	.301	.311
Emotional Arousal (Positive)	1.337	.118	.100	.308	.186
Emotional Arousal (Negative)	0.408	.037	.038	.103	.617
Performance Accomplishments	2.250	.206	.163	.352	.030

Dependent Variable: Career Exploration Score

Statistical significance set at $p \leq .05$.

The findings showed that the only statistically significant predictor of career exploration was performance accomplishments ($\beta = .206$, $p = .030$). This result implies that job exploration activities were more common among participants who reported higher levels of effective performance experiences. Performance accomplishments were the predictor variable that contributed most uniquely to the prediction of career exploration ($\beta = .206$), followed by verbal persuasion ($\beta = .093$), vicarious learning ($\beta = .067$), positive emotional arousal ($\beta = .118$), and negative emotional arousal ($\beta = .037$). Even while verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, positive emotional arousal, and negative emotional arousal all had positive regression coefficients, their contributions were not statistically significant once the effects of the other predictors were taken into account.

All five sources of career self-efficacy vicarious learning ($r = .10$, $p < .05$), verbal persuasion ($r = .36$, $p < .05$), positive emotional arousal ($r = .27$, $p < .05$), negative emotional arousal ($r = .16$, $p < .05$), and performance accomplishments ($r = .38$, $p < .05$) were significantly correlated with career exploration, according to the zero-order correlations. These connections show that career exploration was connected to each source separately.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics

The study variables' descriptive statistics are shown in Table 2. Performance accomplishment had the highest mean score ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.75$), followed by vicarious learning ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.04$) and pleasant emotional arousal ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.73$). The mean score for career exploration was 3.08 ($SD = 0.68$), but the mean score for professional self-efficacy was 2.92 ($SD = 0.89$).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Vicarious Learning	3.21	1.04
Verbal Persuasion	3.15	0.83
Positive Emotional Arousal	3.30	0.73
Negative Emotional Arousal	3.02	0.73
Performance Accomplishment	3.36	0.75
Career Self-Efficacy	2.92	0.89
Career Exploration	3.08	0.68

3.3 Correlation Analysis

The links between career self-efficacy, career exploration, and the sources of career self-efficacy were investigated using Pearson correlation analysis. Students with greater levels of career self-efficacy were more likely to participate in career exploration activities, according to the results, which showed a substantial positive link between career self-efficacy and career exploration ($r = .67$, $p < .05$). All five sources of self-efficacy were positively correlated with career self-efficacy. Career self-efficacy was found to be significantly positively correlated with vicarious learning ($r = .18$, $p < .05$), verbal persuasion ($r = .36$, $p < .05$), positive emotional arousal ($r = .27$, $p < .05$), negative emotional arousal ($r = .16$, $p < .05$), and performance accomplishment ($r = .38$, $p < .05$). Career exploration also showed favorable correlations with verbal persuasion ($r = .30$, $p < .01$), vicarious learning ($r = .21$, $p < .01$), positive emotional arousal ($r = .31$, $p < .01$), and performance

accomplishment ($r = .35$, $p < .01$). The idea that greater job exploration behavior is linked to career self-efficacy and its underlying sources is supported by these data.

Predicting Career Exploration from Sources of Career Self-Efficacy

To find out if career exploration was predicted by the five sources of career self-efficacy, a multiple regression analysis was performed. The sources of career self-efficacy together explained a considerable percentage of the variance in career exploration, according to the overall regression model, which was statistically significant $F(5, 176) = 6.45$, $p < .001$).

Performance accomplishment was found to be the most significant predictor of career exploration among the predictor factors ($\beta = .206$, $p = .030$). Career exploration was positively correlated with positive emotional arousal ($\beta = .118$), verbal persuasion ($\beta = .093$), vicarious learning ($\beta = .067$), and negative emotional arousal ($\beta = .037$), though these relationships did not reach statistical significance when taken into account concurrently in the regression model. These findings suggest that students' previous successful experiences and achievements play a particularly important role in promoting career exploration behaviour.

Predicting Career Exploration from Career Self-Efficacy and Sources of Self-Efficacy

To determine if career self-efficacy and the five sources of self-efficacy together predicted career exploration, a second multiple regression analysis was carried out. $F(6, 175) = 25.54$, $p < .001$, indicated that the model was statistically significant.

The greatest predictor of career exploration was career self-efficacy ($\beta = .619$, $p < .001$). While career self-efficacy accounted for the greatest amount of explained variance, positive emotional arousal ($\beta = .121$), vicarious learning ($\beta = .066$), and performance accomplishment ($\beta = .034$) added extra variance to the model. The results show that students are more inclined to participate in job exploration activities if they have greater confidence in their capacity to make decisions relevant to their careers.

Influence of Biographical Variables

To find out if gender, age, socioeconomic position, and course of study affected career self-efficacy and career exploration, multiple regression analyses were performed. Demographic factors did not significantly explain variation in professional self-efficacy, according to the overall model analyzing the impact of biographical variables on career self-efficacy ($p = .15$). On the other hand, career self-efficacy was positively correlated with the 25–30 age group ($p = .014$). In a similar vein, the model evaluating the impact of biographical factors on career exploration ($F(13, 168) = 1.30$, $p = .217$) was not statistically significant. These results show that the association between career self-efficacy and career exploration was not significantly influenced by gender, age, socioeconomic position, or course of study.

Summary of Findings

The findings strongly suggest that among final-year Management and Commerce students, career self-efficacy and career exploration are positively correlated. The biggest predictor of job exploration behavior was career self-efficacy, which was substantially correlated with all sources of self-efficacy. The most significant source of self-efficacy in predicting career exploration was found to be performance accomplishment. Biographical factors, on the other hand, showed little explanatory power and had no discernible impact on the association between career self-efficacy and career exploration.

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3.4 Discussion

This study's main goal was to find out how final-year management and commerce students at a particular South African university related to professional self-efficacy and career exploration. Under the direction of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), the study investigated if certain biographical factors affected the relationship between career self-efficacy and its sources and career exploration behaviors. Overall, the results showed a strong positive correlation between career self-efficacy and career exploration, supporting the theoretical presumptions of SCCT and adding to the expanding corpus of research on university students' career development.

The findings showed a significant positive correlation between job exploration and career self-efficacy. Students were more likely to participate in activities including acquiring occupational information, assessing career options, and looking for opportunities to explain their professional goals if they felt more confident about their abilities to complete job-related tasks. This result is in line with earlier studies showing that people with high career self-efficacy are more proactive in considering job possibilities and are better able to deal with obstacles connected to their careers (Betz & Taylor, 2012; Gushue et al., 2006; Rogers & Creed, 2011). The results corroborate Bandura's (1997) claim that behavioral decisions, effort expenditure, and perseverance in goal-directed activities are influenced by self-efficacy beliefs.

Significant positive correlations between career self-efficacy and the several sources of self-efficacy vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, emotional arousal, and performance accomplishment were also found in the study. These results support Bandura's (1997) theory that social support, emotional experiences, mastery experiences, and witnessing others all contribute to the development of self-efficacy beliefs. Performance achievement was found to be the most reliable indicator of career exploration among these sources. According to this research, students are more likely to participate in career exploration activities with confidence if they have prior leadership, academic, work-integrated learning, or job-related successes. Similar results have been documented in research demonstrating that mastery experiences, which offer concrete proof of a person's competence and potential, are the most significant source of self-efficacy (Lent et al., 1994; Nauta, 2007).

When examined in conjunction with the sources of self-efficacy, career self-efficacy was also discovered to be the most powerful predictor of career exploration. This finding emphasizes how crucial confidence is to career decision-making and career management practices. Students who think they can effectively find, assess, and pursue job prospects seem more inclined to participate in exploratory behaviors that support smooth transitions into the workforce. These results are consistent with earlier research showing that career self-efficacy encourages adaptive career behaviors, such as job-search activities, career planning, and career adaptability (Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009; Lent & Brown, 2019).

The study's key finding was that the association between career self-efficacy and job exploration was not significantly influenced by biographical factors, such as gender, socioeconomic level, or course of study. Demographic factors typically did not explain for significant variation in either career self-efficacy or career exploration, despite age showing a modest connection with career self-efficacy. This result implies that career exploration behaviors may be more influenced by psychological resources linked to career self-efficacy than by demographic traits. Previous studies

on professional development have revealed that self-efficacy beliefs predict career-related outcomes regardless of demographic variations (Lent et al., 1994; Rogers & Creed, 2011).

The results have a number of useful ramifications for professionals in career development and higher education. Universities should undertake treatments targeted at boosting students' confidence in their job-related talents, given the substantial correlation between career self-efficacy and career exploration. Students' mastery experiences and self-efficacy beliefs may be strengthened by career development programs that offer chances for experiential learning, internships, mentorship, career workshops, and industry interaction. Additionally, career counseling services ought to concentrate on assisting students in recognizing and building upon prior achievements while creating coping mechanisms for worry and uncertainty related to their careers. These interventions could improve graduate employability outcomes and promote more participation in career exploration activities (Maree, 2017).

The results are especially pertinent in the South African context, where graduates still have a difficult time obtaining work. According to Statistics South Africa, youth unemployment is still a significant socioeconomic issue, which makes it more crucial for recent graduates to actively explore their career options and make wise professional decisions. Therefore, boosting career self-efficacy may be a key strategy for helping students navigate the unpredictability of the labor market and enhance their employment prospects.

The study has a number of shortcomings despite its merits. First, it is more difficult to determine a causal association between career self-efficacy and career exploration when using a cross-sectional research methodology. It is impossible to say with certainty whether engagement in job exploration activities increases self-efficacy beliefs or whether higher self-efficacy leads to increased career exploration, despite the fact that substantial connections were found. Longitudinal designs should be used in future studies to investigate the directionality and evolution of these connections across time.

Second, the study's convenience sample was selected from a single university, which would restrict how broadly the results can be applied to other universities and student groups. Career growth may be experienced differently by students from various universities, academic fields, and sociocultural backgrounds. To improve external validity, larger and more varied samples from several institutions should be used in future research. Third, the study only used self-report measures, which could be prone to common method variance and social desirability bias. It's possible that participants exaggerated or underestimated their levels of job exploration and self-efficacy. To gain a more thorough understanding of career development processes, future researchers might find it useful to incorporate qualitative methodologies, longitudinal assessments, or multi-source data.

Future studies should also look into other elements that might affect career exploration, like personality qualities, social support, career adaptability, employability attributes, and labor market perspectives. A more thorough knowledge of the elements that support university students' successful career transitions may be obtained by analyzing these variables within the context of Social Cognitive Career Theory. The current study offers empirical proof that career exploration and career self-efficacy among final-year management and commerce students are positively correlated. Performance achievement was found to be the most significant source of self-efficacy, and career self-efficacy turned out to be the best predictor of career exploration. The results underscore the role of higher education institutions in promoting career exploration and

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employability and emphasize the need of building students' confidence in their job-related talents. Universities may help graduates have better job outcomes and more successful school-to-work transitions by fostering career self-efficacy through focused interventions and support programs.

4.0 Conclusion

The study highlights the strong positive correlation between career self-efficacy and career exploration among University of Fort Hare final-year management and commerce students. The results reinforce the ideas of Social Cognitive Career Theory by confirming that higher levels of career self-efficacy, especially those motivated by mastery experiences, are linked to increased engagement in job exploration activities. The findings also show that students' confidence in choosing professional decisions is influenced by sources of self-efficacy, such as verbal persuasion and vicarious learning. Crucially, this link was not significantly impacted by demographic criteria like gender or course of study, indicating that improving self-efficacy could help students from various backgrounds. Overall, these insights highlight the importance of fostering career self-efficacy to facilitate proactive career exploration and better prepare students for the transition into the workforce.

5.0 Recommendations

The results have important implications for universities, highlighting the necessity of creating focused professional development programs that support students' inquiry and self-assurance. In order to give students mastery experiences and positive reinforcement, universities should include career workshops, internships, mentorship programs, and experiential learning opportunities. These programs can assist students in developing the self-efficacy needed to confidently choose their careers and make wise choices. Institutions should also improve career counseling services by emphasizing the celebration of students' accomplishments and offering emotional support, both of which can boost students' self-efficacy views. In order to better understand the changing dynamics of career self-efficacy and exploration, future research should take into account longitudinal studies and varied populations from several colleges. It should also investigate other influencing elements including personality traits and social support networks.

According to the study's findings, it is recommended that universities create all-encompassing career development plans that emphasize social persuasion and mastery experiences in order to boost students' self-efficacy. Students' confidence in their professional talents can be greatly increased by implementing organized experience learning, such as industrial placements and project-based coursework. Additionally, programs for peer support and mentoring should be set up to offer possibilities for vicarious learning so that students can watch successful role models and develop their own career goals. Universities should also spend money on teaching career counselors to take a more comprehensive approach, incorporating self-efficacy building and emotional resilience into their counseling procedures. In order to better understand causal links and the factors that support or impede the development of career self-efficacy over time, future research should focus on using longitudinal and multi-source data gathering methodologies. This will assist in creating more efficient interventions and support networks to encourage students' confidence and long-term career exploration.

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