

CAREER SELF-APPRAISALS AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF DIVERSE FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

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This study examined the career, social, and academic self-appraisals and educational aspirations of first-year college students of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Participants included 72 first-year students of Black, Asian, and White ethnicities. Career self-appraisals were significantly different for Black and Asian students when compared to White students, and subsequent analysis revealed that White students had higher career self-appraisals. Also, educational aspirations were significantly predicted by academic self-appraisals. Practice implications are explored.

Keywords: first-year college students, academic self-appraisal, educational aspirations

Today, workers in the United States need to be competitive on the global job market, which requires being able to obtain the necessary training and education sought by employers (Hughey & Hughey, 1999). The college preparation of students can be vital in securing a job and developing one's career post-graduation. Hence, educators and researchers have taken interest in the success of first-year college students in order to help these students transition from high school to college, and from college to the world of work. Factors associated with first-year college students' success include membership in learning communities and variables such as gender and ethnicity (Zheng, Saunders, Shelley, & Whalen, 2002). Since it has been shown that ethnicity and other cultural factors can influence success and introduce additional issues and barriers, the career development of first-year college students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds is particularly salient (Alipuria, 2008).

The psychological distress of these diverse first-year college students can be mitigated by positive parental/familial attachment (Kenny & Perez, 1996), and research with Black and Latino men in their first year of college has indicated that parental encouragement and other factors helped these men choose to pursue college degrees (Contreras-Godfrey, 2009). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that a career development course can help decrease the dysfunctional career thoughts of diverse first-year students (Osborn, Howard, & Leierer, 2007).

Of particular interest to the success of these students are the factors of self-efficacy and educational aspirations. Self-efficacy refers to one's belief in one's ability to perform certain tasks (Bandura, 1977), and different areas of self-efficacy relevant to college students have included academic or educational self-efficacy (one's belief in her ability to do tasks associated with academic study), social self-efficacy (belief in his ability to perform

social tasks), and career self-efficacy (belief in her ability to do career-oriented tasks) (c.f., Chung & Sedlacek, 1999). Educational aspirations are the level of education an individual is striving towards, and is usually measured by asking people about what degree they plan to achieve. For instance, if a student is currently working towards earning a bachelor's degree, but hopes to earn a master's degree one day, then that person's educational aspiration is a master's degree. In the next two sections, literature pertaining to academic, social, and career self-efficacy as well as educational aspirations for diverse students will be examined.

Racial/ethnic diversity of first-year college students and academic, social, and career self-efficacy. Chung and Sedlacek (1999) investigated the academic, social, and career self-appraisals (efficacy) of first-year college students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, and found that White students had higher academic and social self-appraisals than Asian and Black students. Other studies of academic self-efficacy have identified this construct as related to performance and adjustment (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001), student's feelings of class belonging (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007), and college persistence (Kahn & Nauta, 2001). Social self-efficacy has been found to mediate the relationship between anxious attachment, loneliness, and depression for these students (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005).

Racial/ethnic diversity of first-year college students and educational aspirations. Few studies have been conducted in this area; however, those studies that have been published do give food for thought. In one major study of 3,895 diverse first-year college students across 23 educational institutions, findings indicated that one educational best practice for first-year students was "effective teaching and interaction with faculty" (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006, p. 375). This faculty contact

variable had a significant interaction effect with the educational aspiration of pursuing a graduate degree at public and private research universities. In other words, students who had more contact with faculty at research universities were more likely to have higher educational aspirations, as opposed to students attending other kinds of institutions such as community colleges, historically Black colleges, and liberal arts colleges (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006). Also, it has been found that among Black first-year students, women had higher educational aspirations, lower ratings of social effectiveness, and higher values of career autonomy (Chung, Loeb, & Gonzo, 1996). However, other research has suggested that Black women have lower educational aspirations than other groups (Kaufman & Creamer, 1991). Furthermore, Phillips and Asbury (1993) found that no evidence suggested that educational aspirations differ significantly for Black first-year college students who have come from homes that are intact (i.e., both biological parents are living together) when compared to those students whose parents who do not live together due to divorce or separation.

Thus, a variety of factors have been identified as salient to the career process of diverse, first-year college students, such as racial/ethnic background, self-efficacy and educational aspirations. However, to date, no study has investigated the academic, social, and career self-efficacy of ethnically diverse college students as they relate to educational aspirations. The present study addressed this question.

Current Study

This study is a partial replication and extension of the Chung and Sedlacek (1999) research, which focused on the academic, social, and career self-appraisals of first-year college students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. The current study investigated whether similar self-appraisal patterns would be found with another group of diverse first-

year college students, and extended the Chung and Sedlacek (1999) research by examining the relationships between appraisals and educational aspirations. Since Chung and Sedlacek (1999) found that White students had higher academic and social self-appraisals than Black and Asian first-year college students in their sample, it was hypothesized that this pattern of racial-ethnic differences would be seen again. It was also hypothesized that educational aspirations would be positively correlated with academic self-appraisals. Finally, it was expected that educational aspirations would be best predicted by academic self-appraisals as opposed to other appraisals. Though career and social self-appraisals were expected to predict educational aspirations, the most powerful predictor was expected to be academic self-appraisals. Since few gender differences have been found in the past in regards to other career variables (Donnay & Borgen, 1996), and since the gender differences that have been found have not been consistent, no hypotheses were advanced concerning gender.

Method

Participants

Initially, data were collected from 99 first-year college students at a small, urban, east coast university who attended a university orientation event for first-year students. However, since 27 of the participants were under the consenting age of 18, these respondents were removed from analysis. Thus, the sample used for analysis included 72 participants (n for women = 36; n for men = 36). The group was 48.6% White, 31.9% Black, 6.9% Asian or Pacific Islander, 5.6 % Latino, and 4.2% who chose "other" (2.8% did not answer this question). Since there were so few participants of Latino/a ($n = 4$) or "other" background ($n = 3$), these participants were excluded from additional analyses. Age ranged from 18 to 28 ($M = 18.56$; $SD = 1.86$). With the exception

of 2.8% who did not respond to this item, the entire sample was single and had never married. Participants' educational aspirations showed that 4.2% aspired to some college, 33.3% to a bachelor's degree, 30.6% to a master's degree, and 26.4% to a professional degree (e.g., J.D., M.D., Ph.D.). Almost all (93%) of the students in the sample indicated that they had decided upon a major, with only 6.9% who were undecided. Finally, 75% did not see themselves as following in the steps of someone who is a role model for their college or career plans.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. This part of the survey included questions pertaining to age, race/ethnicity, gender, level of educational aspirations, major choice status, and current thoughts about career. Specifically, educational aspirations were measured by asking, "What level of education do you hope to achieve?" Response options included some college, associate's degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and professional degree (e.g., J.D., M.D., Ph.D.). For analyses, these response options were coded 1 (some college) to 5 (professional degree).

Self-efficacy. This 26-item measure is comprised of three scales: career, academic and social self-appraisals (Chung & Sedlacek, 1999). The career self-appraisal scale item content reflects participants' "degree of certainty about choosing a major and career plans," the academic self-appraisal scale items focuses on "academic performance and study skills," and social self-appraisal scale items centers on "social life and interpersonal skills" (p. 16). Example items include "I am not sure of my major" (career self-appraisal scale), "I expect to have a hard time adjusting to the academic work of college" (academic self-appraisal scale), and "I do not have the skills to be a leader on campus" (social self-appraisal scale; Chung & Sedlacek, 1999,

p. 17). The authors intended these scales to reflect and measure Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy in these career-related domains. Factor analysis produced these three scales which had internal consistency alphas of .81 (career), .70 (academic), and .64 (social; Chung & Sedlacek, 1999).

Procedures

Data collection took place at the beginning of a university orientation event held in the month before the students' first semester of college. Informed consent was reviewed with the participants, and it was explained that participation in the data collection was not necessary in order to participate in the orientation. Afterwards, a three-page paper-and-pencil survey was administered which contained a demographic questionnaire as well as the Chung and Sedlacek (1999) efficacy measure.

Facilitators. A group of graduate student counselors-in-training from the university master's program in counseling was chosen to lead the orientation workshop. These students had had at least one year of training in their graduate education as counselors. After a one hour-long training session with the counseling faculty member organizing the workshop, these students and the faculty member led the participants through some career self-awareness exercises and then administered the surveys.

Orientation workshop structure. After a short introduction, facilitators led participants in an exercise known as the Holland party, which was based on Bolles (2010) exercise and was intended to help participants develop awareness of their career interests and learn a structure for thinking about the world of work. To increase comprehension, participants were given a handout that described and depicted Holland's hexagon, the RIASEC themes, and occupations suited to each theme. Also, facilitators guided participants in discussion of a series of topics including what personality

was, their unique personality, their world-views, environments in which they might flourish, their favorite activities, and what they had learned from the workshop. Finally, the measures were distributed and participants were given the choice to complete them.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Due to the small number of participants of Asian descent ($n = 5$) and since a similar analytic strategy was used by Chung and Sedlacek (1999), a decision was made to combine the Asian and Black samples into one group (combined $n = 28$). Therefore, all analyses pertaining to ethnicity compared Asian and Black students as a group with White students. Preliminary analyses demonstrated no significant gender differences.

Analyses

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) contrasting Black and Asian students as a group with White students on the three appraisal scales was significant ($F = 4.071, p < .05$; see Table 1). In subsequent univariate analysis, Whites had a significantly higher mean on career self-appraisal only ($p < .05$).

Correlational analyses showed as predicted that educational aspirations had a positive, moderate relation with academic self-appraisal ($r = .36, p < .01$; see Table 2), but was unrelated to social or career appraisals. Other significant correlations at the $p < .01$ level included the relationships between academic and social self-appraisals ($r = .46$) and academic and career self-appraisals ($r = .33$). Finally, linear regression revealed that the strongest predictor for educational aspirations among the three scales of appraisal was academic self-appraisal, as hypothesized (see Table 3).

Table 1. Multivariate and Univariate Differences in Self-Appraisal Scores Among Diverse First-Year College Students

Self-Appraisal Scale	Ethnic Group	M	SE	F
Career	Black & Asian	15.00	.80	4.07*
	White	17.17	.72	
Academic	Black & Asian	33.54	.94	.49
	White	34.41	.84	
Social	Black & Asian	44.23	.99	.49
	White	43.31	.89	

* $p < .05$

Discussion

Contrary to prediction, White students had higher career self-appraisals than the combined Black/Asian group, but no difference was found on academic or social self-appraisal. This is the opposite of the pattern found by Chung and Sedlacek (1999), who found that Asian and Black first-year college students had lower social and academic self-appraisals than White students. It seems as though there may be special characteristics that underlie these different findings.

Special characteristics of the present sample may explain why results differed from those obtained by Chung and Sedlacek (1999) in their study of self-efficacy among diverse first-year students. In the present study, students were part of the first first-year cohort in over 30 years, and were offered free tuition for their first year of college as an incentive to attend. Also, the university provided a special first- and second-year program to support them, which included the workshop they had

just had when they completed this survey as well as other supports (e.g., special academic counseling, learning communities, and so forth). As this university is a commuter campus, many students went home at night, which increased the odds that their social support networks were intact. Additionally, the university has a reputation of serving diverse students, with evidence that "the rate of African-American students who registered for classes in that second year exceeds the rate of all students" (University of Baltimore Strategic Plan Report Card, 2011). This university has a strong history of graduating minority students and there tends to be a lot of local pride in graduates of this university in the community.

Therefore, the degree of financial, academic and social support that these first-year students were given, combined with a relatively familiar setting, may have strengthened the confidence of minority students that they could handle the academic tasks they faced. The Chung and Sedlacek (1999) academic

Table 2. Correlations Among Educational Aspirations and Self-Appraisal Scales in a Sample of First-Year College Students

	Career Self-Appraisal	Academic Self-Appraisal	Social Self-Appraisal
Educational Aspirations	.07	.36*	.04
Career Self-Appraisal		.33*	.06
Academic Self-Appraisal			.46*

* $p < .01$

Table 3. Linear Regression Results Predicting First-Year College Students' Educational Aspirations from Self-Appraisals

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Educational Aspirations				
Social Self-Appraisal	-.03	.03	-1.24	.22
Career Self-Appraisal	-.02	.03	-.61	.54
Academic Self-Appraisal	.09	.03	3.30	.002

Note: Based on theory, self-appraisal scales were entered in the order of least to highest prediction of educational aspirations.

self-appraisals scale asked questions about how students rated their ability to obtain adequate grades, write papers, and complete other academic tasks, and these students may have felt that they could do these things. Also, these factors could also explain why they did not feel they faced social challenges in this environment. However, minority students still reported less confidence in negotiating the university system and choosing a major within it (i.e., career self-efficacy). As previously noted, 75% of these students did not have a role model that they were following in the footsteps by going to college. Given that this author did conduct a post hoc analysis and found no racial/ethnic differences for role model, one possible hypothesis is that perhaps not having role models impacts minorities more strongly than it does White students, who again reported more career confidence via their ratings of career self-appraisals.

For the second hypothesis, it was expected that higher levels of educational aspirations would be positively correlated with academic self-appraisals. Indeed, educational aspirations were significantly correlated only with academic appraisals ($r = .36$), though it is interesting to note that the strongest relationship occurred between academic and social self-appraisals ($r = .46$). This relationship between academic and social self-appraisals is salient, especially given the pattern of findings in both this study and the work by Chung and Sedlacek (1999) where the academic and

social self-appraisal scales are producing results in similar directions with one another (though in different directions when examined with race/ethnicity, as noted previously). Thus, the second hypothesis was supported.

Finally, the third hypothesis was that educational aspirations would be best predicted by academic self-appraisals as opposed to other appraisals, and this was indeed the result. Theoretically, confidence in academics might be more proximal to one's lofty educational goals as opposed to how confident someone is as a social being. Also, someone with favorable career self-appraisals may not necessarily be aspiring to a career that requires much education, and so could have lower educational aspirations as opposed to higher (e.g., obtaining a bachelor's in soil sciences to work on a farm), perhaps weakening the prediction of educational aspirations by career self-appraisals. Therefore, it is not surprising that academic self-appraisals were the best predictor of educational aspirations. Hence, the third hypothesis was supported by the findings.

Practical Applications

These results confirm that there are unique considerations for racial/ethnic differences in first-year college students in regards to career self-appraisals or efficacy. It suggests that counselors and educators need to be aware of and ready to positively intervene with students of color who have lower career self-appraisals. Intervention strategies for building efficacy

include delivering positive feedback, building career task performance mastery, and maintaining a conducive level of physiological arousal (Bandura, 1982).

Though these results have identified a racial/ethnic difference, the similarities among these groups should not be discounted. Few differences between racial/ethnic groups were found, which may indicate that these groups are more similar on these dimensions than not. Of the sole identified difference on career self-appraisals, examination of the means for the Black/Asian group and the White group shows that this difference was small and perhaps less meaningful than the similarities among the groups overall. College counselors should keep in mind that differences in race/ethnicity among clients may not necessarily result in differences in these kinds of appraisals. Learning about the client's individual culture may be more germane to treatment than the client's group memberships.

Other considerations for practice can be derived from the intercorrelations among the variables. These results indicate that the academic and social appraisals as well as academic and career appraisals are related to each other, which suggests that working on one's academic self-efficacy may have some spillover to career and social self-efficacy. Hence, intervention strategies will likely not be mutually exclusive to one kind of efficacy or appraisal. Finally, given that educational aspirations are related to and predicted by academic self-efficacy, counselors are encouraged to help build academic self-efficacy with first-year college students in an effort to develop and promote their educational aspirations. It is important for colleges to provide programs aimed at enhancing these factors as well.

Though this study did not directly test the hypothesis, it is possible that academic self-efficacy is enhanced among diverse students by even a short workshop that gives them a modicum of career knowledge (e.g.,

the Holland types) and facilitates their interaction with other incoming students with similar interests. Academic self-efficacy in the first year, before students have undertaken college coursework, also may be enhanced when students have strong social supports and a clear idea of the career that they want to pursue. Therefore, it appears that social supports and career interventions are important early in the first-year.

Limitations

Generalizability of results may be limited to similar people as the participants; specifically, diverse first-year college students attending a small, urban university on the east coast. Similarly, the results of the study may not be replicated when less support and community enthusiasm exists for first-year students. Additional limitations include the smaller sample size of Asian students, which led to combining the samples of Asian and Black students into one group, and limited the ability in this study to look at differences among these two different racial/ethnic groups.

Other limitations include the questions not answered by this study. For example, it is uncertain how much the special characteristics of the sample influenced the results, how important college role models were for the participants, and what the direct impact of the workshop intervention was. Investigating these issues in future studies seems warranted.

Future Directions

Beyond the directions just noted, future research is needed to determine whether these results are applicable to a wider population. These results do shed interesting light on and provide a basis of comparison of what the aspirations and efficacy of diverse students may look like given an unexpected and valuable opportunity in a supportive environment. Also, work needs to be done to investigate whether a one-item measure of educational

aspirations is sufficient. Generally, one-item measures usually are not as strong psychometrically as lengthier measures. However, the trend in the career field has been to measure educational aspirations via a single item; thus, this question of how to best measure this variable needs to be explored further.

Conclusion

Though differences were found among racial/ethnic groups, many similarities were captured, highlighting both special considerations as well as important commonalities of experience. These results have implications for career development pertaining to first-year college students of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Career development interventions may need to target career self-appraisals as well as educational aspirations in order to promote the career development and success of diverse, first-year college students.

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