



Career Choice Goals of First-generation Higher Education Students of the Maldives

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ABSTRACT

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) recognise that personal inputs, contextual supports, and barriers are key influences on career choice goals. While numerous studies have used this theoretical framework to explore choice goals of various population groups in the United States and East Asia. However, minimal research has been conducted on highly challenging contexts such as small island states. This study explores the lived experiences of 14 first-generation young adults who have successfully transitioned to career-relevant undergraduate education programs in the challenging small island context of the Maldives. The qualitative research methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used research methodology. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and analysed using the six main steps used in this methodology. The data analysis showed three main stages of career decision-making and the salient contextual influences of school subjects, role models, local higher education programs, work experiences, family support and approval and job prospects. Based on the findings, the research concludes that while career self-efficacy-interest-career choice goals is the predominant career choice pathway, the link between interest and career choice goals is weakened in highly challenging contexts. Additionally, this study proposes the need for strategies that enhance the opportunities, targeted strategies for increasing access to support and reducing career barriers.

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KEYWORDS:

Career Decision-making Process, Social Cognitive Career Theory, Career Support, Career Barriers

I. INTRODUCTION

Career choice refers to choosing and entering a particular career path, and the time frame preceding the initial career choice overlaps with the educational life. (Rojewski, 2020). This educational preparation is regarded as part of the broader 'career development process' (Lent & Brown, 2013). During this period, young adults are supposed to be involved in planning for their future careers through understanding their career preferences, information about careers and narrowing down career preferences to a final choice (Gati & Landman-Tal, 2019; Sampson et al., 2020).

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) has been used in numerous research studies to explore the role of personal, contextual, and cognitive processes in career development.

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The theory postulates that career interest development through self-efficacy is the predominant pathway to career choice goals. (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2019). Research findings show consistent evidence for the mediating role of self-efficacy and interest on career goals and less consistent evidence for the influence of proximal contextual factors on interest and choice goals (Sheu & Bordon, 2017). However, since the majority of research was conducted in East Asia and Europe (Sheu & Bordon, 2017) There is a benefit from extending research groups that are not typically studied using SCCT. (Lent & Brown, 2019). Lent and Brown (2019) highlighted the need for further study of contextual supports and barriers that influence career interests and career goals during active phases of choice making. More specifically, Lent and Brown (2019) highlighted the need to explore the roles of contextual supports in highly challenging contexts as the influence of supports and barriers is likely to be heightened in such environments. Additionally, as career choices involve phenomenological aspects, qualitative methods can help discover how young people make career

choices and the influence of support and barriers on these choices.

Hence, this research used the SCCT (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013) and the qualitative methodology of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) to explore the role of contextual influences of opportunities, supports and barriers on the career choices of first-generation young adults in the Maldives. Given that career development is challenging in small states (e.g., Baldacchino, 2019; Sultana, 2006), Maldives is regarded as a highly challenging context for career decision-making. Specifically, the findings are based on two main questions: How do first-generation young adults of the Maldives make career choices and higher education programs? What are the salient contextual influences on their career choices?

II. METHOD

This study used the qualitative methodology of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore and understand young adults' experiences in making their career choices. IPA focuses on the diversity of lived experiences, contextual influences, and the life narratives of the participants (Miller et al., 2018). IPA's propensity for capturing context-specific situations and understanding individuals in the context (Charlick et al., 2016) is aligned with understanding contextual influences on CCPs.

Purposive sampling procedures were used to recruit participants who met the recruitment criteria of the study, which were: (1) a college/university student studying in a degree program at a college in Male', and (2) the student is between the ages of 18 - 26 years. Furthermore, to ensure the inclusion of participants from various career domains, the researcher identified four career domains (teaching, computer science/IT, business & psychology) for participant recruitment (see Table 2). Career domain selection was based on higher education statistics and overall enrollment in various degree programs (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020).

The primary data collection technique was individual semi-structured interviews, as it provided the advantage of adjusting questioning during the interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The interview protocol included preliminary questions related to participants' demographic and socioeconomic background and the core analytical question, sub-questions, and probes for each critical question. The questions were arranged in chronological order, starting from career interests during their primary schooling, junior secondary school (end of compulsory schooling) and transition to Higher Education (HE programs).

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using the six-step guidelines suggested by the

founders of IPA, Smith et al., (2009). The seven steps include (1) reading and re-reading, (2) initial coding, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, (5) moving to the next case, and (6) looking for patterns across cases and (7) taking analysis deeper by importing other theoretical lenses to view the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

While this outlines the general analysis strategy, the analysis was an iterative process. Two main rounds of analysis led to the identification of CCPs. The first round of inductive simultaneous coding inductive coding was based on open coding, values coding and process coding. The second round of coding focused on theoretical coding using SCCT concepts of interest, contextual opportunities, barriers and supports. The primary author conducted initial coding and analysis, and the two secondary authors took the role of intercoder.

Ethical issues were considered during all stages of the research. It included gaining approvals from the University Ethics Committee (Ref No: UM. TNC2/UMREC_1134), local college/university, and informed consent from participants. The researcher conducted all interviews, transcribing, and data analysis. In the write-up of research findings, pseudonyms and aggregates of participants' demographics are used to protect the identity of participants.

III. RESULTS

The findings showed that the career decision-making process has three main phases. Table 1 shows the three main phases and the sub-themes related to the major contextual influences on participants' career decision-making during each stage.

Table 1: Contextual Influences on Career Interest and Choice Goals (Career Choice)

<i>Superordinate themes</i>	<i>Contextual Influences</i>		
	<i>Subordinate themes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>SCCT variables</i>
Phase 1: Career Awareness	School subjects	9	SE & I
	Role model	7	SE & I
Phase 2: “Figuring out” career interests	Certificate programs	6	SE & I
	Work Experiences	5	SE & I
Phase 3: Finalising choices & cross-cutting influences	Family support & approval of interests	8	CS
	Lack of parental support for interest	5	CB
	Local job prospects	14	OE

I = Interest; SE = Self-efficacy; OE = Outcome Expectation; CS = Contextual Support; CB = Contextual Barriers

A. Phase 1: Career Awareness

School Subjects: More than half of the participants (9 out of 14) had reflected on their interest or abilities in school subjects as the basis for future career considerations. Participants' interviews show that school subjects were a source of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interest or a combination of these. For example, Dhana said:

I think interest would be the main thing. ...I like coding a lot. This was one of my best subjects in school, so I wanted to go for something that I am good at. Even if I am interested in something but not good at it, then I would have a really hard life, right?

Alternatively, others like Zaid give up on interests due to a real or perceived lack of ability in a subject. Zaid was interested in becoming an accountant but gave it up because he had difficulty understanding "some of the concepts". Likewise, marine science was Haneefa's "favourite subject" and she "wanted to become a scientist". However, she gave up because "it is very difficult for me to study science".

Role models: Half the participants (7 out of 14) had career interests based on the occupations of role models from the family or school context. For instance, Haneefa and Sara believe that seeing their teachers' work motivated them to become teachers. Zeenath, on the other hand, got interested in psychotherapy after seeing her uncle "help many people" through physiotherapy, and how "many recovered and appreciated". Aiman wanted to become a teacher because both her parents were teachers. However, in senior secondary school, she came to understand that "teaching is really hard work and teachers in Maldives do not get paid enough for the hard work they do" and decided she wanted to do something else. Aiman said:

In senior secondary school, I was going through some personal things, and the school counsellor was very helpful. ... I believe there would be many students like me who did not want to share some things with their parents. So, I thought, why not become a counsellor and help those who need it?

B. Phase 2: "Figuring out" career interests

Exploring interest through Local HE programs: Even though most participants had career interests when they were in school, 11 participants were still undecided at the end of formal schooling. Six of these participants enrolled in college certificate programs of tentative interest. For example, Haleem said:

When I was in grade 10, a certificate course in IT was conducted on our island. So, I enrolled for that and passed with "HD", and it was after that that I changed to IT.

The analysis of participant interviews indicates that most participants wanted to study locally. The interviews showed

that only three participants had considered going abroad to study (all three gave up on that due to various challenges). Hence, all 14 participants explored local HE programs before finalising their education and career choices. Participants "looked into the different programs offered at various colleges in the Maldives" (Mala), or explored "IT courses in local colleges (Sujau).

Work Experiences: Five undecided participants took a job at the end of formal schooling. For example, Dawood reflected on his interest in programming and got a job as a computer programmer before finalising computer science as his career choice. Likewise, both Sara and Sudha decided to become primary teachers after working. For example, Sudha said:

After grade 12, I got a chance to teach on my island, and the principal requested me to teach in primary as he thought I had the potential. Then I got interested in it and was so happy to teach the small kids.

C. Phase 3: Finalising educational and career choices

Family support and approval: All 14 participants highlighted that they discussed their career interests with their families, indicating that parental approval was critical for them. The interviews of 13 participants highlighted that their dream for higher education was also shared by their family. For example, participants said, "My parents wanted me to study for my degree" (Sudha) "it is my mum's dream to complete the bachelor's" (Zaid) and "Everyone in my family is supportive about studying" (Neena).

Five participants' families encouraged them to choose a career of their liking. For example, Sujau said, "My family's opinion was important to me...and everyone was happy with it. So, it was very easy for me". The parents of five participants wanted different careers for their children, but eventually approved of their career interests. For example, Sara highlighted that her parents "at some point, my parents wanted me to be a nurse, but they did not force me to do that".

The interviews of five participants showed that they changed their career interests during various phases due to a lack of parental support and approval of their career interests. For example, when Sudha was in middle school, she developed an interest in Journalism but could not follow through due to a lack of parental support. Sudha said:

I had a dream of being a journalist, but I had to give it up because my mother did not like it. ...My mother feared that because at that time, I think it was thought of as being unsafe.

Local Job Prospects: The findings highlight that all 14 participants had reflected on the perceived availability/unavailability of opportunities in the Maldives or their local island. Participants often linked final career choices to local job prospects. For example, Zeenath

highlighted that “when I chose psychology, I did think about finding something that was not very common in the Maldives. Likewise, Dhanish said: “Ever since I was young, I have been interested in science...field of zoology and botany”, but gave up on the interest because “in the Maldives, there are not a lot of career paths in zoology or botany”. Dhana also highlighted that despite wanting to study computer science she momentarily gave up on the idea her teacher told her that business “don’t hire Maldivians for jobs in this field”, “prefer people from other countries” and “it would be difficult for me to get opportunities if I went for this field”. Dhana only decided to follow her interest in the area after her uncle reassured her that there was a prospective job market.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study extends the application of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by examining how opportunity structures, support and barriers from the context influence the relationships between career interests, goals, and action. The findings highlighted the salient contextual factors, reinforcing the theory’s premise that personal agency interacts with environmental factors to shape career development (Lent et al., 1994). Moreover, the findings confirm Lent and Brown’s (2019) postulation that in a highly challenging environment, the role of contextual supports and barriers and their influence on interest-goal and goal-action are heightened during active phases of choice-making.

Our research findings highlighted that while interest and/or self-efficacy in academic subjects or career-relevant interests were significant influences, it was not the sole or most salient influence on their final education and career choices. Rather, the need for some level of interest (i.e., as opposed to the highest interest) suggests an interest threshold similar to Bandura’s (1986) self-efficacy threshold. While meta-analysis of previous SCCT research indicates a prominent influence of interest in career goals (Lent & Brown, 2019), the findings of this study are more aligned with research conducted with underrepresented samples that reported breaks in the interest-choice link due to contextual factors (e.g. Carrico et al., 2019).

This study supports the need for interventions that enhance access to opportunities, particularly for individuals facing contextual barriers, including cultural elements such as parental barriers, to optimise the development of career interests and actions in alignment with SCCT’s framework. The use of a qualitative methodology that focused on young people’s lived experiences highlighted that career decision-making was not a one-off decision, but rather it was a multi-stage and ongoing process. This reaffirms the value of qualitative research in uncovering new career pathways through the SCCT constructs (Carrico et al., 2019).

V. CONCLUSION

The present study underscores the pivotal role that opportunity structures play in moderating the relationships between career interests, goals, and actions within the framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). While self-efficacy and interest are central to career development, this research emphasises that the availability of contextual supports, absence of barriers and perceived outcome expectations can critically influence how interests translate into career goals and actions. Furthermore, the variability across different cultural and educational settings suggests that interventions tailored to enhance opportunity structures can be particularly effective in strengthening the link between interests and career pursuits. Overall, this analysis supports SCCT’s broader model while highlighting the need for targeted strategies that reduce barriers and amplify support systems to foster successful career development.

VI. DISCLOSURE

The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work.

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