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**SELF-EFFICACY, ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE, PERFORMANCE
RELATED TO CAREER DECISION DIFFICULTIES OF FIRST-
YEAR STUDENTS**

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy, career performance and persistence, and career decision difficulties, on a sample of first year students majoring in Communication Science and Public Relations, from Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. As a pilot study (N=30), one of the main objectives was to validate the scales used and to test if self-efficacy and academic success (academic performance and academic presentence) seem to be correlated with the decision difficulties of freshman students, as show in the present literature. All the scales used had the reliability index close above 0.8. Our findings show that self-efficacy is not correlated to academic success, but it is correlated with the career decision measurements. Because the literature we reviewed for the present study is mostly Western, we can assume that the discrepancy between our findings and others came from the specify of the Romanian context, as the economic and social factors have been show in literature to influence the final outcomes. In the same time, as expected, academic persistence is correlated with professional persistence, and also with the lack of information regarding the career decision process (about the process, about the self, about occupations, and about how to access additional sources of information).

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1. Introduction

Choosing a career is one of the most difficult and important decisions an emerging adult has to face, and as the present study is focusing on students we can say that this important not only for them, but also for the universities they study, as the rate of employment and the ability of alumni to find jobs related to their studies are also an indicator of successful universities. The main factors that influence the career decision are related to the socio-economic status of the family (along with gender, race, parents' education etc.), as well factors as: personality, skills and competences, interests, self-efficacy, performance, previous life experience (Pajares & Urdan, 2006; Sax, Hagedorn, Arredondo, & DiCrisi, 2002). Processing this information, students should be able to choose responsibly and conscientiously a career plan. In the same time, the Romanian realities seem to differ, as students choose a career based on insufficient or irrelevant criteria, without benefiting from proper career counselling services. In 2012, in Romania, a career counsellor had 800 students assigned, 190.000 university graduates were trained for occupations insufficient covered by the labour market, 80% of the graduates were working in a different domain than the one they had been trained for and 74% of the employees affirmed they that would have chosen a different profession if they had been counselled during high school. Furthermore, according to the National Statistical Institute, the dropout rate is at the peak after the first year of enrolment in universities.

2. Problem Statement

The current research takes on the Socio-Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) which incorporates three central concepts from the general social cognitive theory: (1) self-efficacy, (2) outcome expectations, and (3) personal goals, which represents mechanisms that allow people to exercise personal agency. Our focus will be on self-efficacy, as it hasn't been explored enough in the Romanian literature as it was in the Western career decision literature (Hackett & Lent, 1992; Lent et al., 1994; Locke & Latham, 1990; Swanson & Gore, 2000). Given the specificity of Romania (educational system, the communist past, the social and economic structure of the population), we assume the present study will get to different outcomes as the known literature.

A term coined by Bandura, self-efficacy refers to people's beliefs about their capabilities "to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1981). When viewed in relation to career decisions, self-efficacy refers to a person's beliefs regarding "career-related behaviors, educational and occupational choice, and performance and persistence in the implementation of those choices" (Betz & Hackett, 1997). Betz & Hackett (1981) make the distinction between the efficacy expectation, the persons evaluation of their ability to accomplish a task (eg. Get a job, finish one's education) and the outcome expectation, the persons beliefs about the consequences of that task.

Previous studies have investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance, academic persistence and career related difficulties.

2.1. Self-efficacy and academic performance

Several studies have shown that self-efficacy is positively associated to academic and professional performance (Lent et al. 1994, apud Swanson & Gore 2000, Pringle, 1995). For example, better performance at school leads to higher levels of self-efficacy, achieved through better feedback from teachers and parents, and the positive emotions associated with it. At the same time, students with a low level of self-efficacy have a high risk of having low outcomes in school, despite their abilities (Bandura, 1997). Nugent et al. (2015), explain that low self-efficacy not only affects students' grades, but also their career choices, and the subjects they choose to learn, results found previously in other studies (Hackett & Betz, 1981; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994 apud Lent et al., 2000; Chemmers, Hu & Garcia, 2001). The concept of self-efficacy is important not only because it deals with academic performance, but also because it seems to be sensitive to other factors for example gender – women tend to have lower self-efficacy than men, self-efficacy that in this case also has been shown to influence decision careers (Zeldin, Britner, Pajares, 2008) or race – minorities tend to have lower self-efficacy (Withershpoon et al, 1997)

2.2. Self-efficacy and academic persistence

Not only that the relation between self-efficacy and academic performance is positive, but also the one between self-efficacy beliefs and academic persistence (Multon et al 1991, apud Swanson & Gore 2000; Stoecker, Pascarella, and Wolfle, 1988), therefor as the self-efficacy gets higher, the person's ability to persevere increases, perseverance that can be traced in academic or professional performance (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990; Lent, Brown & Larkin, 1984; Schunk & Hanson, 1985; Cabrera, Nora & Castañeda, 1993; Brown, Tramayne, Hoxha, Telandera, Fan, & Lent, 2008).

Important to mention that academic success is strongly linked to short-term self-efficacy evaluations (Schultz et al., 1992) which lead us to understand that self-efficacy is an *instrument for success* that must be nourished, as it varies in time. We know that in Romania the dropout rate is higher among students after the first year of enrolment, and also that, according to Zajacova et al (2005), stress is higher among freshman and it is also linked to self-efficacy; the study outcome state that self-efficacy is a better predictor of academic success (GPS, enrolment status, credits) than stress.

2.3. Self-efficacy and career decision difficulties

Academic performance and academic perseverance lead to certain career decisions, decisions that again pass through a filter of self-efficacy, because people become interested in those activities they feel capable accomplishing and in relation to which they anticipate positive results (Lent 1994, apud Morrow, Gore & Campbell, 1996). Self-efficacy influences undoubtedly the allocated resources necessary for accomplishing a certain task (Bandura & Cervone, 1983, 1986; Schunk, 1991b apud Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). When confronted with difficult situations, individuals with a higher level of perceived self-efficacy will optimally allocate resources and will persist longer in tasks than those displaying a lower level of self-efficacy, but having the same skills. At the same time, people with a higher level of self-efficacy will process information at a deeper level (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

According to (Brown, Tramayne, Hoxha, Telander, Fan & Lent, 2008), self-efficacy is related to individual's activities, to his/her declarative and procedural knowledge, to the degree of difficulty in a task, and last but not least to the individual's motivation. They have advanced a series of specific strategies designed for those facing career related difficulties, by emphasizing the role of self-efficacy beliefs and expectations concerning the results.

One of these means involves encouraging people with few professional experiences to engage in diverse academic and professional learning experiences, meaning direct, vicarious, and persuasive encounters that underwrites one's sense of competence and capabilities (Lent et al., 1994).

Individuals displaying a higher level of self-efficacy will optimally allocate the necessary resources in order to successfully accomplish a task, while individuals with a lower level tend to avoid initiating tasks, escape tasks and fail to accomplish them (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), therefore it can influence the chances a person have in getting a job from the start, when the person may even not apply for it because of a low level of self-efficacy.

3. Research Questions

Our study started with five research questions:

- Q1. Which is the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and academic performance after the first-year of study?
- Q2. Which is the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and academic persistence/dropout after the first-year of study?
- Q3. Which is the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and career choice difficulties for freshmen students?
- Q4. Which is the relationship career choice difficulties and academic performance for freshmen?
- Q5. Which is the relationship between career choice difficulties and students' academic persistence at the end of the second semester?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to research the relationship between career related self-efficacy, career decision difficulties, academic persistence and performance in a sample of first-year students majoring in Communication Science and Public Relations. We have decided to address freshmen as national statistics indicate the highest level of dropout for this category of students.

5. Research Methods

The research consists in a correlational study, drawn from a sample of freshmen students from The Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca.

5.1. Research variables:

- a) *Self-efficacy (5 subscales)*: self-assessment, obtaining information, setting goals, career planning and problem solving
- b) *Academic performance*: general grade after the first semester
- c) *Academic persistent*, assessed dichotomic on a yes/no answer for intention to dropout
- d) *Career decision difficulties (10 subscales)*: career readiness (lack motivation, general indecisiveness, dysfunctional beliefs), lack of information (about the process, about the self, about occupations, and about how to access additional sources of information), difficulties related to inconsistent information (unreliable information, internal or external conflicts).

5.2. Participants:

The study was conducted on a sample of 30 first-year students of the Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, majoring in Communication Science and PR, 22 girls, 6 boys, 2 unnamed, aged between 18-23 (m=19.4, SD=1.4). Participation in the investigation was voluntary and anonymous. Participation agreements, data confidentiality and other ethical aspects were assured.

5.3. Instruments:

5.3.1. Career Decision – Making Self-Efficacy – Short Form Scale; CDMSE-SF (Taylor & Betz, 1983) measures the self-confidence of teenagers to take optimal decisions concerning their own career and presents five subscales: self-assessment, obtaining information, setting goals, career planning and problem solving. The questionnaire contains 25 items (eg items: "How much confidence you have in yourself, so that you can plan your goals for the next five years") is quoted on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is "total distrust", and 5 "complete trust". The scale has high internal reliability, with a Cronbach $\alpha = 0.881$.

5.3.2. Career Decision Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ; Gati, Krausz & Osipow, 1996) assesses difficulties in career decision in terms of three coordinates: the lack of preparation, lack of information and inconsistent information. It includes 34 items grouped into 10 subscales corresponding to the 10 sources of career indecision. Additionally, this questionnaire includes three additional items: one item requiring participants to indicate whether or not they took a decision on the future career, one item that seeks the trust of the person in the decision and the last item measures the degree of difficulty appreciated by them on career decision. The items of the questionnaire are quoted on a Likert scale of 1 to 9. In the present study, the Cronbach $\alpha = 0.859$.

5.4. Research design

Method: survey; instrument: questionnaire.

5.5. Procedure

- a. Sample size: 30 students (ages 18 to 22 years, both women and men);

- b. Sampling type: convenience; first-year students pursuing BAs in Communications and Public Relations at Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania;
- c. Evaluations: performed through paper questionnaires filled in by pencil; the questionnaire was self-administered;
- d. Analysis: was performed using SPSS;
- e. Data collection: March 15th 2017

6. Findings

After a reliability analysis (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.851$), we have computed a single measure for self-efficacy. Despite previous research that showed a strong connection between self-efficacy and academic performance or academic persistence, our finding does not support this hypothesis, as none of the correlations were statistically significant.

Table 01. Analysis 1

	self-efficacy	Sig.
Difficulties related to external conflicts	-0.515	0.04
Difficulties related to inconsistent information	-0.377	0.04

The results are consistent to other research, as the level of self-efficacy grows, the general difficulties in career decision and mainly the external conflicts tend to lower.

Academic persistence on the other hand strongly correlates = 0.606 (Sig. = 0.001) with the lack of information regarding career decision difficulties, meaning that as the information level grows, the academic persistence also improves.

Table 02. Analysis 2

	academic persistence	Sig.
Lack of information	0.606	0.01
Professional persistence	0.471	0.01

The limitations of the study: A larger number of academic specializations would have been desirable, for a higher batch of students, in order to ensure a higher accuracy in generalizing the obtained results and to increase the level of significance. The employment of a small number of instruments, namely four, was due to reasons of rigorous control and focusing on the dimensions that were of the greatest interest. At the same time, this limitation carries with it the reduced possibility of offering a valid model of determining factors for self-efficacy in choosing a career-path for Romanian students. The study could be extended, in order to ascertain the degree to which personality factors, attributional styles, the level of irrationality, decision-making styles etc., explain the relation between self-efficacy and career-choice.

7. Conclusion

The impact self-efficacy has on the academic success in students is, again, not as impressive as socio-economic factors, but as shown in this paper both by the review of the literature and the analysis of the present data, self-efficacy can explain processes that have been overlooked.

Our findings show that self-efficacy is a sensitive measure that has to be included in further studies of academic or professional success.

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