An Examination of Gender Differences in Student-athletes’ Perceived Career Barriers and Coping Efficacy: A Perspective from Social Cognitive Career Theory

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Student-athletes make up a unique population of college students (Harrison et al., 2009) and their numbers have been rising steadily the past several decades in the United States. The overall number of college student-athletes reached its peak in 2015, with approximately 473,000 student-athletes in 1,115 colleges/universities competing in 23 sports (National Collegiate Athletic Association; NCAA, 2015). As more student-athletes become part of the college population, scholars and practitioners are examining career development of student-athletes, and, therefore, career development of student-athletes became a research area within the academic discipline of Sport Management. For instance, a wide spectrum of research has related to student-athletes’ career development including career planning attitudes (Larry & Kerr, 2005; Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005; Tyrance, Harris, & Post, 2013), career exploration (Nauta, 2007), career adaptability (Duffy, 2010), career maturity (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996; Smallman & Sowa, 1996), and career situation inventory (Sandstedt et al., 2004). While a good amount of research has focused on student-athletes’ career development, there is a paucity of study on what kinds of career barriers they often confront and how they overcome those barriers. Moreover, research on how male and female student-athletes perceive career barriers differently is lacking. Thus, this study aims to fill the abovementioned research gap.

Literature Review

Crites (1969) defined career barriers as any internal conflicts (e.g., motivation, self-concept) or external frustrations (e.g. discrimination) related to career development. Career barriers were also defined as “events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, that make career progress difficult” (Swanson & Woitke, 1997, p. 446). Much of the traditional research used the dichotomous concept of career barriers, divided into internal and external barriers (Crites, 1969; Farmer, 1976; O’Leary, 1974). In a later study, however, Swanson and Tokar (1991a) challenged the traditional dichotomy and proposed three types of barriers: social/interpersonal (e.g., role obligations, job relocation), attitudinal (e.g., self-concept, attitude toward work), and interactional barriers (e.g., racial or gender discrimination, lack of qualifications). A number of studies have followed and demonstrated Swanson and Tokar's (1991a) notion of career barriers conceptually and empirically (Luzzo, 1993; McWhirter, Torres, & Rasheed, 1998; Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996; Swanson & Tokar, 1991b; Swanson & Woitke, 1997). Relatively recently, McWhirter (1997), and Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) developed career barriers research by thoroughly reflecting on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1994). A substantial number of empirical studies examined college students’ career barriers from SCCT perspectives since it provides an exhaustive conceptual framework for studying career barriers (Cunningham, Bruening, Sartore, Sagan, & Fink, 2005; Lindley, 2005; Raque-Bogdan, Klingaman, Martin, & Lucas, 2013; Wright, Perrone-McGovern, Boo, & White, 2014).

SCCT could be a salient lens to examine student-athletes’ career barriers as well since the theory is the most widely used theoretical framework in career barriers studies (Lent & Brown, 2013). SCCT was developed based upon social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) focusing on both internal and external factors influencing an individual’s career decision making process (Lent et al., 1994). Specifically, SCCT emphasizes both personal (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, & career goals) and environmental (e.g., gender, ethnicity, & social supports or barriers) factors influencing an individual’s career interests, plans, and actions. According to Lent et al. (1994), perceived career barriers have a substantial influence on an individual’s career development including career interests, plans, and actual behaviors. Several studies used SCCT as a conceptual framework and consistently found that female college students had higher perceived career barriers than male counterparts (Lindley, 2005; Luzzo, 1995; Luzzo &
McWhirter, 2001; Raque-Bogdan, Klingaman, Martin, & Lucas, 2013). However, no empirical study has yet applied SCCT to explore student-athletes' career barriers. While SCCT claims that career barriers play a significant role in shaping an individual’s cognitive factors for career development, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2000) added a concept of coping efficacy as another critical component of SCCT. When individuals confront difficult contextual situations, those with a strong sense of coping self-efficacy tend to overcome and achieve their career goals (Lent et al., 2000). Albert and Luzzo (1999) also explained that an individual who thinks career barriers are internal, controllable, and unstable is more likely to perceive career barriers as something to overcome and cope with using appropriate strategies. As a result, those people make an effort to cope with career barriers and believe that overcoming perceived career barriers gives them opportunities for career success and satisfaction. A number of researchers examined the relationship between perceived career barriers and coping efficacy for the general college student population and discovered a positive relationship (Lindley, 2005; Luzzo, 1995; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2014). However, Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) revealed that male and female college students had similar levels of coping efficacy despite gender differences in the levels of perceived career barriers, a finding inconsistent with the majority of aforementioned research (Lindley, 2005; Luzzo, 1995; Raque-Bogdan et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2014). The relationship between perceived career barriers and coping efficacy needs to be further examined. Furthermore, no studies examined the relationship between perceived career barriers and coping efficacy on student-athletes population yet, especially focusing on gender differences. Therefore, this study aims to examine gender differences in perceived career barriers and coping efficacy for student-athletes.

Method

Based upon identified research gap above, following hypotheses were developed.

H1: There would be a significant difference in perceived career barriers between college students and student-athletes.

H2: There would be a significant difference in coping efficacy between college students and student-athletes.

H3: There would be a significant relationship between perceived career barriers and coping efficacy for student-athletes.

H4: Male student-athletes would have a higher coping efficacy toward perceived career barriers than female student-athletes.

Data will be collected via an online survey with male and female college students and student-athletes in a Mid- eastern university. The Career Barriers Inventory-Revised (CBI-R; Swanson & Daniels, 1995), comprised of 13 subscales and 70 items, will be utilized in order to measure perceived career barriers. In addition, seven career-related barriers items from the Coping with Barriers Scale (CWB; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001) will be used to measure an individual's efficacy for coping with barriers to career goals.

Significance of Study

The results of this study will have two major implications. First, the results of the study will provide a theoretical contribution to the body of literature on Social Cognitive Career Theory and career barriers by expanding its application from general college students to student-athletes. Second, exploring the differences in perceived career barriers and coping efficacy between college students and student-athletes will help explain unique attributes of student-athletes’ career plans for athletes’ academic advisors, counselors, and coaches. In addition, identifying student-athletes’ gender differences in coping efficacy toward perceived career barriers will help both male and female student-athletes understand their career situations and further develop proper career plans.