

Barriers to Accounting as a Career Choice for African-American Students

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Abstract

While the AICPA and accounting firms have recognized that an ethnically diverse profession is better able to serve its clients, diversity gains have been meager over the last 35 years. Career choices made by African-American students may cause this trend. The current study uses social cognitive career theory as a framework to set forth propositions for why traditional recruiting of African-American students may not be successful. Research on factors that hinder African Americans' entrance into the profession will promote addressing those specific barriers in diversity efforts. This paper makes several suggestions for research to advance this goal.

Keywords: recruiting, diversity, career theory, self-efficacy, job outcomes, social values

Introduction

In the late 1960s the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants undertook national initiatives to increase minority representation in the accounting profession. These initiatives continue today and have included scholarships, doctoral fellowships, and faculty development seminars (Craig, 1987). In the last 35 years the chief purpose of diversity initiatives has changed from one of providing access to the profession in response to the civil rights movement to recognition that diversity makes good business sense (Hammond & Paige, 1999). The AICPA and accounting firms have recognized that an ethnically diverse profession will be better able to serve its clients as minorities grow to comprise a greater percentage of U.S. business owners and of the United States population.

Despite this extended effort toward diversification, gains have been meager. For example, Hammond and Paige (1999) reported that while Hispanic representation in accounting had increased, African-American representation in nonminority-owned CPA firms declined from 1.8% to 1.4% between 1976 and 1996. Evidence from Nelson, Venzryk, Quinn, & Allen (2002) also reflected a decline in the number of African-American students majoring in accounting between 1995 and 2000. Research by Hermanson, Hill, & Ivancevich (2002) suggested overrepresentation of Asian-American entrants but an underrepresentation of both African-American and Hispanic-American entrants. Finally, recent data from the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants [AICPA] (2005) showed that African Americans comprised only seven percent of new accounting graduates and only three percent new hires by CPA firms in academic year 2003-2004. The purpose of the current study is to set forth propositions for why recruiting of African-Americans into accounting has not succeeded in hopes that these propositions will be provocative enough to stimulate empirical research of their value.

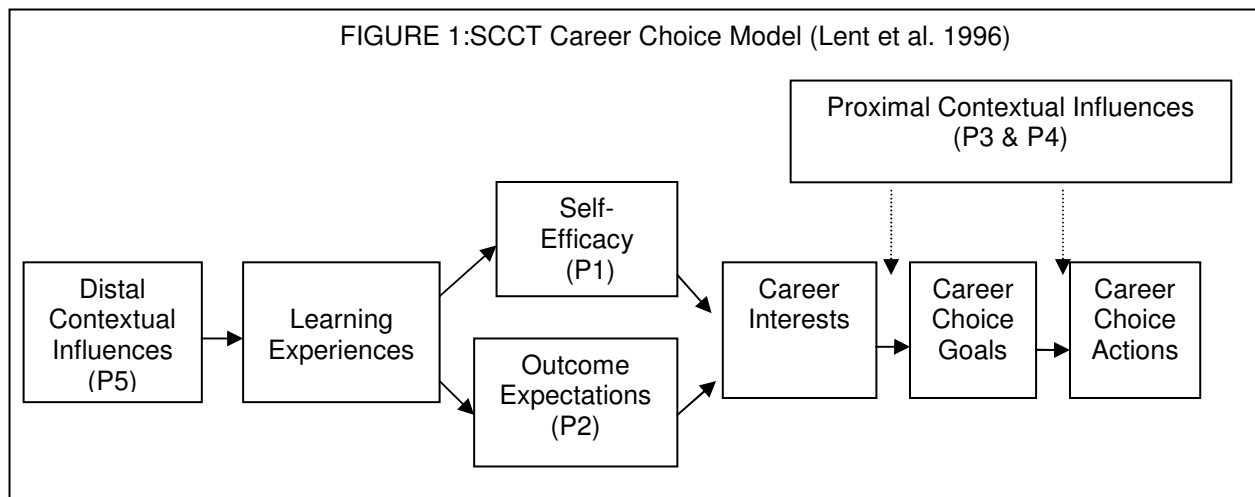
Theoretical Framework

The current study proposes that current diversification struggles are due in part to career choices by African American students. The study uses social cognitive career theory (SCCT) to set forth five propositions for why traditional recruiting of African-American students may not be successful. These propositions are rooted in factors that may differentially affect African-American and Caucasian students' career choices. The SCCT choice model synthesizes and builds conceptual linkages between diverse career theories. It has been tested and shown to be a good fit to the career choice process in a variety of contexts. Two studies have examined applicability of the model specifically to African Americans. Gainor and Lent (1998) supported the utility of the SCCT choice model in predicting math choice intentions of African American college students. Lent, Brown & Sheu (2005) applied the model in an engineering context at both historically Black and predominantly White universities and found it to be predictive for both races.

The SCCT choice model is depicted in Figure 1. Variables in the model that lead to research propositions have been noted as P1 through P5. The model contains two key personal variables that help determine career choice: self-efficacy and outcome expectations. These personal variables develop from collective learning experiences

throughout childhood and adolescence and up to the point of decision. Self-efficacy refers to a person's beliefs about their ability to attain career-related achievements. Outcome expectations are personal beliefs about the consequences of performing certain behaviors. SCCT posits that people will develop lasting interest in a career when they view the career as leading to valued outcomes and they view themselves as competent at the required skills. Interest in turn promotes development of goals to become involved in the particular activity. These goals then lead to the selection and practice of a career (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1996).

In addition to key variables, SCCT proposes that contextual influences may impact key variables and relationships within the model. These contextual influences can be divided into two broad categories. Distal influences are those more distant from the decision point which shape learning experiences, social cognitions and, ultimately, interests. These influences may include factors like early skill development and cultural socialization. Proximal influences are near the decision point and may moderate the relationship between career interests, goals and choice. These influences may include factors like job availability or financial support for a particular career option.



Propositions Based on Key Variables

Proposition 1: Low self-efficacy for the perceived skills necessary for accounting may cause African-American students to avoid accounting as a career.

Self efficacy is specific to particular performance domains and depends heavily on success and failure experiences within each domain. No research has examined the self-efficacy of Black students in the accounting domain. However, the broader construct of personal efficacy may have implications for self-efficacy in accounting. Personal efficacy is a general feeling of competence, personal control and confidence in managing one's life. This construct is similar to self-efficacy but related to life in general rather than a specific performance domain. As such, personal efficacy may impact self-efficacy in a number of different occupational domains.

Sociology literature has found that African Americans score lower than Caucasians on personal efficacy measures (Hughes & Demo, 1989). Similar to self-

efficacy, development of high personal efficacy depends greatly on successful performance experiences. Research suggests that institutional inequality may deprive African Americans of opportunities for successful experiences that would enable them to feel efficacious. Institutional inequality does not denote intentional racism but perpetuation of institutional systems that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, have discriminatory impact (Hughes & Demo, 1989). Low personal efficacy may cause African Americans to have low self-efficacy in a number of occupational domains, particularly domains that are perceived to be challenging or those with low African American representation.

While personal efficacy research suggests African Americans may have low self-efficacy for accounting, additional research creates some ambiguity about whether to expect low self-efficacy. Results from Ellis and Ryan (2003), which studied race and self-efficacy in the context of cognitive ability test performance, showed higher self-efficacy among African Americans than Caucasians. Gaffney, McEwen, & Welsh (1995) measured expectations of accounting career success among Black accounting majors and found them more optimistic than White accounting majors. This result appears to suggest that self-efficacy for African-Americans in accounting may be high. However, 70% of the African American participants in this study were from a predominantly African American university. Thus, lower levels of institutional inequality may have resulted in a sample with greater self-efficacy. Hence, high self-efficacy in this study may not indicate high self-efficacy for accounting in the general Black student population. Additional research is needed to more fully understand this construct as it applies to African-American students.

Proposition 2: Differences in the extent to which work values match perceived outcomes may lead African-American students to choose careers other than accounting.

Outcome expectations are personal beliefs about the consequences of pursuing a particular career. This construct can be viewed as having two components: a person's work values and his or her perceptions of the likely outcomes of a career choice. A person is likely to develop interests in a particular career if there is a match between work values and the perceived outcomes of choosing a particular career. Research suggested that African Americans and Caucasians may hold different work values, or they may prioritize work values differently (Brown, 2002). These differences may affect the likelihood of choosing accounting as a career. Alternatively, differences may exist in the perceived outcomes of a career in accounting each race holds which may also affect career choice. Both work values and perceptions accounting of are discussed further below.

Work values are beliefs about work that a person holds as standards that guide how he or she should function. These may include values such as the level of financial prosperity, altruism and independence that should accompany one's work. While work values are cognitive structures, they have behavioral and affective dimensions and serve the purpose of meeting felt needs of the person who holds them. Hence, work values play a major role in setting professional goals (Brown, 2002).

Roe and Ester (1999) proposed three levels at which values exist: individuals, groups and countries. One parameter that may define a group is race. Thus, values shared among a racial group can motivate individual action and guide collective action. The greatest determinant of such values is personal experiences which primarily shape values development in two ways. First, children receive thousands of values-laden messages in their day-to-day lives which come from people with whom they have personal contact like parents, siblings, and other adults and children at school, church, etc. Second, the mass media is an important source of values messages as children are exposed to television, radio and print media (Keller, Bouchard, Arvey, Segal, & Dawis, 1992; Brown, 1996). On both dimensions, children raised in African American homes may have personal experiences that are different from those raised in Caucasian homes. These differences may lead to differences in values that affect career interest development. Two studies have surveyed African American and Caucasian populations for differences in work values. Brenner and Tomkiewicz (1982) surveyed business students while Brenner, Blazini, & Greenhaus (1988) surveyed utility firm managers. Both studies found that African Americans scored higher on most tested job values.

Little research exists to give an indication of whether African American and Caucasian students' differ significantly in their perceptions of accounting, the second component of outcome expectations. Only one study, Lieberman and Marquette (1986), compared student perceptions by race. In their survey of 700 high school students, African Americans held more favorable perceptions of accounting than Caucasians.

Propositions Based on Contextual Variables

Proposition 3: Cultural differences in social values may lead African-American students to choose careers other than accounting.

Separate from research on work values, psychology and sociology researchers have developed a broader theory of value-orientations. Value-orientation theory contains five dimensions: human nature, person/nature relationships, traditional vs. future time focus, doing vs. being activity focus, and social relations (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). To the extent that members of a group evaluate the dimensions similarly, their evaluations form the basis of group norms that guide group members' lifestyles and decision-making. When the group is a race or culture, these guiding principles are termed "cultural values" (Kluckhohn, 1951).

The value dimension most directly related to the current study is social relations. This value dimension measures whether a group tends to hold group goals or individual goals as more important. Research suggests that Caucasian Americans tend to value individual goals more highly than group goals and, hence, tend to be individualistic in their decision-making (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Brown, 2002). This perspective is consistent with seeing choice of a career as one's own personal right such that parents and other relatives should have little or no influence (Young, 1994). In African-American culture, values tend to dictate a more collective decision making process consistent with subordinating one's individual goals to the goals of the

group (Carter & Helms, 1987). Ethnic groups with more individualistic social values are more likely to choose careers consistent with their personal work values. When more collective social values are held, choice of career will depend heavily on the values of parents and other important parties, altering the extent to which personal work values will lead to a career choice consistent with those work values (Brown, 2002; Simpson, 2001). Thus, successes in convincing a student that choosing accounting will result in desirable outcomes may be negated by the perceptions of parents and others who may be less aware of the benefits of the profession. More successful minority recruiting in areas like law and medicine suggest that African-American students may be steered toward careers with which their parents and other adult relatives are more familiar (Hardin, O'Bryan, & Quirin, 2000). Hence, while career interests may develop, social values may moderate the relationship between interests and career choice making this a proximal contextual influence.

Proposition 4: Perceptions of discrimination may lead African-American students to choose careers other than accounting.

The fact that racial discrimination persists and is a major quality of life issue for African-Americans is well-documented. Researchers have noted the existence of such discrimination in public places including the workplace and have studied its effects on life satisfaction, mental health, self-esteem and coping strategies (Feagin, 1991; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). Racial discrimination has been pervasive enough and permanent enough that most African-Americans have likely experienced it in some way. Brown (2002) suggested that this condition might lead minorities to avoid professions in which they perceive a likelihood that they will be discriminated against, making this a proximal contextual influence.

Consistent with this idea, Tracey and Hopkins (2001) found that ethnicity moderated the relationship between interest and abilities and occupational choice. Specifically, the extent to which interest and abilities lead to career choice appears to be lower for African-Americans than for other races included in the study. Research suggests reasons for this result might include career barriers such as perceived discrimination (Chartrand & Rose, 1996; McWhirter, 1997). A meta-analysis by Fouad and Byers-Winston (2005) drew similar conclusions finding that race/ethnicity did not play a role in expressed career interest but appeared strongly related to perceived occupational opportunities and perceived career barriers.

Weisenfeld and Robinson-Backmon (2001) studied discrimination in accounting and found that 48.5% of African American respondents agreed they had faced racial discrimination in their jobs. Twenty-six percent reported that their career advancement had been curtailed due to discrimination. These perceptions of discrimination may be passed on to students which may discourage them from choosing accounting as a career. Collective decision-making may exacerbate this problem.

Proposition 5: Lack of access to information about accounting may lead African-Americans to be less likely to choose accounting as a career.

Research suggests that African-Americans have less access to information about careers than Caucasians (Brown, 2002), which may create a distal contextual influence. The AICPA (2000) reported that students had many negative misconceptions about accounting as a career. These misconceptions reduce the likelihood that students will choose accounting as a major. To the extent that African-American students have less access to information about accounting, they will also have less opportunity to have their misperceptions corrected.

Moreover, research suggests that access to career information often comes through a personal contact. Nelson et al. (2002) analyzed characteristics of college students majoring in accounting. A vast majority (85%) of these accounting students personally know someone who is an accountant, suggesting that a student may be more likely to choose accounting if they know an accountant who can inform, advise and mentor them. For a Caucasian student, this would often be a parent, aunt, uncle or other close relative. However, due to the current underrepresentation of African-Americans in accounting it seems unlikely that the typical African-American student will have a close relative in accounting who can serve as such a mentor. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that research on mentoring suggests that when non-familial mentoring relationships naturally form, race differences cause the relationship to be much less likely to occur (Dreher & Cox, 1996). People naturally tend to form mentoring relationships with people they perceive as younger versions of themselves. Consequently, African-American students are less likely to form advising or mentoring relationships with someone in accounting which, in turn, decreases the likelihood that they will have access to information and choose accounting as a career. In this way, underrepresentation of African Americans in accounting may be a self-perpetuating cycle or a form of institutional inequality.

Conclusion

The career choice process of African American students has largely gone unaddressed in accounting research. Limited gains in diversifying the profession can likely be attributed in part to a failure to understand factors that lead these students to avoid accounting as a major. Further research is needed to understand what factors hinder African Americans' entrance into the profession so those barriers can be directly addressed by diversification efforts. This study has suggested the following propositions for why African Americans may not choose accounting as a career.

1. Low self-efficacy for the perceived skills necessary for accounting may cause African-American students to avoid accounting as a career.
2. Differences in the extent to which work values match perceived outcomes may lead African-American students to choose careers other than accounting.
3. Cultural differences in social values may lead African-American students to choose careers other than accounting.
4. Perceptions of discrimination may lead African-American students to choose careers other than accounting.
5. Lack of access to information about accounting may lead African-Americans to be less likely to choose accounting as a career.

Future research can use these propositions to develop an operational model to attract African American students by addressing each of these potential barriers. This model can be tested and revised through further research to form an effective basis for recruiting African American students into the accounting profession.

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