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# Career Decision-Making: Empowering Emirati Females for Future Success

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### Abstract

Career decision-making is one of the most challenging tasks that college students will face. Based on Social Cognitive Career Theory, this descriptive study employed the Career Development Self-Efficacy Scale Short Form (CDSE-SF) and a focus group to examine the perceptions Emirati female students hold about their ability to make decisions regarding their career choices. Undergraduate students (n=233) from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) participated in this study. The results indicated no significant difference in the students' career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE) whether they attended private or public high school, nor were their significant differences based on family involvement. Data also indicated that there were no significant differences in these students' CDSE versus other college students around the world. Through the utilization of a focus group, we found that friends and family are the biggest influence in the career decision-making process for many students. However we found that family members often serve as obstacles to this process for many students as they may have negative stereotypes regarding some majors. Themes from the focus group also revealed that friends and introductory courses helped to increase CDSE.

## Introduction

As societies grow and develop, so do attitudes regarding work and economic prosperity. These changes can be witnessed throughout communities in the rapidly growing United Arab Emirates (UAE). In a patriarchal society that has traditionally seen males and expatriates dominate the workforce, Emirati women are now making great strides to enter the workforce as they pursue careers and economic independence. Over the years, academics have spent significant efforts researching the dynamic and changing roles of women in Arab countries (Beitler, R. & Martinez, 2010, Crabtree, 2007; Oraimi, 2011; Hijab, 1991; Schvaneveldt, Kerpelman, & Schvaneveldt, 2005; Zuhur, 2003). In many countries, the roles of these women have undergone significant evolution. Many women have decided to step out of the traditional roles of mother, wife and caretaker and enter the workforce. Like their changing roles, research examining the career decision-making behavior process of this population is emerging as well (Abdalla, 1995; Al-Darmaki, 2012; Gallant & Pounder, 2008; Omair, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to continue the examination of the career decision-making behavior of female Emirati students. More specifically, this study sought to examine the career decision-making self-efficacy of these students. It is likely the results will provide some insight into the issues these students encounter when making such important decisions. This information could influence faculty, practitioners, and administrators when developing programs and/or policies regarding the career development needs of this population. The following hypotheses guided the researchers in this study:

H1. Emirati female students would have significantly lower confidence in their ability to make career decisions as many may not have proper guidance in the process.

H2. There are differences in private and public high school attendees' CDSE.

H3. There are differences in their perceptions of CDSE based on family involvement in the process.

### Changing Roles of Emirati Women

The role of the Emirati female has and continues to change over the years. In reference to Emirati women, Orami (2011) notes that "historically, women played multiple roles in traditional societies and helped to support the family. However after the discovery of oil and the region's entry into a new era of production, society's need for women's labor decreased" (p.80). Bound by a patriarchal society, possible negative influence from outside societies, and a weakened position in the economic arena, women were encouraged to follow traditional roles such as homemaker, wife, and mother (Crabtree, 2007; Schvaneveldt, Kerpelman, & Schvaneveldt, 2005). Along with these obstacles, women were often times regarded as financial liabilities to the household as they live at home until marriage. The opportunity to pursue higher education was also at a minimal for many of these women. Literature states that families placed little value on investing in the post-secondary education of women as the female would eventually leave the household and join another family (Harfoush-Strickland, 1996). As one can see from the literature, historically the idea of Emirati women entering the workforce may have been at best a fleeting one.

As times and societies have evolved and many realized the potential value that women add to a country's economy, women have begun to move outside of traditional roles. Today Emirati women can be found in many diverse roles. They are government leaders, military pilots, doctors and business women. An amazing feat for a population of women whose country is just forty-six years old. However, although the United Arab Emirates (UAE) currently boasts one of the wealthiest economies in the world, unemployment amongst the local Emirati community is still at record highs. According to an article printed in *The National* (a leading UAE newspaper), women compose 80% of this unemployed group (Swan, 2013). The UAE is also home to a host of international businesses and a constantly growing skilled expatriate workforce. Along with these challenges, the baccalaureate degree is often used as a screening tool for those wanting to gain entry into high-status, high-income careers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Such is the case in the UAE as well. As such, many Emirati women and men are encountering several challenges in the process of establishing careers as entering the labor market can be competitive. To address these challenges, many Emiratis are seeking baccalaureate degrees to in order to gain a competitive edge in their pursuit of high-status, high-income careers.

According to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, approximately 40,000 UAE nationals are enrolled in college (2013). Of the 40,000 nationals enrolled in university, approximately 77% are female. Unlike generations of women in the past that followed more "traditional" paths and spent much of their time caring for the household, many Emirati women today are electing to attend college along with their household duties. According to Sherif (1999), this increase in female college attendance is due to several reasons

including: females' personal desire to attend college to help obtain career goals and a realization by some in society that an educated woman can contribute to the rising costs of modern living and in essence make her a better prospect for marriage. Crabtree (2007) echoes this sentiment as she notes that, "Families view an education at this level as providing the final polish to a young girl's life, that marks her out as being successfully poised on the brink of adult life, commensurate with Islamic and cultural expectations of womanhood" (p.577).

Encouragement from the country's leadership regarding the education of its citizenry coupled with the country's need to reduce its dependency on foreign labor are also reasons for this increase in female college attendance (Crabtree, 2007; Gallant & Pounder, 2008).

#### Career Decision-Making Tasks

Today Emirati women can be found in many fields including both public and private sectors. Although this is a monumental achievement, the question remains "How are these women confidently able to make these career choices with such limited generational knowledge regarding non-traditional careers?" Researchers note that making a decision about one's career is one of the most daunting tasks that most college students will encounter on their journey to career success (Alsop, 2009; Gordon, 2007). This task is made even more daunting as "most college students have not been exposed to a range and variety of career options before choosing an academic major or a career direction" (Orndorff and Herr, 1996, p.633). In an environment where many of these students are first-generation college students, and may be unfamiliar with the nature of non-traditional work environments, this is sure to be a challenge for Emirati female students. Add to this the fact the women here live in a

patriarchal society where men are traditionally the decision-makers, this task may prove to be even more challenging for Emirati females.

The process of career decision-making is one that has been explored for several years. As early as the 1950's, researchers were exploring the factors that contribute to career indecision among college students. These factors include: (a) the opinions and attitudes of family and friends, (b) the inability to accept the role a particular occupation represents although it may be appealing, (c) sex-role stereotyping, (d) being a multitalented individual and unable to narrow down the alternatives, and (e) the inability to accept realistic limitations and obstacles (Tyler, 1953). When examining the Emirati female's ability to make confident career choices, it is apparent that her decision may be influenced by many of the factors listed above. As a society that relies heavily on the family for support, encouragement, and influence, the first factor that references the opinions and attitudes of family and friends is sure to appear. As such, one may confidently deduce that without the support of family, Emirati women will encounter some difficulty in the career decision-making process.

### Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a Theoretical Framework

While engaging in this study, it was important to find an appropriate framework from which to understand the experiences and perspectives of this population. As such, the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) model was chosen. Based on Bandura's social cognitive theory, SCCT examines



several cognitive-person variables, (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals), and on how these variables interact with other aspects of the person and his or her environment (e.g., gender, ethnicity, social supports, and barriers) to help shape the course of career development. (p.36)

The model suggests that career development is influenced by objective and perceived environmental factors. Lent et al. (2000) noted quality of educational experiences and financial support as examples of possible objective factors that have the potential to affect one's career development whether or not one ascertains their influence. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy affects patterns of thought and partly determines one's actions and decisions to engage in a particular task, extend the effort, and persevere. He defined self-efficacy beliefs as expectations concerning one's ability to successfully perform a given behavior. Although Bandura traditionally conceptualized self-efficacy as task specific, further research has been found to support the concept of generalized self-efficacy. Lindley (2005) defines this concept as "the tendency to feel capable of mastering a variety of diverse tasks and activities" (p. 273).

Unlike other models such as Holland's Vocational Personalities and Work Environments and Super's construct of Self-Concept, SCCT encompasses two components that address cultural dynamics. The first addresses early experiences that shape and influence career self-efficacy and outcomes expectations, while the second component relates to the continual effects of external contextual factors such as labor market status, racism, sexism, and perceived barriers (Byers, 2001). As this model distinguishes between personal and contextual factors, it also offers several theoretical and practical benefits that (a) help to clarify the processes

through which contextual barriers become internalized, (b) offer counseling and developmental strategies for coping with or compensating for environmentally imposed barriers, (c) identify differing intervention targets and roles for counselors (Lent et al., 2000). The students in the study were composed of students that attended both private and public schools in the UAE. It was important to examine the perceptions of these students as the results could provide insight into what is being done or needs to be done in order to help these students succeed in the career decision-making process. As this study sought to uncover the perceptions of a group of students that may be relatively new to the to the process of career development, utilizing a model that allows for the examination of perceived and actual barriers will allow for the development of effective strategies.

### **Methodology**

Based on Social Cognitive Career Theory, this descriptive study employed the Career Development Self-Efficacy Scale-Short Form (CDSE-SF) to examine the perceptions female Emirati students hold about their ability to make decisions regarding their career choices. The scale rates its users on five scales including: self-appraisal, occupational information, goal selection, planning, and problem solving. Along with using the CDSE-SF, we also recruited students for a focus group to gain more in-depth information into the reasons why these students held their current beliefs. In addition, a demographic survey to assess students' age, parental and high school involvement in career decision making were also added to the study.

## **Hypotheses**

H1. Emirati female students would have significantly lower confidence in their ability to make career decisions as many may not have proper guidance in the process.

H2. There are differences in private and public high school attendees' CDSE.

H3. There are differences in their perceptions of CDSE based on family involvement in the process.

## **Participants**

The participants were female students enrolled in an undergraduate career development course at a medium-size public university. The female students were first year Emiratis ages' 18- to 27 years old. A total of 233 female students completed portions of the survey. After removing the invalid responses because of incomplete surveys, 232 valid surveys remained in the study. 142 students attended Public school, while 81 students attended private school in the United Arab Emirates. Out of this number, 6 decided to participate in the focus group that followed the completion of the surveys.

## **Instruments**

### **Quantitative Instruments**

Two quantitative instruments were used to collect data for the study. First, a demographic survey developed by the researchers to obtain information about the age, educational, and familial characteristics of the participants. The second instrument, the Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy Scale–Short Form (CDSE-SF), was utilized to measure students'

perceptions regarding their career decision-making beliefs. The CDSE-SF developed by Betz & Taylor (1983) was a 25-item questionnaire that was developed to determine students' perceived self-efficacy related to career decision-making beliefs. The five tasks explored in the CDSE-SF were: (a) accurate self-appraisal, (b) gathering occupational information, (c) goal selection, (d) making plans for the future, and (e) problem solving (Lip, 2014). According to Betz & Taylor (2012), the Self-Appraisal scale measures the ability to accurately appraise one's own abilities, interests, and values as they related to educational and career decisions. Occupational Information gauges the ability to locate sources of information about college majors and occupations. Goal selection estimates the ability to match one's own characteristics to the demands and rewards of careers. Planning is defined as knowing how to implement an educational or career choice, including enrolling in educational programs, job search, resume writing and job interviewing. The final task of problem solving is defined as being able to figure out alternative plans or coping strategies when plans do not go as intended. According to Betz, Klein, & Taylor (1996), the internal consistency reliability coefficient for the 5-item scale is .94 for the 25 item total score. The content validity of the CDSE-SF has been evidenced by several studies (Miller, Sendrowitz, Brown, Thomas, & Mcdaniel; Peterson & delMas 1996; Walsh & Betz, 2001). The CDSE-SF was also analysed by an English as a Second Language expert to identify possible words and/or phrases that could be confusing to the students. Once identified, these words were defined and given to each student on a separate hand-out in both Arabic and English.

## Qualitative Instrument

Along with collecting and analyzing quantitative data that may be generalized to the larger population, the study also sought to better understand the experiences of this population. As such, the researchers undertook a qualitative approach as well. Stake (2001) explains that it is “an expectation that phenomena are intricately related to many coincidental actions and that understanding them requires a wide sweep of contexts: temporal and spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, personal” (p.31). The researchers found it necessary to examine many of the previously mentioned concepts in order to gain a holistic perspective regarding the experiences of these women.

To assist with the collection of this information, the researchers chose to conduct a focus group. At the beginning of the focus group, a signed consent form was collected from the participants. A semi-structured interview method was utilized to collect qualitative data. The researchers developed a five question interview protocol to guide the interview with the participants. The focus group was scheduled from 45 minutes to 1 hour and was video recorded per the students’ consent. Transcriptions were also created based on the video recordings.

## Analysis

The researchers sought to understand the perceptions of the career decision-making abilities of Emirati female students. As such, Creswell (2009) argues that independent t test sampling is a productive way to measure the means between two quantitative variables. Because the researchers examined the relationship between career decision-making, age, parental and high school involvement in self-efficacy, no attempts to manipulate the variables

were utilized. In this study there was no attempt to assert causation. The statistical significance of the findings were made using a criterion alpha level of .05. Because the researchers sought a deeper understanding of this relationship, qualitative research is explored. The surveyed participants were contacted to participate in a focus to group to better understand responses to the CDSE-SF. An Interpretive analysis approach provided the researchers with a way of exploring the data collected via the focus group. Smith & Osborn (2008) further explains this type of analysis as they noted that the focal point of this approach is to try to understand the content and complexity, focusing on the meanings of the participants' experiences through a deep examination of interview data rather than measuring their frequency.

## Results

### Demographics

The majority of the sample was comprised of Emirati 90.6 % of the respondents. Non-Emirati were 3.9% of participants. Ages were between the ages 18-19 (73%) and 20-38 (25.3%). Table 1 summarized the sample's demographic variables. Students (60.9%) who attended public school made of the majority of the sample, and students who attended private schools made up 34.8% of the participants.

Table 1

*Demographics: Nationality, Age, and high school type*

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Nationality	Emirati	211	90.6
	Non-Emirati	9	3.9
Age	18-19	168	73.0

	20-21	57	25.3
	22-38	5	1.7
High School Type	Public	142	60.9
	Private	81	34.8

### **Career Decision Making Subscale**

In this subscale the researchers sought to measure the participants' perceptions of their ability to make career decisions. The scale was measured as 1= no confidence at all, 2= very little confidence, 3= moderate confidence, 4= much confidence, and 5= complete confidence. Two hundred and thirty- two students responded to the Career Development Self Efficacy subscale. Respondents reported near much confidence on their ability to accurately appraise their own abilities ( $M = 3.91$ ) subscale. Participants had moderate confidence in their ability to find occupational information ( $M = 3.82$ ). The respondents declared that they had moderate confidence in matching their characteristics with career choices ( $M = 3.78$ ). Students reported moderate confidence in knowing how to implement educational and career choices ( $M = 3.85$ ). Being able to make alternative plans when plans do not go as envisioned was the lowest of the mean scores, but students still reported moderate confidence on this task ( $M=3.59$ ). Overall, the Emirati students were moderately confident in their career decision-making abilities.

### **Hypothesis # 1**

*Emirati female students would have significantly lower confidence in their ability to make career decisions than their peers around the world.*

The average overall CDSE-SF mean score for participants around the world is 3.80 (Betz& Taylor, 2012). There was no statistical significant difference between X university students overall self-efficacy means score (3.79) and other CDSE-SF participants mean scores. Table 2 depicts the descriptive statistics of the 5 CDSE-SF subscales and overall score. Hypothesis 1 was no proven to be correct because there was not a significantly lower level of confidence.

*Table 2*

*Descriptive Statistics: Career Decision Making Subscale*

		Self Appraisal	Occupation Info	Goal Selection	Planning	Problem Solving	Overall Score
N	Valid	232	232	232	232	232	232
	Missing	1	1	1	1	1	1
Mean		3.9069	3.8259	3.7866	3.8509	3.5901	3.7927

**Hypothesis #2**

*There are differences in private and public high school attendees’ perceptions of their abilities to make career decisions.*

Independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare overall career decision-making ability mean score of public high school graduates and private high school graduates. There was a no significant difference in the scores for public (M=3.8042, SD=0.56) and private (M=3.8049, SD=0.58) conditions; t (221) -.009, p = .993. These results suggest that the type of high school did not change students’ perceptions of career decision-making. Hypothesis 2 was not



supported as there were no confidence differences found in students based on high school type.

Table 3

*Independent t Test: CDSE-SF Overall Score and High School Type*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
CDSETotal	Equal variances assumed	-.009	221	.993
	Equal variances not assumed	-.009	162.368	.993

**Hypothesis #3**

*There are differences in perceptions of career decision-making based on family involvement in decision-making process.*

Independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare means score of students' whose family were involved in their career decision making process. There was a no significant difference in the scores for family involvement (M=3.7938, SD=. 59097) and non-family involvement (M=3.8660, SD=. 59097) conditions;  $t(189) = -.759, p = .449$ . These results suggest that the involvement of family in the career decision-making process type of high school did not impact the CDSE overall score of students. Hypothesis 3 was not supported because no significant difference found based on family involvement.

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics: CDSE-SF Overall Score and Family Involvement*

	Family Involvement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CDSE Overall Score	Yes	144	3.7938	.55850	.04654
	No	47	3.8660	.59097	.08620

Table 5

*Independent t Test: CDSE-SF total and Family Involvement*

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
CDSE Total	Equal variances assumed	-.759	189	.449
	Equal variances not assumed	-.737	74.685	.463

Respondents attending public schools did have a higher mean score of self-efficacy than those attending private school. However, the score was not statistically significant. Those who reported family involvement in their career decision-making process had similar overall self-efficacy scores as those whose family were not involved in their decision-making process. Respondents reported a statistical significantly lower score on their perceptions of their ability to gather information on careers than their western peers.

## Qualitative Results

Question 1 of the focus group sought to determine the biggest influence on the participants' abilities to make decisions regarding their career choice. Although the participants gave several responses including attending introductory courses, discussions with family and friends appeared to be the recurring theme. When speaking of her biggest influence, one of the participants revealed, "Being with friends, knowing them and being supportive. They encouraged me with my decision which made me feel stronger and more determined". Another participant, echoed this revelation as she stated that, "Discussions with family and friends made me look around at all the different areas and majors I want".

Question 2 of the focus group inquired about possible obstacles to their ability to make decisions regarding their career choice. To our surprise, one of the biggest influences of the participants' was also one of their biggest obstacles. A majority of the participants agreed that family members were often obstacles to their career decision as they misunderstood or did not agree with career choices. One participant noted, "When I first told my family that I wanted International Affairs, they thought I'd be working in mixed environments or at the embassy with boys". Another participant agreed with this comment noting, "I would say family as well because they misunderstand and they have stereotypes of certain majors and they get very sensitive because I'm a girl".

Question 3 of the focus group inquired about the sources that aided in increasing the confidence of these students regarding their career choice. Responses were split on this question. However it appeared that friends and taking introductory courses were the recurring

themes. When responding to this question, one student passionately stated “My friends really helped me because they know me on a personal level and on an educational level. They’re not like my family that just know me personally. They know what I like, what I don’t like. The way we discuss the subject after finishing class really really helped me”. A second student was just as passionate when responding to the question but it was the introductory course that helped her. As a current International Affairs student, she declared, “Taking global classes the first year and when I started studying more about the major, I was interested in the topics”.

Question 4 of the focus group asked participants to describe their feelings regarding the process of deciding on a career. The overwhelming majority of participants expressed difficulty with the process. One student noted, “It was kinda hard because International Affairs wasn’t in my mind at all. I initially chose IT and my second option was Art. But it all comes to what I took in the first year”. Another student echoed this sentiment as she agreed that the process was difficult “Because sometimes family expectations are...They say you have to have a job but when you present something new to them, they’re like is it gonna work? Will you have a career? It’s confusing. Even in high school I wanted to be something different”. Another student commented that, “Even knowing yourself, what I like the most, knowing your abilities; it’s all difficult to figure out”.

Question 5 of the focus group asked participants where they saw themselves in the future. Again, researchers were surprised at the responses. Overwhelmingly participants noted their desire to continue their education. When asked about her plans, one participant responded, “Getting more degrees. I think our mindset is so different from our parents because in five

years they wanted to have a job to survive. We just want to explore more”. Another expressed that they wanted more than just a job. She stated, “We want to create something new”.

The quantitative results indicated that female UAE students have similar self-efficacy scores regarding career decision making as their western counterparts. Respondents attending public schools did have a higher mean score of self-efficacy than those attending private school. However, the score was not statistically significant. Those who reported family involvement in their career decision making process had similar overall self-efficacy score as those whose family were not involved in their decision-making process. Upon analyzing the qualitative results, we found that friends and family are the biggest influence in the career decision-making process for many students. In contrast, we found that family members often serve as obstacles to this process for many students, as they may hold stereotypes regarding some majors and/or careers. Themes from the focus group also revealed that engagement with friends, family and introductory courses helped to increase confidence. Overall students in the focus group felt as if the process of deciding on a career was difficult. However, there was also a desire to be innovative and to do something different than their parents before them.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

The results of the study have important implications for both students and practitioners. Based on the CDSE scale results, it would appear that many Emirati female college students have garnered a sense of career decision-making self-efficacy that would allow them to make decisions in regards to their career. Upon analysis through facilitation of a focus group, we found that students would benefit from more a purposeful and multi-faceted approach to career decision-making. Career practitioners should involve family and friends when engaging

students in the career exploration process. As family members have much influence on the decisions of these, career practitioners should also work to educate and demystify stereotypes that families may hold. It is also imperative that career practitioners develop current and research driven curriculum in order to further engage students in this process.

It is imperative that universities work to develop policies and/or initiatives to enhance the career guidance that is provided to the student body. This guidance can come in the form of academic assistance (course work in career preparation and/or career-related workshops). Universities should also consider engaging students in practical experiences early on. These experiences not only provide first-hand knowledge and increase students' confidence, but could also lessen the burden of deciding amongst the various majors. Pearson and Dellman-Jenkins (1997) noted that the ability to select a realistic major appropriate to career aspirations is one of the most important contributors to student satisfaction, success, and retention. These efforts could be particularly beneficial as universities are researching ways to retain students and are also considering curriculum reviews to enhance students' experiences.

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