
The Evaluation of Career Indecision in Career Development

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Abstract

The current state of research on career indecision is examined through a review of two bodies of literature: (a) variables that have been consistently investigated as predictors of career indecision, and (b) tools incorporated to measure career indecision. The literature provides no strong basis for identifying factors that shape an individual's degree of "undecidedness" nor is it sufficient to warrant the continued practice of accepting sub-groups of "decidedness" as conceptually meaningful. Given the current state of research, the ability to evaluate career development by focusing on career indecision is limited. Eight issues are raised that would impact on evaluation efforts in this area. Practitioners are encouraged to test the validity of their own mental models that underlie their use of career indecision in intervention strategies.

Résumé

L'état actuel de la recherche sur l'indécision de la carrière est examiné à partir de deux cadres de littérature: a) les variables qui ont été régulièrement examinées comme étant les éléments clés de l'indécision carriéologique et b) les outils utilisés pour mesurer l'indécision carriéologique. La littérature ne procure aucune base solide pour identifier les facteurs qui façonnent chez l'individu le degré d'"indécision" et d'ailleurs est-il suffisant de justifier la pratique courante qui est celle d'accepter des sous-groupes de "détermination" comme étant conceptuellement significatif. Etant donné la situation actuelle de la recherche, l'habileté à évaluer le développement de carrière est limitée si elle centre ses efforts sur l'indécision carriéologique. Huit points sont soulevés qui auront un impact sur les efforts d'évaluation dans ce domaine. Les praticiens sont encouragés à tester la validité de leurs propres modèles mentaux qui sous-tendent leur utilisation de l'indécision carriéologique dans leurs stratégies d'intervention.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the field of vocational psychology has been focusing greater attention on the issue of career indecision. It is generally acknowledged that individuals of various ages appear to reflect some uncertainty in their decision-making and choice of career goals. For example, undecided students seeking help with career decisions have comprised a large portion of the clientele of most university counselling centres (Utz, 1983). However, there is a growing tendency to treat this indecision ". . . almost as a mental disorder by professional counsellors" (Krumboltz, 1992, p. 240). Implicit in this focus on "indecision" is the assumption that such individuals would benefit from appropriate and effective counselling strategies.

Much of the research to date has been hampered by limitations, the most serious of which has surrounded the concept of "career indecision" itself which has been widely used to refer to any problem state in career development. Yet, most authors have pointed to confusing and even

contradictory views on the nature of career indecision as a theoretical construct (Fuqua, Seaworth & Newman, 1987; Holland & Holland, 1977; Salomone, 1982). In a recent comprehensive review of literature on career decision making, Slaney (1988) characterized the research findings on career indecision as contradictory and inconsistent. Tinsley (1992) characterized the research in the field as "relatively atheoretical" (p. 209). Contributing to the confusion, most empirical studies have equated the broad concept of "career indecision" with similar self-reports. This reduction of the construct to a "decided-undecided" dichotomous grouping has persisted despite many arguments for much more complex conceptualizations of career indecision (Holland & Holland, 1977; Salomone, 1982; Vondracek, Hostetler, Schulenberg & Shimizu, 1990).

Inadequate, overly simplistic definitions of the construct have impacted on intervention strategies as well. The counselling of undecided students has often been limited to interest testing, self-exploration strategies, and exposure to career resource materials, "which clearly reflects an underlying assumption that career decision-making is a routine developmental task without serious secondary implications" (Newman, Fuqua & Seaworth, 1989, p. 221). Neither the dichotomous definition of career indecision, nor an exclusive developmental orientation in its treatment can be justified at this time, given the fragmented nature of research, in general, and the growing body of evidence which underscores the complex and multidimensional nature of career indecision.

Two bodies of literature will be reviewed as a means of describing the current state of research on career indecision. First, research on variables that have been consistently investigated as predictors of career indecision will be examined. This is followed by a brief examination of tools that are implemented to measure career indecision. The final section presents a number of issues emerging from the career indecision literature that could impact on the evaluation of career development.

Factors Related to Career Indecision

The complexity of career indecision has been underscored through empirical studies of factors that relate to career indecision (Fuqua, Blum & Hartman, 1988). This research has focused most strongly on three factors which purportedly differentiate "career decided" from "career undecided" students: ability level, anxiety, and personality characteristics.

Is ability related to career indecision? The empirical evidence on ability is equivocal. In a pair of early longitudinal studies dealing with undecided graduating seniors (Elton & Rose, 1971) and undecided freshmen (Rose & Elton, 1971) evidence was found both for and against the relationship of ability and career indecision. Although the authors believed that

ability was related to career indecision, they acknowledged that “undecided” was too broad a category.

Taylor (1982) found that college students who had not decided on a career were more likely to have lower ACT scores than students who were decided. Further support for the role of ability was provided by Lunneborg who found low achievement among college seniors (1975) and college graduates (1976) to be predictive of career indecision. However, ability was also found to be highly correlated with both college satisfaction and career indecision, thereby bringing the role of ability into question.

Weak relations between ability and career indecision were reported by Rogers and Westbrook (1983) and Taylor and Betz (1983). For example, Rogers and Westbrook (1983) examined the relationship between SAT scores and performance on Osipow's Career Decision Scale. No evidence was found for a relationship between career indecision and ability, with correlations reported in the range of .06 and .07.

The available evidence on ability and career indecision is contradictory. However, a weak relationship has emerged in studies that have introduced more moderating or control variables and continuous measures of career indecision. At this point, ability level should be viewed as a weak predictor of career indecision.

Is anxiety related to career indecision? Anxiety has received the most attention over the years, and the findings generally confirm its relationship to career indecision. However, a limited amount of research has failed to support the relationship between anxiety and career indecision. For example, McGowan (1977) found no relationship between the two constructs using the Manifest Anxiety Scale and the Self-Directed Search. In an attempt to develop a model of indecision, Jones and Chenery (1980) found no significant relationship between trait anxiety, as measured by the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, and career indecision. In a more recent study, Jones (1989) reported that trait anxiety was linked with how students felt about their career decision status rather than their actual level of decidedness. The findings of McGowan (1977), Jones and Chenery (1980) and Jones (1989) conflict with the bulk of the evidence supporting the relationship between anxiety and career indecision.

Early studies (cf. Hawkins, Bradley & White, 1977; Kimes & Roth, 1974) reported relationships between anxiety and students' levels of decidedness. In a recent study that examined the relations among 13 career subscales, Fuqua and Newman (1989) found a positive relationship between anxiety and a Factor that represented more indecisive characteristics of the subjects. In examining the role that various types of coping play in anxiety and career decision-making, O'Hare and Tamburri (1986) demonstrated that students who were least likely to make a career decision were highly trait and state anxious, as well as unable to

establish their priorities and goals. Newman et al. (1989) noted the key role anxiety plays in identifying the chronically undecided student. For such students, career indecision is symptomatic of an underlying psychological problem and by recognizing the anxiety, counsellors have an opportunity to differentiate among the undecided students.

What personality variables correlate with career indecision? The evidence points to a relationship between career indecision and a variety of personality characteristics, with few studies having systematically replicated the findings. An early portrait of the undecided student was presented by Hawkins et al. (1977) as alienated, tense, dependent, and complacent. Students who have not decided on a career appear more likely to have an external locus of control and a greater fear of success than decided students (Taylor, 1982). Barrett and Tinsley (1977) associated high self-esteem with well crystallized self-concepts and the self-perception of being a competent decision maker. In an application of self-efficacy theory to career indecision, Taylor and Betz (1983) found that increasing levels of career indecision were strongly related to decreasing levels of self-efficacy. Investigators have also noted the following variables as antecedents to career indecision: lack of self-confidence in decision making skills; lack of a clear sense of identity; perceived external barriers to preferred choices; and lack of the immediacy of a perceived need to make a decision (Holland & Holland, 1977; Slaney, 1980, 1988).

The atheoretical and correlational nature of the research on career indecision is compelling evidence of the need for more complex conceptualizations of the problem (Fuqua, Newman & Seaworth, 1988; Tinsley, 1992). Only then does a more thorough understanding of the undecided student become possible. It is not simply the question of whether or not an individual has decided on a career that is important, but rather the degree of one's indecision and the major forces that are operating which have led to such a degree of uncertainty.

Tools for Measurement of Career Indecision

The volume of research on career indecision has focused primarily on measurement issues. Within this focus, researchers have tended to accept the tendency to dichotomize and treat the issue as unidimensional. The virtual absence of theoretical work in this area has limited both debate and inquiry into the potential multidimensional as well as the possible developmental nature of career indecision. Given this view of the field, measurement in general, and as a necessary step for intervention, should be treated very cautiously. In this section, various approaches to the measurement of career indecision are identified and described briefly.

Although numerous assessment tools have been developed to measure career indecision, few have evolved in a systematic way. In reviewing the various measurement tools currently in use, the Career Decision Scale

(CDS) developed by Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico and Koschier (1980) is most advanced. The CDS was originally designed to explore the different dimensions of career indecision from a unidimensional perspective. The CDS consists of 19 items concerning issues related to educational/vocational indecision and was developed from client interviews conducted with a sample of college students. In addition to yielding a total score of indecision, efforts have been made to establish the psychometric properties of the CDS (Osipow et al., 1980; Osipow & Schweikert, 1981; Rogers & Westbrook, 1983; Slaney, 1980).

Osipow's recommendation to use the total CDS score had tended to discourage attempts at developing subscales or factors that differentiate among indecision. However, efforts are being made to identify the possible dimensions of indecision (cf. Fitzgerald & Rounds, 1989; Martin, Sabourin, Laplante & Coallier, 1991; Shimizu, Vondracek, Schulenberg & Hostetler, 1988; Vondracek et al., 1990). The work by Martin et al. (1991) raises serious questions about the four factor multidimensional model identified by Shimizu et al. (1988) and Vondracek et al. (1990), and in particular, its applicability to career indecision in college students. The dimensionality issue has yet to be resolved and consideration should be given to Osipow's original caution.

Holland and Holland (1977) developed a 13-item instrument aimed at identifying possible explanations of career indecision. Their Vocational Decision Making Difficulty Scale was designed to identify types of indecision in that its score indicates the degree of indecision a person is experiencing. According to the authors, the primary factors that appear to differentiate decided from undecided students are their differences in sense of identity and vocational maturity, although in most other respects it was found that decided and undecided students do not differ significantly.

Development and use of the following measurement tools has been less extensive than the two previously mentioned. Slaney (1980, 1983) demonstrated the utility of what he referred to as the Occupational Alternatives Question. It consists of two parts: "list all the occupations you are considering right now," and, "which occupation is your first choice?" Slaney (1980) has reported that, in spite of its simplicity, the Occupational Alternatives Questions has yielded meaningful and consistent results and could therefore be of value to counsellors to more efficiently use limited time with students.

In their approach to career indecision as a continuous variable, Jones and Chenery (1980) constructed the Vocational Decision Scale to assess decidedness, comfort with decidedness level, and reasons for being undecided. More recently, Jones (1989) revised the Vocational Decision Scale to produce the Career Decision Profile (CDP). The CDP is an effort to operationalize a three-dimensional model of career decision status

which included decidedness about a career choice, comfort with career choice status and reasons for being decided or undecided.

The measurement tools mentioned above have enabled researchers to address career indecision in terms of stages and sub-types. The CDS appears to have received the greatest scrutiny as a career indecision assessment tool, particularly the debate regarding dimensionality. The other assessment tools reported vary substantially in terms of how much they have been used and their known properties (i.e. reliability and validity). More cross validation is needed with these tools before one can place much confidence in the results obtained from them.

Issues in Evaluating Career Development

The review of literature on career indecision has revealed a number of issues that can impact on the ability to evaluate career development. These issues should be given consideration by both counselling researchers and practitioners who are confronted with the issue of variability or uncertainty in career choice.

1. The atheoretical nature of career indecision makes prediction as well as the use of clinical intuition very difficult. Is career awareness a psychological construct? The best research evidence clearly supports the view that career choice is complex and multifaceted. That same research does not yield a theoretical framework to which the researchers in the field are subscribing and which could provide a basis for systematic investigations that are hypothesis-based.
2. If we accept that indecision in career choice is multifaceted, then evaluation approaches must acknowledge the issue of differentiating between persons who are undecided about their careers and those who are generally indecisive about many decision areas of their life.
3. While there is some consensus on the idea that career decision making is developmental in nature, the literature on career indecision does not support a simple transfer of this reasoning. Differences of opinion exist as to whether career indecision follows some type of developmental progression. Yet such a position would impact on approaches to measurement because the developmental processes would have to be articulated more precisely. Perhaps more importantly, it would call for a shift in thinking such that "deciding" reflects a progression that was a normal part of development. Most of the research does not reflect a theory of development that can advance our explanation of indecision. Is indecision a quality of the individual or of the process?
4. Much of the research has approached career indecision as a measurement issue. The researchers appear to work on the assumption

that career indecision is a meaningful concept in its own right and that variability in scale scores is sufficient grounds for making inferences, predictions and interventions. The "real-life" meaning of the scales appears to be not well understood.

5. Some evidence has accumulated to warrant evaluation of individuals at multiple times. At the minimum, the use of scales in pre-post fashion to shed light on interventions should be addressed.
6. A majority of the research on career indecision, and hence measurement development, has occurred with either high school or college-aged subjects. The generalizability of the instruments should therefore be considered. This is particularly relevant if career indecision is located within a developmental framework that recognizes the impact of changing life experiences (i.e. delaying, job loss, retraining) on cognitions and hence on decision-making. The life circumstances and events of high school and college students are markedly different and their interpretations of wordings in the available scales could vary substantially.
7. The radical transformation of the labour market has resulted in uncertainty being the rule rather than the exception. If, in fact, young people perceive that they will experience several major shifts in career, could career indecision be viewed as reflecting this uncertainty? Career indecision would then become an indicator of a person's reading of the instability of career structures in the labour market.
8. Career decision-making is being subjected to considerable social pressure that might generate heightened or artificial responses. Our social system places significant weight on young people "deciding" on what they will do and it reacts with concern and even more strenuously at signs of wavering in such decisions. Is there some portion of career indecision that is "manufactured" by the system?

CONCLUSION

The current review reinforces an emerging position that career indecision is of limited use in guiding career intervention strategies. Despite the continuing practice of identifying "decidedness" sub-groups or clusters (c.f. Rojewski, 1994), the available literature provides no strong basis for identifying factors that shape an individual's degree of career uncertainty. For example, in a recent study of factors affecting occupational aspirations of Canadian female adolescents, Davey and Stoppard (1993, p. 248) found that "... most of the significant factors were not predicted by theories. ..." Without such understanding, the specificity of programs and hence our ability to evaluate them, is restricted.

The inadequacy of both the theoretical basis of career indecision and the available measurement tools places the evaluability of interventions programs in grave doubt. Any intervention program description (ideally in the form of a Logic Model) on which an evaluation would be based would be ambiguous or speculative. Therefore, counsellors who chose to use career indecision as an entry point to intervention should re-examine the conceptual model underlying their position, and in particular the validity of the assumptions that inevitably form the base of such mental models that guide subsequent behaviour (Senge, 1990).

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