From Undecided To Decided: Validating The Career Decision Making Process

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From Undecided To Decided: Validating The Career Decision Making Process

“What do I need to do to choose a career?” This question echoes frequently in the ears of all those who work with students as career advisors and counselors. Many of these professionals have developed elaborate processes based on research and experience for assisting students to move towards increased decisiveness. As a result, there is a large body of literature, both academic and professional, that discusses and describes the process of career decision making and the variables that contribute to decidedness. The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent the various behaviors, characteristics, and the development of specific types of career related knowledge prescribed within this career selection literature actually correlate with students’ perceived levels of decidedness.

The Career Decision Making Process

According to Schultheis (2003), “Career counseling has been conceptualized as a process wherein individuals are guided through the collection and integration of varied information about themselves and the world of work, followed by a rational process of decision making.” (p. 302) The steps identified in this description, vocational self evaluation, acquisition of career market knowledge, and rational decision making are widely recognized as the major components of the career decision making process (Bolles, 2001; Ellis, Lamkowitz, Stupka, & Toft, 1993; Ettinger, 1996; Figler & Bolles, 1999; Frances, 2000; Hall, 2003; Zunker, 1998). However, a precursory step is not included in this description. That step involves an understanding of the career decision making process.

Knowledge of the process

Vernon Zuncker (1998) described four levels of career seekers. The first level includes those individuals who are, “undecided about a career and confused about the process of career counseling” (p. 253). These students tend to struggle not only because they are not sure of what they want to do, but also because they do not know how to engage in the process of career decision making. Hence, Zuncker labeled this level of indecision “anxiety” (p. 253).

Vocational Self-Knowledge and Characteristics

Once students have gained an awareness of the process whereby vocational decisions are made, the next step is to increase vocational self-awareness. Malach-Pines and Yafe-Yanai (2001) indicated that this step involves the identification of, “aptitudes [and] interests” (p. 171). This assertion is supported by many career counselors. (Bolles, 2001; Carter & Troyka, 2000; Champan, 1976; Ellis, et. al., 1993; Figler & Bolles, 1999; Frances, 2000; Lent, et. al., 2002; Miller, 1999; Zunker, 1998) However, these are only a couple aspects of self-knowledge and personal characteristics that must be addressed. Researchers have also documented the need to identify and understand the influence of personal values (Frances; Ellis; Lent, et. al.; Miller), lifestyle choices (Ellis), desired income (Ellis), learning style (Carter & Troyka) self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Hall, 2003; Spitzer, 2000; Stauser & Ketz, 2002),
In order to gain these kinds of knowledge, facilitate the emergence of vocational self-awareness, and assess the characteristics of students, advisors often utilize both exploratory counseling methodologies and career assessments. With the aid of these tools, they attempt to assist individual in their attempts to increase their level of decidedness.

**Career Market Knowledge**

The next step in the career decision making process involves the acquisition of knowledge about the career market. This involves locating, evaluating, and interpreting career related information. The kind of information that should be examined includes: information relevant to a specific job, a career field or industry, and explicit organizations. (Bolles, 2001; Figler & Bolles, 1999)

The information necessary to understand a specific job includes occupational outlook, salary, educational requirements, skills required, tasks performed, opportunity, and other similar factors. (Frances, 2000) This information can be acquired by searching career texts, relevant websites, career databases, and through personal research and experience, both professional and volunteer. (Frances; Lent, et. al. 2002) Internships should not be overlooked as a means of determining if a career path is likely to prove rewarding.

The second kind of information relevant to career market knowledge relates to the field or industry in which an individual works. While a person may perform the same tasks as a marketing manager in a business field as in an educational and non-profit setting, there are differences in values, types of people with whom one works, cultures, the kind of knowledge required and used, job stability, etc. This level of awareness usually requires more in-depth research and experience.

The third type of career market information that career explorers should seek to obtain is organization specific. Like industry specific information, organizational knowledge includes values, culture, types of people with whom one works, knowledge used, etc. In addition, however, employees need to consider actual salary, benefits, organizational stability, opportunities for advancement and training, etc. (Frances, 2000; Phillips & Phillips, 1998). This type of information can usually only be obtained through hands-on interaction with the environment, informational interviews, and company resources.

To this point, we have discussed the career decision making process as occurring in stages. This linear description has been used solely to facilitate the explanation of the process in a written format. The reality, however, is that the interaction between self and career knowledge is completely nonlinear. As a person gains knowledge of the career market, he or she instantaneously evaluates it for meaning. The process of meaning making involves determining whether or not one likes what has been learned. If an interest is identified, then the individual will likely seek and evaluate more knowledge in the area. Hence, the relationship between the acquisition of self-knowledge and career market knowledge is
actually nonlinear in nature.

This process of learning about the world of work and redefining oneself is ongoing and life long. So long as we interact with our environment, we learn from it. That is why career decision-making is an “ongoing process that continues throughout a person’s life” (Malach-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001, p. 171).

**Career Decision Making**

At times, the knowledge that one has acquired about oneself and about the labor market converges in such a way as to lead a person to make a career decision. At that moment the individual is “decided.” Bringing about that moment is the objective of career decision making, even though it may only be temporary. As a result, the next step in the decision making process involves actually deciding on a career to pursue and developing an action plan to do so. Even though the person may be considered decided at this point, the reality is that following a plan to obtain a career is simply another means of obtaining career and self-knowledge. Hence, even decided students may benefit from career counseling and advising.

**Research Questions**

While it is apparent there is an abundance of literature describing the career decision making process, very little empirical research has been done to assess to what extent behaviors and traits relevant to self knowledge, knowledge of the career market, and some of the other factors previously delineated correlate with levels of decidedness. Consequently, this study is designed to address this question.

The first and primary question this study addresses is to what extent do certain specific behaviors, types of knowledge, characteristics, attitudes and perceptions influence decidedness. These specific independent variables were selected based on the literature and are catalogued in the following section. While it is expected that these correlations will be significant, high correlations are not expected because the literature infers that a combination of the variables accounts for decidedness rather than any single variable.

The second question this study is designed to answer is to what extent do the categories into which these variables fit relate to perceived decidedness. As mentioned in the review of literature, career decision making is typically considered to involve the acquisition of different types of knowledge and awareness (ie. knowledge about oneself, knowledge about the career market, etc.) These categories will also be delineated in the following section. It is expected that these correlations will be stronger than those in the previous section.

Another important question is to what extent a combination of all the variables relates to perceived decidedness. If the theory is correct, and the survey well constructed, it is assumed that this would be the strongest correlation.

Some additional questions that will be addresses are focused on descriptive analysis. These include: how many students within the sample fell into each of the four levels of decidedness and to what extent are each of the variable distributions normally distributed.

**Methodology**
In order to respond to these questions, a survey instrument was developed and administered to 151 college students enrolled in student success classes at a regional state university in the inter-mountain west. This class is strongly recommended for all new freshmen, who are the primary participants in the course. The classes were selected based on the willingness of instructors to allow time for surveys in their classes. Before filling out the survey, the research study was explained to the students and they were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. Over 95% of the students the classes participated in the survey. Once the agreement was signed, students were asked to rate their level of decidedness using the following scale before completing the survey:

1. Undecided: You have no idea what you want to major in or pursue as a career. You are similarly confused regarding the career decision-making process.

2. Somewhat decided: You have some ideas as to what you would like to major in or pursue as a career; however, you are having difficulty deciding which options to pursue.

3. Mostly decided: You have narrowed your career interests to one or two options and simply need to do some more research to decide or confirm your decision.

4. Completely decided: You have done your research and you know what you want to do. It is not likely to change.

These categories of decidedness were adapted from a review of the literature on decidedness to meet the purposes of this study. (Gordon, 1998; Mahall and Berg, 2003, & Zuncker, 1998). Of the 151 students surveyed, 140 ranked themselves using this scale in addition to responding to the survey questions.

The survey questions were selected because they relate to the variables previously discussed in the review of literature, which are considered important elements of the career decision making process:

- I have researched outlook, salary, educational requirements, etc. for the career(s) I am considering
- I have taken career assessments in the past
- I have researched a number of different careers
- I have some ideas about what career I would like to pursue
- I have visited with someone who works in the career field(s) I am considering
- I am aware of my major personality traits and their relationship to careers
- When I set goals I am usually able to accomplish them
- I have experience (volunteer/professional) in the careers I am considering
- I know what kind of work activities I am good at
- I have some ideas about what major I would like to pursue
- I am confident in my ability to select a career
- I do not know how to find out what careers interest me
I have had a lot of different types of work experience
I know and live according to my values
It is important to me that I decide on a major/career as soon as possible
I am not familiar with what jobs/careers are available in the career market
I know in what career fields I would like to work
I know what I need to do next in order to decide on a career
I know what obstacles I am likely to encounter in pursuing the career I have selected
I know how I can use my skills and interests in the workforce
I am willing to devote time and effort to the career decision making process
I know what major is required to pursue the career that interests me
I do not have any idea what I want to major in
I am not sure what careers are available to people in my major
I am unable to think of any careers that interest me

The students’ responses were weighted using a likert scale of one to five. A one indicated that the statement did not accurately describe the student; a three indicated that it somewhat accurately described the student; and a five indicated that it very accurately described the student. While most of these questions are phrased in a positive fashion (I know, I am, etc.), some were phrased in a negative fashion to test for positive affect. To facilitate scoring, the students scores on these were flipped so that a five indicated an inaccurate description and a 1 represented a very accurate description.

Results

Once the data was collected, it was analyzed to determine how many students indicated that they fell into each category of decidedness. Table 1 summarizes this information.

The majority of students fell into the categories of somewhat decided and mostly decided (28% in each). Furthermore, a larger percentage of students considered themselves completely decided (19.6%) than undecided (7.7%).

In order to test the relationship between the behaviors, knowledge, and characteristics of the students and their levels of decidedness the Spearman Rho correlation coefficient was used. This particular test was chosen because the data in this study was collected using ordinal measures, rather than interval or ratio (Hinckle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003). This correlational measure was also chosen because the data does not have to be normal in order to use it (Norusis, 2005).

The Spearman Rho correlations were used to test the hypothesis that there was no relationship between each of the variables and decidedness. The evaluation identified a significant relationship between students’ levels of decidedness and all of the variables in question at a .05 alpha level. The strengths of these relationships, however, varied significantly, as illustrated in Table 2. The variables with the highest relational strengths included:
I have researched outlook, salary, educational requirements, etc. for the career(s) I am considering \( (\rho = .572) \)

I have some ideas about what career I would like to pursue \( (\rho = .594) \)

I have visited with someone who works in the career field(s) I am considering \( (\rho = .525) \)

I have some ideas about what major I would like to pursue \( (\rho = .563) \)

I am confident in my ability to select a career \( (\rho = .675) \)

I know in what career fields I would like to work \( (\rho = .582) \)

I know what I need to do next in order to decide on a career \( (\rho = .661) \)

I know what obstacles I am likely to encounter in pursuing the career I have selected \( (\rho = .559) \)

I know how I can use my skills and interests in the workforce \( (\rho = .493) \)

I know what major is requires to pursue the career that interests me \( (\rho = .568) \)

I do not have any idea what I want to major in \( (\rho = .579) \)

The strength of these correlations indicates a moderately strong, or approaching moderately strong, relationship between each variable and decidedness. That these relationships are moderate is to be expected given the complex array of factors that contribute to career decision making.

As a result of this complexity, the variables were also combined and organized based on their relationships to the following categories:

- Confusion regarding career decision making
- Proximity to deciding
- Self knowledge
- Career Market Knowledge
- Confidence/Self-efficacy
- Motivation
- Knowledge of the Career Decision Making Process

The scores in these categories were ascertained by dividing the sum of each individual student’s scores in each related variable by the total possible scores in the same. These figures were then correlated with decidedness. Finally, the total sum of each student’s scores on all of the variables was correlated with decidedness to test the extent to which a combination of all the variables related to decidedness.

In every case, the correlations were significant and the strengths of the correlations indicated at least a moderate relationship with decidedness. In the case of the confidence score and the total score, the relationships with decidedness were above .700, which indicates a high correlation between these
scores and decidedness. Confusion regarding career decision, which is cored in reverse, proximity to deciding, and career market knowledge were also high at over .600. Table 3 summarizes these results.

Discussion

The research outcomes derived from this study provide some interesting insights regarding the career decision making process. First, and primarily, the outcomes support the traditional model of career decision making as dependent on various individual characteristics, behaviors, and knowledge of both oneself and the career market. The moderate correlations on most of the individual variables infer that while each variable is significantly correlated with decidedness, no single variable accounts for decidedness. However, when combined into a total score, there is a high correlation with decidedness. Thus as students develop their personal awareness, motivation and self-efficacy, knowledge of the decision making process, and career market knowledge, it is likely that they will increase their overall career decidedness. It is worth noting, however, that the variables that related to acquiring career market knowledge were more strongly correlated with decidedness than were those relevant to self-knowledge. This is partially due to the low correlations between many of the variables in this area, which may either be a result of their limited validity as contributors to decidedness. On the other hand, they may only possess low correlational strength because there are more variables that contribute to decidedness in this area than those included in this study. Further research would be necessary to address this question.

While validation of the career decision making process was to be expected, the strength of the correlation between decidedness and confidence/self-efficacy was not expected. This obviously implies that student’s who are more decided are also more confident in their ability to decide. While in hindsight this idea seems obvious, the implications, if verified through further research, could significantly impact the practice of career advising by focusing advisors more on the need to help students to build the confidence necessary to motivate them to engage fully in the process. As Bandura (1997) explained, “people’s beliefs in their personal efficacy determine the life pursuits they foreclose from consideration, as well as those they choose to follow and their level of interest, staying power, and success in them” (p. 26). Thus if students possess a low sense of self efficacy regarding their ability to select a career, they may fail to engage fully in the process, which may result in less intentional career decision making. This could obviously have implications regarding their overall career satisfaction. As a result, advisor’s should work to provide students with a “responsive environment that rewards valued accomplishments.” (p. 20). According to Bandura this “fosters aspirations, productive engagement in activities, and a sense of fulfillment,” which represent “the conditions that enable people to exercise substantial control over their lives through self-development” (p. 20-21).

Finally, since some of the individual variables resulted in higher correlations than the composite variables they pertained to, it may prove useful to reevaluate some of these constructs. By fine tuning the survey, it may be possible to better isolate the behaviors, characteristics and knowledge that most influence decidedness among college students.

Limitations

In spite of the significant findings resultant from this study, it is obvious that much remains to be understood about the career decision making process. First, while the total score of the individual
variables demonstrated a strong correlation with decidedness, it is obvious that many of the factors that contribute to decidedness were not accounted for in this study. Further research should be conducted to determine what these variables may be and to test their relationship to career decidedness. In addition, the survey instrument used in this study could use some refinement in order to increase its ability to measure decidedness. Finally, the sampling of students was done using a convenience method which limits the ability to generalize the results of this study to populations beyond that of this institution.

**Conclusion**

In spite of the limitation of this study, the support it lends to the traditional career decision making process and the insights it provides regarding that process are valuable. If supported by further research, these finding could provide insights regarding critical leverage points that advisors may use to better serve their students as they strive to identify and pursue their career goals. Then, perhaps, as a result of this work, advisors will be able to more decisively respond to the question, “what should I do to decide on a career?”

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat decided</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mostly decided</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completely decided</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>System</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>168</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Table 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Items</th>
<th>Decidedness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have researched outlook, salary, educational requirements, etc. for the career(s) I am considering</td>
<td>0.572 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have taken career assessments in the past</td>
<td>0.195 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have researched a number of different careers</td>
<td>0.325 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have some ideas about what career I would like to pursue</td>
<td>0.594 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have visited with someone who works in the career field(s) I am considering</td>
<td>0.525 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am aware of my major personality traits and their relationship to careers</td>
<td>0.433 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I set goals, I am usually able to accomplish them</td>
<td>0.287 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have experience (volunteer/professional) in the careers I am considering</td>
<td>0.341 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what kind of work activities I am good at</td>
<td>0.340 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have some ideas about what major I would like to pursue</td>
<td>0.563 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident in my ability to select a career</td>
<td>0.675 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not know how to find out what careers interest me</td>
<td>0.457 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had a lot of different types of work experience</td>
<td>0.173 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know and live according to my values</td>
<td>0.227 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to me that I decide on a major/career as soon as possible</td>
<td>0.336 *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I am not familiar with what jobs/careers are available in the career market 0.373  *

I know in what career fields I would like to work 0.582  *

I know what I need to do next in order to decide on a career 0.661  *

I know what obstacles I am likely to encounter in pursuing the career I have selected 0.559  *

I know how I can use my skills and interests in the workforce 0.493  *

I am willing to devote time and effort to the career decision making process 0.274  *

I know what major is required to pursue the career that interests me 0.568  *

I do not have any idea what I want to major in 0.579  *

I am not sure what careers are available to people in my major 0.441  *

I am unable to think of any careers that interest me 0.348  *

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3
Spearman Rho Correlations Between Response Categories and Decidedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>Decidedness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confusion regarding career decision making</td>
<td>0.617 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity to deciding</td>
<td>0.691 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self knowledge</td>
<td>0.572 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Market Knowledge</td>
<td>0.619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>0.709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>0.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the career decision making process</td>
<td>0.579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Score</td>
<td>0.706</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**References**


VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]