Career decision-making in college students: A path analysis of early childhood attachment, gender, age, and socioeconomic status

Lara Strate, Department of Counseling and Psychology
Tennessee Technological University

Introduction & Literature Review

Career indecision has been linked to higher rates of burnout, lower psychological well-being (Edwards & Dirette, 2010), and a less developed sense of identity (Holland & Holland, 1977).

Attachment has long been known as a vital factor in child development and healthy development into adulthood (Bretherton, 1992); parental unavailability or unresponsiveness can lead to barriers in healthy development, and even to psychopathological behaviors later in life.

Previous studies have explored and found a significant influence of parental attachment on career decision-making (Blustein et al. 1991; Lopez & Andrews, 1987), as well as gender differences between males and females, in specific their attachment to the opposite-sex parent (Lopez, 1989).

Additionally, studies have indicated that demographics like the socioeconomic status (SES) and age impact the level of difficulties in career decision-making during the transition into adulthood and later in life (Hsieh & Huang, 2014; Zhou & Santos, 2007).

Career decision making is of importance especially in the student population as they move into new careers for the first time.

Methods

The sample consisted of 309 students from a mid-size university in the southeastern United States.

47.9% of the participants were female and 52.1% male; 89.9% White/Caucasian, 3.6% Black or African American, 3.2% Asian, 1.1% Hispanic or Latino/a, and .7% Multiracial.

The majority of participants belonged to the middle class (52.1%), followed by the upper middle class (21%) and the lower middle class (19.7%). 4.2% identified themselves as lower class, and 2.3% as upper class.

My Vocational Situation (MVS; Holland, Daiger & Power, 1980): assesses difficulties in career decision-making over three subscales.

Adult Scale of Parental Attachment – Short Form (ASPA-SF; Michael & Snow, 2019): measures the perceived type of parental attachment. It consists of 10 subscales, 5 examining the relationship to the mother and 5 to the father. The subscales differentiate between a safe (MS/FS), a dependent (MD/FD), parentified (MP/FP), fearful (MF/PF), and distant (MA/FA) relationship to each parent.

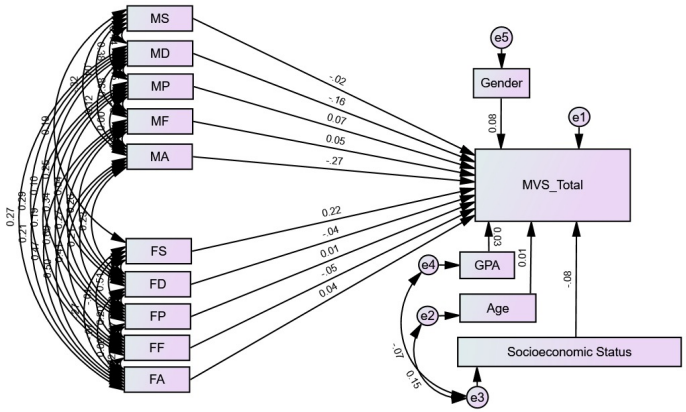
Research Questions

Question 1: Individuals with secure attachment will score lower on MVS, indicating higher career decision making.

Question 2: Individuals with a safer relationship to opposite-sex parent will have fewer difficulties in decision-making.

Question 3: Gender, age, and socioeconomic status will have an influence on career decision-making difficulties.

Results



Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to determine the relationship between attachment style and career decision-making. A path analysis was conducted using the maximum likelihood estimation of AMOS, which indicated a good fit of the model for examining the theoretical structural model.

The results indicated that MS, MD, MP, and MF all had small effects, while MA had a medium effect on MVS. This effect was negative, indicating the more absent the mother is perceived, the fewer career decision-making difficulties students had. The relationship between MS and career decision-making showed to be negative, while FS was positively associated with MVS.

Goodness-of-fit indices	Benchmarks	Value
Chi-square		114.65
Chi-square/degrees of freedom	≤3	2.20
Comparative fit index (CFI)	≥95	.96
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	.05-.08	.06
Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)	≥90	.91
Normed fit index (NFI)	≥90	.93

The model was tested for two different samples, one including only male participants and the other females. The results showed a good model fit for both samples.

The model fit for the female sample resulted in x^2(39/N=149) = 62.31; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .06; TLI = .92; and NFI = .93. The model fit indices for the male sample were x^2(39/N=159) = 65.96; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .07; TLI = .91; and NFI = .93.

According to Cohen (1988), standardized path coefficients with absolute value less than .10 indicate a small effect, those with a value of .30 a medium and values above .50 a large effect.

Attachment Style	Females	Males
Mother – Safe	-.15	-.04
Mother – Dependent	-.16	-.11
Mother – Parentified	.15	.01
Mother – Fearful	-.14	.16
Mother – Distant	-.15	-.37
Father – Safe	.15	.30
Father – Dependent	-.12	-.08
Father – Parentified	.05	.06
Father – Fearful	.27	-.27
Father - Distant	-.17	.28

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Discussion

The results indicated a relationship between parental attachment in early childhood and career decision-making. Students with a secure attachment had fewer difficulties in career decision-making overall. However, the effect was negative for MS and positive for FS.

The strength of the attachment varied and was strongest for MA, indicating that a perceived absent relationship to the mother may be associated to more career decision-making difficulties.

The effect was stronger for males, which may suggest that gender differences play a role in the relationship between attachment and career decision-making. Gender did not impact the influence of the relationship of FS and MVS.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The sample consisted of a majority of Caucasian students, which is not representative for minorities, who can experience differences in career barriers (Wright et al., 2012).

Future research should focus on exploring the differences in how attachment relationships are manifested in different cultures, as well as how shifting gender roles can affect the accessibility of attachment figures in early life and the function of attachment in career.

The role of mindfulness should be explored in future studies as it has been proposed to be associated with career decision-making.

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