



Roles of attachment relationships in emerging adults' career decision-making process: A two-year longitudinal research design[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether attachment relationships with the mother, father, best friend, and romantic partner relate to the career decision-making process (occupational information, goal selection and vocational identity) of emerging adults directly as well as indirectly through self-concept clarity as a mediator. The questionnaires were administered to 1,342 young people at two time points (two years apart). The results of our structural equation modeling analyses indicated significant direct paths between attachment to all figures under the investigation and career decision-making process at Time 1. The self-concept clarity mediated all associations between attachment figures and career decision-making process. Moreover, at Time 2, only attachment to the romantic partner (not to the other attachment figures) was associated with the career decision-making process both directly and indirectly through the self-concept clarity. These findings suggest that the romantic partner is the most influential attachment figure in emerging adults' career decision-making process, although attachment relationships with parents and the best friend also remain important in their career development.

Career identity development is a critical task in emerging adulthood during which time individuals explore their life goals (Arnett, 2004). The failure to develop career identity has been found to be associated with various negative adjustment indicators, such as a low level of well-being and low life satisfaction (e.g., Hirschi, 2009; Strauser, Lustig, & Çiftçi, 2008). Several theorists have hypothesized that the successful achievement of a career decision requires individuals to go through a sequence of career decision-making process activities (e.g., Gati & Asher, 2001; Harren, 1979; Van Esbroeck, Tibos, & Zaman, 2005). During emerging adulthood, individuals explore information about careers, formulate career goals, and develop their career identity based on their evaluation of their career experiences (hereafter referred to as the “career decision-making process”). These aspects of the career decision-making process have been studied in terms of career decision-making self-efficacy (e.g., Taylor & Betz, 1983) and vocational identity (e.g., Marco, Hartung, Newman, & Parr, 2003), for example. Some individuals perform behaviors that are more effective, and they are likely to be more advanced in their career decision-making process, whereas other individuals engage in ineffective behaviors, and they are less developed in this process.

Attachment theory has been used as an organizing framework for relationship-based perspectives that have been applied to career development (Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995). In addition, more recent studies have proposed and empirically demonstrated a mediating role of young people's self-development in the association between attachment relationships and career decision-making process (Downing & Nauta, 2010; Tokar, Withrow, Hall, & Moradi, 2003). However, the roles of attachment relationships with

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different figures in the career decision-making process have not been systematically examined yet. Moreover, only some research on attachment and career development has employed a longitudinal research design; therefore, the effects of attachment relationships on longitudinal changes in the career decision-making process have not been clarified. Consequently, the present study employed a two-year longitudinal research design to examine direct associations between attachment relationships with four different figures (the mother, father, best friend, and romantic partner) and career decision-making process as well as their indirect associations mediated by self-concept clarity.

1. Attachment to parents and career decision-making process

According to the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), individuals who develop a secure attachment to an important figure are able to seek support from this figure and consequently confidently explore the world around them. This confident exploration is based on the developmental outcome of their mental representations (i.e., “internal working models”), which suggests that an important figure will provide support when needed. Drawing upon this theoretical idea, several prominent scholars have proposed that attachment relationships facilitate the career decision-making process. Specifically, secure attachment fosters confident explorations, which enable individuals to engage in risk-taking behaviors and experimentations during their career development process (Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, & Palladino, 1991; Blustein et al., 1995). Wright & Perrone, (2010) recently proposed that secure attachment experiences provide internal working models characterized by positive outcome expectations, which lead individuals to develop higher levels of career decision-making self-efficacy (one's belief in his/her ability to select career goals and his/her ability to search for occupational information).¹ Finally, besides the literature based on the attachment theory, recent publications have also stressed the importance of interpersonal relationships in the career decision-making process (e.g., Blustein, 2011; Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Flum, 2001; Richardson, 2012). Although these studies did not necessarily focus on the attachment theory, they indicated that the quality of interpersonal relationships provides important basic experience that can foster career development.

Consistent with these theoretical explanations, the existing research has demonstrated that secure attachment to parents is associated with greater levels of emerging adults' career exploration (Ketterson & Blustein, 1997; Vignoli, Croity-Belz, Chapeland, de Fillipis, & Garcia, 2005) and with greater level of their commitment to career decisions (Blustein et al., 1991; Scott & Church, 2001). In addition, parental attachment has also been found to be associated with emerging adults' career decision-making self-efficacy (e.g., O'Brien, 1996; Wolfe & Betz, 2004). A meta-analysis study concluded that attachment relationship is one of the most important factors in understanding young people's career decision-making self-efficacy (Wright & Perrone, 2008). However, one important limitation of these previous studies is that these studies were cross-sectional (e.g., O'Brien, 1996); thus, they were not able to examine the effects of attachment relationships on individuals' changes in their career decision-making process.

To address this limitation, O'Brien, Friedman, Tipton, and Linn (2000) longitudinally examined the associations between parental attachment and career self-efficacy in high-school female students and again five years later. The results of their study showed that secure attachment to parents at the first time point was associated with higher career self-efficacy at the first time point. Similarly, secure attachment at the second time point was also associated with an increase in career self-efficacy at the second time point after controlling for career self-efficacy at the first time point. However, they did not find any associations between attachment relationships at the first time point and career self-efficacy at the second time point. That is, they found only concurrent associations at both first and second time points, as represented in Model A in Fig. 1, but no cross-lagged associations from the first time point to the second time point, as represented in Model C in Fig. 1. These empirical results suggest that current rather than past attachment relationships with parents are more important for young people to develop positive career expectations. Nevertheless, we did not have a strong theoretical basis for concurrent versus cross-lagged models. Therefore, although we hypothesized concurrent associations based on the empirical findings, we examined both concurrent and cross-lagged models in this study.

In accordance with the described theoretical ideas and empirical findings regarding the connection between parental attachment and career decision-making process in emerging adulthood, we expected the following:

Hypothesis 1a. Emerging adults' attachment relationships to the mother and to the father are associated with their career decision-making process.

Hypothesis 1b. These associations between attachment relationships and the career decision-making process are concurrent but not cross-lagged.

2. Attachment to peers and career decision-making process

Although parents play important roles in the life of young people, as individuals develop, their relationship focus shifts from parents to peers, such as friends and romantic partners (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). In this line of research, Felsman and Blustein (1999) revealed that young people who reported greater levels of secure attachment to peers were more likely to be engaged in greater levels of environmental exploration and were more likely to commit to their career choices. Hence, the authors of the current study proposed that young people use peer relationships as their support networks to help them negotiate their exploration of and commitment to their career development process. Similarly, Wolfe and Betz (2004) found that the quality of peer

¹ This idea was developed due to the integration of attachment theory and social cognitive career theory. Although these two theories have different roots (i.e., psychoanalysis and social learning theory, respectively), they can be linked through the concept of internalized working models.

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