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Factors affecting teenagers' career indecision in southern Switzerland

Jenny Marcionetti[a]*

[a]University of Lausanne and University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland

Abstract

In contemporary western societies making the first career choice after lower secondary education is not always easy and the number of undecided teenage students is increasing. Career indecision can push students to avoid decisions or to make "wrong" decisions which can affect their professional life, both in the short and long term. The purpose of the study presented here is to detect and describe relations between some personal characteristics, personality, self-esteem, perceived social support and career indecision, in order to highlight and understand which elements have greater influence on teenagers' career indecision in southern Switzerland. A longitudinal study has been designed: specific questionnaires were administered to 8th grade students, and will be repeated to the same students at the beginning and at the end of their 9th grade. Preliminary results indicate that some personality traits and self-esteem are significant predictors of career indecision. Moreover, self-esteem partially moderate the relationship between personality and career indecision.

Keywords: Career indecision; Personality, Self-esteem; Perceived Social Support

1. Introduction

Career indecision, typically defined as the difficulties encountered by individuals while making career-related decisions (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996), can be a big problem for individuals who live moments of career transition, when important choices must be made. As a matter of fact indecision can push individuals into avoiding vocational choices or making wrong vocational choices (Gianakos, 1999). This is why indecision has been of large interest in the field of counselling psychology (for a review, see Forner, 2001). When experienced for a brief and limited moment, career indecision can be seen as an appropriate developmental experience. It can however become a strong personality trait –*indecisiveness*– which can limit the decision-making process in

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +41-058-666-68-38; fax: +41-058-666-68-19.
E-mail address: jenny.marcionetti@unil.ch

relation to career choices, and general choices too (Crites, 1969 ; Holland & Holland, 1977 ; Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996 ; Santos, 2001; Guay, Ratelle, Senécal, Larose, & Deschênes, 2006). However, if we consider *situational indecision*, this should decrease or disappear with adapted intervention including for example the access to appropriate information and the exploration of the youths' values and objectives (Gordon, 1981 ; Ferrari, Nota, & Soresi, 2012).

Indecision –for different ages and in different career transitions– has been examined in depth and related to different psychological factors: it has been for example associated to career maturity (Rojewski, 1994), to decision-making style (Mau, 1995), to vocational barriers (Patton, Creed, & Watson, 2003), to the identity status (Vondracek, Schulenberg, Skorikov, Gillespie, & Wahlheim, 1995), to the affective dispositions toward the world (Larson et al., 1988 ; Saunders et al., 2000) and to locus of control (Kishor, 1981 ; Taylor, 1982 ; Santos, 2001). If we consider studies carried out in southern Switzerland (Donati, 1999; Donati & Lafranchi, 2007; Marcionetti, Donati, & Casabianca, 2010), two main difficulties have been detected. The first is the difficulty in complying with the compromise process through which individuals give up their favorite aspirations to choose others that seem "less compatible with itself" but more accessible (Gottfredson's *minor compromise*, 1981). Indeed, this process becomes more difficult and less voluntary when the individual must put aside acceptable alternatives and can even be very painful when the choice is limited to alternatives that the individual perceives as unacceptable (*major compromise*). The second difficulty detected was, for some young people and for different reasons, the almost complete absence of a reflection on the future and therefore on career. Both situations enter among those proposed by Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996). The difficulties highlighted by these authors are based on a model of the "ideal career decision-maker". This one has to be conscious of the need to make a career decision, wants to take a decision and is able to make an appropriate and adequate decision (which is based on a suitable decision-making process, and compatible with the person's objectives and resources) (Gati, Osipow, Krausz, & Saka, 2000). Any deviation from this ideal model is seen as a possible problem that can affect the individual's decision-making process in two possible ways: by preventing the person from making a decision or by pushing him or her to a less than optimal decision, as in the situations described above.

The main contexts in which adolescents grow and make career choices are family and school (Guichard, 1993): factors affecting career choices indissolubly relate the individual to these contexts. Considering family-related characteristics such as socio-economic status and foreign nationality, studies conducted in Switzerland attest that these are risk factors which predispose the individual to career decision procrastination (Perriard, 2005; Cattaneo et al., 2010). The family's socio-economic status and foreign nationality can in fact influence the youngster indirectly: for example foreign families recently arrived in Switzerland could have more difficulty understanding how the educational, training and work systems are organized. That can prevent the family from adequately supporting the youngster, for example when searching for information that would be useful to him or her. In this case, the family does not play an active negative role, as a creator of indecision, but rather, it refrains from playing a positive role in the construction of the professional identity of the youth (Lopez, 1989) unintentionally denying important support. The issue here is indeed related to family support (one of the dimensions of social support, Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) that parents can provide the teenager and at the same time to the perception that the youngster has of this support. Several studies have indeed highlighted the importance of direct or indirect family and social support for psychological and physical well-being of individuals and demonstrated that social support acts as a buffer between stressful life events and symptoms (Cassel, 1976; Cobb, 1976; Levitt et al, 1985).

Moving our focus to school-related factors, different authors argue that the school provides a specific context and identity possibilities in which the teenager creates his or her identity, including professional identity (Guichard, 2009). Implicit or explicit school rules, the content of school education, the recovery and the assessment which is made on it and the curriculum in which the youth falls, can categorize them in various ways: the attentive student or the agitated one, the gifted student or the ungifted one, the good or the bad student (Parsons, 1959; Lahire 1995; Ravaioli, 2008). These categories can be internalized by the student and become part of the way he/she perceives and thinks him/herself as a future worker (Kardiner 1939; Deschamps & Moliner, 2011). Academic performance also directly influences the professional future of students by opening or