



Parental support for adolescents' autonomy while making a first career decision

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Career decision-making
Parental autonomy support
Self-determination theory
Autonomous decision

ABSTRACT

Background: First career-related decisions such as choosing a high school major have effects on adolescents' later life. Employing Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study was conducted to investigate the association between parental support and the type of motivation adolescents adopt while deciding, and the mechanism underlying these relations.

Aims: The study aimed to examine whether perceived parental support of autonomy in adolescents' first career decision is associated with motivation to learn, satisfaction with choice, wellbeing, and success. Moreover, the study aimed to assess the mediating role of the extent to which adolescents' decision was made autonomously.

Samples: Two hundred and twenty-nine 10th-grade students participated in this study.

Methods: Participants completed questionnaires at the very beginning and end of the school year.

Results: Through path analysis with bootstrapping, the findings indicated that adolescents who perceived their parents as autonomy-supportive during the process of decision making, made an autonomous decision. This "autonomously motivated decision" was found to be the mediating mechanism that explains the relations between parents' autonomy-support and the cognitive/emotional outcomes.

Conclusions: The results highlight the positive role that parents can play in adolescents' career decisions by supporting their autonomy and helping them make an autonomous decision.

1. Introduction

Career-related decisions are not easy to make at any age, as they involve many factors and have impacts on the person's entire life (Federman, 2007). First career decisions such as choosing a high school or a college major, are taken during adolescence, while the person is struggling with questions of self-image, sense of ability, and identity (Blustein, 2011). In this confusing process, adolescents need their parents' support. Further complicating the situation is the fact that parents themselves are very stressed by this decision and its consequences (Gati & Saka, 2001), which might increase their tendency to try to control the adolescent's decision. Additionally, adolescence is characterized by a mutual reexamination of boundaries, autonomy, and the relationship with parents (Soenens et al., 2007), which makes parents' involvement in this decision highly delicate. Accordingly, there is a need to understand how parents' involvement in the process of adolescents' first career decision is associated with the motivational, emotional, and cognitive consequences of the decision made.

In this study, we investigate these questions using the conceptualization suggested by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan &

Deci, 2017). We chose this theory to guide our research because of the central theoretical structures it provides, such as "autonomy support" and "autonomous motivation." This conceptualization fits our desire to examine the type of involvement by parents in the process of career decision making, as well as the motivational and emotional outcomes of the adolescent's choice.

We asked whether adolescents' perceptions of their parents as supportive in the process of selecting a high school major, is associated with adolescents' motivation to learn the major, satisfaction with their choice of major, self-efficacy in learning their major, and grades. We also asked whether adolescents' autonomous decision (choosing a major out of interest, understanding the relevance of their choice to their future goals, and a sense of volition), is associated with the decision outcomes. Namely, we assessed whether an "autonomously motivated decision" is a mediating mechanism to explain relations between parents' support and the cognitive and emotional outcomes.

1.1. Parents' involvement in adolescents' career decisions

The role of parent-child relationships in adolescents' career

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decisions has been emphasized by researchers interested in career development (Blustein, 2011; Ginevra, Nota, & Ferrari, 2015; Kenny & Medvide, 2013). Studies that have recognized parents' impact on adolescents' career-related choices have suggested that the way parents interact with adolescents can affect adolescents' career-related self-efficacy, interests, intentions, and goals (Ginevra et al., 2015; Kenny & Medvide, 2013; Zhao, Lim, & Teo, 2012), as well as their openness to explore the various options and their feasibility (Guan et al., 2015).

One theory that attributes great importance to the interpersonal context in emotional and cognitive well-being is SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT assigns a primary role to the support provided by significant others, such as parents, in various aspects of the child's life (Deci & Ryan, 2011). Indeed, studies using SDT have demonstrated that when children perceive their parents as supportive of their autonomy in school-related activities, they experience high levels of well-being, are emotionally and cognitively adjusted, are persistent in their learning, and have high achievements (Grolnick, Raftery-Helmer, Flamm, Marbell, & Cardemil, 2015; Katz, Kaplan, & Buzukashvily, 2011). Within SDT, autonomy-supportive relationships between parents and adolescents implies that parents support adolescents' natural desire to experience a sense of personal choice, volition, and psychological freedom (Ryan & Deci, 2016). Accordingly, parental support of autonomy is conceptualized in terms of promotion of volitional functioning, not simply promotion of independence (Soenens et al., 2007).

1.2. Parents' autonomy support in the context of career decision making

SDT literature provides basic principles that characterize autonomy-supportive behaviors, regardless of the domain in which support is provided. Behaviors that support autonomy include showing understanding of the child's perspective, providing relevant rationale, offering choices, highlighting meaningful goals, supporting volitional endorsement of behaviors, and legitimizing negative affect and criticism. (Grolnick, 2009; Reeve, 2009; Soenens et al., 2007). Autonomy-supportive contexts and their effects on adaptive psychosocial outcomes and academic achievement are crucial during adolescence (Emery, Heath, & Mills, 2016; Soenens et al., 2007; Vasquez, Patall, Fong, Corrigan, & Pine, 2016). At this age, children develop their perception separately from their parents, and parent–child relations are re-organized in a process that often includes increased conflict and decreased harmony (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013).

Although the influence of perceived parental autonomy support for children's motivation has been well documented, few studies using SDT have assessed the effects of perceived parental autonomy support on adolescent decision making ((Dietrich, Kracke, & Nurmi, 2011; Guay, Ratelle, Sénécal, Larose, & Deschênes, 2006; Guay, Sénécal, Gauthier, & Fernet, 2003; Pesch, Larson, & Surapaneni, 2016); Van (Van Petegem, Beyers, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, 2012)). While some such studies aimed to explore the effect of parental support in the context of career decisions, they operatively assessed adolescents' general perception of their parents as supportive of their autonomy, and not the support provided within this specific context. As first career decisions are sensitive and complex for both parents and adolescents (Gati & Saka, 2001), parents, out of true concern for their child's future, may exert more pressure than usual on the child to choose a subject that seems right and appropriate. Accordingly, unlike previous studies, here we assess adolescents' perceptions of the autonomy support from parents in the specific context of choosing a high school major. Based on a previous operationalization of autonomy-supportive practices in other domains (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Katz et al., 2011), we developed a scale to assess the extent to which adolescents perceive their parents as supportive in this specific context. Supportive parents will initiate dialogue regarding the decision process; listen to their child's perspective on the various options; discuss with him/her the possible advantages and disadvantages of the options; legitimate negative

emotions and criticism regarding the options and/or the process; encourage him/her to explore and be aware of their attitudes, emotions, and competencies; show empathy; and encourage him/her to choose the subject they believe is best. We hypothesize that when an adolescent perceives his/her parents as supportive, he/she will be more autonomous in his/her decision.

1.3. What is an autonomous decision?

According to SDT, a person's sources or reasons for intentional action (motives) are placed along a continuum representing the relative autonomy felt toward the behavior. At one end are motives stemming from integration of the action with personal beliefs, or identification with the value of an action (autonomous motivation to act); at the other are less internalized motives originating from internal pressures (guilt, a sense of obligation), or external pressures (expecting a benefit or avoiding sanctions) (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Studies have highlighted the huge benefits of acting from an internal locus of causality in various domains. However, the extent to which a choice or decision is made from autonomous or controlled motives has hardly been studied (Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006). Previous SDT studies in the context of career decision have assessed the effects of volitional choice (Pesch et al., 2016) and career decision-making autonomy (Guay et al., 2003), and demonstrated their role in decision outcomes. We relied on Moller et al.'s (Moller et al., 2006) distinction between “autonomous choice”, which is accompanied by an internal perceived locus of causality, and “controlled choice”, which is accompanied by the feeling of being compelled to make a specific choice and used Ryan and Connell's (Ryan & Connell, 1989) scale of perceived locus of causality in academic activity, to develop a scale to assess the extent to which adolescents felt autonomous regarding their decision. We assessed the extent to which adolescents felt they had chosen their major based on their own interests, sense of volition, identification with the values, and/or understanding of its benefits to their future goals.

1.4. Autonomous decisions and their potential association with decision-related outcomes

While various studies have demonstrated positive outcomes of acting from autonomous sources of action (see (Ryan & Deci, 2017), for a review), not so many studies assessed the potential benefits of autonomous decisions. Accordingly, we mainly based our hypothesis that autonomous decisions will lead to various motivational and emotional outcomes on the numerous SDT studies showing that when people act autonomously they deeply understand and internalize the rationale and value of the action. This internalization results in meaningful engagement (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016), higher achievements (Taylor et al., 2014) higher self-perceptions of ability (Katz, Eilot, & Nevo, 2014), higher satisfaction from the choice made (Pesch et al., 2016), and greater well-being (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2013). We hypothesize that when an adolescent makes an autonomous decision regarding the major, the various outcomes of the action will derive from the autonomous quality of the choice.

2. The current study

In Israel, during the transition from 9th to 10th grade, students choose a major subject that they will study in the last three years of high school. Students can choose from a wide range, including one of the science subjects (math, biology, chemistry, computer science physics, etc.), humanities (literature, history, language, etc.), or arts (visual art, sculpturing, theater, music, etc.). Final high school exams are taken at the end of the 12th grade and the results of these exams are a key to acceptance to higher education (college or university). Some of the university professions are blocked for students who did not major in a specific subject unless they complete their studies in this subject in a

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