



Variations of career decision ambiguity tolerance between China and the United States and between high school and college



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ABSTRACT

The variation of career decision ambiguity tolerance (CDAT) by cultures and development stages was examined in a sample of Chinese high school students ($n = 339$), a sample of Chinese college students ($n = 356$), along with U.S. college students ($n = 328$). It was hypothesized that career decision ambiguity tolerance decreases when individuals experience more societal/cultural pressure on decidedness and responsibility for their career decision making. Based on the three-factor structure of CDAT (i.e., preference, tolerance, and aversion), measurement invariance was examined between Chinese and U.S. college students and between Chinese high school and college students. While the factor of tolerance was not upheld in both Chinese samples, the factors of preference and aversion were found to be structurally invariant across cultures and developmental stages. The analyses comparing means of preference and aversion found that U.S. college students had a higher level of preference relative to Chinese college students. It was also found that in comparison to Chinese high school students, Chinese college students had a higher level of aversion. The criterion validity of CDAT in Chinese culture was supported in the findings of preference and aversion being associated with career exploration and career indecision. The implication of this study was discussed along with its limitations and suggestions for future research.

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There has been an emerging proposition in the vocational psychology literature that the career decision-making process is full of ambiguity and the ability to handle this ambiguity is critical in terms of career decision outcomes (Xu & Tracey, 2014, 2015a; Xu & Tracey, 2015b). Xu and Tracey (2015b) have proposed and demonstrated that ambiguity tolerance specific to the career decision-making domain is an important construct with respect to career decision making. However, it remains unestablished as to the similarity and variation of this construct across cultures and across developmental stages. The focus of the current study was thus to examine measurement invariance of career decision ambiguity tolerance across China and the U.S. and across high school and college.

1. Ambiguity tolerance in career decision making

Career decision making has been conceived, in part, as an information collecting and processing process, which can be widely seen in primary career theories (e.g., Holland, 1997; Sampson, Lenz, Reardon, & Peterson, 1999). Parsons (1909) long ago proposed a model of collecting information about the self and the vocational world and then using the information to identify a vocational and educational match. While this model continues to serve the field as a guiding model (e.g., Blustein, 1997; Flum & Blustein, 2000; Zikic & Hall, 2009), the significance of information proposed by this model has been revealed to be equivocal.

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For example, Xu, Hou, and Tracey (2014) investigated the relation of environmental and self exploration with career indecision and only found small associations.

Therefore, researchers have proposed that how individuals evaluate and respond to informational ambiguity is a critical area in the career decision-making process as individuals hardly ever have clear and unequivocal information (Xu & Tracey, 2014, 2015a; Xu & Tracey, 2015b). Ambiguity tolerance (AT) has been defined as the way individuals evaluate and respond to ambiguous situations or information characterized by an array of unfamiliar, complex, or inconsistent clues (Budner, 1962; Furnham & Ribchester, 1995). According to Furnham and Ribchester (1995), people with low levels of ambiguity tolerance tend to experience stress, react prematurely, and avoid ambiguous information, while those with high ambiguity tolerance perceive ambiguous situations/information as desirable and interesting and do not deny or distort the complexity of incongruity.

There has been evidence consistently supporting the salience of ambiguity tolerance in career decision making. Xu and Tracey (2014) found that ambiguity tolerance negatively predicted different areas of career indecision directly and indirectly through career exploration. In addition, ambiguity tolerance was found to moderate the link of career exploration with career indecision. Xu and Tracey (2015a) demonstrated that ambiguity tolerance was positively linked to career decision-making self-efficacy and negatively predictive of career indecision. These results therefore collectively portrayed ambiguity tolerance as an important factor related to not only an important process variable of career decision-making (i.e., career decision-making self-efficacy) but an important outcome variable of career decision-making (i.e., career indecision) as well.

Based on the emerging support of general ambiguity tolerance being important with respect to career decision making, Xu and Tracey (2015b) proposed a construct of career decision ambiguity tolerance, which refers to ambiguity tolerance in the specific career decision-making domain. They also developed and validated a measure specific to this construct. The initial Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (CDAT) was developed based on Budner's (1962) tripartite model of ambiguity tolerance (i.e., tolerance for novelty, complexity, or inconsistency) and an additional factor (i.e., tolerance for unpredictability) was derived from Germeijs and De Boeck's (2003) and Dequech's (2000) work. Xu and Tracey (2015b) conducted an exploratory and confirmatory analysis and found that college students in the U.S. primarily perceived career decision ambiguity tolerance based on a three-factor structure, consisting of preference, tolerance, and aversion.

In Xu and Tracey's (2015b) model of CDAT, preference emphasizes positive appraisal of ambiguity in career decision making and the excitement for change and new things. Individuals with high preference tend to approach the career decision-making process and show interests. In contrast to preference, tolerance emphasizes confidence in coping with ambiguity and the ability to tolerate ambiguity. Individuals with high tolerance tend to appear comfortable and relaxed when facing ambiguity, but they do not necessarily enjoy the ambiguous process. The third factor of aversion emphasizes negative avoidance to ambiguity in career decision making. Individuals with high aversion tend to find ambiguity in career decision-making anxiety provoking and daunting. The validity of this three-factor CDAT was supported by its incremental prediction on career indecision, career decision-making self-efficacy, and career adaptability over and beyond general ambiguity tolerance.

2. Cross-cultural measurement of career decision ambiguity tolerance

While career decision ambiguity tolerance has been demonstrated to play a salient role in career decision making among U.S. students (Xu & Tracey, 2014, 2015a; Xu & Tracey, 2015b), it remains unclear as to the measurement and role of this construct in international backgrounds, particularly in a collectivistic context (Triandis, 1989). It is plausible that handling ambiguity in career decision making is a pan-cultural process as individuals hardly ever have complete and unequivocal information regardless of cultural backgrounds (Xu & Tracey, 2014, 2015a; Xu & Tracey, 2015b). However, the structure and levels of this construct could vary across cultures.

It has been demonstrated that different cultures associate different meanings with work and the career decision-making process (Zhou, Leung, & Li, 2012), which potentially leads to different reactions to ambiguity in career decision making. Zhou et al. (2012) found that Chinese students endorse traditional Chinese values (e.g., career as a way to repay parents and sustain family well-being) in addition to Western values (e.g., individuals' self-actualization). They also found that Chinese students commonly believe that work is a process full of hardship and they need to utilize positive qualities to reach desirable outcomes. Such a strong goal-oriented approach to work as well as a strong family-oriented responsibility could elevate Chinese students' concerns and fears regarding potential career decision mistakes. Consequently, new and complex information in career decision making could appear less interesting and desirable (i.e., lower preference) for Chinese students in comparison to U.S. students. However, Hofstede (2001) found that China endorses a lower score (30) on the ambiguity avoidance dimension than the U.S. (46), indicating that Chinese individuals are more accepting to the unknown future relative to U.S. individuals (i.e., lower aversion). This finding was consistent with the influential Taoism teaching that people should be open to and tolerant of unpredictable future (Bai, 2005).

In addition, different personalities of Chinese and U.S. students could result in different levels of career decision ambiguity tolerance as well. McCrae and Terracciano worked with colleagues to collect data on Big Five personality in 51 cultural contexts (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005). They found that Chinese college students had lower mean scores on neuroticism and extroversion than U.S. college students (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005). As neuroticism embraces anxiety, it is plausible that Chinese students could find ambiguity less anxiety provoking and intimidating than U.S. students (i.e., lower aversion). As extroversion entails seeking excitement, it is reasonable to expect that Chinese students could have a lower level of excitement for new information than U.S. students do (i.e., lower preference). In summary, we thus hypothesized that Chinese students have a lower level of preference and a lower level of aversion relative to U.S. students. As acceptance of unpredictability is emphasized in Chinese culture

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