



# Career indecision and career exploration among older French adolescents: The specific role of general trait anxiety and future school and career anxiety



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between two forms of adolescent anxiety, career exploration and career indecision. Two-hundred and forty-two French senior high school students filled out a self-report questionnaire that measured career indecision, frequency of career exploration, general trait anxiety, and fear of failing in one's academic and occupational careers. The results showed that adolescent career indecision and career exploration were positively and significantly related to general trait anxiety and career anxiety. Nevertheless, career anxiety accounted for an additional part of the variance in career exploration and, to a lesser extent, in career indecision. General trait anxiety accounted for an additional part of the variance in career indecision only. In addition, general trait anxiety and career anxiety mediated the relationship between career indecision and career exploration. The discussion focuses on the role of anxiety (personality trait anxiety or an emotion connected to one's future) in career development. It also addresses the implications of these results for improving counseling practices.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Indecision, identity, and adolescence

Identity building is a major developmental task during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1972; Super, 1957). Erikson (1972) postulated that adolescent identity development is the result of a combination of exploration and commitment processes. For older adolescents and emerging adults, commitment to a career choice after exploration of oneself and one's external environment represents a transition into adulthood and is congruous with the most advanced identity status: the development of a coherent ego identity. Exploration, selection, and commitment to a career choice are major concerns for adolescents. Potential difficulties in decision-making can therefore arise during this period. Career indecision, which is generally defined as the inability to make a choice or uncertainty about one's choice in a situation that requires making choices (Crites, 1969), is closely related to the academic contexts in which career choices are determined (Neice & Bradley, 1979). Career indecision is a normal transitional phase in the developmental process of making a particular decision, in contrast to indecisiveness, which is defined as a chronic problem with decision-making in various situations (Cooper, Fuqua, & Hartman, 1984; Crites, 1969; Osipow, 1999).

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## 1.2. Career exploration and career indecision

The career exploration process consists of activities directed toward enhancing knowledge of oneself and one's external environment, thus contributing to career planning (Blustein, 1992). Individuals acquire information during this exploratory phase, which in turn enables them to crystallize their interests. By decreasing uncertainty related to a lack of vocational information, the career exploration process fosters progress in career decision-making (Blustein, Pauling, DeMania, & Faye, 1994; Greenhaus, Hawkins, & Brenner, 1983).

According to the developmental perspective (Erikson, 1972; Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, & Herma, 1951;; Harren, 1979; Super, 1957), career indecision is a necessary step that precedes career decision-making. It corresponds to a period during which adolescents or emerging adults elaborate and explore career choices. Consequently, while career exploration may contribute to career development by facilitating career decision-making, one might expect that during the choice-elaboration period there would be a positive relationship between career exploration levels and career indecision levels. Both processes can also be viewed as lifelong adaptation processes (Flum & Blustein, 2000), especially in a society where future employment is unstable and uncertain (Krumboltz, 1992; Savickas et al., 2009).

As earlier studies have shown (e.g. Blustein & Philipps, 1988), career decision-making processes induce stress that entails exploratory activities. In line with these studies, we can hypothesize that career decision-making processes -- and by extension difficulties in making decisions about one's career for example -- and career exploration processes interact with each other, with career indecision being either the precursor or the consequence of career exploration.

## 1.3. Anxiety, career indecision, and career exploration

Anxiety is usually seen either as an emotional state or as a trait. According to the classical distinction made by Spielberger (1966), state anxiety is defined as a tendency to experience anxiety in response to a situation perceived as being threatening. General trait anxiety is defined as a personality trait referring to the tendency to experience anxiety in response to a wide range of situations. The properties of the context are not taken into account in the assessment of trait anxiety. However, some theorists argue for a "person-in-context" perspective in the domain of vocational psychology and personality traits (Endler, Parker, Bagby, & Cox, 1991; Savickas, 2000). In this view, individual differences in anxiety depend on the type of threatening situational context, such as the vocational context. The tendency to experience anxiety in one type of threatening situation is relatively independent of the tendency to experience anxiety in other types.

However, the societal context specific to the 21st century is defined by a new social arrangement of work and a more uncertain labor market (Savickas et al., 2009). The current situation facing young people entering the working world in Europe, and notably in France, is worrisome. Having a diploma or degree helps in preventing unemployment, but the unemployment rate of young adults is high (20–25%) and the available jobs are often temporary and low-paid (Barret, Ryk, & Volle, 2014; Goffette & Vero, 2015; Perruca, 2008). In the context of globalization, uncertainty about the future is particularly great among emerging French adults, and the young adult population constitutes a key variable for adjusting France's economy. A smaller proportion of French youths (25.5%) than American youths (54.1%), for example, feel they have promising future or are sure they will get a good job (Galand, 2008). Instability and uncertainty regarding future employment for older adolescents and emerging adults in France, and more generally in southern Europe (Galand, 2008; Perruca, 2008), can induce anxiety. In this context, decisions and transitions related to school and work are challenging situations that can lead to anxiety (Schultheiss, 2008). Moreover, future school and career anxiety tends to increase throughout normal adolescent development (Mallet, 2002).

### 1.3.1. Anxiety and career indecision

According to Newman, Gray, and Fuqua (1999), over the past three decades in the field of career psychology, there have been efforts to understand and explain the construct of career indecision. Some early studies focused on identifying the psychological correlates of career indecision (Newman et al., 1999). One of these correlates is anxiety. For Brown and Rector (2008), anxiety (trait and state) is one of several negative-affectivity factors that represent a major source of career indecision.

In earlier research, general trait anxiety was found to be positively related to career indecision (Campagna & Curtis, 2007; Corkin, Arbona, Coleman, & Ramirez, 2008; Fuqua et al., 1988; Hartman, Fuqua, & Blum, 1985; Hawkins, Bradley, & White, 1977; Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992). Several patterns of anxiety and career-indecision relationships exist (Newman, Fuqua, & Seaworth, 1989). Anxiety can be viewed as a learned response to an undecided state that is related to maturation factors or informational deficits (Goodstein, 1965). Failure to develop the specific skills for making career decisions may induce anxiety. Anxiety can also be viewed as a determining factor that inhibits the acquisition and use of the information and skills needed for career decision-making (Crites, 1974; Goodstein, 1965). As Newman et al. (1989) suggested, in the absence of clear evidence of this type of cause-and-effect relationship, these two factors may influence each other via a continuous reciprocal relationship.

While general trait anxiety is positively related to career indecision (e.g. Fuqua et al., 1988; Hartman et al., 1985), as far as we know, few studies have explored the influence of different forms of career anxiety on career indecision or career commitment (Daniels, Steewart, Stupnisky, Perry, & Lo Verso, 2011; Fuqua & Hartman, 1983; Leong & Chervinko, 1996; O'Hare & Tamburri, 1986; Weinstein, Healy, & Ender, 2002). In these studies, the participants used a modified state anxiety scale (STAY inventory, Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Luschene, 1983) to indicate how they feel when they are thinking about being decided or undecided about their career, or a scale to indicate how worried they are about their career choice (e.g., Daniels et al., 2011). The assessment of anxiety corresponds to the uncertainty involved in choosing, or to anxiety about being in an undecided state. This career-choice anxiety is

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