



# The role of ambiguity tolerance in career decision making<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The role of ambiguity tolerance in career decision making was examined in a sample of college students ( $n = 275$ ). Three hypotheses were proposed regarding the direct prediction of ambiguity tolerance on career indecision, the indirect prediction of ambiguity tolerance on career indecision through environmental and self explorations, and the moderation effect of ambiguity tolerance on the link of environmental and self explorations with career indecision. Results supported the significance of ambiguity tolerance with respect to career indecision, finding that it directly predicted general indecisiveness, dysfunctional beliefs, lack of information, and inconsistent information, and moderated the prediction of environmental exploration on inconsistent information. The implications of this study are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.

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Career decision making is a highly ambiguous process as evidenced by the lack of clear criteria for the optimal career choice and the existence of information unavailability and inconsistency in the process. Thus one could argue that individuals who can handle the ambiguity well tend to have better career decision outcomes. While there has been extensive research investigating how people should collect and utilize the information to select a career (Nauta, 2010; Spokane, Meir, & Catalano, 2000), there has been much less research investigating the effect of information unavailability and inconsistency tolerance on career decision making. The focus of this study was to examine the role of ambiguity tolerance in career decision making.

## 1. Ambiguity tolerance

Ambiguity tolerance (AT) has been defined as the way individuals perceive and respond to ambiguous situations or stimuli 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 stimuli, while those with high ambiguity tolerance perceive ambiguous situations/stimuli as desirable and interesting and do not deny or distort the complexity of incongruity.

Numerous studies in the business and organizational psychology literature have investigated the positive role of ambiguity tolerance in entrepreneur inclination and performance given the fact that entrepreneurs' job is to make decisions under ambiguity. Koh (1996) reported a strong positive relationship between measures of ambiguity tolerance and an individual's entrepreneurial inclination. Begley and Boyd (1988) also reported that established entrepreneurs had higher ambiguity tolerance than the small business managers. Wagener, Gorgievski, and Rijdsdijk (2010) and Schere (1982) supported ambiguity tolerance being a characteristic distinguishing entrepreneurs from managers as entrepreneurs will face more ambiguous and uncertain situations. Endres, Chowdhury, and Milner (2009) found support for the link of ambiguity tolerance with self-efficacy in a complex decision task,

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suggesting the positive role of ambiguity tolerance in ambiguous decision making situations. On a whole, ambiguity tolerance was portrayed by the research as an essential competency and characteristic for entrepreneurs (Morris, Webb, Fu, & Singhal, 2013; Ng, 2013), suggesting that ambiguity tolerance is related to decision making quality in conditions of ambiguity.

In addition, the research is very clear regarding the link of ambiguity intolerance with anxiety disorder symptoms. Dugas, Gagnon, Ladouceur, and Freeston (1998) demonstrated that ambiguity intolerance was pivotal in distinguishing Generalized Anxiety Disorder patients from non-clinical subjects, suggesting that ambiguity intolerance was related to excessive worry about future. In non-clinical samples research has also revealed the association of ambiguity intolerance with worry, obsessions/compulsions, and panic sensations (Buhr & Dugas, 2006; Dugas, Gosselin, & Ladouceur, 2001). Excessive worry and anxiety have been found to be the risk factors for impaired decision-making as those result in attention, memory, and interpretation biases, depletion of cognitive resources, and loss of emotional control (De Visser et al., 2010; Miu, Heilman, & Houser, 2008). Thus, one could expect that ambiguity intolerance would be associated with career decision-making in a negative way.

Given the empirical evidence for the importance of ambiguity tolerance with respect to decision making under ambiguity and the association of ambiguity intolerance with detrimental anxiety, it is plausible to suggest that ambiguity tolerance would be associated with career decision making. We proposed that people with lower ambiguity tolerance would have more anxiety in the career decision making process since ambiguity is an inevitable and crucial part of career decision making and consequently they would tend to have more career indecision. Additionally, both environmental and self explorations would be expected to mediate the relation of ambiguity tolerance with career indecision.

Environmental exploration (EE) and self exploration (SE) are emphasized in Parsons (1909) that individuals collect information about the self (e.g., interests, values, and personality) and about the vocational world (e.g., salaries, requirements, and duties), and then use the information collected in the first two steps to find an area of match. Xu, Hou, and Tracey (in press) found support for the link of both environmental and self explorations with career indecision, although the magnitude of the link was only moderate. As argued before, individuals with high ambiguity tolerance are likely to feel less anxiety in the ambiguous career exploration process. Thus it is plausible to suggest that those people tend to be more proactive in the career exploration process instead of withdrawing from it. We proposed that ambiguity tolerance indirectly predicted career indecision through both environmental and self explorations, as high ambiguity tolerance would lead to more information gathering (i.e., environmental and self explorations) and then lead to less career indecision. However, there is direct prediction of ambiguity tolerance on career indecision, which is distinct from information gathering.

The unique importance of ambiguity tolerance with respect to decision outcomes has been supported in the economics decision-making studies (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Tversky and Kahneman (1981) have shown that individuals make their decisions not only based on the information available but also based on their preference for ambiguity. This challenged the rational choice theory, which only emphasizes the information gathering and processing but ignores the inevitable information unavailability and inconsistency. The cluster analytic literature has also identified a group of informed indecisive individuals (Larson, Heppner, Ham, and Dugan, 1988). They were well informed but still reported high ambiguity in their decision-making, suggesting that ambiguity cannot be eliminated simply through getting more information but needs another coping process for a better adaptation. Therefore, we hypothesized that there is direct prediction of ambiguity tolerance on career indecision, as individuals with high ambiguity tolerance are more likely to handle the inevitable information unavailability and inconsistency well and thus result in less career indecision.

Additionally ambiguity tolerance was expected to moderate the relation of both environmental and self explorations with career indecision, because individuals with high ambiguity tolerance are more likely to use the information collected in career exploration to make a career decision, while ambiguity intolerant people might feel intimidated by the information limitedness and conflicts encountered in the career exploration process and thus get stuck in the decision process. In other words, ambiguity tolerance could adjust the effectiveness of both environmental and self explorations on career indecision.

## 2. Career indecision

However, the research has demonstrated that career indecision is not a unidimensional construct (e.g., Brown et al., 2012; Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996). Gati, Krausz, and Osipow's (1996) multidimensional model of career indecision was developed based on an adaptation of decision making theory to the context of career decisions. It proposed three overarching domains of career indecision, consisting of lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information. Lack of readiness describes career indecision due to the three indicators of lack of motivation, trait-like indecisiveness, and dysfunctional beliefs. Lack of information describes career indecision due to the four indicators of lack of information about the career decision making process, about self, about occupations, and about ways of obtaining additional information. Inconsistent information describes career indecision due to the three indicators of unreliable information, internal conflicts, and external conflicts.

There has been a good deal of data supporting the reliability and validity of this model among college students (e.g., Gati & Saka, 2001; Gati et al., 1996; Osipow & Gati, 1998). However, the previous research has also indicated that the three indicators of the lack of readiness domain diverged from each other as demonstrated in low correlations among the indicators and low alpha coefficients compared to the other two domains (e.g., Gati & Saka, 2001; Gati et al., 1996; Osipow & Gati, 1998). This suggested that lack of readiness was not a sound factor. Instead, lack of readiness should be treated more as three distinct indecision types. Based on these previous findings, we specified and adopted a revised model in the current study by breaking down the lack of readiness domain into three indecision types, anticipating that it could achieve a better model-data fit. There would be five domains of career indecision in this revised model, consisting of lack of motivation, general indecisiveness (RI), dysfunctional

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