



Indecisiveness and career indecision: A test of a theoretical model



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ABSTRACT

Research on career indecision has emphasized the need to distinguish between normative indecision, which corresponds to a developmentally-appropriate state, and indecisiveness, a persistent problem in making decisions across multiple dimensions. This distinction is important in order to design appropriate interventions. These two types of indecision are related with two dimensions (decided–undecided and decisiveness–indecisiveness) that, if conceptualized as orthogonal, result in a diagnostic scheme with four groups (high or low in career decidedness and high or low in indecisiveness). The aim of this study was to test whether the four groups could be distinguished from each other with regard to cognitive and affective variables that have been used in career indecision research. A descriptive discriminant analysis was employed with a sample of secondary school students. The grouping variable effects of two significant functions are described and implications for career counseling and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Career indecision, defined by Kelly and Lee (2002) as “the inability to specify an educational or occupational choice” (p. 322), is a classical topic of theoretical debate and research in vocational psychology (Crites, 1969; Gati et al., 2011; Holland & Holland, 1977; Osipow, 1999; Santos, 2007; Slaney, 1988). Initially, career indecision was conceptualized as a dichotomous construct (decided or undecided). However, from the mid-1960s, some authors began to sustain that career undecided individuals could present different profiles. A previous assessment of its characteristics was particularly important in order to provide appropriate intervention for clients with different needs.

Two main types of career indecision were identified. The first was *developmental indecision*, a transitory phase of the vocational decision-making process. This type of indecision is considered a normative period of development and can be seen as the inevitable consequence of a stage of career exploration, according to career developmental theories (Super, 1957; Tiedeman, 1961). The second type of indecision, *indecisiveness*, also called *chronic career indecision* (Fuqua & Hartman, 1983; Hartman & Fuqua, 1983), is considered a trait and is not exclusive to the career domain. It is a pervasive type of indecision that is present in other domains of life. At the same time, several psychological characteristics, suggesting less adaptive levels of psychological adjustment, were indicative that indecisiveness should not be considered a normative type of indecision (e.g., Santos, 2001).

Earlier authors (Crites, 1969, 1981; Fuqua & Hartman, 1983; Goodstein, 1972; Hartman & Fuqua, 1983; Holland & Holland, 1977; Tyler, 1969) described quite accurately indecisiveness and developmental indecision. Paul Salomone (1982) wrote a seminal article on this matter in the early 1980s. He proposed that vocational decision–indecision should be conceptualized as a construct that comprised two states: *decidedness–undecidedness* and *indecisiveness–decisiveness*. Each of these two states is

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related with two separate and independent continua. The first is a rational-cognitive state that is present when individuals face some process of choice, including a vocational one. They could be undecided for different reasons, like being involved in a process of self and environmental exploration, for example. The second is an emotional-psychological state related with developmental problems, including identity confusion, a high level of anxiety, and difficulty in making choices, no matter how individuals are helped through the decision-making process.

Van Matre and Cooper (1984) suggested a different approach to the conceptualization of career decision problems. They presented a diagnostic scheme based on two primary dimensions along which career decision problems can occur. The first is the *Decided–Undecided State*, a transitory level of indecision that is present in all decision processes. The second is the *Decisiveness–Indecisiveness Trait* and refers to a more stable proneness regarding decision-making tasks. Individuals may range from very high to very low in these two dimensions. Contrary to Salomone's (1982) proposal, they suggested that the two dimensions could be conceptualized as orthogonal. Hence, there were four quadrants in which clients could be included. The authors believed that the combination of the two dimensions could comprise almost all cognitive, affective, and behavioral difficulties that career counselors encountered in counseling situations that involved career decisions.

The originality of this proposal is the combination resulting from high indecisiveness and high decidedness. "Clients who are located at the negative end of the decisiveness dimension and the positive end of the decided continua (...) have usually made a temporary career decision. Due to their general indecisiveness, however, they are likely to experience ambivalence over their choice and return to a state of vocational indecision" (Van Matre & Cooper, 1984, p. 637). We know that indecisive individuals reveal high levels of anxiety (Goodstein, 1972; Salomone, 1982) and that this variable is a strong predictor of indecisiveness (Santos, 2001). We postulate that for some indecisive students the choice of a career, without exploring a full range of career alternatives, could serve to lower anxiety in the process. However, as Van Matre and Cooper (1984) suggested, satisfaction with the choice may remain low and high levels of choice instability may persist, an idea that has since received empirical support. Nauta (2007) showed that indecisive students were less satisfied with their majors in college. Two longitudinal studies (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2011; Germeijs, Verschueren, & Soenens, 2006) presented empirical evidence showing that indecisiveness at the beginning of the 12th grade had a negative impact on the degree of commitment to the chosen university course at the end of the year and after students had entered college. Low levels of commitment, in its turn, predicted higher levels of choice instability. This means that even when indecisive individuals do select an option, they are less committed to their choice and they change the options they had previously chosen more often. They could be considered a risk group in terms of their career decision process. However, empirical studies on this topic are rather scarce.

To the best of our knowledge, the Van Matre and Cooper (1984) diagnostic scheme has yet to be empirically tested. We think that there are two main reasons that could explain this fact. The first is related with the absence of instruments to assess the two dimensions when the article was published, in particular indecisiveness. As the authors mentioned at the time: "it is important to further develop practical assessment tools to supplant clinical judgment of these factors" (p. 639). The second is associated with the conceptualization of indecisiveness itself, identified with the difficulty of making decisions. However, several authors suggested that indecisiveness should be studied before, during, and after a decision is made. Post-decision dysfunctional behaviors and emotions, like worrying, checking, regretting decisions that were made, and choice instability, are now considered important facets of the indecisiveness construct (see Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002; Rassin, 2007).

Descriptive discriminant analysis (DDA) was the statistical method used to analyze the data (see Betz, 1987; Sherry, 2006), since the model we wanted to test is taxonomic. DDA involves statistical analysis in which a group of variables can be described more parsimoniously to examine differences between previously defined groups. In the words of Sherry (2006):

In DDA, dependent variables are linearly combined to create a synthetic or composite variable that separates or maximally differentiated the groups. Because of this, the DDA technique tends to emphasize group differences and to deemphasize group similarities because variables on which group differ are generally weighted more heavily (p. 665).

In order to select the variables used in our study, beyond career decidedness and indecisiveness, the two structural dimensions of the Van Matre and Cooper model, our choice was based on those that have been identified as more characteristic of indecisiveness. These include high levels of anxiety (Chartrand, Robbins, Morrill, & Boggs, 1990; Fuqua & Hartman, 1983; Goodstein, 1972; Hartman, 1990; Hartman & Fuqua, 1983; Heppner & Hendricks, 1995; Jones, 1989; Lancaster, Rudolph, Perkins, & Patten, 1999; Lucas & Wanberg, 1995; Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992), low self-esteem (Chartrand et al., 1990; Crites, 1981; Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002; Lucas & Wanberg, 1995; Salomone, 1982; Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992), external locus of control (Fuqua & Hartman, 1983; Hartman & Fuqua, 1983; Johnson, 1990; Salomone, 1982; Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992), and a poorly defined sense of identity (Chartrand et al., 1990; Fuqua & Hartman, 1983; Hartman, 1990; Hartman & Fuqua, 1983; Johnson, 1990; Salomone, 1982). Based on these studies, the variables selected were anxiety, self-esteem, locus of control, and vocational identity, as the most likely to contribute to group separation in the DDA.

Vocational identity was selected as the variable for identity, since it seems to play a pivotal role in identity formation when compared with other domains of the identity construct. As Erikson (1968) stated: "In general it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which most disturbs young people" (p. 132). According to Skorikov and Vondracek (1998), development in the vocational domain seems to be the driving force of identity development of youth in the context of industrialized countries.

The aim of this study was to empirically test the Van Matre and Cooper (1984). In particular, we wanted to verify if some previously chosen variables of a cognitive and affective nature could distinguish the four groups as defined by the levels of career decidedness and indecisiveness and explore their implications for career interventions.

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