Effects of parental expectations and cultural-values orientation on career decision-making difficulties of Chinese University students

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of cultural-values conflict and parental expectations on the career decision-making difficulties of university students in three cities in China (Beijing, Wuhan, and Hong Kong, N = 1342). The Multidimensional Scales of Individual Traditionality and Modernity (Yang, Yu, & Ye, 1989) were used as a measure of cultural-values conflict and cultural orientation. The Living-Up-to Parental Expectation Inventory (Wang & Heppner, 2002) was used to measure parental expectations. The Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (Gati & Saka, 2001) was used as a dependent measure. It was found that levels of cultural-value conflict were associated with higher levels of career decision-making difficulties for students in the Chinese Mainland cities but not for students in Hong Kong. Perceived parental expectations and perceived self-performance in the expected areas were found to be predictive of career decision-making difficulties. Cultural-value orientation, especially endorsement of Chinese traditional values, was found to moderate the relationship between parental expectation and career decision-making difficulties. Theoretical, research and practical implications of findings were discussed.

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Vocational psychology scholars have observed that there is a need for vocational psychology to integrate cross-cultural and international perspectives into its theory, research, and practice (Athanasou & Esbroeck, 2008; McMahon & Yuen, 2009). Theories of career development were developed in Western countries, and they are limited in their capacity to address indigenous constructs and issues that are salient in other geographic regions (Leung & Chen, 2009; Leung et al., 2009). Moreover, career development research tended to rely on samples that are restricted in cultural and geographic diversity, thereby limiting the generalization of findings across cultures. In order to enrich the cross-cultural foundation of vocational psychology, it is imperative that contextual and culture-specific variables be included in research and conceptual formulations (Savickas, 2007). This study aims to fill this gap through examining the effects of cultural-values conflict and parental expectation on the career decision-making difficulties of Chinese university students.

Relational considerations and parental expectations

An important theoretical position of this study is that career choice and development should be examined in the context of the close relationships that characterize Chinese communities. Many vocational researchers have underscored the importance of conceptualizing studies that examine the interface between work and relationships (e.g., Blustein, 2001; Keller & Whiston, 2008; Richardson, 1993; Whiston & Keller, 2004). In a seminal article on work and relationships, Blustein (2001) asserted that "one of the most important and relevant contextual factors is that working is inherently social for most people" (p.180). The call to examine

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the interface between work and family, however, has not resulted in a significant increase in the amount of empirical work in that direction, especially studies on young adolescents. For instance, Whiston and Keller (2004) reviewed the literature on the influence of family on career development and observed that (a) there were few studies that examined the linkage between specific parental behaviors (e.g., aspirations and expectations) and adolescent career development, (b) the mechanisms that parents influenced adolescent career development were seldom explored, and (c) most studies used Caucasian samples.

A relational perspective encompassing the influence of family on career development is critical in Chinese communities. Indeed, in many Asian and Chinese communities, career choice and work-related issues could seldom be separated from relationship issues. Family-related considerations and expectations could create conflicts and dilemmas yet at the same time inject vital meanings and support to the individual (Young, Valach, Ball, Turkel, & Wong, 2003). For example, Fouad et al. (2008) found that family influenced career decision-making and shaped the values that Asian American participants placed on work and career. Examples of qualitative themes on family influences found in this study were family expectations, family support, family obligations, family as a safe in-group, family expectations of the role of work, and friction between family and U.S. cultures.

Cultural-values conflict and cultural orientation

A second conceptual theme examined in this study is Chinese cultural-values conflict and cultural orientation. Economic globalization and rapid advancement in information technology have accelerated the speed of social and cultural transformation in Chinese communities in Asia. Whereas the traditional cultural pillars of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism still maintain a strong foothold in these communities, individuals are also exposed to Western cultural values in their everyday lives. Confucian relational ethics encourages individuals, especially young persons to fulfill their parents' expectations and obey their wishes, to show respect to parental figures, and to maintain interpersonal harmony through their choices and actions. In contrast, Western cultural values often encourage individuals to be independent in their thinking, judgment and choices, and to pursue personal goals and career fulfillment. Indeed, Yang (1996) commented that "in the past 100-plus years China has undergone the biggest political, economic, social, and cultural changes of the five millennia of Chinese history" (p.480) and that the process of societal modernization has lead to far-reaching and profound psychological and behavioral changes. Young people who stand at the confluence between Eastern and Western cultures are bound to experience certain degree of conflicts when they make important life decisions. Accordingly, Kwan (2009) used the term collectivistic conflict to denote the "psychological tension between forsaking/asserting individualistic aspects of their self and confronting/conforming to the perceived expectations or constraints of the collective group" (p. 980). Collectivistic conflict is triggered within Chinese individuals when they try to adopt Western/ modern value orientations within the collectivistic expectations inherent in their cultural context (Hwang, 2009).

An approach to understand and examine cultural-values conflict and accommodation is through Yang's (1996, 2003) conceptualization of individual traditionality (T) and modernity (M). Yang viewed traditionality and modernity as co-existing psychological and behavioral characteristics that are manifested as diverse and potentially competing Chinese (e.g., filial piety and submission to authority) and Western culture-based values (e.g., open-mindedness and gender equality). Societal modernization would likely elevate the salience of Western cultural values, yet would not replace traditional Chinese social and cultural values. Thus, traditionality and modernity would exert concurrent influence on the psychological and behavioral functioning of Chinese individuals in varying degrees and magnitudes.

Through a process aiming to extract indigenous expression of traditionality and modernity, Yang, Yu, and Ye (1989) identified five dimensions of T and five dimensions of M. The five T dimensions were submission to authority, filial piety and ancestral worship, conservation and endurance, fatalism and defensiveness, and male dominance. The five M dimensions were egalitarianism and open-mindedness, social isolation and self-reliance, optimism and assertiveness, affective hedonism, and sex equity. The resulting scales were labeled the Multidimensional Scale of Chinese Individual Traditionality (MS-CIT) and the Multidimensional Scale of Chinese Individual Modernity (MS-CIM). The MS-CIT and MS-CIM would be administered "under the assumption that individual T and M are two separate, independent, multidimensional psychological syndromes" (Yang, 2003, p.266).

Individual traditionality (T) and modernity (M) offered a set of indigenous, useful constructs to understand the effects of cultural-value conflict on career development. In this study, we conceptualize those individuals with high scores on both the T and M scales derived from the MS-CIT and MS-CIM (defined as scoring at 67th percentile or above on both scales; Cell A in Table 1) as participants who experience high cultural-values conflict. We conceptualize those individuals who showed a significantly higher preference on one scale over the other (T or M scores; Cells C and G in Table 2) as participants who experience low cultural-values

Table 1
Conceptualization of cultural conflicts based on Modernity (M) and Traditionality (T) Scores derived from the MS-CIM and MS-CIT.

	High T score (67th to 100th percentile)	Medium T score (34th to 66th percentile)	Low T score (33rd percentile or lower)
High M Score (67th to 100th percentile)	(A) High conflict	(B) Medium conflict	(C) Low conflict
Medium M score (34th to 67th percentile)	(D) Medium conflict	(E) Medium conflict	(F) Medium conflict
Low M Score (33rd percentile or lower)	(G) Low conflict	(H) Medium conflict	(I) Medium conflict

Note. MS-CIM = Multidimensional Scale of Chinese Individual Modernity. MS-CIT = Multidimensional Scale of Chinese Individual Traditionality.