



Parents' role in adolescents' decision on a college major: A weekly diary study[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study examined 39 adolescents during their transition to university. In standardized weekly diaries over several weeks ($M = 8.13$) adolescents reported on engagement in career exploration (in-breadth and in-depth self and environmental exploration), their parents' transition-related involvement (frequency of conversations, support, and interference), and their satisfaction with how the transition progressed. The results showed that exploration largely fluctuated across weeks, whereas parent involvement was more stable. Family members' engagement varied according to the phase of the application process the adolescent was involved in. The more adolescents explored during a given week, the more they talked to their parents, and the more supportive parents were. Associations between interference and exploration differed by type of exploration. Both exploration and support contributed to higher satisfaction.

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Introduction

At career transitions, individuals can engage in a variety of adaptive behaviors (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010; Nurmi, 2004; Savickas, 2005). For example, when adolescents invest effort in finding a job or apprenticeship after finishing school or when they emphasize transition-related goals, they are more successful in finding a suitable position (Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008; Nurmi, Salmela-Aro, & Koivisto, 2002). In the same vein, when adolescents engage in career exploration, that is, think about their occupational interests and examine the world of work, they are subsequently better adjusted in their university studies or vocational training (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Kracke & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2001). Moreover, the more engagement youths show during educational or career transitions, the more satisfied they are with their choices (Schindler & Tomasik, 2010) and the higher is their well-being (Haase et al., 2008). As the focus of previous research has been mainly on adolescents' engagement and its outcomes, less is known about how this engagement is complemented and affected by what significant others do (cf. Heckhausen et al., 2010). In adolescence, parents are youths' main partners when it comes to deciding on their future career path (Tynkkynen, Nurmi, & Salmela-Aro, 2010). Whereas some evidence has demonstrated that parents influence the kinds of goals youths set and engage in, the evidence on parents' role for adolescent exploration is comparably scarce (Nurmi, 2004). Regarding the design of existing studies, only cross-sectional and longitudinal studies with rather long time intervals between measurement points have been conducted on the topic. While exploration has been suggested to be a highly fluid behavior (cf. Porfeli & Skorikov, 2010), there is a lack of research demonstrating this situational variability. In this study, we examined how youths' engagement in terms of career exploration fluctuated in the transition period between the end of school and the beginning of university studies and how the adolescents perceived their parents being involved in this process. We employed a weekly diary

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intensive longitudinal design with adolescents making the transition from high school to college in Germany. First, we examined the extent to which adolescent and parent engagement fluctuated from week to week. Second, we studied how adolescent engagement was complemented by parent involvement on a general level, as well as on the level of specific situations. And third, we investigated whether youths' engagement paid off in terms of higher satisfaction with the choice process and whether parents' involvement also contributed to it.

Career exploration and its consequences

Career exploration in adolescence has been described as deliberate and purposeful actions of seeking and processing information that people engage in to enhance their knowledge of the self and the outer world with respect to future career (Blustein, 1992; Taveira & Moreno, 2003). This implies that individuals can engage in several forms of career exploratory activities (e.g., Gati & Asher, 2001; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006; Porfeli & Skorikov, 2010; Taveira & Moreno, 2003). First, individuals can engage in self-exploration and reflect on their interests, abilities, career goals, or values. Second, they can explore the opportunities in the labor market or various educational and career options (environmental exploration). Third, they can collect very broad information either towards the self or towards the world of work (in-breadth exploration). And fourth, they can look for detailed information on particular occupational options and think thoroughly about how well they would fit in that occupation (in-depth exploration).

In accordance with the career theory by Super (1990), career exploration increases during the high school years (Creed, Patton, & Prideaux, 2007) and particularly before making a career transition (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006). Furthermore, past longitudinal research revealed differential associations between the above mentioned facets of career exploration and several indicators of positive career development. In line with theories on identity formation (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006), in-depth exploration has been shown to be associated with positive outcomes, such as decreases in career indecision and increases in career confidence, planning, and commitment (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006; Porfeli & Skorikov, 2010). In-breadth exploration, on the other hand, has been described as less adaptive (Luyckx et al., 2006). However, there are ambiguous findings in the career domain: in line with Luyckx et al.'s theorizing, Porfeli and Skorikov (2010) found a less favorable relationship pattern between in-breadth exploration and indecision and confidence and planning. By contrast, Germeijs and Verschueren (2006) found positive relationships between in-breadth environmental exploration during the last high school year and positive career development.

In accordance with developmental theories of motivation (Heckhausen et al., 2010; Nurmi, 2004; Salmela-Aro, 2009), which propose that individuals profit from phase-adequate engagement, career exploration has been found to predict adjustment after the transition from high school to university, such as commitment to university studies and academic motivation (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007). Developmental motivation theories also propose that individuals profit from phase-adequate engagement in terms of well-being and satisfaction. While this relationship has been demonstrated for goal engagement in general (e.g., Haase et al., 2008; Schindler & Tomasik, 2010), we are not aware of any evidence to suggest such benefits concerning career exploration.

The longitudinal studies described above were based on designs with intervals of at least several months between the measurement points (e.g., Creed et al., 2007; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006; Porfeli & Skorikov, 2010). Such designs offer valuable insights on the macro-level of development (Lichtwarck-Aschoff, van Geert, Bosma, & Kunnen, 2008) but are not informative about development on the micro-level while making career-related choices, such as college major choice. In fact, the PIC model of career decision-making (Gati & Asher, 2001) suggests that career exploration could be a highly fluid behavior (see also Porfeli & Skorikov, 2010). To the best of our knowledge, however, no attempt has been undertaken to track short-term fluctuations of career exploration. Yet studying situational or within-person variation in adolescents' exploration would enable researchers to understand the actual processes of engagement during particular transitions (cf. Mroczek, Spiro, & Almeida, 2003). In doing so, this within-person variability could also be predicted by specific characteristics of the situations. For example, Heckhausen et al. (2010) proposed that goal engagement increases when individuals approach a deadline. One could assume micro-cycles of goal striving consisting of different phases that predict the level of engagement in a specific situation.

The role of significant others, such as parents, in shaping adolescent behavior during transitions can also be understood in greater detail when distinguishing interactions in specific situations from variability in the relationships of parents and children living in different families.

The role of parents in adolescents' career-related transitions

The application of Bowlby's (1969) assumptions about the attachment–exploration link in childhood to career development during adolescence has been popular during the last two decades (cf. Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995; Grotevant & Cooper, 1988). Both cross-sectional and recent longitudinal researches have confirmed that attachment to parents indeed seems to foster higher engagement in exploration (Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2009). Even attachment assessed in early childhood predicted career exploration during the adolescent years (Roisman, Bahadur, & Oster, 2000). But how does a positive relationship quality translate into specific behaviors?

To address this question, Dietrich and Kracke (2009) developed the parental career-related behavior scales which tap several types of parental involvement, such as support (i.e., freedom of choice while offering support if needed) and interference (i.e., parental controlling of adolescents' career-related actions and choices). Focusing on specific parental behaviors particularly allows one to study processes of what has been called co-development (Nurmi, 2004) or co-agency (Salmela-Aro, 2009). In line with

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