



Chance events in career development: Influence, control and multiplicity

Jim E.H. Bright^{a,*}, Robert G.L. Pryor^a, Eva Wing Man Chan^b, Jeniyanti Rijanto^b

^a School of Education, Career Education and Development, Australian Catholic University, 4/9 Ponderosa Parade, Warriewood, Sydney, NSW 2102, Australia

^b School of Psychology, University of New South Wales, NSW, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This article reports three studies on the nature and impact of chance events. The first study investigated chance events in terms of the dimensions of influence and control. The second and third studies investigated the effects of multiplicity of chance events on career development in terms of respondents' own careers and then in terms of career scenarios. Results indicated that chance events can be characterized by the interactive influence of influence and control. High influence and low control chance events had the biggest impact on career development. When there is a connection between multiple chance events, the impact is greater than when unrelated chance events occur. The finding was confirmed regardless of whether individuals rated their own experiences or those presented in scenarios. However, it was also found that negative outcome chance events had the greatest impact regardless of whether such events were single or multiple influences on individuals' careers. The results provide further support for the integration of chance events into the Chaos Theory of Careers.

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1. Introduction

Career theorists have given limited attention to chance events. Crites (1969) accident theory, Osipow's (1973) chance theory of vocational selection, and Pryor and Bright's (2003) Chaos Theory of Careers have recognized the presence and influence of chance on career decisions. However, apart from other sporadic efforts such as Chen (2005), Miller (1983) and Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz (1999), the impact of chance or unplanned events on career development has been neglected or at least underestimated. Most career development literature has tended to emphasize the agentic propensities of individuals to make career decisions and to proactively construct their careers (e.g. Savickas, 2005).

Research on chance in career development has focused on a range of topic areas: incidence, attribution, diverse populations, event categories, multiplicity effects, and dimensionality.

1.1. Incidence of chance events

Roe and Baruch (1967) conducted a study on 30 participants from different work professions and found that most participants attribute their career influences to a myriad of chance events. Likewise, Hart, Rayner, and Christensen (1971) examined the career histories of 60 men at different occupational entry levels and found that the vocational histories of skilled and semi-skilled workers were often influenced by chance events. In a study of 917 nonprofessional workers, Salomone and Slaney (1981) found that chance events were perceived to have an impact on the workers' vocational decisions. Scott and Hatal-

* Corresponding author. Fax: +61 299860411.

E-mail addresses: jimbright@me.com, jim@brightandassociates.com.au (J.E.H. Bright).

la (1990) also found similar results in a study on the career patterns of college educated women. Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, and Earl (2005) identified chance events among the major influences on students' career development.

1.2. Attribution of events to chance

According to the fundamental attribution error, people have a tendency to underemphasize situational factors when making attributions about their actions (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Caplow's (1954) study concluded that error and accident often have a greater impact on their careers than their participants were willing to concede. Bright, Pryor, and Harpham (2005) tested individuals' response attributions against locus of control and concluded that these attributions for chance events could not be accounted for by attribution factors alone. However, Bright et al. (2005) did find some relationship between locus of control and chance events such that people who tended to attribute causes to factors beyond their own control ("externals") were more likely to report chance events. Although this effect alone cannot account the reporting of chance events, it does suggest that there may be some scope to alter individual's attitudes to chance events which is consistent with Gelatt's notion of positive uncertainty (Gelatt, 1991).

1.3. Diverse populations

Betsworth and Hanson (1996) found that in their sample of older adults, 63% of men and 58% of women indicated that their careers were influenced by chance events. Similarly, Williams, Soeprapto, Like, Touradji, Hess and Hill (1998) found that 13 academic women in counseling psychology also indicated that their career choices were significantly influenced by at least one chance event. Bright et al. (2005) with a survey sample of 772 high school and university students found that 69% of the students reported that chance events had some influence on their career decisions. These studies indicate that the influential effect of chance on career decisions can be found across a diverse group of individuals.

1.4. Multiple chance events impact

Guindon and Hanna (2002) found that through the use of case studies that participants revealed accounts of the presence and influence of a series of connected chance events on their career paths. Williams et al. (1998) observed the presence of multiple chance events reported by some participants in their study on career development. Wiseman (2003) also observed the influence of multiple linked chance events on some of his participants' career choices. Thus while the incidence of multiple chance events on careers appears evident from these studies there has been no research to investigate the impact of single chance events in comparison with multiple chance events on individuals' careers. Also the issue of whether there is a difference of impact if multiple chance events are perceived as connected or discrete, has not received empirical attention. The current research seeks to investigate both these issues and also sought to take into account whether there were differences across these conditions depending on whether the chance events were either positive or negative for individuals' careers.

1.5. The dimensionality of chance events

In the Betsworth and Hanson (1996) study, participants were requested to remember "influential" events and typically give examples beyond their control. Recall measures are generally regarded as indicating that the material recollected is more readily available in memory because it either better encoded due to its relevance or its relationship to pre-existing memory schemas or because the material or similar material has been recalled more recently (e.g. Baddeley, 1990). However, to date there has been no research which establishes that influence and control are actual perceived dimensions of chance events nor on their relative and interactive importance. The research to be presented also addresses these issues.

Further the current research also investigated whether there were differences in the perceived career impact for positive outcome chance events in comparison with negative outcome chance events. We also wanted to research whether such outcome effects might alter the impact of the other issues being addressed in this research.

Research to date on the role of chance events in career development has been sporadic and despite occasional calls for further research, little has been forthcoming. While many theories of career choice acknowledge the existence of chance events in careers there has been little theoretical or empirical investigation of the nature, structure and impact of such events. While the theoretical gap in our understanding of chance events in careers is addressed in the CTC, significant further empirical work is also required to address this gap. The studies reported here are an attempt to address this gap and they represent an extension of Bright et al.'s (2005) empirical investigation of chance events in careers, through a closer consideration of the nature, structure and perception of chance events.

Therefore the three studies reported below sought to investigate the perceived relative importance and impact on individuals' careers of the levels of influence and control of both positive and negative multiple chance events as well as the perceived levels of connection between multiple chance events.

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