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The Impact of Vocational and Personality Factors on Career Development of First-Year College Students

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In 1969, Super wrote that adolescents are in a crucial stage of exploring and confirming their career plans. Fast forward 30 years and Arnett's (2000) research has concurred with Super and suggested that the emerging adults of today view their career potential as limitless, with or without career planning. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999–2000) has predicted that by the year 2008, 12 of the 20 fastest growing occupations will require an associate degree or higher. Thus, it is necessary that vocational planning views individuals' needs through the career decision-making stage they are in, their interests, and unique personality variables (Borchard, 1995). One must be interested in one's vocational pursuits and qualified to meet the demands of the job to attain the best person-environment fit possible. For many, both interest and ability are marked on a continuum. How individuals perceive themselves as fitting into their environment plays a role in understanding first-year college students' career development as it relates to career decision making. Okun and Finch (1998) found that college students who experienced a good fit within their environment and self-understanding also reported having an educational plan (i.e., a declared major), which ultimately led to increases in retention rates at the university level.

The average freshman-to-sophomore retention rate is 76 % (Hood, Davis-Burns, & Balzer, 2000). Today, universities are expending money and effort to identify what could decrease departure rates from their universities. A national study developed by the Student Support Services (SSS) program, a federal program developed to increase the college retention rates of individuals who are first-generation college students, disadvantaged, or disabled, identified five features of successful retention programs. These programs had (1) a project-designed freshman year experience for most or all participants, (2) an emphasis on providing academic support for developmental and popular freshman courses, (3) extensive student service contacts, (4) targeted participation recruitment and participation incentives, and (5) dedicated staff and

directors with strong institutional attachments. Having access to career exploration and planning opportunities was embedded into this system and vital to their success (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Understanding career decision-making variables, personality dimensions, and vocational personality variables in the process of career development appears to be important for emerging adults in higher education. Access to this information will assist school counselors and college career counselors in developing career planning resources that are more aligned with students' needs. In essence, understanding the level of fit between a person and his or her environment would not only improve personal self-awareness but also assist students in better utilizing their time and resources in college, which could potentially decrease the length of time necessary to complete a degree and the overall cost of the degree, and ensure an individual's timely entry into the workforce.

As such this study sought to discover the extent career decision making, as assessed by the Career Factors Inventory (CFI; Chartrand & Robbins, 1997), was influenced by an emerging adult's sex (male/female) or college major (undeclared/declared). This study also sought to determine the relationships among these career decision-making variables, personality variables as assessed by the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992), and vocational personality variables as assessed by the Self-Directed Search (SDS; Holland, 1985) for young men and women in their first year at a university in the southwest.

Method

There were a total of 217 participants in this study with the majority (75.5%; $n = 164$) reporting their age as being 18. Women represented 59.4 % ($n = 129$) of the population and men comprised 40.6 % ($n = 88$). Furthermore, 67.7 % ($n = 147$) stated having a declared major. Ethnic diversity reported in this study reflected that the preponderance of participants identified as Euro-American, 70.5 % ($n = 153$). All participants

completed a short demographic form and the three instruments: CFI, NEO-FFI, and SDS.

Results and Discussion

Exploratory data screening tests and procedures were conducted prior to analysis. To address the study objectives, multiple analyses of variance (MANOVA) were used to evaluate CFI subscale scores by participants' sex and major, and bivariate correlations were computed to assess relationships between career decision-making variables (CFI scores), personality factors (NEO-FFI), and vocational personality variables (SDS). Results from the MANOVA analyses indicated that perception of the need to acquire specific information about or experience in various occupations before making a career decision was essentially the same for male and female college students. Regardless of sex, both groups reported a need for greater self-understanding of career dimensions. In regards to making a career decision, self-understanding was considered equally as important as obtaining additional information about careers. Nervousness or distress factors expressed relating to career choice was also essentially similar for male and female college participants, and nervousness was no more a mitigating factor than career information or self-knowledge for either sex. Difficulty in decision making was also of no greater or lesser importance than career information, self-knowledge, or the level of nervousness felt when faced with making a career decision for males or females. However, undeclared majors, as compared to those who had declared a major, significantly expressed more of a need to acquire specific information about or experience in various occupations before making a career decision. As could be expected, seeking career counseling assistance to make a career choice may be helpful for undeclared majors.

Mortimer, Dennehy, and Lee (1992) suggested that emerging adults/ adolescents are not only impacted by social contacts but also by emerging cognitive strengths and skills, and that contemporary males and females do not differ in the importance they place on career development. Super's (1969) vocational maturity model suggested that world-of-work knowledge, career planning, and exploratory behavior predominantly influence career decision-making. Holland and Holland (1977) reported that students who exhibit vocational maturity are more likely to identify a college major than students who fall into the realm of being undecided about their major. They also indicated that elements that reflected vocational maturity are related to interpersonal competence, self-confidence, low anxiety, stable identity, and good decision-making

skills. The Career Factors Inventory (CFI) by Chartrand and Robbins (1997) parallels Super's model by seeking to assess if students have a need for career information, a need for self-knowledge, and decision-making skills related to general topics and career specific concerns. The findings in this study confirmed that male and female emerging adults have a similar need for career information and self-knowledge, and they also have similar levels of career choice anxiety and generalized indecisiveness on career decision-making factors. Major status in this study had an influence on career decision-making needs for emerging adults.

Bivariate correlational analyses revealed several small to moderate correlations among the CFI and NEO-FFI variables for both men and women. For male participants, moderate correlations exist between CFI – Career Choice Anxiety and NEO-FFI – Neuroticism and Conscientiousness on the FFI; and CFI – General Indecisiveness and NEO-FFI – Neuroticism. Moderate bivariate relationships were found for female students between CFI – General Indecisiveness and NEO-FFI – Conscientiousness and Neuroticism. These correlations suggested that men who are generally calm and able to deal with stress report some nervousness when faced with making a career choice and may experience feelings of guilt, anger, and sadness. Relationship also exists among men who are anxious about career selection and personality characteristics of dependability and industriousness in work settings. Both men and women in this sample who had difficulty making decisions and were inclined to worry struggled with feelings of guilt, shame, and sadness.

In terms of relationships between the CFI and the SDS, moderate correlations were found for only college males between the Need for Career Information (CFI) and the Enterprising and Conventional scales of the SDS. No correlations were found between these two groups of scales. Correlations suggested that men who are interested in acquiring additional occupational information were also inquisitive, energetic, and ambitious. The lack of relationships among these variables for female participants in this sample may be a factor of perceived societal barriers in that women may have less of a need for career information (McDonald & Hite, 1998). According to Farmer (1995), women often tend to limit their career planning and typically explore a smaller scope of career possibilities than men even though they currently make up almost one half of the work force.

Several moderate correlations were identified between NEO-FFI and SDS variables for male and female participants. Students who reported enjoying the company of others while also valuing privacy tended to be friendly, generous, and social. Men who were

outgoing also appeared to be self-confident, popular, and inquisitive. A relationship was also found among students of both sexes with characteristics of warmth, trust, and agreeableness, and being willing to explore or understand new things or events, rather than desiring to persuade others to conform to their ideas, and to work with creative ideas and self-expression. Additionally, female participants reported a link between enjoying the company of others and generally liking or being interested in people and expressing care and concern for others.

The relationships present between the CFI, NEO-FFI, and SDS variables are substantiated in Erikson's work (1968), where adolescents (emerging adults) are in a state of identity development versus role confusion, which leads them to naturally question their surroundings and their role in the future. Career theorists have long suggested that individuals are more likely to be satisfied when they are following career paths that match their interests and values (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984).

Implications for Practice

Providing career exploration opportunities for emerging adults will not only enhance their knowledge about potential career opportunities, but also lead to a reduction in career choice anxiety. Young men and women entering college would benefit from exposure to self-awareness opportunities as a component to creating a strong person-environment fit at their new universities, which can be important to overall happiness and retention and likelihood of obtaining a college degree. An entry-level freshman course provided in the fall semester upon entry into college, or through an enrichment opportunity or a summer connection program for freshman, could provide opportunities for a more genuine self-assessment experience related to understanding one's level of need for career information, personality characteristics, and exposure to vocational personality measures. Through small group discussions and individual sessions, students could be provided accurate self-assessment information which would lead them to being positioned to make autonomous, informed life decisions, with the knowledge that they are in a constant state of growth and development, and result in the exploration of a career path in their futures.

Prior to entering college, students would benefit from career information, self-awareness activities, and exposure to various career exploration activities. All of this can be provided by school counselors in conjunction with classroom teachers under the umbrella of comprehensive competency-based guidance (CCBG)

which is developmental and pledged to provide services to all students K-12. CCBG is an inclusive model that encourages the open discussion of cross-cultural, socioeconomic, and gender concerns in three domains: personal, academic, and career counseling. Whether in high school or entering the world of higher education, students would benefit from exposure to career decision-making information.

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