



Antecedents of career exploration among Hong Kong Chinese university students: Testing contextual and developmental variables[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In this study we investigate the antecedents of career exploration. We apply the perspectives of Flum and Blustein [Flum, H., & Blustein, D. L. (2000). Reinvigorating the study of vocational exploration: A framework for research. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 56, 380–404] for the first time in Hong Kong, and we also test culture-specific factors in exploration. A quantitative research study was conducted with Chinese students from a university in Hong Kong over a period of up to six months to examine relationships between career exploration and its antecedent variables. Data were obtained from a cross-sectional sample of 271 students and a longitudinal sample of 101 students who participated in either a student internship or a series of career seminars. The results demonstrated that relational support and prior career exploration were related consistently to career exploration as hypothesized, but the claim that achievement motivation is an antecedent of exploration received only limited support. The framework of Flum and Blustein [Flum, H., & Blustein, D. L. (2000). Reinvigorating the study of vocational exploration: A framework for research. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 56, 380–404] was found very relevant in our conceptualization and analysis of career exploration in the Hong Kong context. Implications of this study are discussed and suggestions are made to further extend career exploration research in Hong Kong and other Chinese societies.

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1. Introduction

The subject of career exploration interests both theorists and practitioners. It is now increasingly conceptualized broadly as a lifespan process underlying career learning and development (Blustein, 1997; Harrington & Hall, 2007; Taveira & Rodriguez, 2003), making it even more important to life-career development in the 21st Century. Building on previous research, Flum and Blustein (2000) put forward a comprehensive research framework of career exploration. They defined career exploration broadly as “including the appraisal of internal attributes and exploration of external options and constraints from relevant educational, vocational, and relational contexts” (p. 381). Career exploration is understood as “as a process with critical lifelong and adaptive functions” (p. 381) rather than a stage in career development or decision making, which includes cognitive and attitudinal components, as well as planned and unplanned activities.

Based on a view of “humans as having the capacity to self-construct and self-determine their lives, contingent naturally on the social and cultural factors, which can inhibit and/or facilitate the exploration process” (p. 399), Flum and Blustein (2000) employed the perspectives of identity formation and human motivation, as well as the explicit consideration of

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contextual and historical contexts to examine career exploration. Specifically, they adopted literature broadly from theories of ego-identity (Erikson, 1968; Berzonsky, 1992; Marcia, 1966) and self determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to inform the process of career exploration. From their framework, those who are intrinsically motivated (as opposed to extrinsically motivated) and have achieved a self constructed (as opposed to conferred) identity tend to engage in self-determined or autonomous exploration. Moreover, career exploration is also framed by the immediate relational, cultural and historical contexts, which may inhibit or facilitate exploration, as well involving the meaning making process in exploration.

Flum and Blustein (2000) contributed significantly by extending the definition and scope of career exploration to reinvigorate the study of vocational exploration in the 21st Century. Given this context-rich, comprehensive approach, the model can potentially be applied in a different culture to explain autonomous exploration behavior by individual and contextual factors. The research framework (Flum & Blustein, 2000) outlines key perspectives and broad directions for future career exploration research and it provides plenty of room to test different variables in the domains of antecedents, process and consequences of career exploration. To the best of our knowledge, there is no major effort to test the relations among antecedents, process and outcomes in this framework of career exploration in Hong Kong and other Chinese societies. This is a first endeavor to test specific motivational and contextual factors of exploration in the Hong Kong context.

1.1. The Hong Kong context

Hong Kong is a large cosmopolitan city with a population of over 6.9 million (Census & Statistics Department, 2008) and GDP Per Capita US\$ 29,900 (Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 2008) under Chinese sovereignty. Citizens have been accustomed to Western-style administration, education, and rule of law and generally have a very Westernized outlook. According to the Government's population census (Census & Statistics Department, 2006), 95% of the citizens are ethnic Chinese. Local China citizens still keep Chinese traditions and customs, with strong identification to the Chinese ethnicity and culture. In the 1970s, only about 2% of the 17–20 age group entered university. In the 1990s we saw the rapid expansion of higher education in Hong Kong, with the percentage of the 17–20 age group entering university increasing from 8.6% in 1990 to 18.8% of 1996 (University Grants Committee, 1996). From the perspective of some employers, the graduates from mass university education now are of lower quality in terms of language abilities, reasoning skills and career preparation compared with the elite graduates of say 20 years ago.

From cross-cultural comparisons (Hofstede, 1984), Hong Kong Chinese, together with Chinese in Taiwan and Mainland China, incline to be collectivistic and accepting of inequality of organizational power. From indigenous theorizing, we can find that a lot of emphasis was put on the impact of social relationships on behavior (Bond, 1991). Chinese societies are highly contextual and individual needs are subordinated to social obligations (e.g. Bond & Hwang, 1986; Yang, 1981). Since social orientation and power distance are characteristic of Chinese culture, it is very likely that they also affect Chinese vocational behavior. With reference to the context-rich model (Blustein, 1997; Flum & Blustein, 2000), we aim to examine the influence of these contextual factors on career exploration.

1.2. Testing motivational variables

Adopting Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, Blustein and Flum (1999) postulated that exploration of various vocational interests is intrinsically motivated, and active exploration will result in greater ownership and an increased proportion of adaptive career behavior and attitudes. Career exploration can also be generated by extrinsic motivation so long as the exploration activities are considered functional to the implementation of one's life plan or identity. The key question to ask is how extrinsic motivation will be internalized to predict autonomous exploration. According to the self determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), the satisfaction of basic human needs for autonomy, competence or relatedness are necessary for the internalization of extrinsic motivation. As SDT included both intrapersonal and interpersonal needs (of relatedness) in accounting for autonomous behavior, it can potentially be employed to understand exploration in both individualistic and relational cultures. The relatively collectivistic concepts of self and life concerns are often reinforced in the family and societal socialization process, affecting Chinese children's motivation to achieve. In terms of achievement motivation, for instance, Yu (1996) did not think the achievement motivation of Chinese people was properly explained by McClelland's motivation theory (e.g. McClelland, 1976) which is individual oriented. In contrast to individual oriented achievement motivation of the West, Yu and Yang (1987) put forward the indigenous construct of social-orientated achievement motivation or SOAM. For SOAM, significant others (i.e. the group or society) set one's achievement goals or standards, approve the means of goal attainment and appraise final outcomes of performance. For individual achievement motivation or IOAM, the individual sets achievement goals, selects achievement behavior, and evaluates outcomes.

The pursuit of academic success by Chinese students has often been discussed in relation to their achievement motivation (e.g. Gow, Kember, & McKay, 1996; Lee, 1996; Salili, 1996), especially SOAM (Stevenson & Lee, 1996). Tao and Hong (2000) found both IOAM and SOAM to be positively associated with learning behavior in a Chinese context, with IOAM correlated with establishment of learning goals and SOAM with endorsement of learning performance. So far the construct of SOAM has not been linked to career exploration. Based on the above discussion on Chinese achievement motivation, we propose that in the relatively Westernized Hong Kong context, university students will be motivated by IOAM to career exploration just as their counterparts are in the West. On the other hand, like academic achievements, obtaining good career prospects can hon-

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