



The role of personality in the selection of a major: With and without vocational self-efficacy and interests

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of personality traits measured by the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Tellegen, 2000; Tellegen & Waller, 2008) in selecting educational majors. Personality traits were examined alone, and with the combination of Holland's hexagonal confidence domains, as measured by the general confidence themes (GCT) of the Skills Confidence Inventory (SCI; Betz, Borgen, & Harmon, 2005), and Holland's interest domains, as measured by the general occupational themes (GOTs) of the 2005 Strong Interest Inventory (SII; Donnay, Morris, Schaubhut, & Thompson, 2005). Personality traits significantly contributed to the discrimination of nine educational major families in a sample of 368 undergraduate decided students. When the set of confidence and interest scales was added to the personality traits, the conservative jack knife hit rate was almost doubled.

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1. Introduction

In vocational counseling, counselors sometimes assume that certain personality traits in a client may make her/him more or less likely to pursue a particular major. For example, extraverted clients may be seen as more likely to pursue business careers; neurotic clients may be viewed as more likely to be interested in artistic pursuits. Likewise, John Holland in his writings noted that choice of occupation and by extension, choice of educational major, is an expression of personality (Holland, 1997). Also, the role of personality traits in vocational choice actions (e.g., selection of a major) is explained in social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and forms the conceptual foundation of the study. That is, personality is a precursor to vocational choice actions and influences choice actions through domain-specific self-efficacy and interests.

The intent of this article is to examine how personality traits can help differentiate one's choice of college major. In order to accomplish this goal, it was necessary to choose a personality model that was comprehensive and yet parsimonious, in which personality traits already were shown to relate to interests closely corresponding to college majors. Including personality traits closely related to interest would be helpful for counselors to assist vocational clients in choosing majors that are consistent with their interests and personality traits. For example, an extraverted client who is socially persuasive would be well suited to choose a marketing college major. Some work relating personality and college major has come from an examination of the personal style scales of the 1994 Strong Interest Inventory (Harmon, Hansen, Borgen, & Hammer, 1994) which are global measures of preferences in living (e.g., learning environment) and working (e.g., work style) derived from interest items. The personal style scales have been shown to differentiate among college majors (Donnay, Morris, Schaubhut, & Thompson, 2005; Gasser, Larson, & Borgen, 2007; Rottinghaus, Gaffey, Borgen, & Ralston, 2006). Although information

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linking the personal style scales with choice of major is informative, it is limited due to the personal style scales being mostly related to extraversion and openness (Lindley & Borgen, 2000) and the personal style scales being related to but distinct from personality traits (see Donnay et al., 2005; Harmon et al., 1994).

1.1. Personality alone

In this study, we chose a well known personality model developed by Auke Tellegen and colleagues consisting of 11 comprehensive, nonoverlapping personality traits, which were operationalized in the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ, Tellegen, 2000; Tellegen & Waller, 2008). The 11 MPQ primary scales have several strengths in investigating the association between personality and selection of college majors. First, the 11 MPQ primary scales capture distinct personality dimensions. For example, Tellegen and colleagues differentiated extraversion into three components: (a) love/affiliation labeled the social closeness primary scale, (b) social dominance or power labeled the social potency primary scale, and (c) control versus impulsivity labeled the control primary scale (Tellegen & Waller, 2008). This distinction of extraversion into more precise nonoverlapping traits is necessary in order to differentiate college majors that are enterprising in nature and more socially dominant (e.g., marketing) from those college majors that are social in nature and more affiliative in nature (e.g., elementary education). The capacity of the MPQ's social potency and social closeness scales to differentiate between enterprising and social interests has been demonstrated in the literature (Staggs, Larson, & Borgen, 2003, 2007). Second, the MPQ's 11 personality traits have already been shown to predict specific interests that may map onto college major. For example, harmavoidance has been shown to be negatively related to realistic interests and specifically interests in mechanical activities (Staggs et al., 2003, 2007). Third, the MPQ is comprehensive and includes the Big Five as well as additional traits beyond the Big Five. Six of the 11 MPQ primary scales have been used as markers of the Big Five: namely stress reaction (neuroticism), social closeness and social potency (extraversion), absorption (openness), aggression (inverse of agreeableness), and control (conscientiousness; Blake & Sackett, 1999; Church, 1994; Tellegen & Waller, 2008). Traits not used as markers of the Big Five include wellbeing, achievement, alienation, traditionalism, and harmavoidance.

The MPQ is organized into three higher order factors, namely positive emotionality (PEM), negative emotionality (NEM), constraint, and one distinct primary scale labeled absorption. The first higher order factor, PEM, comprises an agentic and communal component (Church, 1994; Tellegen & Waller, 2008). Agentic PEM includes three primary scales and captures positive emotions (wellbeing) and interpersonal effectiveness (social potency) and noninterpersonal effectiveness (achievement). Communal PEM includes two primary scales (social potency and social closeness) and captures interpersonal connectedness (Tellegen & Waller, 2008). Three primary scales are included in NEM and encompasses negative emotions (stress reaction) and the tendency to be involved in antagonistic interpersonal transactions (aggression and alienation) (Tellegen & Waller, 2008). The constraint factor measures behavioral inhibition and includes three primary scales capturing cautiousness (control), tendency to avoid fear (harmavoidance), and conventionality (traditionalism). Finally, the primary scale, absorption, captures susceptibility to external stimuli. Although it includes both PEM and NEM, it is considered distinct (Tellegen & Waller, 2008).

No article was located related to personality traits embedded in the MPQ and the selection of college major with one exception (Ackerman & Beier, 2003). They used only three MPQ primary scales and used college majors retrospectively. They applied Ackerman and Heggstad's (1997) model to differentiate four major families. They created a trait complex *z* score for each trait complex by combining measures of specific personality traits, interests, and abilities that conceptually fit the model and that empirically loaded on the same factor. Of the three complexes, only the intellectual/cultural trait complex and the social trait complex included personality traits—absorption, social closeness, and social potency—measured by the MPQ. Their visual display showed that the trait complex *z* scores varied across the four academic major families (science/math, arts/humanities, social science, and business). One disadvantage of this study was that the authors were unable to determine the unique contribution of the specific personality traits in the separation of the four educational major families. Also, there were no majors included that would have fit within the clerical/conventional trait complex.

Although no other studies looking at college major using the MPQ were located, we identified only two additional studies that used the Big Five measured by some version of the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992). De Fruyt and Mervielde (1996) sampled university students in Belgium and showed that the Big Five using a Dutch version of the NEO-PI-R differentiated 21 majors. They did not provide mean differences or any details about the significant functions in the discriminant analysis. Larson and colleagues (2007) provided evidence that, in a Taiwanese undergraduate sample, the Big Five personality traits contributed to distinguishing among four educational majors. Significant mean differences across majors were seen on agreeableness (inverse of MPQ aggression).

1.2. Personality with self-efficacy and interests

An additional purpose of the present study was to determine if self-efficacy and interests would remain potent predictors of vocational choice after personality traits have been considered. According to SCCT, personality is a distal determinant of choice actions while vocational self-efficacy and vocational interests are more proximal determinants. The influence of vocational self-efficacy as measured by the SCI (e.g., Betz & Rottinghaus, 2006; Larson, Wei, Wu, Borgen, & Bailey, 2007; Rottinghaus, Betz, & Borgen, 2003) and interests as measured by the SII (e.g., Betz & Rottinghaus, 2006; Donnay et al., 2005; Gasser et al., 2007; Harmon et al., 1994; Rottinghaus et al., 2003) in the choice of educational major has been well

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