



Role of perfectionism and Five-Factor model traits in career indecision

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ABSTRACT

Although perfectionism has been linked to a variety of mental health problems, the relevance of perfectionism in other life domains is just beginning to receive attention. Given the evidence that personality plays an important role in career choice and adjustment, the present study evaluated whether aspects of perfectionism make any unique contribution to the prediction of career indecision beyond certain traits of the Five-Factor model that may also be related to career indecision. Results showed that both maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism accounted for unique variance in career decision-making self-efficacy beyond variance predicted by neuroticism, extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness. In contrast, only maladaptive perfectionism accounted for unique variance in certainty of career commitment beyond variance predicted by neuroticism and conscientiousness. Results are discussed in terms of perfectionism, the role of personality in career indecision, and implications for career counseling.

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1. Introduction

Although theoretical models have conceptualized perfectionism as having various dimensions, factor analytic studies have consistently found that the item content of measures is defined by just two factors (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004). The first factor, maladaptive perfectionism (MP), reflects doubts and concerns about one's decisions and the perception that others hold unreasonable expectations for one's performance. The second factor, adaptive perfectionism (AP), reflects adherence to a set of standards regarding one's level of achievement in various life domains. Research has shown that MP is linked to a number of mental health problems, while AP is related to effective coping and positive affect (e.g., Dibartolo, Li, & Frost, 2008).

Although MP and AP are associated with indices of psychopathology and adjustment, respectively, there has been little examination of the potential relevance of perfectionism for other life domains. However, recent research in vocational and industrial/organizational psychology has begun to reexamine the role of personality in understanding individual differences in unsuccessful career choice (e.g., Mount & Barrick, 1995; Tokar, Fisher, & Subich, 1998). Problems in career decision-making and commitment, or career indecision, consist of difficulties in acquiring occupational information, in identifying and evaluating alternative career options, and in selecting and committing to a single alternative. To the extent that certain personality traits facilitate or inhibit a person's engaging in successful career decision-making and commit-

ment, then identification of personality characteristics that play a critical role is important.

Although there has been some research on the role of neuroticism in career indecision (e.g., Slaney, 1988) not until recently has there been a comprehensive model of personality to guide researchers on the possible role of personality in the development of career interests and career decision-making skills. The Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Piedmont, 1998) offers an empirically validated, taxonomic model of the structure and nature of personality traits. One advantage in using the FFM in studying personality and career indecision is that it offers a comprehensive description of personality from which hypotheses can be generated regarding the relevance of particular traits for career indecision.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the unique role of particular FFM traits plus MP and AP in predicting career indecision. Although previous research in career indecision has assessed the role of some variables reflecting neuroticism (including perfectionism), this research has examined neuroticism in isolation from other FFM traits and without separating perfectionism into its two components. For instance, Leong and Chervinko (1996) found that measures of anxiety, self-consciousness, and perfectionism were inversely related to career decision-making self-efficacy. However, when aspects of neuroticism are tested outside of the full FFM, it is difficult to determine whether neuroticism should be given greater or lesser weight in predicting career indecision than other potentially relevant traits such as extraversion and conscientiousness. Also, if MP, for example, is a possible facet of neuroticism, then it is essential that its potential contribution in predicting career indecision be tested after first accounting for variance due to the higher order trait of neuroticism. Such an analysis would help determine

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whether the more specific trait of MP has relevance for problems of career indecision beyond that explained by the general trait of neuroticism.

Two variables were chosen to evaluate career indecision. The first variable was career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE) which involves the possession of self-efficacy beliefs regarding one's own decision-making competencies for such tasks as accurate self-appraisal, gathering occupational information, goal selection, and planning how to implement one's career goals (Hackett & Betz, 1981). The second variable was certainty of career commitment which is defined as a person's willingness to maintain their occupational preference in the face of obstacles, the belief that one's preference will be achieved, and forming a cognitive and emotional attachment to one's preference (Jordaan, 1983).

The first purpose of this study was to examine the unique relationships between certain FFM traits and the two indices of career indecision. Theoretical definitions derived from Piedmont (1998) were used to generate predictions of the relevance of each factor to each career indecision variable. For neuroticism (*N*), it was predicted that *N* would be inversely related with CDMSE because the negative emotions and feelings of vulnerability indicative of *N* should be related to the belief that one is less capable of performing the tasks that are necessary for successful career decision-making. Likewise, it was predicted that *N* would be inversely related with certainty of career commitment because greater negative affect and feelings of vulnerability should undermine a person's certainty about the appropriateness and the likelihood that they would achieve their career goal.

For extraversion (*E*), it was predicted that *E* would be positively related to CDMSE because the social poise and positive feelings reflected in this characteristic should increase the person's tendency to complete the tasks necessary for successful career decision-making. Likewise, it was predicted that *E* would be positively related with certainty of career commitment because an extravert is more likely to evaluate situations in an optimistic fashion thereby increasing a person's certainty that they would achieve their career goal. For openness (*O*), no unique relationship was predicted between *O* and CDMSE. Reed, Bruch, and Haase (2004) found that *O* was either unrelated or inversely related with engaging in some specific occupational exploration tasks (e.g., gathering occupational information). This finding suggests that people higher in openness may view some job exploration tasks as uninteresting compared to seeking a variety of experiences for their own sake. Consequently, because of mixed evidence no relationship was expected between *O* and CDMSE. In contrast, an inverse relationship was predicted between *O* and certainty of career commitment because there is evidence that more open people tend to have a greater number and variety of career interests (Tokar et al., 1998). Given the greater amount and diversity of their interests, it was expected that open people would have more difficulty making a commitment to a particular vocational preference.

For conscientiousness (*C*), it was predicted that *C* would be positively related with CDMSE because greater competence, organization, dutifulness, and achievement striving are requisite characteristics that insure the completion of exploration tasks which in turn should lead to stronger self-efficacy beliefs about one's decision-making abilities. In addition, it was predicted that *C* would be related to certainty of career commitment because the more deliberate, organized, and highly disciplined manner of the conscientious person should enhance this person's confidence that they have selected an appropriate career alternative that is attainable.

Agreeableness (*A*), the fifth and final FFM trait, pertains to interpersonal tendencies such as altruism, trust, modesty, and sympathy for others. We did not predict any relationship between *A*

and the two indices of career indecision because there appears to be no theoretical or empirical basis for such linkages.

The second purpose of this study was to test whether MP and AP possessed incremental validity beyond the FFM traits in predicting career indecision. Based on Hill, McIntire, and Bacharach (1997), it was assumed that MP is most closely related with *N* while AP is most closely related with *C*. It was predicted that MP would have an inverse relationship with CDMSE because concern over making mistakes and doubts about one's past actions should be associated with lower self-efficacy regarding one's ability to successfully negotiate the career decision-making process. Also, it was predicted that MP would be inversely related with certainty of career commitment because concerns about making mistakes and the perception that other people hold unreasonable expectations about making the correct choice, may result in the person remaining tentative and unattached to a particular career preference.

It was predicted that AP would be positively related with CDMSE because the tendency to adhere to a set of self-standards should facilitate successful completion of various career exploration tasks that in turn contribute to a greater sense of self-efficacy when engaging in the career decision-making process. Likewise, for certainty in career commitment, it was predicted that AP would be related to greater certainty because possession of a set of self-standards reflects the development of a person's unique identity which should enable the individual to better recognize the appropriateness of a particular career alternative for him or herself.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 212 undergraduates (119 women) who volunteered for a study involving "career decision-making" and received a \$5 remuneration. Participants had a mean age of 21.2 years ($SD = 3.56$), and 1% were freshmen, 9% were sophomores, 34% were juniors, and 56% were seniors. Among the participants, 43% were Caucasian, 22.6% were African American, 12.3% were Hispanic, 18.4% were Asian, and 2.8% classified themselves as of mixed racial background.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Five-Factor traits

The Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) has 44 items consisting of short phrases based on trait adjectives known to be indicators of the FFM traits. Respondents rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each phrase on a scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly).

John (1990) reported coefficient alphas of .84, .88, .81, .79, and .82, respectively for the *N*, *E*, *O*, *A*, and *C* scales and John et al. (1991) reported three-month test-retest reliabilities that ranged from .80 to .90. Validity evidence includes substantial convergent validity with the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa et al., 1992) and convergent validity between the BFI and a peer-rating version of the BFI (Benet-Martinez and John, 1998). In the present sample, alphas of .79, .82, .78, .75, and .79, respectively, were found for the *N*, *E*, *O*, *A*, and *C* scales.

2.2.2. Perfectionism

Maladaptive perfectionism (MP) and adaptive perfectionism (AP) scales were formed from relevant subscales of two existing measures of perfectionism (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Following Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, and Winkworth (2000), the MP scale consisted of the

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