



# Insecure attachment and career indecision: Mediating effects of anxiety and pessimism<sup>☆</sup>

Hedva Braunstein-Bercovitz<sup>a,\*</sup>, Benny A. Benjamin<sup>b</sup>, Shiri Asor<sup>a</sup>, Maya Lev<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The Academic College of Tel Aviv-Yaffo, Israel

<sup>b</sup> Israel National Employment Service, Israel

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine a theoretically-based model in which insecure attachment is related to career indecision through the mediation of negative emotions. Two hundred college students completed questionnaires measuring anxious and avoidant dimensions of insecure attachment, negative emotions (trait and career-choice anxiety, trait and career-choice pessimism), and career indecision. Path analysis indicated that anxious attachment was indirectly related to career indecision through a full mediation of career-choice anxiety and career-choice pessimism (but not through the trait emotions). Avoidant attachment was neither related to the negative emotions nor to career indecision. These findings contribute to the understanding of the linkage between internalized relationships with significant others and career planning and development, and highlight the important role that career-choice-related emotions play in the process of career decision making. In light of the findings, implications and recommendations regarding career development, career counseling interventions, and preventive measures aimed at reducing career indecision are presented.

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## 1. Introduction

Choosing a career and being committed to it is one of the central developmental challenges during adolescence and young adulthood (Super, 1980), and has long-term effects on career adjustment and individuals' well-being (e.g., Gati, Garty, & Fassa, 1996). However, career choice may be jeopardized by a variety of reasons (e.g., Kelly & Lee, 2002), resulting in career indecision, the inability to choose a career goal and to commit to it (e.g., Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996). Career indecision, frequently associated with psychological distress (Multon, Heppner, Gysbers, Zook, & Ellis-Kalton, 2001) is a relatively common state and yet remains a major concern among young adults. Given the centrality and the high prevalence of career indecision, it would be useful to better understand its antecedents in order to treat incidents of indecision more effectively, and to take relevant preventive measures.

Over the last two decades there has been a growing interest in the way that family dynamics are involved in career decision making (see Whiston & Keller, 2004, for a review). Theoretical approaches have posited that the quality of the internalized relationship with one's parents is associated with career development and career adjustment (e.g., Blustein, 2011; Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995; Lopez & Andrews, 1987), a position supported empirically (e.g., Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi, & Glasscock, 2001). The primary focus of the current paper is on the role that relationships with significant others (e.g., parents), specifically attachment, and their emotional ramifications play in career indecision.

Attachment, regarded as an emotional bond developing in the early child–parent relationship with ramifications on the nature of an individual's interpersonal relationships into adulthood (Ainsworth, 1989), has been related to career developmental

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\* Corresponding author at: School of Behavioral Sciences, the Academic College of Tel Aviv-Yaffo, 14 Rabenu Yeruham St., 68114 Tel Aviv-Yaffo, Israel.

E-mail address: [hedvab@mta.ac.il](mailto:hedvab@mta.ac.il) (H. Braunstein-Bercovitz).

variables (e.g., Vignoli, Croity-Belz, Chapeland, de Fillipis, & Martine, 2005) and to career indecision (e.g., Downing & Nauta, 2010; Tokar, Withrow, Hall, & Moradi, 2003; Vignoli, 2009). However, the manner in which attachment is linked to career decision-making difficulties has yet to be clarified. We posit that incorporating emotional/affective factors as mediators in a model linking these two variables would advance the understanding of these dynamics. This position is grounded in the following: first, negative affectivity (prone to experience distress and negative emotions) has been proposed in a recent model as one of the major sources of career indecision (Brown & Rector, 2008). Similarly, another model (Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008) demonstrated the considerable impact of negative emotional and personality-related aspects on career indecision. In addition, attachment theories view the sense of secure attachment as an inner resource which can be applied to managing and regulating negative emotions, as well as to adapting coping efficacy with life's problems, whereas insecure attachment (comprised of anxious and avoidant forms) is viewed as a risk factor for negative affectivity/emotionality and maladjustment (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Taken together, it is suggested that insecure attachment exacerbates career decision making by the mediation of negative emotional responses (i.e., insecure attachment increases the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions, which in turn exacerbate career decision-making difficulties). The value in specifying the association between these variables lies in the prospect of extending our knowledge about career indecision's antecedents, and about interventive options in career counseling among those clients characterized by an insecure attachment style. Thus, the primary goal of the current study was to examine a model which links insecure attachment with career indecision through the mediation of negative emotional indices. To the best of our knowledge, the mediation of the association between attachment orientation and career indecision by negative emotions has yet to be examined in the literature.

### 1.1. Attachment and career decision-making difficulties

Theories of career development and choice have posited that choosing a career is a process originating at the early stages of development and is subject to various contextual factors (e.g., Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Roe, 1956; Savickas, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009; Super, 1980), with some theories underscoring the role of the family of origin's relational dynamic in career decision making (e.g., Blustein et al., 1995; Lopez & Andrews, 1987). For example, Blustein et al. (1995), relying on Bowlby's theory of attachment (1982), hypothesized that internal working models of security enhance the likelihood of a clear formulation of a career self-concept, which in turn fosters career development and decision making. Indeed, previous studies have demonstrated that attachment is linked to a variety of career developmental variables. Secure attachment, characterized by trust in others and high tolerance of interpersonal closeness, was positively linked to effective career developmental indices, such as commitment to career choice (Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, & Palladino, 1991; Wolfe & Betz, 2004), college adjustment (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004), career exploration (e.g., Vignoli et al., 2005), career self-efficacy (O'Brien, Friedman, Tipton, & Linn, 2000), and career decision making (Tokar et al., 2003; Vignoli, 2009). Insecure attachment, on the other hand, was positively linked to ineffective developmental variables, such as dysfunctional career thoughts (Van Ecke, 2007), and career indecision (Downing & Nauta, 2010; Tokar et al., 2003).

However, in spite of the distinction made in the literature between the two different forms of insecure attachment, anxious and avoidant, very little is known about the way in which each of these forms (which are considered to be orthogonal) is separately related to career indecision. Attachment anxiety is characterized by doubts about self-worth, dependence on others, and enhanced negative emotions, resulting in cognitive disorganization (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), and may therefore hinder career decision making. Attachment avoidance may also impede career decision making, albeit for different reasons: attachment avoidance involves discomfort with interpersonal relationships and intimacy, blocking access to emotions, an inability to deal with inevitable adversities and to manage stressful situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Although theory predicts that both insecure forms would result in career indecision, the limited findings reported on this subject are equivocal. With respect to the anxious form, two studies have demonstrated that anxious attachment is positively related to indecision (Downing & Nauta, 2010; Tokar et al., 2003), while Van Ecke (2007) reported no significant relationship with career decision-making confusion. Avoidant attachment was either directly related to career decision-making confusion (Van Ecke, 2007), or indirectly to career indecision, by the mediation of identity diffusion (Downing & Nauta, 2010).

Based on the above theoretical arguments for an association between each attachment form and career indecision, and empirical evidence that largely support these contentions, we expected the following:

**Hypothesis 1a.** Anxious attachment is positively associated with career indecision.

**Hypothesis 1b.** Avoidant attachment is positively associated with career indecision.

### 1.2. Negative emotions: relationships with career indecision and attachment

Two recent models for career indecision underscore the role of negative affectivity/negative emotions in career indecision: Brown and Rector (2008), in a meta-analytic study of variegated potential antecedents, identified four major sources that underlie career indecision: negative affectivity/indecisiveness, lack of information, interpersonal conflicts and barriers, and lack of readiness. Based on this meta-analysis, they concluded that the negative affectivity factor proved to be the major source of career indecision, being comprised of both state- and trait anxiety, neuroticism, low self-esteem, and related aspects of depressive affect, such as external locus of control, pessimism and avoidant coping.

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