



Using narratives to explore other-directed occupational choice and academic success

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Abstract

The construct of “other-directed versus self-directed career choice” has existed for quite some time. The current focus of vocational psychologists and counselors has made them question the relevance of this construct for contemporary American society. Many counselors today challenge the assumption that a career choice based on others’ expectations is problematic. This longitudinal study utilized a logistic regression analysis to determine whether self-directed or other-directed status, as measured by the Thematic Apperception Test related to success with which individuals enacted career choices. The sample consisted of 433 BS/MD students enrolled in a Bachelor of Science-Doctor of Medicine (BS/MD) degree program at a Midwestern medical college. The findings showed that self-directed or other-directed career choice did not predict academic success.

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1. Introduction

For over 50 years career counselors and vocational psychologists have viewed individuals choosing a career based on others' expectations as a problem (Crites, 1969; Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, & Herma, 1951; Strong, 1955). Regardless of the individual's reasoning or experiences, following the directions of other people in making a career choice was considered immature, dependent, or coerced. Counselors and psychologists raised concerns that these individuals would be less likely to enact their chosen career successfully, be more likely to be unhappy in their occupation, and often face a severe identity crisis later in mid-life (Jordaan & Super, 1974). Thus, career counselors and vocational psychologists considered it good practice to challenge a person's career choice if it was rooted in the expectations of other people. These individuals should be dissuaded from pursuing others' wishes or at least encouraged to explore other options related to their own interests, skills, and abilities. Interventions should also foster individuals becoming more self-determined, independent thinking, and self-actualized (Archer, 1989). The commitment of counselors and psychologists to prefer self-directed choice over other-directed choice is also demonstrated by a litany of career research on similar topics (see Bandura, 1977; Berzonsky, 1989; Crites, 1969; Erikson, 1968; Harren, 1979; Perry, 1968; Riesman, Denny, & Glazer, 1950; Rotter, 1966; Seligman & Schulman, 1986; Weiner, 1979).

Many counselors today, however, challenge the assumption that a career choice based on others' expectations is always problematic. The bias against other-directed career choice flows from its foundation in traditional Western and modernistic approaches to decision making (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Western-centric and modernistic thought processes often discounted alternative or less rational ways of knowing and choosing (Phillips, 1997). Now, as Western societies move from a modern to a post-modern worldview, the practice of counselors giving preference to an independent and rational approach to the world will continue to become more dubious. This critical questioning, or deconstruction, seems very appropriate in the area of career choice especially when considering individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. Many cultures of the world view interdependence as a strength and asset, not as a deficit. In these cultures a basic underlying assumption is that individuals will give preference to the desires and directives of significant family members (Triandis, 1989; Triandis & Suh, 2002).

Studies are just beginning to assess cultural influences in relation to occupational choices. For example, Hardin, Leong, and Osipow (2001) stated that Asian Americans might encounter strong family expectations to pursue more prestigious careers in the fields of medicine, law, or engineering. Often these family desires and expectations exist regardless of the adolescent's own interests. For people from ethnic backgrounds where interdependence or other-directed career choice is normative, the effects of such an other-directed career choice may be negligible or even positive. Therefore, when considering career choice from this multicultural perspective, individuals who follow the normative pattern for their cultural context and choose occupations based on family expectations might be just as likely as those who independently have made their decisions to enact such career choices successfully.

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