

The Importance of Partner Involvement in Determining Career Decision-Making Difficulties

Danielle C. Brosseau
Trinity Western University
José F. Domene
University of New Brunswick
Todd W. Dutka
Trinity Western University

Abstract

Investigating the impact of systemic factors on career decision-making has become essential to ensure decision-making models remain relevant for today's workforce. The present study explored the connections between romantic partner involvement and career decision-making difficulties. Eligible participants ($N = 105$) were between the ages of 20 and 40 and currently involved in a committed romantic relationship of at least one year in duration. Hierarchical multiple regression revealed that, after accounting for gender, age and school status, level of partner involvement was a small but significant predictor of career decision-making difficulties. Limitations and implications for future research and practice are discussed.

The Importance of Partner Involvement in Determining Career Decision-Making Difficulties

Research investigating the processes of career development and decision-making has begun to move beyond individual factors to embrace contextual and relational influences (e.g., Blustein & Fouad, 2008; Collin, 2006; Spiker-Miller & Kees, 1995; Whiston & Keller, 2004). This transition reflects the continued influence of systems theory and accommodates the needs of a changing workforce. Despite this trend in the broader field, research investigating career decision-making difficulties has remained focused on probing individual characteristics alone (e.g., Kleiman, et al., 2004; Saka & Gati, 2007; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008). As Patton and McMahon (1999) and Collin (2006) have suggested, frameworks for understanding career processes that fail to acknowledge interpersonal relationships are becoming

irrelevant amidst the increasing prominence of dual-career couples.

The importance of a systemic perspective on career development has been advanced by the work of Patton and McMahon (1999). In their systems theory framework (STF), career decision-making is understood as a process occurring within a myriad of individual, social and environmental systems. As the authors suggest, STF provides a cohesive conceptual basis for the investigation of relational factors in both research and counselling settings. A small but growing body of research has investigated the intersection of systems theory and career decision-making (e.g., Chope, 2008; Hargrove, Creagh, & Burgess, 2002; Okubo, Yeh, Lin, & Fujita, 2007; Pixley, 2008; Shea, Ma, & Yeh, 2007), revealing that parental pressure and expectations are often associated with young adults' career indecisiveness. Researchers investigating multicultural career counselling have disproportionately contributed to this investigation of systemic influences on career decision-making. Unfortunately, most of these investigations have focused only on the impact of family-of-origin on career decision-making. As a result, the impact of family of procreation (i.e., spouse, committed life partner) on the career decision-making process remains inadequately delineated.

Investigation of family-to-work conflict and spillover is an exception within vocational research that has recognized family of procreation influences. This literature has focused primarily on the negative family-to-work conflicts rather than investigating the potential positive family-to-work enhancements that may be occurring (Frone, 2003). Additionally, other avenues of empirical study have explored family of procreation influences on decision-making in other life do-

main, such as health and religion (e.g., Roest, Dubas, Gerris, & Rutger, 2006; Stephens, et al., 2009). Although these streams of research suggest that family of procreation may have many important effects on individuals' decision-making, there is currently little empirical evidence delineating the impact that romantic partners have on the career decision-making difficulties of individuals.

Itamar Gati and colleagues have pioneered the measurement of career decision-making difficulties (Amir, Gati, & Klieman, 2008; Gati & Asher, 2001; Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996) and demonstrated its associations with career decision-making self-efficacy, career decision-making style (Amir & Gati, 2006), emotional and personality based facets (Saka & Gati, 2007; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008) and decidedness (Kleiman, et al., 2004). Despite these advancements, research on career decision-making difficulties has yet to investigate the influences of systemic factors such as family of procreation. In light of the theoretical position advanced by Patton and McMahon (1999) and the emerging empirical research (e.g., Pixley, 2008, Roest et al., 2006; Stephens et al., 2009), this omission represents a gap in the literature. The present study began to address this deficit by investigating the importance of partner involvement in determining the amount of career decision-making difficulties experienced by adults in romantic relationships. More specifically, it was hypothesized that a significant portion of the variance in career decision-making difficulties can be accounted for by romantic partner involvement, even after controlling for a range of individual differences (i.e., gender, age, and student status).



Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 105$; see Table 1) were recruited from an urban centre in Western Canada through a variety of advertising media including local newspapers, internet, electronic mailing lists, and via flyers posted at family/community centers, churches, and local universities. Eligible participants were between the ages of 20 and 40 ($M = 29.94$ years) and were in a committed romantic relationship (dating, common law, or married) of at least one year in duration ($M = 6.60$ years, $SD = 5.35$ years).

Measures

A self-report questionnaire was used to collect a range of demographic information, including age, gender, and student status (i.e., "student" or "not a student"). Partner involvement in career decision-making was operationally defined as participants' self-reported perception of their partner's involvement, on a 9-point Likert scale. Participants' level of career decision-making difficulty was assessed using Gati, Krausz, and Osipow's (1996) Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ). The CDDQ probes 10 areas of career decision-making difficulty: (a) lack of readiness due to lack of motivation, (b) lack of readiness due to general indecisiveness, (c) lack of readiness due to dysfunctional beliefs, (d) lack of knowledge about the process, (e) lack of information about one's self, (f) lack of information about occupations (g) lack of information about additional sources, (h) inconsistent information due to unreliable information, (i) inconsistent information due to internal conflicts, and (j) inconsistent information due to external conflicts. Consistent with previously reported levels of internal consistency (Amir & Gati, 2006), the CDDQ had a Cronbach alpha score of .91 in this sample.

Procedure

All measures were administered anonymously, using an online survey. Participants were instructed to complete the survey independently from their romantic partners and, in cases where both partners wished to participate, they were asked to avoid discussing their re-

sponses until both had completed the survey. Hierarchical multiple regression was subsequently used to test the predictive value of partner involvement on career decision-making difficulties. Post-hoc correlational analyses were then conducted to identify which of the 10 specific areas of career decision-making difficulty are most closely associated with partner involvement.

Results

Primary Analysis

Data screening revealed 3 outliers, which were removed from subsequent analyses. Test assumptions were met, with one exception: normality was violated in the response variable, making it necessary to conduct a square root data transformation. In the primary analysis, age, gender, and student status were treated as control variables and entered in the preliminary block. Partner involvement was then entered into the model. Results revealed that, after controlling for the effects of gender, age and school status, partner involvement remains a small but significant predictor of career decision-making difficulties, accounting for approximately 5% of the variance in the final model ($DR^2 = .05$, $p = .02$; see Table 2). The direction of relationship between partner involvement and career decision-making difficulties was inverse ($b = -.23$, $t = 2.37$, $p = .02$). That is, higher partner involvement was associated with lower career decision-making difficulty. Interestingly, in the final model, age was also a significant predictor ($b = -.29$, $t = 2.89$, $p = .01$). Although this was not a hypothesized relationship, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that career decision-making difficulties decreased as the age of the participants increased.

Post Hoc Analysis

Additionally, an exploratory post hoc procedure was conducted to determine whether partner involvement is more strongly associated with certain components of the CDDQ than others. Spearman's rank-order bivariate correlation was used to identify the relationships between partner involvement and career decision-making difficulties (see Table 3). Results suggest that romantic partner involvement is specifically asso-

ciated with 'lack of readiness due to dysfunctional beliefs' ($r = -.22$, $p < .05$). Additionally, the relationship with the 'lack of information about self' factor approached significance ($r = -.18$, $p = .07$).

These correlations were also completed for male ($n = 29$) and female participants ($n = 76$) separately, with results suggesting that the associations may differ by gender: For women, romantic partner involvement was only significantly associated with lack of readiness due to dysfunctional beliefs ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$) while, for men, it was only significantly associated with the career decision-making difficulty of lack of information about self ($r = -.46$, $p < .05$). The divergence of these results across gender suggest that the more involved a female's romantic partner is in the career decision-making process, the fewer dysfunctional beliefs she experiences, while involvement of a male's romantic partner decreases the lack of information about self he experiences. However, caution must be exercised when interpreting the results of the gender specific analyses, given the small size of the two sub-samples.

Discussion

Confirming the research hypothesis, the results of this study reveal that romantic partner involvement has a significant, albeit small, role in determining career decision-making difficulties. The more that partners were perceived as being involved in the process, the less career decision-making difficulty the individual experienced. Romantic partner involvement appeared to be particularly linked to two specific kinds of career decision-making difficulty: (a) dysfunctional beliefs, which Gati and colleagues (1996) describe as the process of overestimating the importance and impact of the decision, and (b) lack of information about the self, which is defined as a lack of awareness of personal strengths, weaknesses and potential. These results suggest that partner involvement is helpful for specific types of decision-making difficulties, and what it is helpful may be dependent on the decision maker's gender. These results provide preliminary support for the importance of attending



to the influence of family of procreation on the career development of adults who are in romantic relationships. The present study also provides justification for further empirical exploration of family of procreation influences within career development and decision-making conceptualizations. For instance, the contextual component of Patton and McMahon's (1999) STF, which acknowledges the influence of family on an individual's career development in a generic sense, may be enhanced by further specification of the concept of family influence. The results of this study indicate that this influence encompasses not only family of origin, which has been the focus of most previous research, but also factors related to an individual's family of procreation. Although more empirical investigation is necessary, the results of this study also suggest that Gati, Krausz, and Osipow's (1996) model of career decision-making would benefit from greater incorporation of systems theory and examination of the role that romantic partners can play in the career decision-making process. The results also suggest that romantic partner involvement is not only important but is also beneficial both in preparation and during the career decision-making process. Gati and colleagues (1996) propose that the career decision-making difficulty of dysfunctional beliefs impedes an individual's readiness to make a career decision. The correlational analysis conducted in the present study indicates that increased partner involvement was associated with fewer dysfunctional beliefs, particularly for women. This increased communication provides an opportunity for romantic partners to listen to and then challenge individuals' dysfunctional beliefs about their future career.

The post hoc analyses provide tentative indication that, for men, partner involvement may be particularly beneficial in reducing the career decision-making difficulty of lack of information about self. This aspect of the decision-making process involves knowledge of one's own abilities and preferences. Romantic partners may reduce this decision-making difficulty as they are intimately aware of their partner's gifts and abilities and may act as a resource

in helping both the individual and counselor in clarifying these strengths and preferences. Future research investigating family of procreation influences on career decision-making difficulties should focus on deciphering the role partners play in minimizing these career decision-making difficulties, and further clarifying how this role differs across genders.

Implications for Counselling

The results of the present study reveal the importance of family of procreation influences in the career decision-making difficulties of individuals. Assuming the findings of this exploratory study are confirmed in future research, practitioners who are working with clients who are in committed romantic relationships should consider involving the client's romantic partner in the career counselling process. Partners may be involved either as a resource to draw on for assistance with career decision-making difficulties or may be involved directly in career counselling. For some clients, it may be sufficient to educate them about the potential benefits of engaging in discussion with their partners regarding their career-related decisions, and using their partner as a way to double-check their assumptions (thus correcting dysfunctional beliefs). Similarly, clients may use their partners as a resource in order to obtain more objective information about themselves and their capabilities (thus correcting for problems associated with lack of information about the self). Given the benefits of open communication for couples, a secondary benefit of this approach may be to improve the quality of the romantic relationship itself.

Alternatively, those seeking professional assistance with career decision-making may benefit from a systemically-oriented career counselor who is able to actively involve the client's partner as a resource in the career counselling process. Indeed, Spiker-Miller and Kees, discussing the specific situation of clients who are in dual-career couple relationships go so far as to suggest that "career counselors in any setting, private or public, retail or wholesale, should consider conjoint counselling with an integrated coun-

selling approach as 'standard operating procedure'" (1995, p. 44). Specific areas for intervention may include identification and resolution of decision-making difficulties associated with the client's romantic partner or the nature of the relationship itself (e.g., conflicting career and relational goals), remediation of communication and conflict resolution problems, or drawing on the romantic partner's experiences of successes in career decision-making as a model for the client's process.

In situations where counsellors may be deliberating the value of involving a romantic partner in the career counselling process, Gati, Krausz, and Osipow's (1996) CDDQ may be a useful tool. Given that results suggest partner involvement is beneficial for clients struggling with dysfunctional beliefs or lacking knowledge about their own abilities, counsellors may use the results of the CDDQ to identify clients explicitly suited for this type of intervention. These results will further provide support for counsellors' suggestions and encouragement of romantic partner involvement.

Systemically-minded career counsellors employing Patton and McMahon's (1999) STF of career development and its associated clinical tool, My System of Career Influences (McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2005) may wish to consider expanding the specification of the influence of family in the social system. The influence of family within the STF may be more clearly understood as the influences of two connected but separate systems, the family of origin and family of procreation. Counsellors may even want to alter the family influence factor within the My System of Career Influences tool in order to explicitly acknowledge both family systems and ensure that those employing this instrument recognize and probe both aspects of family influence on career decision-making.

Limitations and Future Directions

Some caution must be employed in generalizing from the results of this study, given the relatively small sample size and homogeneity of the couples' levels of functioning. Specifically, the vast majority of participants had a func-



tional and affectively close relationship, as measured by Gorall, Tiesel, and Olson's (2006) Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale IV, and their responses to Holman and Jarvis's (2003) couples' conflict scenarios, which are grounded in Gottman's (1994, 1998) theory of couples conflict. Therefore, it is unclear whether adults in abusive or highly conflictual relationships will experience the same beneficial effects from having partners who are more highly involved in their career decision-making. Indeed, it is possible that increased romantic partner involvement may actually be detrimental to the career decision-making difficulties of couples in dysfunctional relationships. Future research needs to be undertaken to determine if the same patterns emerge in more heterogeneous samples, or if the relationship between partner involvement and career decision-making difficulties is mediated or moderated by the quality of the romantic relationship. In addition, despite efforts to recruit individuals in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, all participants reported being in a heterosexual relationship. Future research would benefit from being more inclusive and exploring whether these findings also apply to GLBT couples. Lastly, the study focused on longer-term, committed couples and may not be indicative of career decision-making difficulties experienced by individuals in dating or newly established romantic relationships. Thus, it is unclear whether romantic partner involvement has the same influence on the career decision-making difficulties of these divergent populations. Despite the presence of these limitations, the results of the present study reveal the importance of romantic partner involvement in career decision-making, at least for adult, heterosexual individuals in longer-term, close relationships. On the basis of these results, further research exploring the links between these variables and greater incorporation of systems theory into models of career decision-making should certainly be encouraged.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics (N = 105)

Variable	Frequency	%
Sex		
Male	29	28
Female	76	72
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	96	91.40
Asian/South Asian	6	5.71
Aboriginal	1	1.00
No response	2	1.90
Highest Level of Education		
Some high school or Grade 12 Graduate	5	4.76
Some college, university or post-secondary training	32	30.50
Bachelor's Degree	44	41.90
University or Professional Degree	24	22.86
Relationship status		
Dating	13	12.40
Engaged	10	9.50
Married or Common-Law	82	78.10
Student Status		
Student	25	23.80
Not a student	80	76.20
Employment status		
Full time employment	60	57.10
Part time employment	20	19.00
Unemployed	22	21.00
No response	3	2.90

Note: Because of rounding, percentages may not total 100



Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Testing Partner Involvement as a Predictor of Career Decision-Making Difficulties (N = 105)

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Step 1			
Age	-0.015	0.006	-.264*
Gender	-0.040	0.071	-.055
Student or Not	-0.010	0.076	-.013
Step 2			
Age	-0.017	0.006	-.288**
Gender	-0.021	0.069	-.029
Student or Not	-0.029	0.075	-.038
Partner Involvement	-0.03	0.013	-.226*

Note. $R^2 = .07$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .05$ for Step 2 ($ps < .05$).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.



Table 3

Intercorrelations Between Partner Involvement and CDDQ Subscales (N = 105)

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Partner Involvement	—	-.01	-.11	-.22*	-.14	-.18	-.15	-.10	-.08	-.06	-.13
Readiness											
2. Lack of motivation			.23*	-.22*	.36**	.41**	.15	.24*	.27**	.26**	.04
3. General indecisiveness			—	.23*	.34**	.38**	.21*	.28**	.38**	.25**	.17
4. Dysfunctional beliefs				—	.26*	.11	.12	.12	.10	.15	.26**
Lack of information											
5. Stages of CDM process					—	.70**	.55**	.61**	.65**	.47**	.36**
6. Self						—	.64**	.72**	.67**	.62**	.36**
7. Occupations							—	.79**	.52**	.55**	.32**
8. Obtaining information								—	.62**	.53**	.28**
Inconsistent information											
9. Unreliable information									—	.71**	.45**
10. Internal conflicts										—	.50**
11. External conflicts											—

Note. CDM = Career decision-making.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$