Variables Affecting Readiness to Benefit from Career interventions

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This article identifies and briefly describes the broad range of variables that may influence clients' readiness to benefit from career interventions. The article also discusses consequences of low readiness for effective use of career interventions and addresses implications for practice as well as for future research. Variables contributing to low readiness for effective use of career interventions include personal characteristics and circumstances; knowledge of self, options, and decision making; and prior experience with career interventions. Consequences of low readiness for using career interventions include premature disengagement, negative perception of skills and interests, selective acquisition of incomplete information, premature choice foreclosure, protracted exploration, dependent decision-making style, and poor evaluation of options.

A variety of constructs have been developed to explain readiness for career decision making (i.e., why some clients experience difficulty in making career decisions and others do not). These concepts have been theory based—such as career maturity (Super, 1957, 1980), vocational identity (Holland, 1997), and career decision-making self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)—or empirically based—such as career indecision (Jones, 1989) and career decision-making difficulty (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996). These concepts have been widely used in research to clarify variables that influence individuals' vocational behavior. Clarifying clients' readiness for career decision making has also been viewed as an element in improving the effectiveness of career interventions (i.e., providing the level and type of career intervention congruent with a client's readiness for decision making; Sampson, 2008; Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004).

The goal of this article is to improve the translation of career theory and research to practice by helping practitioners and researchers better identify and understand the potential impact of readiness variables and assessment on career intervention outcomes. We begin with a description of variables that contribute to low readiness for effective use of career interventions. We then discuss the potential negative consequences of clients' low readiness for effective use of career interventions and end with implications for practice and future research.
Conceptual Background

Readiness for career decision making reflects an individual's state of preparation for engaging in the learning processes necessary to explore and decide among various occupational, educational, training, and employment options. Within the framework of the cognitive information processing (CIP) approach to career choice, Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, and Lenz (2000) defined readiness for career decision making as the capability of an individual to make appropriate career choices while also taking into account the complexity of family, social, economic, and organizational variables that influence an individual's career development. Another way of viewing these two dimensions is that capability represents internal variables and complexity represents external variables that influence an individual's ability to make appropriate career choices. Readiness for career decision making is not a static state, as changes within individuals or their circumstances can enhance or detract from readiness.

Numerous meta-analyses have examined the efficacy of career interventions. Brown (2006) summarized these findings and concluded that career interventions are effective on the whole, with little variation by intervention format. However, in reviewing this research literature, Whiston and Tai (2006) noted that the effectiveness of the interventions was not examined in relation to variation in career decision-making readiness. It is likely that the efficacy of the career interventions included in these meta-analytic studies would be enhanced if care was taken to ensure that the amount and the nature of practitioner assistance were congruent with clients' readiness for decision making. Different levels of readiness for career decision making can contribute to a career intervention being successful for one client and unsuccessful for another client (Sampson, Dozier, & Colvin, 2011).

The following variables may contribute to this disconnect in theory, research, and practice. First, there is no readily apparent schema available for easily organizing and accessing the extensive number of variables included in readiness research. Second, the readiness concept for career decision making should be broadened to include such matters as learning disabilities. Third, there appears to be a lack of awareness among practitioners of the potential negative consequences of clients' low readiness to benefit from career interventions, such as premature foreclosure in decision making. Fourth, practitioners are not fully aware of the diverse measures that are available to assess readiness for career decision making, which may contribute to the apparent lack of readiness assessment in career interventions.

Variables Contributing to Low Readiness

Most of the research on variables that affect individuals' readiness to make career decisions has focused on variables related to personality, the need for information, understanding decision-making strategies, and barriers to choice. Although understanding these variables in clients' readiness to make career decisions is essential for delivering effective career interventions, they do not provide a complete indication of clients' readiness to benefit from interventions. Variables such as literacy, learning disability, and prior experience with career services can also have an impact on the
effectiveness of career interventions. Practitioners designing career interventions and researchers examining the efficacy of these interventions need to be aware of the full range of readiness variables that can affect intervention effectiveness. However, taking a comprehensive approach can be problematic given the large number of variables involved. A schema for organizing readiness variables is needed to assist practitioners and researchers in dealing with the large number of concepts.

This article provides a comprehensive conceptualization of readiness to benefit from career interventions that is presented in a four-part schema (see Table 1). The schema includes personal characteristics; personal circumstances; limited knowledge of self, options, and decision making; and prior experience with career interventions. This schema includes both the internal and external variables included in the CIP approach to career choice (Sampson, 2008; Sampson et al., 2004).

**Personal Characteristics**

Personal characteristics are those cognitive and affective variables related to capability in the CIP model and include the following.

- Acute and/or chronic negative thoughts and feelings. Negative thoughts and feelings can make it difficult to use career interventions. These negative thoughts and feelings can be acute, chronic, or both. Acute negative thoughts and feelings can cause a temporary inability to focus on career decision making, as well as the inability to focus on the effective use of career assessments and information. Chronic negative thoughts and feelings can make it difficult for clients to initiate or sustain career decision making because of variables such as absolute thinking, fear of failure, fear of success, perfectionism, anxiety, and depression, despite the availability of career interventions (Lustig & Strauser, 2003; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1998; Van Ecke, 2007).

Sampson et al. (1998) suggested that clients may be unable to make a commitment to a career choice even though sufficient information is available and adequate time for problem solving has transpired. Gati,

**TABLE 1**

Variables Contributing to Low Readiness for Effective Use of Career Interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acute and/or chronic negative thoughts and feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited verbal aptitude</td>
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<td>Limited language proficiency</td>
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<td>Limited computer literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal circumstances</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acute or chronic external barriers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited knowledge of self, options, and decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited life experience</td>
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<td>Limited inclination to reflect on self-knowledge gained from life experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited knowledge of occupations, educational/training providers, or employers</td>
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<td>Limited knowledge about the decision-making process</td>
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<td>Prior experience with career interventions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited prior experience with career resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inappropriate expectations about career choice and career services</td>
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<td>Negative prior experience with career interventions</td>
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100 The Career Development Quarterly June 2013 • Volume 61
Landman, Asulin-Peretz, and Gadassi (2010) added that clients may also be unwilling to assume personal responsibility for their own decision making. (Note, however, that the appropriate amount of input desired from significant others in career decision making varies among cultures.) In addition, clients may not have the motivation necessary to adequately use and learn from career interventions (Kerka, 2001; Leong, Hardin, & Gupta, 2010; Pizzolato, 2007), and they may be indecisive to such an extent that they have difficulty in making any type of decision, including a career decision (Abu Talib & Tan, 2009; Gati et al., 2010; McAuliffe et al., 2006; Sampson et al., 2004). Other researchers (Holland, 1997; McAuliffe et al., 2006; McQuown-Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010) observed that clients may have inadequate vocational identity necessary for them to have clear and stable career aspirations and confidence in their decision-making ability. Finally, Lustig and Strauser (2003) suggested that clients may have temporary or continuing problems adjusting to a behavioral, emotional, cognitive, physical, or sensory disability that makes it difficult for them to attend to career decision making.

Limited verbal aptitude, language proficiency, and computer literacy. Chapman and Katz (1982) and Roselle and Hummel (1988) called attention to how clients' limited verbal aptitude can reduce their capacity to process the large amounts of often complex and symbolic information about self, options, and decision making that is required in choosing among occupational, educational/planning, and employment options. Limited language proficiency can compromise clients' capacity to read and understand the content of career resources in a second language. Limited computer literacy can make it difficult for clients to operate a computer or use the Internet to obtain the career resources, and ultimately career services, that they need.

Personal Circumstances

Acute or chronic external barriers. Sampson et al. (2000) called attention to a second factor contributing to a lack of readiness for career decision making, which included the existence of disabling family, social, economic, or organizational variables. Family variables include multiple family responsibilities, multiple family stressors, deferral, role overload, and dysfunctional family input. Family life can contribute to or detract from readiness for career choice. For example, Van Ecke (2007) noted that clients' career choice readiness can be enhanced when family members have few family responsibilities or stressors that complicate choice, provide healthy assistance during career choice, and are supportive of clients' choices.

Social variables include stereotyping, discrimination, lack of role models, bias in education or employment, and harassment in education or employment. Social variables can contribute to or detract from readiness for career choice. Clients' career choice readiness can be enhanced by modeling, mentoring, networking, and caring relationships with significant others (Shinnar, 2007; Williams, Glenn, & Wider, 2009; Wu & Chang, 2009). Economic variables include rapid economic change and inadequate personal finances, such as poverty. Although occupations, education/training providers, and employers change over time, the rate of change varies from rapid to relatively stable (Diemer & Hsieh, 2008; Lustig & Strauser, 2003; Schnorr & Ware, 2001; Shinnar, 2007). Orga-
nizational variables include complicated internal job markets, unstable organizations, and unsupportive organizational cultures. This element applies only to employed clients (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008; Wu & Chang, 2009).

**Limited Knowledge of Self, Options, and Decision Making**

The following four sets of variables can contribute to a lack of readiness for career decision making in this area.

*Limited life experience.* Krumboltz (1992), Lustig and Strauser (2003), Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008), and Wu and Chang (2009) reported that some clients lack the work, education, and leisure experience needed for them to articulate their values, interests, skills, and employment preferences.

*Limited inclination to reflect on self-knowledge gained from life experience.* Grier-Reed, Skaar, and Conkel-Zieball (2009) and Usinger and Smith (2010) observed that some clients are disinclined to reflect on their life experience, which can result in them having difficulty using their prior work, education, leisure, and family life as a basis for clarifying values, interests, skills, and employment preferences.

*Limited knowledge of occupations, educational/training providers, or employers.* Super (1957) coined the term *occupalk* to indicate that some people may not have the language skills to talk about occupations or jobs in an informed way. Abu Talib and Tan (2009), Gati et al. (1996), Holland (1997), and Shinnar (2007) further noted that some clients find it difficult to generate plausible options because of a lack of knowledge about their occupational, educational/training, or employment alternatives.

*Limited knowledge about the decision-making process.* Gati et al. (1996), Hirschi and Lage (2007), Krieshok, Black, and McKay (2009), and Sampson et al. (2004) noted that some clients are unable to initiate or sustain career decision making because of a lack of knowledge about the decision-making process. This can happen despite the availability of career interventions.

**Prior Experience With Career Interventions**

The fourth category of variables contributing to low readiness for the effective use of career interventions relates to the nature of previous experiences using counseling, websites, career courses, computer-based guidance systems, or other career tools.

*Limited prior experience with career resources.* Di Fabio and Bernaud (2008) and Koszalka, Grabowski, and Darling (2005) found that limited prior exposure to self-assessments or occupational information may leave clients confused about how to use the career resources that are available to them. For example, when using an interest self-assessment, these clients may not know when they need to seek assistance from a counselor. This may be particularly problematic for clients with limited experience who are attempting to use self-help resources in a career library.

*Inappropriate expectations about career choice and career services.* Career decision-making readiness can be negatively affected by the unrealistic belief that there is one perfect choice and all a client must do is find the occupation or educational/training option he or she is seeking (Diemer & Hsieh, 2008; Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008; Koszalka et al., 2005; Osborn, Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 2003; Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). For example, clients sometimes have an inappropriate
expectation that a computer-assisted career guidance system best knows how to match occupations with their characteristics (Krumboltz, 1985).

Negative prior experience with career interventions. Fouad et al. (2006), Tuttle (2000), and Williams et al. (2009) observed that clients' negative prior experience with career interventions can result in anticipation of unsuccessful use of career interventions and consequently a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure in making an informed career choice.

Whereas some clients may only experience one of the aforementioned readiness variables, others may experience multiple barriers and have a particularly difficult time making a career decision. In some cases, even experiencing one acute readiness-impeding factor can result in great difficulty in executing a career choice or making a career-related decision.

Eight Consequences of Low Readiness for Effective Use of Career Interventions

The variables that contribute to low readiness for effective use of career interventions can result in a variety of potentially negative consequences for clients. To provide specific interventions for addressing these consequences of low readiness, counselors need to be alert to the following eight client behaviors.

Premature Disengagement
Clients may prematurely disengage their use of career resources and services because of a perception that difficulty in using career resources suggests failure to be helped (McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2005; Wachter Morris, Shoffner, & Newsome, 2009). For example, a client may discontinue use of a computer-assisted career guidance system when the initial listing of appropriate occupations does not include current occupational aspirations. The client may become frustrated and unwilling to ask for help in using the system to obtain a more satisfactory list of options.

Negative Perception of Skills
Clients may develop a negative perception of their skills because of their anticipated failure in completing the work tasks, which would then lead to disappointment and embarrassment (Gati, Fishman-Nadav, & Shiloh, 2006; Hirschi, 2009; McQuarrie & Jackson, 2002). For example, a client may underestimate his or her skills in an assessment, resulting in an unnecessarily restricted list of potentially appropriate occupations that do not fully reflect the client's potential for success.

Negative Perception of Interests
In addition to negative perceptions of skills affecting low readiness for career decision making, clients may develop a negative perception of their interests after they imagine failure in applying skills associated with an interest (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Hirschi & Lage, 2007, 2008b; Kerka, 2001). For example, a client may initially like public speaking but then experience failure in front of others because of a lack of skill, which results in reduced interest in speaking publicly.
Selective Acquisition of Incomplete Information

Corcoran (2000) and Sherrod (1999) suggested that clients may selectively acquire incomplete information, which then reinforces a preexisting conclusion that they would not be interested in or succeed in an occupation or education/training program (e.g., a self-fulfilling prophecy). For example, a client selectively reviews occupational information topics that focus on the difficult aspects of work in an occupation and then decides not to pursue learning about the opportunities in that field.

Premature Choice Foreclosure

Related to the selective acquisition of information, Ladany, Melincoff, Constantine, and Love (1997) and McQuown-Linnemeyer and Brown (2010) found that clients may prematurely foreclose occupational, educational, training, or employment choices to avoid the risk or effort involved in exploring other potentially appropriate options. This lack of readiness leads them to take the path of least resistance in career decision making. For example, a client may prematurely discontinue use of the search-for-options feature of a computer-assisted career guidance system after one search in order to confirm an occupational choice that poses little risk of failure, even though the client has only minimal interest in the occupation.

Protracted Exploration

Low readiness for career decision making may also be affected by a compulsive need to find a perfect option. Clients may engage in protracted exploration of occupational, educational, training, or employment choices to avoid the risk of failure (McAuliffe et al., 2006; Pizzolato, 2007; Yang & Gysbers, 2007). They are incessantly seeking more information before making a career choice, which Paivandy, Bullock, Reardon, and Kelly (2008) described as a maximizing decision-making style. For example, a client may repeatedly use the self-assessment and search-for-options features of a computer-assisted career guidance system, thinking that he or she is making good use of the system by making sure that all appropriate options have been identified.

Dependent Decision-Making Style

Clients may adopt a dependent decision-making style to avoid taking responsibility for a career decision that is favored by a significant other (Creed, Patton, & Bartrum, 2004; Gati et al., 2010; Hirschi & Lage, 2008a; Leong et al., 2010; Van Ecke, 2007). For example, a client may defer to a significant other to interpret the meaning of interest inventory results and to suggest occupations on the test interpretation profile that are most appropriate for further consideration.

Poor Evaluation of Options

Finally, clients may engage in poor evaluation of options whereby the benefits are underestimated and the limitations are overestimated in a way that reinforces a preexisting conclusion that an occupational or educational/training option is inappropriate. Otto, Dette-Hagenmeyer, and Dalbert (2010) and Schnorr and Ware (2001) elaborated on this phenomenon related to lack of readiness. For example, a client may focus only on occupational information that supports his or her preexisting
biased view of occupations. The two ultimate consequences of low readiness for career decision making include making a poor choice when an absolute time limit is reached (often selecting by default the only option that remains) and failing to select a good occupational, educational/training or employment option when it was available.

Discussion

Implications for Practice

Career interventions need to include an assessment of readiness for clients to benefit from the interventions. Sampson et al. (2000) suggested that the goal of readiness assessment is to assist both clients seeking career services and practitioners delivering these services to design appropriate interventions. Ideally, such collaborative decisions will guide the level of staff assistance that is most likely to meet clients’ needs.

For clients with moderate to low readiness for the use of career resources, brief staff-assisted or individual case-managed counseling interventions are needed (Sampson et al., 2000, 2004). Sampson (2008) outlined a four-step counseling model entailing screening, recommending, orienting, and follow-up, which can be used in both brief staff-assisted and individual case-managed counseling. One aspect of the screening process involves assessing readiness for using career resources to determine how much and what type of help the client needs to make effective use of career assessments, information, and instruction in arriving at an informed career choice.

Some of the personal characteristics associated with readiness to use career interventions identified in Table 1 can be evaluated during the first interaction with the client by combining interview data with one of the 48 readiness assessment measures listed in Sampson, McClain, Musch, and Reardon’s (2012) table, which provides data on the title, authors, publication date, number of items, and scales for each measure. It is important to select readiness assessment measures that are congruent with the theoretical constructs that guide the career interventions delivered by the counselor.

Other personal characteristics associated with career choice readiness are more difficult to identify, such as limited verbal ability, limited computer literacy, limited knowledge of decision making, or negative prior experience with career services. In these cases, the counselor needs to be sensitive to these issues and explore any potential client problems when it becomes apparent that the client’s readiness may be lower than initially assessed. Alternatively, a client may have a learning disability that is not immediately apparent. In this case, the client needs to be invited to self-identify the disability so that appropriate adaptations in service delivery can be made (e.g., helping an adult with a learning disability use a transferable skills exercise at a time and place where visual and auditory distractions do not interfere with the ability to concentrate and think).

If any barriers do exist, it is important to monitor the eight potential negative consequences described earlier in this article. If negative consequences are evident, counselors can help clients become aware of this negative impact on their use of career interventions. The service delivery process can then proceed cautiously and work to limit any further negative impact on decision making.
Conceptualizing Readiness: Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

The readiness variables included in Table 1 are phrased in negative form to make it clear that some characteristics of clients, the circumstances in which they live, or both can contribute to problems in making career decisions and that these problems need to be addressed when delivering career services. Clients who have low readiness for career decision making can be described as either having too few strengths or having too many limitations.

A high level of readiness for choice can contribute to career decision making, whereas a low level of readiness can detract from decision making. Cultural and personal variables can both enhance or limit readiness for career decision making. For example, the increased family involvement among some cultural groups can provide additional support for individuals making career choices. However, the discrimination faced by some cultural groups and individuals (e.g., poor, unemployed) can make decision making much more difficult.

Although there is value in stressing the positive and focusing on strengths with clients, it is important for counselors to help clients understand how their characteristics or circumstances may have a negative impact on their ability to make an informed career choice and that there is a need for a collaborative agreement on how much and what type of help clients require, given their readiness to make a choice. One option is to conceptualize readiness variables as barriers, which imply that the barriers can be either removed or coped with. Although counselors can conceptualize readiness in negative terms, a somewhat more positive approach can be taken by using the concept of barriers that can be removed or accommodated.

Implications for Future Research

Research is needed to clarify the effects of readiness constructs on career intervention effectiveness and the ability of practitioners to incorporate readiness assessment into effective counseling practice. Research is also needed to determine the prevalence of the readiness variables identified in Table 1. It is important to investigate how multicultural and diversity variables affect the nature and prevalence of readiness variables among various groups. In addition, an examination of the potential interaction among readiness variables would be useful. Learning more about how counselors make judgments regarding clients’ level of readiness for choice could enhance the overall assessment process. Finally, the focus on evidence-based practice that incorporates readiness assessment would balance the emphasis on the nature of the intervention with one on the nature of the client.

Conclusion

The readiness of clients to use career resources effectively is influenced by their personal characteristics and circumstances; knowledge of self, options, and decision making; and prior experience with career interventions. Although some readiness variables are more difficult to identify than others, it is possible to assess the existence of these barriers using various measures and interview questions. By identifying readiness barriers, counselors can help clients take full advantage of the career interventions available to foster informed and careful career choices.
References


108 The Career Development Quarterly June 2013 • Volume 61


