

How the Decision-Making Literature  
Might Inform Career Center Practice

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Running Head: HOW THE DECISION-MAKING LITERATURE

### Abstract

Krieshok (1998) reviewed the empirical literature and concluded with ten things the field knows for sure about career decision-making, as well as ten things we assume we know but which the literature suggests need reconsideration. This article summarizes those findings in light of their implications for career center practice, including less emphasis on becoming decided, more emphasis on acting as one's own agent, and the importance of addressing clients' resistance to engaging in anything more than simple short-term interventions.

### How the Decision-Making Literature Might Inform Career Center Practice

Today's career centers face increasing pressures from students and administrators to deliver the goods of career development. Success over the past 20 years has suggested what those goods might look like for large numbers of students. In their efforts to improve what they can offer in an increasingly competitive higher education marketplace, some campuses reduce the evaluation of career center effectiveness to the popular and easily measured variable of choice of college major. Some colleges even boast that they will only admit students who have committed to a major on their college application. Unfortunately, committing to a college major, especially when not yet ready to do so, may have more negative consequences than simply admitting that one is still undecided.

In a review of the empirical literature on career decision-making (Krieshok, 1998), I concluded there were ten things the field knows for sure, as well as ten things we assume we know but which the literature suggests need reconsideration. This article summarizes those findings in light of their implications for career center practice. Several of those conclusions are consistent with how we usually think about decision-making. Decidedness and related constructs of career decision-making skills, career decision-making self-efficacy, and vocational identity are being adequately assessed in research and practice. That individuals we see in practice vary in their decidedness, and that decidedness develops over time seem evident, as do the conclusions that career interventions increase decidedness, and that gender, SES, educational attainment, and ethnicity affect decidedness (though we don't yet understand the mechanism by which this happens).

But other conclusions are much less obvious and considerably more unsettling. Beginning with a review of the cognitive and experimental social psychology literatures, what

emerges is a view of the decision-making process far removed from the completely rational and conscious process we typically embrace in practice. Instead, we find what might be called an “anti-introspectivist” (AI) view that holds that “... most processing performed by the human mind for decision making and behavior initiation is not performed at a conscious level, and that reflection on those decision-making processes is not only futile, but possibly confusing and detrimental to good decisions” (Krieshok, 1998, p. 217).

A few examples of the arguments supporting this view follow. Tversky and Kahneman (1974) held that because we are capable of processing only limited amounts of information, we tend to a) overvalue information readily available to immediate memory, b) represent unfamiliar data with similar familiar data, and c) fail to adjust to disconfirmatory information. In the area of career decision-making, we over rely on the same heuristic devices that make manageable all the information coming into our cognitive system and trying to impact our decisions.

Neisser (1967) outlined two different phases in the decision-making process, the first phase accessing memory passively or unconsciously to make a rough draft interpretation of the current experience, and a second more conscious phase that involves deliberate cross checking of the first solution. Most of the decisions we make in a day never get to the second phase, because they are adequately handled at the first phase. Epstein (1994) suggests this is nature’s way of protecting conscious awareness for more urgent and newer unlearned activities. When you start learning to drive, you are amazed by how much concentration it takes to keep the vehicle between the lines. But after that task is mastered, its control is relegated to unconscious processes, allowing still newer tasks (like using the clutch) to have fuller attention. Relative to career choice, whether I express an interest in this occupation or that one is probably determined

by an unconscious intuitive judgment, even if later I am able to articulate what (I believed) I was weighing as more important in the decision.

Blustein and Strohmer (1987) found with career decisions that we engage in confirmatory and disconfirmatory biasing, attending to information that supports alternatives we are already considering, and filtering out information that argues against those alternatives. And Bodden (1970), in discussing cognitive constructs, warned that decision makers might have a tendency to distort information in order to arrive at cognitive simplicity, a state more likely to yield a decision.

Unfortunately, we are mostly unaware that we use these devices, and are fairly well convinced we approach decisions on a conscious, if not always logical, basis. When asked to provide the reasons behind our choices about such things as who we date or which occupations are attractive to us, we readily provide such lists, even though the literature finds we very often leave critical items off the list and insert items of no consequence in our decisions (e.g., Slovic, Fleissner, & Bauman, 1972).

The generation of such lists drives most computerized career interventions, as well as a significant part of own career counseling when, for example, we have clients list their work values, generate a list of occupations satisfied by the list, and explore those. Several writers, including Bargh (1990) and Nisbett and Wilson (1977) argue that when deciders do attempt to articulate their constructs, when they try to retrace the steps used in making a particular decision, they often make errors. They titled their article, "Telling more than we can know," and examining studies on learning without awareness, subliminal perception, order effects, and the effects of others' presence on helping behavior, built a case for consistent errors in reporting our decisional values.

There is even evidence that introspection can lead us away from the very outcomes that persuaded us to introspect in the first place. Bargh and Barndollar (1996) described a "wise unconscious" whose wisdom comes in that decisions made and implemented at the unconscious level are often more satisfying than decisions made consciously. Apparently, we have a very difficult time answering "why" questions, so in order to short-circuit that difficult (anxiety arousing) work, we jump to shortcuts that allow us to get on to other activities. We bring to mind accessible, plausible, and easy to verbalize reasons, but those reasons often imply a new attitude or belief for us, especially if we are unknowledgeable about the subject matter.

While the strictest AI view holds that we never have access to the reasons behind our choices, a less radical view asserts that such material is just much more difficult to access than we previously imagined. Engaging in such activities as guided imagery, journal writing, retelling stories of achievements from our past, and teasing out themes from vocational card sorts are all useful exercises that would make it more likely to uncover accurate values driving our decisions. Krumboltz' (1993) monograph on private rules in decision-making seems especially pertinent to this discussion.

### A Metaphor

When I was a youngster my parents always owned a big station wagon. The rear seat of the station wagon, what we called the "way-back" inevitably faced rearward, allowing the occupants a most unusual experience of any trip. Unlike riders in the front or middle seats, the kid in the back seat always sees the world after things have happened, never before and never during. If you were to ask the kid in the backseat where she went on vacation, she could tell you various sites she remembers (the Statue of Liberty, the Grand Canyon) and you could piece together a reasonably good approximation of the itinerary. But you'd always have to keep in

mind that the kid in the back seat was pretty much guessing about the actual intentionality of the driver. You could presume that there was an adult in the driver's seat, someone who was responsible and was generally making good decisions about routes. You might even imagine another grownup in the passenger's seat, reading maps and making suggestions. But if you limited your interview to the kid in the back seat, you would be presuming a great deal, and probably missing a lot.

I think the literature on decision-making says consciousness is the kid in the back seat. Our unconscious is driving, and for the most part is making good decisions, but so far we have not found ways to communicate directly with the driver. Now, unlike all but the youngest of way-back riders, our consciousness still thinks it is controlling the car, actually making the choices about where to go and how to behave. I believe the literature suggests otherwise. While we experience the world as conscious choosers, we either are not that way at all, or at least enjoy much less conscious authority over decisions than we believe.

Krieshok (1998) reviewed the empirical literature and concluded with ten things the field knows for sure about career decision-making, as well as ten things we assume we know but which the literature suggests need reconsideration. This article summarizes those findings in light of their implications for career center practice, including less emphasis on becoming decided, more emphasis on acting as one's own agent, and the importance of addressing clients' resistance to engaging in anything more than simple short-term interventions.

### Challenged Assumptions

Decidedness is always good. The AI perspective challenges many of the assumptions on which we base our work in career centers. The first to be challenged is the assumption that decidedness is always a good or necessary thing. If in fact decidedness happens mostly at an

unconscious level, our attempts to manipulate it may in fact be doing more harm than good. While this is a fairly radical stance, several writers in the career development literature have supported this conclusion over the years. Frederickson, Rowley, and McKay (1975) urged counselors to help clients learn flexibility and elasticity in coping with change. Cabral and Salomone (1990) and Miller (1983) discussed the importance of chance events and happenstance in shaping career decisions.

Krumboltz' (1994) work on self-efficacy theory argues that our interventions should be aimed not at forcing a decision, but at enabling clients to create a satisfying life in a changing work environment. Given the rapidity of change in the current economy, it makes less sense to perfectly spell out an individual's skills, interests, and personality, and more sense to teach them to be flexible in adapting to change. That flexibility might include identifying areas of non-interest and trying to develop some interest there, or identifying some areas of low skill and going out and developing new skills in that area.

Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz (1999) have developed these ideas into a theory of "planned happenstance" that encourages us to always be watchful and ready for those opportunities that appear to randomly confront us, but that have critical importance in shaping our careers. In fact, they argue, while there is clearly a chance element in such happenings, we play a much more active role in both creating and in recognizing those events than we have previously assumed. This is quite different from how we do career counseling today. Instead of focusing our efforts on perfectly matching students to occupations, Mitchell, et al might argue we would do better to teach them the rudiments of matching, but then tell them that matching only plays one small part in their eventual success, that adaptability and resourcefulness-on-the-fly will play even greater roles, and then work with them to develop those.

Interventions are never harmful. A second assumption challenged by the AI perspective is that career interventions are never harmful. Since we are susceptible to mental processing errors, simply shoving large amounts of information at a decision maker might force errors in processing, and if commitment to an outcome is seen as required (even before the information has had a chance to percolate) unwise decisions could result. In an effort to help clients organize their decision making, counselors may be helping them become clear about a set of values that really aren't theirs, but that are reasonable explanations of the data most available (not necessarily most important) to them.

Most of us make reasonably good decisions on our own, without the help of counselors or other aids. It is for those times when decisions do not come easily that this is most important, because it is when we stop and think about our decisions that we can get into trouble, and that describes much of what happens in counseling. If a student comes to us for help in choosing a major, their lack of choice may simply be an instance of too little information about the world of work. But it may be due to delayed development, or to any number of other causes that will not be addressed by our simplest interventions. Committing to a major may still be necessary, but let's not confuse commitment to a major with true decidedness.

Occupational information is always helpful. When it comes to occupational information, the AI perspective challenges us as well. If we don't know which information about an occupation is in fact most critical to us, then what might be required is exposure to the richest set of information about occupations available. If, for example, formality of a work site is very important to me, it is unlikely I will know that about myself. It is equally unlikely that any of our current assessments will inform me of that. However, if I visit a half dozen different work sites that vary in their degree of formality, while I won't necessarily know that it is site formality that

attracts me to them, I will know that several of the sites are attractive to me and others are not.

This argues for such activities as internships, informational interviews, field trips, and the like. It might also argue for the limited utility of text-only career information that can satisfy only a very limited range of variables and only in a limited fashion.

## Implications for Career Centers

### Less Emphasis on Decidedness

The first implication of AI for career centers is that we reduce our view of decision-making as the most critical outcome. I am much more comfortable teaching clients the skills and attitudes that will make it more likely they will be able to adapt to a changing world of work, and letting decidedness happen on its own. We need to recognize, and to insist on this with our clients, that career decidedness is not at all the same thing as career commitment. Many times conditions force us to commit to a choice when we are not fully decided, and often we are never fully blessed by a sense of decidedness. While I must commit to a college major in order to continue enrolling at my university, I must not assume that means I have decided on a line of work. What happens so often is that students come into our centers when their anxiety about choosing a major gets high enough to trigger some action. They come in ready to do exploration, but typically very anxious. Most often we tell them we can settle their anxiety by helping them find a suitable major. Once they have committed to such a suitable major, they proceed to the worst possible course of action; they push it to the far recesses of the mind so they don't have to be anxious about it anymore.

Instead, a more desirable response would be, "Okay, I have committed to biology as a major, because it seems like a reasonable match with where I am today, and where I could see myself in five years. But, in fact, I am likely to change a great deal in the next five years, and more importantly, I am likely to be exposed to a thousand different people and situations that could provide opportunities for planned happenstance. Instead of forcing this issue to the far recesses of my mind, I must now, with the greatest of effort, redouble my resolve to attend to those thousand possibilities, to engage in self-exploration and awareness activities, to get as

many work related experiences as I can imagine (using a very broad definition of ‘work’), and on a regular basis revisit my commitment to biology as my major.”

### Becoming One’s Own Agent

Years ago, as I was starting out in the publish-or-perish world of academia, which itself was beginning to transform into a procure-grants-or-perish world, I became aware of the need for an agent. What I desperately needed was someone who knew me and knew my skills, truly understood what my genius was and where my weaknesses were. In addition, my agent would be knowledgeable about my particular specialty of vocational psychology, about the various journals I could write for and various grant possibilities I could apply for, and the politics involved in university life. Finally, my agent would have my best interests at heart, and would work diligently out of a sense of dedication to furthering my contributions to the field. While I think this describes a great job for someone, such agents do not typically exist in higher education or psychology, so I was left to my own. But clearly, some of my successes and failures through the years are related to how well I have been able to take on that role for my own career. Unfortunately, many of the skills required by that job description are not at all similar to the skills that would make me a good scientist or a good practitioner. Many of these skills require an enterprising set of interests and skills often missing in science, arts, trades, and the various helping professions.

I envision a career center offering something of a “boot camp” to all entering freshmen. This very intense intervention would be structured to thoroughly immerse students in the planned happenstance view of the world. Its first goal would be to convince students that simply choosing a major is a totally inadequate way of approaching this as an issue, but instead convincing them

to take a very active stance toward scrapping for new information, truly equipping themselves to move about in the jungle out there.

### Dealing With Resistance

The practice of career counseling for real clients presenting real problems makes for an even more difficult picture. Clients show up at our door knowing something about what they want. It might take the form of discomfort with their current job, or anxiety about not having a college major, but their expectation about how to resolve the problem is that the solution will be relatively quick and relatively effortless on their part.

Perhaps we have contributed to this expectation through our promotion of relatively quick assessments (almost never more than an hour for an entire battery), self-scored instruments, and our newer self-help web offerings. While I support all of these as tools in a comprehensive process of career counseling, and support their use as stand alone interventions for persons who need very little assistance, they nonetheless convey that career interventions are quick and simple. Add to this the use of these tools by many counselors not sufficiently trained to provide anything beyond such simple interventions, and the public has expectations based on a reasonable sample of reality.

When, as is often the case, the process requires much more effort, clients need to be converted to a mindset that allows greater probing and much more work on their part. This new mindset will also allow for less certainty in outcomes, less decidedness, and less surety, even in the midst of a commitment to a particular course of action. Converting clients who come in thinking they were going to take a test that would tell them what they should be requires sophisticated skills beyond what the typical beginning counselor has to offer. The age-old question about the difference between career counseling and personal counseling is never more

evident than it is here. The work that needs to be done is much the same, but the contract the incoming client has for career counseling is much narrower and needs to be renegotiated.

The decision-making literature demonstrates how complex career choice must be, and how easily the human mind is set adrift in a sea of career information. By attending to those findings, we will be more likely to provide real assistance and avoid overly simplistic interventions that may be doing much less good than we think. Gregory, Lichtenstein, and Slovic (1993) recognized the delicate role played by someone helping another delineate their values, a role similar to the one played by career counselors. They described such facilitators "not as archaeologists, carefully uncovering what is there, but as architects, working to build a defensible expression of value" (p. 179). Only when we are at our very best, do we rise to the architectural challenge.

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