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Fear and Career Decision-Making Difficulties: Guiding Individuals With Career Indecisiveness

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## Abstract

Individuals with fear-based career indecisiveness exhibit extreme career decision-making difficulties (CDD) which prevent them from successfully making career decisions. Fear must be recognized as a significant contributor to indecisiveness in order to aid those with fear-based career indecisiveness. Career guidance professionals may help indecisive individuals by first identifying the causes of indecisiveness and the decision-making fear. Career indecisiveness may have either low career self-efficacy or low emotional intelligence as a contributor, each of which impact individuals differently. Career indecisiveness also involves either a fear of failure or a fear of commitment, which may contribute to CDD. Guidance for these individuals must be tailored to their specific combination of cause of indecisiveness (low career self-efficacy or low emotional intelligence) and type of career-making fear (fear of failure or fear of commitment).

*Keywords:* career decision-making difficulties, career indecisiveness, emotional intelligence, fear of failure, fear of commitment

### Fear and Career Decision-Making Difficulties: Guiding Individuals With Career Indecisiveness

10% of all 2017 college graduates changed their major two or more times before graduation (Leu, 2017). Most college students go through some period of undecidedness where they consider various options relating to college majors and future careers, but a small subset of students experience extreme difficulty in making career-related decisions, otherwise known as career decision-making difficulties (CDD). CDD refers to a variety of internal characteristics and situational responses that limit an individual's ability to make a career decision (Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, & Reuven, 2012). Great effort has been taken in vocational psychology to attempt to understand and assist individuals with CDD, including the creation of many measures to identify related causes. Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996) created the Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire, which is currently used by many countries around the world including the United States, China, Korea, Turkey, and others (Creed & Yin, 2006; Gati et al., 1996; Oztemel, 2013; Sovet et al., 2016). Gati et al. (1996) also separated different aspects of CDD into three sub-categories: lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information. Of these, only lack of readiness pertains to internal characteristics and therefore presents the greatest challenge to professionals in career guidance. However, while lack of readiness incorporates such characteristics as lack of motivation and dysfunctional myths, it does not take into account the effect of fear on career indecisiveness.

Career indecisiveness is characterized by a chronic inability to make decisions relating to one's career, and correlates highly with CDD (Gati, & Kelly, 2008a). Many factors influence career indecisiveness, but emotional intelligence and self-efficacy both show significant negative correlations to career indecisiveness and may severely impact career decision-making (Taylor & Betz, 1983; Udayar, Fiori, Thalmayer, & Rossier, 2018).

Fear has been recognized as an indicator of general indecisiveness, but fear affects

decision-making enough that it must be recognized as a significant contributor to career indecisiveness and CDD. Fear includes multiple categories of interest, but of these, fear of failure and fear of commitment correlate most strongly with career indecisiveness (Betz & Serling, 1993; Lerche et al., 2018). Identifying how the career indecisiveness of an individual with CDD relates to a fear of failure or a fear of commitment may aid the career guidance process.

The effect of fear on CDD must be addressed within vocational psychology. Without this change, individuals with fear-based career indecisiveness may continue to experience extreme difficulty in making career decisions, and career guidance professionals may lack insight into aiding these individuals. In order to best assist individuals with fear-based CDD, career guidance professionals should identify the individual's cause of indecisiveness and identify the decision-making fear. This paper will then propose a type-based plan for assisting indecisive clients with CDD based on their specific needs.

### **Identify the Cause of Indecisiveness**

Career guidance professionals must first identify the client's cause of indecisiveness to help him or her overcome CDD. In contrast to indecision (which is a normal state of temporary undecidedness concerning a particular decision), indecisiveness is characterized by a chronic inability to make significant decisions, and is considered an abnormal subset of indecision (Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008b). Without counseling or other intervention, indecisiveness may cause severe CDD and prevent individuals from ever choosing a specific career path. Many factors influence indecisiveness, but emotional intelligence and career self-efficacy are two factors that have been shown to have significant negative correlations to indecisiveness within vocational psychology, and may impact career decision-making (Taylor & Betz, 1983; Udayar et al., 2018). Because low emotional intelligence and low career self-efficacy impact career indecisiveness in

different ways, career guidance professionals must learn to identify which of the two causes a client's indecisiveness.

### **Identifying Low Career Self-Efficacy**

To properly identify low career self-efficacy in clients, it is of particular importance for career guidance professionals to understand details of how low self-efficacy may contribute to career indecisiveness. The theory of self-efficacy claims an individual's convictions in their own effectiveness may affect how they cope with given situations, and has been well established as a key factor in career decision-making (Bandura, 1977; Gushue & Whitson, 2006). Further, career self-efficacy refers to a belief in the ability to successfully participate in a career path (Hackett & Betz, 1981). Hackett and Betz (1981) split career self-efficacy into two major domains: content and process. Content domains of career self-efficacy refer to an individual's self-efficacy in specific fields or skills within a career, such as math, writing, etc. Process domains instead refer to an individual's self-efficacy in navigating a career decision-making process. Low career content self-efficacy could likely be improved through tutoring or other academic pursuits, but low career process self-efficacy poses greater challenges, including decreased career exploratory behavior, inhibited development of career skills, and low motivation to gather career-related information (Santos, Wang, & Lewis, 2018). In other words, individuals with low career process self-efficacy do not believe they can successfully choose a career or learn how to gain the skill of choosing a career.

Before career guidance professionals can provide tailored assistance, they must be able to identify low career self-efficacy within a client. The simplest way to perform this identification is by using the pre-established Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale, which gathers responses relating to accurate self-appraisal, gathering occupational information, goal selection, making plans for the future, and problem solving (Taylor & Betz, 1983). If this scale is

unavailable, the Self-Efficacy Scale may also be a reasonable option, as it focuses on quick identification (Fall, 1994). The scales created by both Taylor and Betz (1983) and Fall (1994) focus on a lack of belief, meaning that if neither of these scales are available, career guidance professionals may still identify low career self-efficacy by asking generalized questions about a client's career decision-making difficulties and listening for various iterations of the phrase "I don't believe I can...". While less specific, this may provide enough insight for the career guidance professional to identify low career self-efficacy in a client.

### **Identifying Low Emotional Intelligence**

While self-efficacy impacts career indecisiveness through self-doubt, trait emotional intelligence may cause career indecisiveness and CDD by inhibiting risk-taking behaviors. Trait emotional intelligence is the ability to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, as well as successfully handle interpersonal relationships, and has been shown to correlate with CDD (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2014; Saka et al., 2008a). Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on why this correlation exists. However, one recent study suggests emotional intelligence may decrease risk-taking behaviors due to negative mood and anticipated fear (Udayar et al., 2018). Risk avoidance often is a positive trait, but it also may prevent individuals from pursuing worthwhile risks such as choosing a career.

As with self-efficacy, career guidance professionals must correctly identify low emotional intelligence as the cause of an individual's indecisiveness to effectively assist them. The most widely-used scale currently available for trait emotional intelligence is the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short-Form (TEIQue-SF), which measures answers to 30 statements such as "I'm usually able to influence the way other people feel" on a 7-point Likert scale (Cooper & Petrides, 2010). If this measure is not available, The Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), which measures 15 emotional intelligence skills through a self-report, would

be a valid replacement (Bar-On, 1997). In cases where neither the TEIQue-SF or the EQ-i are available or in situations where it may not be appropriate to use, the career guidance professional might ask questions relating to the individual's emotional intelligence such as "How often do you try to understand how you are feeling?". When listening to the response, they might listen for key phrases relating to low emotional intelligence or a general difficulty expressing emotions to identify low emotional intelligence as a likely factor for this individual's indecisiveness.

### **Identify the Decision-Making Fear**

After identifying an individual's cause of indecisiveness, career guidance professionals must identify the specific type of fear present in the individual with CDD because different types of fear have different decision-related effects. Fear is traditionally defined as a feeling of anxiety concerning an outcome, and has been researched for many years and in many situations to understand its nature and its effects ("Fear", 2018; Sidis, 1911). Many types of fear have been identified, but the specific constructs of fear of failure and fear of commitment are the most important types of fear for a career guidance professional to be able to identify in order to assist their clients with CDD. If career guidance professionals can identify fear of failure and fear of commitment in a client, their ability to counsel individuals with fear-based CDD may increase.

### **Identifying Fear of Failure**

Fear of failure must be identified within clients because it may significantly affect an individual's ability to make a career decision. Early research by Elliot (1999) defined fear of failure as a failure-avoidance system to escape shame, humiliation, or similar feelings. More recently, Conroy, Kaye, & Fifer (2007) narrowed this definition to "a tendency to appraise threat and feel anxious during situations that involve the possibility of failing" (pp. 239). Both of the previous definitions focus emotions or feelings, but the emphasis on escape within Elliot's (1999) definition raises questions of how the internal feelings and sub-fears that exist within fear

of failure may lead to unhealthy actions. Conroy & Elliot (2007) identified five specific fears associated with failure: 1) fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment, 2) fear of significant others losing interest, 3) fear of devaluing one's self-esteem, 4) fear of anxiety towards an uncertain future, and 5) fear of disappointing significant others. Depending on the severity, each of these specific fears may lead an individual to take extreme measures to avoid situations where fear of failure could occur, including career decision-making. This may cause individuals with decision-making difficulties to avoid the decision completely due to perceived threat, feelings of anxiety, and any of the five specific fears as shown by Conroy & Elliot (2007). In addition, many of these fears could occur simultaneously. For example, if a student were attempting to decide on a career, he or she may experience all five of these fears. This could compound the effects, increasing the perceived threat, raising anxiety, and increasing the likelihood of the individual avoiding the career decision-making process.

Fear of failure may also contribute to career indecisiveness by negatively influencing character traits, leading to unhealthy career decision-making behaviors and CDD. Studies in sport psychology show fear of failure to be correlated with perfectionism, anxiety, and stress (Correia & Rosado, 2018; Correia, Rosado, & Serpa, 2018; Gustafsson, Sagar, & Stenling, 2017). Additional studies correlate fear of failure with a lack of motivation as well as risk avoidance (Chua & Bedford, 2016; De Castella, Byrne, & Covington, 2013). A combination of these effects could have serious consequences for career decision-making, and cause further decision avoidance. For example, perfectionism may result in an intense desire to make the correct career decision, which leads to risk avoidance, which manifests as avoidance of the decision. Many other negative combinations of traits associated with fear of failure are possible and may contribute to decreased career decision-making ability.

Career guidance professionals can best identify fear of failure within a client by

observing for evidence of the five fears as specified by Conroy and Elliot (2007). Unfortunately, no current scale or measure of fear of failure was found within the current literature. Instead, Career Guidance Professionals could ask questions to probe for the existence of anxiety and any of the five sub-fears of fear of failure within the client. Seeing as Conroy et al. (2007) identified anxiety as a key trait of fear of failure, anxiety must be present in the client to positively identify fear of failure. At least one of the five sub-fears must be present as well, which may be identified through questions directly related to each fear, such as “Do you find yourself afraid of significant others losing interest in you because of your career decision?”. In addition, creation of a fear of failure measure would allow career guidance professionals to identify fear of failure within clients more reliably, and this may be an area for future study within vocational psychology.

### **Identifying Fear of Commitment**

Fear of commitment is the second type of fear that may hinder career decision-making and which career guidance professionals must be able to identify. Serling & Betz (1990) related career decision-making to a fear of commitment, defining fear of commitment as “a reduced ability to make important decisions (e.g., career choice) due to perceptions of negative outcomes after decisions”. Fear of commitment also negatively correlates with vocational outcomes and satisfaction, including educational and vocational choices. (Betz & Serling, 1993).

Understanding reduced decision-making ability and altered perceptions as effects of fear of commitment provides opportunities to differentiate fear of commitment from fear of failure.

The underlying causes and sub-fears of fear of commitment provide possible methods for career guidance professionals to identify fear of commitment within a client. Various contributors to fear of commitment have been identified; these include the aforementioned fear of failure, as well as fears of: loss of options, losing or over-defining self, making the wrong choice, displeasing others, being disliked, and success (Serling & Betz, 1990). Limited research

exists on fear of commitment in the career field, but research by Ingram (1986) on romantic relationships and intimacy identified an insistence on freedom as a leading contributor. This supports the findings of Serling & Betz (1990) on loss of options and making the wrong choice as sub-fears of fear of commitment. This suggests that career guidance professionals may look for an insistence on freedom to identify fear of commitment within a client.

Career guidance professionals may identify fear of commitment within a client by using the Fear of Commitment Scale and listening to the client's rationale. Because fear of commitment includes fear of failure as a sub-fear, the challenge for career guidance professionals is to properly differentiate fear of commitment from fear of failure (Serling & Betz, 1990). The best option is to use the established Fear of Commitment Scale, as it has been consistently shown to differentiate between those with fear of commitment and those without (Serling & Betz, 1990). If the Fear of Commitment Scale is unavailable, career guidance counselors may observe their clients for evidence of an insistence on freedom (Ingram, 1986). This could be done by asking questions such as, "What makes you the most anxious about choosing a career?", then listening for identifying phrases such as "I don't want to be tied down" or "I want to keep my options open". Many phrases may identify an insistence on freedom and creating an exhaustive list would be impossible, but if career guidance professionals can identify an insistence on freedom within the client, they can conclusively identify fear of commitment as a contributor to a client's CDD.

### **Assisting Indecisive Clients With CDD**

Identifying causes of indecisiveness and types of fears will only benefit individuals with CDD if accompanied by a plan to help them overcome career indecisiveness and progress toward successful career decision-making strategies. Once these identifications have taken place, the client can be grouped into one of four types: 1) *The Doubters*, characterized by fear of failure

and low career self-efficacy, 2) *The Demanding*, characterized by fear of failure and low emotional intelligence, 3) *The Reliant*, characterized by fear of commitment and low career self-efficacy, and 4) *The Cautious*, characterized by fear of commitment and low emotional intelligence. Each of these groups will require different forms of guidance. Because individual circumstances vary, suggestions in this literature review will be limited to overarching messages for each classification that should be conveyed to the client. Decisions on specific treatment or counseling steps should be left to the career guidance professional.

### **Guiding The Doubters**

Clients classified as one of The Doubters must come to believe the message, “you can learn how to successfully choose a career”. Characterized by a fear of failure and low career self-efficacy, this type poses a particular challenge because they genuinely believe that if they fail in choosing a career, they are a failure. These clients may seem more depressed and express feelings of hopelessness, as their low career self-efficacy enhances a fear of failure. Fear of failure and low career self-efficacy both increase self-doubt, meaning the best way to guide The Doubters through career decisions lies in improving career self-efficacy (Conroy et al., 2007; Hackett & Betz, 1981). By understanding and believing the message of “you can learn how to successfully choose a career”, clients may begin changing their behavior and begin to trust in their ability to make career decisions, thereby improving their career self-efficacy. Personality assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the 5-Factor Model may provide the client with valuable insight about their learning style that may further promote career self-efficacy, alleviate fear of failure, and relieve career indecisiveness.

### **Guiding The Demanding**

Clients classified as The Demanding must come to believe the message, “You do not need to be perfect to be successful”. Characterized by a fear of failure and low emotional

intelligence, it is likely that this type will manifest as perfectionists in regards to their career decisions; they must be perfectly suited to and adept in their career, and therefore cannot decide on a career due to the risk of choosing imperfectly (Correia et al., 2018; Udayar et al., 2018). In other words, The Demanding cannot make a choice because their self-worth stems from their success, and if they choose a career and do not ‘succeed’ by their own standards, their self-worth will suffer. If these individuals can come to believe that perfection is not required for success (and in fact is impossible to achieve), they may realize that multiple occupations fit their skill set and interests and may become more willing to take calculated risks in career decision-making. One specific method that may help these clients is to encourage them to conduct informational interviews with professionals in fields of interest. This may help narrow down career options as well as show how various ‘imperfect’ people have succeeded in different ways, which may help The Demanding to adjust their self-expectations and make a career decision.

### **Guiding The Reliant**

Clients classified as The Reliant must come to believe the message, “You are more capable of making a good decision than you think”. This type’s insistence on freedom couples with a low confidence in their ability due to low career self-efficacy (Hackett & Betz, 1981; Ingram, 1986). Lack of belief in their own ability to choose a career feeds a certainty they will make the wrong choice, which may lead to an overwhelming anxiety regarding the career decision. Most likely, The Reliant simply wish someone will make the choice for them. To move forward, they must believe that they are the best person to make this decision. To accomplish this, their career self-efficacy must improve. If clients believe that they have the required capability, their fear of commitment may be relieved. Details of their counseling may include a thorough overview of their career decision-making resources, including the Strong Interest Inventory and other available resources. With insights from these resources, the client may make

more educated decisions about possible careers, which may mitigate their fear of commitment and resolve their career indecisiveness.

### **Guiding The Cautious**

Clients classified as The Cautious must come to believe the message, “You have more than one ‘right’ answer”. The Cautious will likely manifest an insistence on freedom and a fear of taking risks as a result of a fear of commitment and low emotional intelligence (Ingram, 1986; Udayar et al., 2018). This type fears getting stuck somewhere they don’t want to be, and focus so heavily on making the “best” decision that they are terrified of making a good decision. They may tend to focus on potential missed opportunities, rather than reality. If these individuals can believe they have more than one right answer, their decision-making anxiety may drastically decrease. They should then understand that a career is not unchangeable, and many occupations would be suitable careers for their interests and skill sets. The Strong Interest Inventory should be highly recommended for this type, as it identifies a list of the client’s top ten possible occupations by interest level, and will help them to see that various decisions could correct.

### **Conclusion**

Identification of a client’s cause of indecisiveness and fear of failure and subsequent identification of their related classification is essential to properly guide individuals with career indecisiveness. The findings and ideas proposed in this literature review will primarily be of use to those working in career guidance. A logical structure has been provided for aiding students with career indecisiveness, while taking into account the underlying complications of fear. This has potential to be used in career guidance centers around the United States, and could assist many career guidance professionals in their counseling sessions. However, this study is far from exhaustive. Individual circumstances may vary widely, and so the identification practices and counseling concepts discussed should be adapted to individual situations.

There are several limitations to the current study. First and foremost, the developed career indecisiveness types of The Doubters, The Demanding, The Reliant, and The Cautious are theoretical and have not yet been experimentally validated. In addition, many of the measures used or recommended were developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and may be out of date. In particular, the modern job search holds difficulties that may not have existed at the time of previous studies, particularly the effect of the internet on career decision-making. Most studies reviewed used Caucasian undergraduate students as research subjects, meaning that the found conclusions, while likely relevant, should not be universalized to all ages and ethnicities without further study.

Further study should be conducted in a number of areas to validate the ideas posited here. Research to validate the proposed career indecisiveness type system would allow career guidance professionals to begin utilizing the recommendations in this paper. Creation of a measure for fear of failure would be very helpful in identifying the type of fear, and could be used in areas other than vocational psychology as well. Specific study on how the four main concepts of self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, fear of failure, and fear of commitment relate to career indecisiveness (as opposed to generalized indecisiveness) would also be beneficial. Conducting these studies and applying the improvements will assist the continuing refinement of the career guidance process and aid students with fear-based career indecisiveness to overcome their fears and have successful, fulfilling future careers.

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