

Career Decision Making Difficulties of Adolescent Boys and Girls

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Abstract

The Career Decision Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ; Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996) was administered to investigate for gender differences in career decision making difficulties faced by young people. As well as assessing their level of difficulties according to the three subscales of the CDDQ – Lack of Readiness, Lack of Information, and Inconsistent Information, measures were also obtained of students' undecidedness, their satisfaction with their decisional status, and their confidence in their current career choice. The sample consisted of 347 Australian high school students (199 females, 148 males) from single-gender and coeducational schools in a regional city in South-East Queensland. No gender differences were found in overall levels of career decidedness, although boys reported a higher level of career knowledge, and girls indicated that they were more motivated and more flexible with regard to careers. Type of school attended had little impact on the outcomes measured in this study, with the only difference being that students at single-gender schools were more undecided than students from coeducational schools.

Career Decision Making Difficulties of Adolescent Boys and Girls

The current era of dynamic change in the workplace has brought considerable instability and insecurity, and for many has heralded the disappearance of what had once been lifetime “careers”. Within this fluid environment, the role of career counsellors in assisting young people with career decision making (CDM) remains a vital one. For while it was once viewed as a one-off task of adolescence, CDM has become an ongoing feature of one’s involvement in the world of work. The ability to make good career decisions is becoming more important than it has ever been.

For some young people CDM is the happy yet vexing dilemma of having to choose between a number of equally desirable alternatives, all offering possibilities for satisfying and fulfilling careers. Others however have a more constrained choice, restricted by limited interests and/or abilities, as well as a number of interpersonal, social and environmental factors. The focus of career counselling has been, and continues to be, on assisting young people develop the skills to negotiate the maze of issues and factors to arrive at a satisfactory decision. This study looked at some of the difficulties currently faced by young people in making career choices, and investigated how these difficulties were experienced differentially by boys and girls.

Earlier this century, career patterns and aspirations of men and women were more notable for their differences than their similarities. Careers were primarily the domain of men, while women were socialised to see their role as homemakers (Zunker, 1998). Zunker noted that career counselling for women, if it occurred at all, assumed the woman’s career goals and plans to be secondary to her husband’s career or other family responsibilities. However, over the past few decades, social, technological, medical, and legislative changes have brought about significant changes in women’s participation in the workforce (Astin, 1984). Women are increasingly considering paid work as a lifelong career. Zunker suggested three reasons for this change are that many women are deciding against the option of motherhood; that there is a financial need for dual incomes to support families; and that there are more jobs that are now available to women. This increased participation brought with it a developing interest in women’s career development. According to Fitzgerald, Fassinger, and Betz (1995), much of the early research focused on factors that differentiated career-oriented women from those who chose to be homemakers. These two roles were seen as dichotomous, with very few women attempting to combine the two.

This “classification” of women persists, with Zunker (1998) describing four categories of women: those who are homemaker-oriented; those who place more emphasis on home than job; those who place more emphasis on job than home; and those who are career-oriented. Such an interpretation serves to perpetuate the myth that CDM is not a significant issue for some girls. A better explanation of women’s careers is presented in Patton’s (1997) systems approach which looks at the complex patterns of interrelationships involved in women’s career and life choices. While women may exhibit the behaviours appropriate to Zunker’s categories at different times, it is more accurate to suggest that some women move among these categories at different stages of their life depending upon the complex of circumstances they are facing at those stages (Wicks & Mishra, 1998).

In fact, results of current research into the workplace participation of Australian women suggest that the career-oriented/home-oriented dichotomy is no longer a valid representation of women’s life plans. Initial data from a longitudinal study being conducted by researchers at the University of Newcastle (Wicks & Mishra, 1998) suggest that young women aspire to having both full-time paid work and family relationships. This change in women’s attitudes and aspirations would suggest that CDM is as important for girls as it is for boys and it was

proposed that this would be reflected in their responses to questions about their career decision difficulties.

According to a social systems perspective (Gottfredson, 1981; Patton & McMahon, 1997), adolescents' social environments significantly affect their career development through the influence of factors such as role models and peer relationships. As students in this study were selected from both coeducational and single-gender schools, it was decided to investigate for effects in young people's CDM that may be associated with these gender-related differences in school environments. Much of the research into coeducational and single-gender educational environments has focussed on efforts to enhance girls' participation and outcomes in maths and science subjects. Studies such as that conducted by Rennie and Parker (1997) suggest different results for boys and girls from segregated schooling, with single-gender classrooms being more supportive learning environments for girls than for boys. Johnson (1994) also found that girls in single-gender classes had more positive attitudes towards science than girls in mixed classes. Girls' schools appear to provide more supportive environments for encouraging girls to consider non-traditional subjects and careers, and this schema-inconsistent information may make girls at these schools more likely to take longer to make career decisions. As it seems that boys' schools currently place no similar emphasis on encouraging boys into non-traditional careers, it is expected that the effect on CDM by school type may be different for girls and boys.

Aims and hypotheses

This study looked at the CDM difficulties being faced by young people and investigated for differences associated with gender and the gender-mix of their school environments. Specific issues that appeared to cause most difficulty to students were identified as those that were ranked most highly by students in general.

While the CDDQ can be used as a general measure of career indecision, the items represent individual concerns encountered in the CDM process as reported to career counsellors (Gati et al., 1996). The scale can also be used diagnostically to identify particular concerns that individual deciders may be facing. A priori comparisons were planned to investigate specific items that may reveal gender differences in the pattern of difficulties faced by young people. In order to find if boys and girls were similarly motivated to think about careers, scores on the item relating to that issue (item 2) were compared. Other issues of concern to this researcher were the role of career counsellors in young people's CDM (item 5), and the degree of flexibility adolescents demonstrated in their approach to CDM (item 10). The latter issue was considered to be of vital concern as students approach an ever-changing world of work. In order to minimise family-wise error rate associated with multiple comparisons (Howell, 1992), investigation was limited to these three items.

The following hypotheses were proposed:

1. As careers are an important issue for both girls and boys, there will be no gender differences in the overall level of CDM difficulties they experience.
2. While no overall differences are anticipated in CDM difficulties, it is expected that issues causing major concern to girls may be different from those impacting on boys' decision making.
3. It is hypothesised that there will be an interaction effect between gender and school-type, with girls at single-gender schools being more undecided about their careers than boys at single-gender schools.

Method

Subjects

Participants in this study included 347 students (199 females, 148 males) from Years 11 and 12 at a number of high schools in a provincial city in South-East Queensland. The sample

consisted of students from coeducational state schools and from coeducational and single-gender private schools. The mean age of participants was 16.01 years ($SD = .67$). Other descriptive data for the sample are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Description of Sample by School Type, Gender, and Year Level (N=347).

School Type	Girls		Boys		Total
	Yr 11	Yr 12	Yr 11	Yr 12	
Coeducational	70	23	31	28	152
Single-gender	106	0	66	23	195
Total	176	23	97	51	347

Materials

Career Decision Difficulties Scale (CDDQ)

This study is based on students' responses to the CDDQ (Gati et al., 1996) which consists of 44 statements of attitudes to and beliefs about CDM. Respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement with these statements on a nine-point scale, ranging from 1 - "Does not describe me", to 9 - "Describes me well". There are also a number of introductory questions seeking some demographic data and a general overview of their level of career indecision. Respondents are asked to indicate how undecided they are about their career choice, how satisfied they are with that level of decidedness, and how confident they are of their current decision.

Designed to assess the particular areas of difficulties people are facing in their CDM, the CDDQ differentiates three categories of difficulty – Lack of Readiness to make a career decision, Lack of Information, and Inconsistent Information. These three categories are further subdivided into a number of subscales.

Lack of Readiness (10 items) incorporates:

1. Lack of Motivation (3 items),
2. Indecisiveness (4 items), and
3. Dysfunctional Myths (3 items).

The second category, Lack of Information (17 items), is subdivided into:

4. Lack of Knowledge about the Process (3 items),
5. Lack of Knowledge about the Self (8 items),
6. Lack of Knowledge about Occupations (4 items), and
7. Lack of Knowledge about How to Access Additional Sources of Information (2 items).

The third category, Inconsistent Information (17 items), consists of:

8. Unreliable Information (6 items),
9. Internal Conflicts (7 items), and
10. External Conflicts (4 items).

The scale also yields a total score which is an indication of the severity of difficulties being faced by individual respondents.

Gati et al. (1996) reported medium to high reliabilities for 9 of the 10 scales of the CDDQ, ranging from .53 for the Lack of Motivation scale to .91 for the Lack of Knowledge about the Self scale. The one scale that displayed extremely poor reliability was the Dysfunctional Myths scale ($\alpha = .40$), suggesting that subjects may endorse one dysfunctional myth about CDM without necessarily endorsing others. Despite the poor reliability, the

authors decided to retain these items as a scale because of the diagnostic information they provided.

Procedure

Data were collected as part of a larger study of CDM. In addition to the CDDQ, students were asked to complete other questionnaires asking about their interests, personality and abilities. Only CDDQ data will be presented for analysis and discussion in this study.

Participation was encouraged by offering students individual written feedback on their personality profile, career interests, and CDM difficulties. The study was conducted in consultation with the schools' Guidance Officers and Career Advisers and class time was made available for the completion of the questionnaires. The researcher personally explained and administered the tests to class groups of students. The tests took 50 to 60 minutes to complete.

Results

Data Screening

The data were screened for out of range and missing values, normality, and outliers. Most cases consisted of complete data sets, however one variable had been consistently missed, with 39 respondents not indicating their confidence in their current career choice. As this represents more than 10 percent of the sample, deletion of these cases was deemed inappropriate, resulting as it would in considerable loss of data.

Those who failed to answer this question did so because of their negative response to the preceding censored variable. That is, students were asked if they had made a career choice to which they responded either yes or no. The missing data were a logical outcome of the fact that most negative responders, when asked how confident they were of that choice, did not record an answer. One solution would be to assign these respondents the lowest score (1). However, a subsequent question asked students to list careers they were currently considering, in response to which all but 9 of the 39 were able to list at least one such career. It was decided that the nine students who indicated that they had not made a career choice and were unable to list a career of interest would be given a confidence score of 1, while scores for the other 30 would be estimated and replaced using regression. Regression was considered the best option as confidence was highly correlated with both undecidedness ($r = -.64, p < .01$) and satisfaction ($r = .80, p < .01$), and the regression coefficients of these variables could thus be used to provide a good prediction of the missing confidence values (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989).

Descriptive Statistics

Reliability.

Reliability coefficients were calculated for the CDDQ (Gati et al., 1996), and were found to be similar to those reported by the scale's authors. Reliability data are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive and Reliability Data for Career Decision Difficulties Scale (N=347).

Scale	No of items	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	Cronbach Alpha	<u>M</u> *	<u>SD</u> *	Cronbach Alpha*
<u>Lack of Readiness</u>							
Lack of Motivation	3	2.96	1.66	.67	2.72	1.52	.53
Indecisiveness	4	4.44	1.70	.66	4.52	1.73	.69
Dysfunctional Myths	3	5.01	1.57	.30	5.11	1.57	.40
<u>Lack of Information</u>							
About the process	3	4.20	2.26	.88	3.63	2.08	.86
About the Self	8	3.98	1.96	.90	3.51	1.88	.91
About Occupations	4	4.26	2.13	.87	3.96	2.15	.88
About Additional Sources	2	3.81	2.18	.75	3.22	1.87	.66
<u>Inconsistent Information</u>							
Unreliable Information	6	3.51	1.79	.82	3.34	1.72	.79
Internal Conflicts	7	3.68	1.57	.75	3.57	1.59	.75
External Conflicts	4	2.64	1.85	.89	2.64	1.90	.88
Lack of Readiness	10	4.16	1.15	.66	4.16	1.02	.63
Lack of Information	17	4.07	1.84	.94	3.60	1.78	.95
Inconsistent Information	17	3.38	1.46	.89	3.27	1.45	.89
Total CDDQ	44	3.82	1.36	.95	3.60	1.32	.95

Note. *Descriptive data for an American sample ($N = 304$) as provided by Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996).

The Dysfunctional Myths scale exhibited poor reliability for this sample of Australian students ($\alpha = 30$), with the other two scales making up the Lack of Readiness category - Lack of Motivation, ($\alpha = 67$), and Indecisiveness, ($\alpha = 66$) – also showing only moderate internal reliability. Closer inspection of the Dysfunctional Myths scale revealed that one item in particular (Item 9) had a higher mean score than all other CDDQ items, with large numbers of students endorsing the statement that they believe there is an ideal career which can fulfil all their ambitions. The mean score for this single item was 7.01 ($SD = 2.07$), while the mean score for the whole scale was 3.82 ($SD = 1.36$). Other items which were rated as presenting significant difficulties for this sample were item 7: “I am usually afraid of failure” ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 2.70$); and item 5: “I usually feel that I need confirmation and support for my decisions from a professional person or from someone else I trust” ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 2.57$). These three discrepant items all form part of the Lack of Readiness category, and suggest a lack of robustness in this part of the scale structure as proposed by Gati et al. (1996).

Scores on the preselected items of the CDDQ were investigated for gender differences. Item 2 asks about the importance of work to the student, item 5 asks about need for support in CDM, and item 10 asks if they believe that a career choice is a one-time choice and a life-long commitment. Mean scores for these items are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Mean Scores by Gender on Selected Items from Career Decision Difficulty Scale (N=347).

Item	Female ^a		Male ^b	
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
2. Work is not the most important thing in my life and therefore the question of choosing a career doesn't worry me much.	2.50	1.91	2.97	1.99
5. I usually feel that I need confirmation and support for my decisions from a professional person or from someone else I trust.	5.34	2.57	4.70	2.54
10. I believe that a career choice is a one-time choice and a life-long commitment.	4.00	2.52	4.58	2.65

Note. ^a n = 199, ^b n = 148.

In order to determine whether the differences in each of these scores were indeed attributable to gender and not other influences such as age or year level, the possible influence of these covariates was statistically controlled by conducting three univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVA). Each of the selected CDDQ items were the dependent variables (DVs) in separate analyses, with gender as the independent variable (IV), and age and year level entered as covariates each time. Results indicated that boys reported less motivation to choose a career than girls, $F(1,343) = 6.25, p = .01$, and were more likely than girls to endorse the notion that a career was a one-time, life-long choice, $F(1,343) = 9.51, p < .01$. There were no gender differences in the expressed level of need for support for decisions, $F(1,343) = 3.27, p > .05$.

Comparison of undecidedness, satisfaction, and confidence and CDDQ subscale scores.

Descriptive data for students' self-ratings of their undecidedness, their satisfaction with their decisional status, and their confidence in their current career choice are presented in Table 4. Most students reported that they are slightly or very undecided about their career choice (76.3%), but that they are at least moderately satisfied with their decisional status (85.3%), and moderately or very confident of their current career choice (89.9%).

Table 4
Frequency of Career Decision Making Outcomes (N=347).

Outcome	Rating	Frequency	% of sample
Undecided	Not at all	82	23.6
	Slightly	209	60.2
	Very	56	16.1
Satisfaction with decisional status	Low	51	14.7
	Medium	110	31.7
	High	186	53.6
Confidence in decision	Low	35	10.1
	Medium	115	33.1
	High	197	56.8

In order to investigate for differences in decision status due to school gender-mix type and gender, a 2x2 multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed on three

DVs: undecidedness, satisfaction with decisional status, and confidence of current choice. The IVs were school gender-mix type (coeducational or single-gender), and gender. To control for the possible influence of age and year level, these variables were included as covariates. Mean scores by group are presented graphically in Figures 1 to 3.

Insert Figures 1 to 3 about here

The MANCOVA revealed no significant gender effects in this sample, with all differences being attributable to age. Older students were less undecided, $F(1,341) = 6.03, p < .05$, more satisfied, $F(1,341) = 6.28, p < .05$, and more confident of their choice, $F(1,341) = 4.00, p < .05$. While there were no differences in levels of boys' and girls' undecidedness, it was found that students at same-gender schools were more undecided than students from coeducational schools, $F(1,341) = 8.85, p < .01$. There were no significant interaction effects.

A 2x2 MANCOVA was run with the three subscales of the CDDQ (Lack of Readiness, Lack of Information, and Inconsistent Information) as the DVs and the same IVs and covariates as before. This analysis revealed only one significant effect, with girls reporting more difficulties due to lack of career information than boys $F(1,341) = 3.87, p = .05$. Again, no interaction effects were evident for this sample. Mean scores for these subscales are presented graphically in Figures 4 to 6.

Insert Figures 4 to 6 about here

Discussion

Results of this survey partially support the hypothesis that young men and women would not differ in the difficulties they face when making career decisions. No gender differences were found in boys' and girls' general level of career decidedness, although boys reported less difficulty with CDM due to lack of information about careers than girls did, but were more likely to see a career-choice as a one-off event and a life-long commitment. In interpreting these results, it is important to note that the measures of career information are all based on self-report data. No objective measure of the actual career knowledge of boys and girls is provided, and boys' scores on career knowledge may well be a reflection of their high confidence level rather than any real difference in this area. Nevertheless, these results suggest that career counsellors may need to ensure that equal importance is placed on the provision of career information to girls and boys. It is significant to note that there is no overall difference between girls and boys in their readiness to consider career issues, and that, in fact, girls report higher levels of motivation towards work and career related goals than boys, thus dispelling the myth that career goals are not an issue for some girls.

The hypothesised interaction effect between gender and school-type was not found. Boys and girls at single-gender schools did not differ in their levels of decidedness. However, a significant difference was found between school types, with both boys and girls at single-gender schools being more likely to be undecided than students from coeducational schools. One explanation for the difference in decidedness across school types may be as suggested, that girls at segregated schools are considering a wider range of career options which is prolonging their career decision making. It may also be that boys and girls at single-gender schools are taking note of advice to keep their options open rather than to foreclose prematurely on their career choices. Their greater undecidedness does not appear to be a concern to these students who report similar satisfaction with their decision status to students from coeducational schools.

As the majority of the students in this study were in Year 11, it is not surprising that most described themselves as slightly or very undecided about their career choice. These students are engaging in behaviour appropriate to Super's (1985) Exploration stage of career development. They have made some tentative decisions with which they are reasonably happy (89.9% are at least moderately confident of their choice), but only one-quarter of these students consider themselves to be completely decided.

An important finding from this survey is that a significant number of students appear to be having difficulties in their CDM process due to their adherence in the belief that there is an "ideal" career that can fulfil all their ambitions. Of the 346 students who responded to the survey, 304 (87.6%) indicated that they agreed with this idea more than they disagreed with it, with 111 students fully endorsing the view. In order to gain some understanding of what respondents meant when they endorsed this item, a brief informal interview was conducted with a group of students. All were students at a private girls school, so while their comments may shed some light on the issue, they can in no way be considered as representative of the whole group. When asked if their hope of finding an ideal career made it more difficult to decide, some students commented that it was a concern and that they worried that they may not be able to find that ideal. Others expressed concern that their ideal job may exist now, but may not still be there in the future. For many others however, endorsing that item was a statement of hope in the future. Most of the girls felt confident that they would be able to find a "suitable" if not "ideal" job, but they thought that there probably was an ideal job out there, and it was just a matter of finding it.

While the optimism displayed by students' responses to this item is an encouraging and positive sign, career counsellors need to ensure that students are not adopting an inflexible approach to their CDM. Such attitudes will be counterproductive for students as they attempt to negotiate a career in an era that is characterised by instability and change. Holding unrealistically high hopes and expectations that they will discover that "ideal" career may also present them with immediate problems. With their limited knowledge and experience of occupations and their relatively undeveloped interests and skills, many students are unlikely to be able to identify their "ideal" career, even if such a thing were to exist. Also, if students work from the premise that there is a hypothetical "ideal" career, then the CDM task becomes monumentally and disproportionately important to them, leading to feelings of excessive anxiety. For some students, their strategy for reducing this anxiety is to avoid thinking about their career choice, thereby setting up a self-perpetuating cycle of distress compounding their worry that they are still undecided.

That girls are less likely than boys to see a career choice as a one-time event and a life-long commitment reflects the more variable workplace participation pattern of most women. This more flexible attitude may be a particular advantage which could stand girls in good stead to better cope with future vagaries of the workplace. When advising boys, counsellors may need to place additional emphasis on the need for flexible planning.

Another difficulty that was endorsed by a majority of students was a general fear of failure. Lack of confidence in their own ability to make effective decisions was also indicated by their stated reliance on adult or professional support for their career choices. This emphasises the important role that parents, teachers, and counsellors have to play in supporting their students through the CDM process. Adults can help by encouraging their students to trust their own decisions and by helping them talk through some of the choices they are considering.

While this study has not considered the content of students' CDM, it has shown that there are few differences in the involvement of boys and girls in the CDM process. The only significant gender difference was that boys reported a higher level of career knowledge than

girls. There was no overall gender difference in CDM difficulties, but the pattern of concerns varied, with boys being less flexible in their approach to careers. There was also some evidence that the type of school attended was related to differences in decidedness. Importantly, both girls and boys were found to be similarly “career ready”, with girls being more motivated to consider career-related issues. Further research into differences in boys’ and girls’ actual choices and aspirations may suggest reasons for the ongoing inequalities that characterise women’s participation in the workforce.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Mean scores of students on level of undecidedness about careers. Responses range from 1 “not at all undecided” to 3 “very undecided”.

Figure 2. Mean scores of students on level of satisfaction with decisional status. Responses range from 1 “not at all satisfied” to 9 “very satisfied”.

Figure 3. Mean scores of students on level of confidence in current career choice. Responses range from 1 “not at all confident” to 9 “very confident”.

Figure 4. Mean scores of students on difficulties due to lack of readiness. Responses range from 1 to 9. High scores indicate greater levels of difficulty.

Figure 5. Mean scores of students on difficulties due to lack of information. Responses range from 1 to 9. High scores indicate greater levels of difficulty.

Figure 6. Mean scores of students on difficulties due to inconsistent information. Responses range from 1 to 9. High scores indicate greater levels of difficulty.