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Family processes and their influence on career decision-making

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FAMILY PROCESSES AND THEIR INFLUENCE
ON CAREER DECISION-MAKING

The family is a strong influence over many facets of one's life. One of the areas influenced is career decision-making. In the past decade the family has been studied in terms of its influence on the career decision-making process. Some of the constructs within family systems theory such as cohesion and adaptability have been linked to career development and decision-making as well as other concepts such as ego-identity development and communication. This thesis looks at how the literature has studied family processes and characteristics in terms of career decision-making ability.

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FAMILY PROCESSES AND THEIR INFLUENCE
ON CAREER DECISION-MAKING

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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BY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that family life and those factors present in the family help shape and influence an individual's life. The family has a strong influence over how individuals construct their reality and the world in which they reside (Friesen, 1986). One part of that world which may be influenced is career development and more specifically, career decision-making. Noeth, Engen, and Noeth, (1984) found that high-school students rated their families among the most helpful components in their career decision-making process. Roe (1957) was among the first to look at the family's influence on career development. However, she concentrated mainly on how the parents influenced an individual's needs for satisfaction and gratification. It was these needs which helped determine the chosen career.

Until this past decade, most of the research on the family influence on vocational development has been focused on the outcome rather than the process (Schulenberg, Vondracek, and Crouter, 1984). Beginning in the late 1970's and early 1980's researchers have centered more on the family factors which influence the process of career development, and more specifically, one's career decision-making abilities and

behaviors. Through researching the literature of this time period, this author has determined that family systems theories are a valid and appropriate orientation in which to discuss and determine various influences on an individual's career decision-making process and ability.

The organization of this thesis begins with a description of the methodology used by the author. Next, a brief overview of family systems theories is given along with a discussion of how and in what forms those theories may influence career decision-making. Two important aspects of a model within family systems theories (the Circumplex model), namely family adaptability and cohesion, are given special attention in terms of how they influence the family which thus influences career development. A theory of vocational identity is also discussed first as opposing family systems theories but then as complimenting the theories. Other influences on the family which may appear to be atheoretical in nature, such as encouragement, support, and sibling placement, are also reviewed. Another powerful construct, communication, is addressed both in terms of family systems theories and its importance on its own. A discussion section will then center on some of the discrepancies and conflictual findings among the studies. In general, this thesis will focus on the

characteristics and constructs in family systems theories which effect one's career decision-making process and ability. The purpose, therefore, is to use the existing literature to explore and discover both the extent and type of influence the family has on one's career decision-making ability.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

This thesis is designed as a literature review. The articles examined were found by both looking through current periodicals as well as using Loyola University's computer listing of journal articles and papers. Psychlit, ERIC, and Social Science reviews were used to obtain the literature. The majority of articles were written between the years 1982 through 1991 though a few of the articles were written prior to that decade. This time period was chosen because it is when most of the discussion and work on this subject began. Most of the articles were also theory based as opposed to empirical studies. This fact and its implications will be discussed further in chapter V. In terms of the empirical studies, the subjects were generally late high school and college age students. In addition, some of the articles either included their parents or used only the parents. The researchers of the empirical studies used various questionnaires with which to gather and derive their data. Each study and its methodology is discussed further as it appears in the thesis.

CHAPTER III

SYSTEMS THEORY, FAMILY PROCESSES, AND CAREER DECISION-MAKING

Few would argue that the family influences a child's development. Recently in career development, researchers have studied the ways in which the family, as a system, influences one's career development and decision-making ability (Lopez, 1989; Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, and Palladino, 1991). These researchers argue that the family influences personal attributes, experiences, and skills. Family systems theories allows one to look at the family from a unique perspective - to view the family as a system which is made up of semi-autonomous units. These units or members interact with each other in such a way that each unit both influences and is influenced by the other units. Thus the system, the family, becomes a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 1991).

Systems have rules which they follow. The rules determine the boundaries among the members and between the family and the outside world. The boundaries determine, to a great extent, the quality and quantity of the interactions between two or more parties. A system which allows a great deal of information to flow between the outside world and the family is considered an open system. A family in which the boundaries

are not easily crossed is referred to as a closed system (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 1991).

The interdependency of a family's members, as mentioned earlier, is one of family systems theories' most unique characteristics. It implies that if there is a change anywhere in the system, the entire system changes as well. The degree to which the family is able to change or adjust to various situations and be flexible is referred to as adaptability (Olson, 1988). Another construct operating within a family system is cohesion which refers to the togetherness within a family or the separateness or connectedness an individual experiences within the family (Olson, 1988). Both of these constructs, adaptability and cohesion, operate at various levels along a continuum ranging from low to high. For adaptability, the continuum runs from rigid (very low), to structured, to flexible, to chaotic (very high). The continuum cohesion range from disengaged (very low), to separated, to connected, to enmeshed (very high) (Olson, 1988). The Circumplex Model, a model within family systems theories, believes that the central levels of adaptability and cohesion are most conducive to appropriate family functioning. The extreme levels on both ends may lead to problematic and dysfunctional families (Olson, 1988). For example, if a family

is too high in cohesion there is too much consensus within the family and not enough room for independence. If the opposite is the case, the family members may tend to "do their own thing" with very little regard, thought, or attachment to the other members. In regard to career decision-making, an individual in the former situation might choose a career that the family chooses - not necessarily what is best for that individual or what that person may want. The latter scenario may not give the individual a place or people to discuss the decision-making process with - the family would not lend itself to helping or being there for one another. In terms of adaptability, very high levels tend to lead to chaos and inconsistency. The individual trying to choose a career would probably not have a stable model or experience on which to base a decision. On the other hand, when a family is too low on adaptability, the family and its members are not able to adjust to changes that may occur in a lifetime. An individual may not look at all of the possibilities that are available and have a more narrow view on career choice. More or less is not necessarily better when it comes to family functioning. Adaptability and cohesion work together in a family. When something changes in a family, for instance when an adolescent begins yearning and working toward more independence, the

system reacts and its levels of adaptability and cohesion may need to be altered. The reason that the more central levels of the two constructs are seen as healthier is because these levels tend to allow change more so than the extremities do.

We are now able to return to the original question of how the family or family systems theories influence, affect, or applies to career decision-making. An individual is a part of a family and therefore is subject to influences by the other family members and by the family as a whole. Certain characteristics may exist within that family which help set a life course the individual may take in terms of acquiring the skills, knowledge, ability, or even developmental level necessary to becoming a more autonomous individual capable of making decisions for oneself. One of these decisions is choosing a career.

The following are some factors which the family, especially the parents, are able to influence and thus influence career decision-making.

Modeling

The first and perhaps most obvious way a family or parents are able to influence their children is through modeling. Children learn forms or patterns of behavior by watching the people

around them, especially their parents. When the parents display adequate decision-making behaviors, the children will pick up on them and have a model upon which to pattern themselves (Johnson, 1990). If the parents lack decision-making skills, which may be evident in the way they live, then they will not be able to provide a stable and positive model for decision-making behavior (Johnson, 1990). Modeling is also an interactive behavior. While much of it may come from the parents and be directed at the children, some modeling may be a result of a child's inquiry, an apparent interest in a subject, or a child's inappropriate behavior in various situations.

Independence and Autonomy

As argued above, the family is a system in which each family member both affects and is affected by the other members (Bratcher, 1982). The family, especially the parents, can influence the degree of independence and autonomy an individual experiences within that family structure by determining the levels of cohesion and thus influence that individual's career decision-making ability. Independent and autonomous thinking has been found to be a major determinant in one's ability to choose a career for oneself (Herr and

Lear, 1984; Bratcher, 1982; Johnson, 1990; Lopez and Andrews, 1987; Young, Freisen, and Dillabough, 1991). According to the literature, independence and autonomy refer to the ability and capacity for self-direction (Herr and Lear, 1984). According to the Circumplex model (Olson, 1988), it is the central levels of cohesion which allow this to occur. The disengaged family does not bestow any direction or guidance to its members. The enmeshed family does not permit independent thinking. Lopez and Andrews (1987) have observed, for example, that students who are indecisive about their careers tend to be emotionally overinvolved with their parents. It is felt that this enmeshment tends to inhibit the individuation process and thus contribute to career indecisiveness by not allowing the children to become independent or autonomous (Lopez and Andrews, 1987). Functioning in a self-directed manner leads to addressing important questions about work and education, being responsible enough to gather and use information pertaining to the world of work, and finally coming to a reasoned and well thought out decision about one's career (Lopez and Andrew, 1987). Responsibility is a part of becoming autonomous. Young et al (1991) conducted a study in which parents and students chose parent-child activities which they believed would have an impact on career development. Many

of the subjects in the study believed that one of the results of parental influence is the formation of a responsible individual. "Parental influence should provide the basis for learning long-term personal responsibility which, in turn, enables one to make important, independent decisions when they are called for" (Young et al, 1991). Being responsible includes realizing one's own control in situations through persistent effort and hard work (Johnson, 1990). Therefore, independence and autonomy should affect career decision-making because one is operating in a self-directed manner and is executing the need to make one's own decisions. However, based upon another aspect of systems theories, namely its curvilinear characteristic, too much independence and autonomy may be harmful as well. This will be expanded upon in the next section.

Family Cohesion and Career Decision-Making

Lopez and Andrews (1987) argue that student's emotional overinvolvement or enmeshment with parents inhibits the individuation process and contributes to career indecisiveness. This would suggest that there may be a problem with the family boundaries.

In the case of emotional fusion, the members become over-

involved in each others' lives. There are not any boundaries separating one person from another. This type of system does not provide an opportunity for its members to differentiate and make decisions for themselves (Herr & Lear, 1984). Lopez and Andrews (1987) concluded that the overinvolvement restricts and suppresses the autonomy which is part of the individuation process and thus contributes to career indecisiveness (Lopez and Andrews, 1987).

One implication of a family system in which its members have a healthy degree of autonomy is that they are able to establish their own rules and ways of thinking (Bratcher, 1982). Autonomy provides structure as a foundation for being able to make decisions for one's self. Using systems theory to determine how the family can influence career decision making, Bratcher (1982) realized that the most obvious influence was the extent to which an individual can separate from the system and become autonomous. He proposed that a family system which has flexible boundaries and does not impose all of its rules upon all of its members is one that advocates personal autonomy. Someone in a family with this structure is expected to be more able to separate him/herself from the family, become an independent person, and be able to make life choices for him/herself which would include vocational choice

(Bratcher, 1982).

The structure and boundaries in a family system help to determine the interactions and attachments among the family members. Eigen, Hartman, and Hartman (1987) conducted a study to assess the relationship between family interaction and one's ability to make a career choice. More specifically, they sought to assess whether the difference in functional and dysfunctional family interaction patterns affected one's ability to make a career choice. This longitudinal study began in the spring of 1979. The subjects were 129 girls and 79 boys which were approximately one-half of a senior class at a Chicago suburban high school. To assess family function, the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scales (FACES II) was used. Career indecision was assessed by how many times the individuals changed their career plans. Eigen et al (1987) found that chronically undecided students tended to come from families characterized by a combination of few rules and little emotional attachment between parents and children, or families which were characterized by having overly strict rules and too much emotional attachment. For families characterized as having few rules and low attachment, these families may produce adults who are chronically undecided about their careers because the children separated from the

family prematurely and therefore did not receive the direction needed to learn how to make effective decisions. For families characterized by strict rules and overattachment, these families may produce chronically undecided adults because they are unable to trust in their own career decision-making process due to the lack of autonomy experienced growing up (Eigen et al, 1987).

Therefore, as a determinant in career decision-making, it is felt that personal autonomy and independence is affected by the boundary conditions within the family of origin. Families characterized as being at either end of the scales in terms of cohesion (separateness or connectedness among family members) are believed to result in children who are more likely to become chronically undecided when engaged in career decision-making.

Family Adaptability and Career Decision-Making

In addition to cohesion, family adaptability has also been found to be related to career decision-making. Hesser (1984), for example, investigated the association among various career development processes, two of which are decision-making styles which refers to the degree to which individuals incorporate rationalism, intuition, or dependence when making a decision

and decision-making information which refers to the cognitive dimensions involved in career decision-making, and family systems variables of adaptability and cohesion. Hesser (1984) surveyed 262 high school seniors and used the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES) to measure these constructs and the Career Development Inventory (CDI) and the Assessment of Career Decision-Making (ACDM) to measure the career development variables. When explaining Hesser's findings it is important to keep in mind the range of scores on both adaptability and cohesion that Hesser had for his study. Recalling the Circumplex Model discussed earlier, the more central levels of adaptability and cohesion are considered most desirable overall for family functioning. The lower levels of both adaptability and cohesion Hesser refers to in his study are actually those central levels. The lower scores of cohesion are that of a connected family and the lower scores of adaptability reflect that of flexibility. Hesser found that higher decision-making knowledge scores were related to lower family adaptability but to higher family cohesion scores. Here we are looking at a family which is flexible yet very close and interconnected. By being flexible, the family allowed for different types of experiences thus the individual may have a wider range of knowledge on which to

base his/her opinion. However, this study used students of high school age for its sample and that is typically a difficult and confusing age. An individual may need a more connected and close family for the guidance and direction needed to make competent decisions. The results may have been different if Hesser used college students because they may tend to be more independent from their families than high school students. Another finding was that for decision-making style, higher intuition levels were found to be related to higher family adaptability. One explanation could be that the more one feels comfortable and is able to adapt to new situations, the more self-confidence that individual possesses. Thus, that person is more able to rely on and trust intuition. This does not necessarily mean that using intuition alone is a good and sound way to choose a career. What this study points out is that family adaptability affects how one may go about choosing a career whether it means relying on others for advice and direction, using rational means such as researching the career and determining if that career fits with one's own skill and desires, or relying on one's inner voice without looking to others or information.

Ego-Identity Development and Career Decision-Making

Up until this point we have looked at different ways in which family systems theories are used to determine the effects the family has on career decision-making. Another approach to understanding career decision-making is that of ego-identity development.

Erikson (1968) viewed adolescence as a phase in the life cycle in which he/she searches for his/her own identity by working toward both an occupational and ideological commitment. The accomplishment of that task is referred to as ego-identity. Marcia (1966) expanded on Erikson's theory by trying to determine the degree or consequences of an individual's ego identity. Marcia used two variables as criteria for establishing ego identity: crisis and commitment. Crisis refers to the consideration of meaningful alternatives (Marcia, 1966). Commitment means the degree of personal investment an individual demonstrates (Marcia, 1966). In recent publications, these two variables have been referred to as exploration (active consideration of ideological and interpersonal alternatives) and commitment (having a clear sense of self across ideological and interpersonal domains) (Blustein, Devenis, and Kidney, 1989). These two constructs are not only used as criteria for determining the

establishment of ego identity but are also processes in ego identity development (Erikson, 1968). A person must first explore the possibilities before committing oneself to an idea or occupation.

The above concepts of ego identity and the criteria used to determine the extent of its presence is similar to vocational identity and the process involved in reaching it. Career development also uses the terms exploration and commitment. In terms of career development, exploration refers to the consideration of alternative careers by looking at oneself for information about skills, values, etc. and then seeking information in the external environment to see how the two may fit together (Blustein, 1989). Commitment in career development refers to deciding on a career that is right or fits that individual (Blustein et al, 1989). Thus, by definition, the processes in both ego identity and vocational identity seem to be similar. In their 1989 study, Blustein et al studied the relationship among ego identity status, exploratory activity, and occupational commitment. They believed that the stages or levels of commitment and exploration in career development would be associated with similar stages or levels in ego identity development. They found that the exploration and commitment processes in ego

identity development were indeed closely related to comparable processes in career development ($p < .002$).

Career development can be explained through at least two distinct and separate theoretical approaches: family systems and ego identity. These two theories may not necessarily be mutually exclusive. In 1988, Lopez conducted a study which looked at a family based model of vocational identity. Lopez (1989) believed that current family dynamics such as marital conflict or conflict between the parent and child may affect one's ability to separate adequately and become independent. In 1989, Lopez tested a model for predicting vocational identity by considering and assessing, among other variables, one's current family dynamics. His sample consisted of 299 students from intact families. All of the students were enrolled in undergraduate psychology classes and 70% of them were freshmen or sophomores. Lopez used the Vocational Identity Scale to measure vocational identity and two of the four subscales of the Psychological Separation Inventory (the conflictual independence scale and the emotional independence scale) as well as the Marital Conflict scales to measure the current family dynamics. Lopez found that though the parents' marital conflict scores were significantly intercorrelated with the students' vocational identity ($p < .05$ for men, $< .01$

for women) there were greater intercorrelations among conflictual independence from the parents with the greatest intercorrelations being with vocational identity among opposite sex parents (for men: from mother $r=.35$, $p<.001$, from father $r=.24$, $p<.01$; for women: from father $r=.36$, $p<.001$, from mother $r=.25$, $p<.001$). The emotional independence measure did not intercorrelate with vocational identity for either sex. These findings suggest that parent-young adult conflictual independence from the opposite-sex parent is a somewhat powerful predictor of vocational identity scores. If there is greater separation from the parents, the child may be better able to identify with and choose a career. If this is not the case, the nature of the relationship may hamper proper and appropriate vocational identity development.

Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, and Palladino (1991) tried to duplicate Lopez's findings with one exception, they looked at career indecisiveness as opposed to vocational identity. Blustein et al still used the PSI to measure both conflictual and emotional independence but they used the Career Decision Scale to measure career indecisiveness. Their sample was smaller ($n=101$) than Lopez's and included only 5% freshmen and sophomores with 44% being juniors and the remaining 51% seniors. They were not able to replicate the

results. While Lopez (1989) found evidence of a relationship between psychological separation (conflictual independence) and vocational identity, Blustein et al (1991) were not able to find such a relationship between psychological separation and career indecision. One reason for this discrepancy may be that there is a significant difference between the concepts of vocational identity and career decisiveness. A more clear definition may eliminate that discrepancy. Another reason for the difference may lie in the difference in class level of the subject. In Lopez's study (1989), 70% of the subjects were freshman and sophomores, only 5% of the Blustein et al study were in those class levels. Perhaps the further along a student was in college, the less influence the parents have over career decisiveness or vocational identity. Still another reason may be that there are two factors at work and the research or measures were not sensitive enough to discern between the two. Blustein et al (1991) believed that both separation and parental attachment influence career indecision. Therefore, those researchers conducted a second study.

In that second study in the same paper (Blustein et al, 1991), the authors looked at both separation and attachment. The subjects in this study were 178 undergraduates, 82% were

freshmen, 13% sophomores, 4% juniors, and 1% seniors. The authors used the mother and father subscales of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment to assess parental attachment, the attitudinal and conflictual independence subscales of the PSI to measure psychological separation, the Vocational Exploration and Commitment Scale (VECS) and the Tendency to Foreclose scale (TTFS) to measure both the progress and approach to career commitment. They found that for women, being free from excessive conflict with their parents along with having a close relationship with them tended to hinder those women from foreclosing on a career choice. Similar relationship patterns did not have the same effect on the males. The reasons for this are unknown and unable to be drawn from the data in the study.

Integration of Family Systems and Ego Identity

At first glance, it appears that these two views, family systems theories and ego identity development, have nothing in common. The former looks at behavior and career development in terms of family influences on an individual. The latter views career development as a natural step in one's development of ego identity. I believe that the two theories may actually be connected. In order for an individual to proceed through

developmental stages, certain conditions must be present. Those conditions may very well be the central levels of cohesion and adaptability discussed in some of the models of family systems theories. An individual may need for the family to function within certain parameters in order to be able to successfully complete various stages of development or for parents to behave in various ways in order to facilitate developmental growths. A study which discusses just that is Young et al (1991).

Young et al's (1991) study was conducted without a theoretical orientation. They argued that adolescents continually seek out their parents as sources of help and information throughout their career development. The authors wanted to determine which parent-child activities and/or constructs were valued in regards to career development. Young et al (1991) found two broad factors in reference to the outcome of parental influence, these were responsibility and autonomy. Successfully completing the ego identity process should result in an individual who is autonomous and using an earlier definition of autonomy, is also a responsible individual. However, both the adolescents and parents questioned in Young et al (1991) felt that responsibility and autonomy is a result of parental influence. It thus appears

that perhaps parental influence enhances the ego identity process. Young et al (1991) also identified some of the processes or styles of parental influence. These constructs include open communication, support and encouragement, and direction and guidance. They also appear to be able to enhance the ego identity processes of exploration and commitment by encouraging the child to engage in the activities necessary to choose an identity.

As stated earlier, it appears that the two theoretical schools of ego identity and family systems theories may actually be interconnected. The above studies from Lopez (1989) to Blustein et al (1991) to Young et al (1991) demonstrate that at least parents have the ability to encourage certain characteristics and perhaps even developmental stages in their child's life, in this case their child's career development. Erikson and Marcia believed that separation from one's parents is a natural stage of development which occurs during adolescence. Blustein et al (1991), Lopez (1989) and Young et al (1991) found that the relationships between parents and their children influence that separation and the development of a responsible and autonomous adult.

Encouragement and support

Another concept which demonstrates the interdependency of both family systems theories and ego identity is that of encouragement and support. Separating from one's parents and becoming autonomous has already been discussed as being significantly influential to career decision-making ability. Also as discussed above, the family, especially the parents, may play an important role in its development. Lopez and Andrews (1987) wrote that one aspect of the changing interactions is the parents' continual encouragement and support for their child. Encouraging a child to think for him/herself and become responsible for various activities enhances the individuation process. This process of individuation or separation will then influence one's career decision-making ability.

Lopez and Andrews (1987) argued that the career decision making process is a function of that individual's interaction with the family as opposed to attributing it to one's personality or traits. They explained that in late adolescence, the individual is struggling to achieve independence, to separate from the parents, to assert one's own identity. Choosing a career is a natural extension of that separate identity (Lopez and Andrews, 1987). Lopez and Andrews

also argued that in order to foster independent decision-making, the parents will need to alter their behavior and interaction with their child. The parents may need to step back and start playing more of a peripheral role. This role is one which offers encouragement and support but also advocates and accepts independent thinking (Lopez and Andrews, 1987).

Children and adolescents need to gain knowledge about their interests, skills, and values. In her article describing a group for parents to help them help their children in the career development and decision making process, Susan Whiston (1989) asserted that parents can influence the career decision-making process by encouraging that process to happen. She argues that parents need to learn how to encourage their children to gain their own knowledge concerning their interests, skills, and values (Whiston, 1989). Parental encouragement appears to be a consistent and important motivator for students. Kenny (1987) reasserted her 1985 finding that knowledge of parents' confidence in, acceptance of, and support in first year students was more important to them than actual contact. Thus, parental support is believed to be an important construct in career decision-making.

Some research indicates that parents may have a specific role when it comes to giving encouragement and support to

their children. Young et al (1991) compared young adults and parents (n=279) to investigate how different types of parental influence interact with their children's career development. Using a Q-sort procedure comprised of descriptions of important or critical events and activities within the parental domain, Young et al (1991) assessed participants' beliefs about the values of the various activities and incidents. Participants were motivated to sort the activities by how valuable they would be in young people's career development. Parents focused on the value the activities would be in their own child's career development. Similarly, the young adults focused on how valuable the activities would be in their own career development. They found that a specific role is given to parents within the parenting style of support and encouragement. The role included being available to one's children, reacting positively to their interests, and being actively involved in their child's life. The young adults recognized the value of parental involvement and credit the lack of it as "being a significant factor in the absence of career direction in their own lives (Young et al, 1991)."

Palmer and Cochran (1988) studied a program in which parents are involved in the career decision-making process of their children. This program, the Partners Program, was

devised to allow the parents and their children to work together to establish a partnership involving "...warmth, active attention, reciprocity, and a more mutual balance of power (Palmer and Cochran, 1988)". The program was based on theories concerned with relationships and career development. A majority of the students involved in the study showed improvement in their career development as well as a strengthening of the bond between them and their parents. The results seem to suggest that when the parents become actively involved with their children, at least on this task, it affects the students' career development and improves it.

Sibling placement

A final aspect of the family thought to have an influence on one's ability to choose a career is the placement of the siblings to one another. The roles and duties expected of an individual may in part be due to where that person is placed in the family. Johnson (1990), in his explanation of the case study "Sondra", does suggest that in some families, the youngest child is expected to stay dependent on the family, especially on the parents. Thus the child is never encouraged to find a career for him/herself that would enable that person to be self-sufficient. That individual may never really make

a decision as to a career because the family encourages him/her to remain dependent on the family system.

Communication

Communication, in terms of family systems theories, is of great importance mainly because it serves as a facilitating dimension. Communication enables all of the other factors within a family to take place and exist. Positive communication skills allows family members to share their needs and preferences as well as their feelings (Olson, 1988). Negative communication does not give the family a chance to adapt to new needs such as when an adolescent strives to become more independent (Olson, 1988). Communication, whether verbal or non-verbal is how one person relates to another. A program for parents based on the Integrated Family Systems Model (Wolf, 1983) stresses the importance of communication and that improved communication may lead to parents becoming more aware and accepting of their children.

Communication is a construct which affects many, if not all, aspects of career decision-making. Some of its influences have already been discussed. One such influence is the importance of the parents altering their interactions with their children by distancing themselves and giving support

instead of doing the required activities for their children. By doing this, the parents communicate their support and encouragement in and of their children. Another example of communication's influence is in modeling decision-making behavior. The parents communicate this knowledge through their actions rather than through words. In this section, I will discuss how different aspects of communication - as the main construct as opposed to being a part of another construct - influence one's career decision-making ability.

Open communication

One aspect of communication which influences career decision-making is how openly family members can discuss various topics. Open, positive, and mutual parent-child communication and interaction along with respect for the child and others comprises an interactive parenting style Young et al (1991) found to be important. A number of the subjects in Young et al (1991) replied favorably when they came across incidents which may include conflict between the parent and child but also included open discussion and resolution of the conflict. It appears that this type of communication may be very helpful in teaching the adolescents how to make decisions as well as demonstrate the parents respect for their children. Seligman,

Weinstock, and Owings (1988) looked at how the family affects early career development in children. Their subjects were 24 children between the ages four and a half and five and a half. The children were asked a number of questions about their families, parents, and themselves and also completed the Kinetic Family Drawing (KFD) to gain another perspective on the children's self-images and perceptions of their families. Seligman et al (1991) found that a positive family environment (active, positive, cooperating family which includes closeness, nurturance, and communication) especially a positive father (positive and active) was correlated with professional orientation (being able to voice career options and ideas). The data implies that elementary school children who have difficulty articulating career goals may come from families which provide only limited communication (Seligman et al, 1988).

Communication patterns

A second aspect of communication which influences career decision-making is the pattern of communication. Whiston (1989) describes a workshop for parents who want to become involved in their child's career exploration. One of the goals of that group is to help the parents and thus the family

establish positive and effective patterns of communication and interaction. The parents learn techniques to help facilitate the career development process such as learning to encourage their children to seek knowledge about their own interests and skills (Whiston, 1989). Sometimes facilitating the process includes distancing oneself from the child much like was discussed earlier in the Lopez (1989) study. The parents need to let the child do the work him/herself. The parents need to learn to give encouragement and perhaps suggest activities instead of telling the child what to do or doing it for that child. Thus the parents allow their children to assume responsibility for their behaviors (Whiston, 1989).

As stated above, communication is important mainly because it allows all of the other factors to take place. When good communication skills are present, it becomes easier for both the parents and their children to behave in a manner which allows for the child to learn to become independent enough to adequately choose his/her career.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

From the literature described in the previous section, it appears safe to expect that an individual who has become independent and autonomous will most likely be able to decide on a career for him/herself. It also appears from the literature that it is safe to use general family systems theories and more specifically the Circumplex Model within family systems theories to discuss the family's role in influencing one's career decision-making ability. The Circumplex Model gauges the levels of adaptability and cohesion within the family and believes that the central levels are most desirable overall and will provide the best environment for family functioning (Olson, 1988). Recall Hesser (1984), who conducted a study investigating the relationship among family adaptability, cohesion, decision-making knowledge, and decision-making style. He found that the central levels of adaptability scores along with the higher cohesion scores were related to higher decision-making knowledge scores. The flexible family allows for more and varied experiences for its individual members. These experiences broadens one's range of knowledge upon which to base an opinion or decision. The higher family cohesion scores

may reflect a high school student's need for more direction during a difficult and confusing age. Another finding in that study was that in terms of decision-making style, higher intuition levels were related to higher adaptability levels. One reason for that finding could be that the family environment has taught the individual to learn to adapt to new situations and thus that person may possess more confidence about his/her own decisions and be able to comfortably rely on intuition. Although this does not demonstrate that relying on intuition alone should be recommended practice for career decision-making, this does demonstrate that the various levels of family adaptability and cohesion do affect and influence some of the aspects and factors involved in the career decision-making process.

In the section discussing vocational identity, there was a discrepancy in the results of studies conducted by Lopez (1989) and Blustein et al (1991). Lopez tested a model of predicting vocational identity using one's family dynamics. His main finding suggested that if there is greater separation of the child from the parents, the child may be better able to identify with and choose a career. Blustein et al attempted to duplicate the findings but were unable. There were some discrepancies in the terms and measures the researchers used.

Lopez (1989) employed the term vocational identity and used the Vocational Identity Scale as a measurement device. Blustein et al (1991) chose career indecisiveness as opposed to vocational identity and thus used the Career Decision Scale to measure that variable. The discrepancy may then be because the two terms of vocational identity and career indecisiveness do not refer to the same concept. Another explanation may lie in the fact that the class levels of the subjects were different between the two studies. Lopez's (1989) subjects were mostly freshman and sophomores while the subjects in Blustein et al's study (1991) were comprised of mainly juniors and seniors as well as being a smaller sample size (n=101 versus n=299). It is therefore very difficult to form any positive conclusions from these studies though there seems to be the possibility of a relationship between vocational identity/career decisiveness and family dynamics. Blustein et al (1991) reported on a second study within that same paper in which he found that for women, being free from excessive conflict with their parents as well as having a close relationship with them tended to interfere with their ability to foreclose on a career choice. This finding may reinforce an idea expressed by the Circumplex Model which states that the central levels of family cohesion are most desirable for

family functioning. Having high levels of cohesion may not allow for individuation and the opportunity to become an independent and autonomous thinker. The above is another example of how ego identity theories and family systems theories are not separate entities, especially when looking at career decision-making ability. As discussed in the previous chapter, parents have the ability to help shape their children by encouraging various behaviors, ways of thinking, and perhaps even developmental stages. The parents are likely to have some control over the levels of adaptability and cohesion present within the family. Family systems theories as well as ego identity theories agree on the above (Blustein et al, 1991; Lopez, 1989; and Young et al, 1991).

One determinant influencing career decision-making ability which the current research appears to consistently reinforce is that of becoming an autonomous and independent individual. This concept or characteristic embodies many factors such as being responsible, flexible, and having a developed sense of self (ego-identity). Parents appear to have much influence over the development of this characteristic in their children. Parents can learn to alter their communication styles and patterns so as to encourage their children to think for themselves and gain self-confidence. They can teach their

children, by example, effective decision-making skills and behaviors. Parents may also be able to alter the cohesion and adaptability levels in their family system to better insure adequate guidance and perhaps even vary the amounts and types of experiences their children are exposed to. All of these occurrences help shape the person each child grows to be. The above environments and experiences may lead to that child becoming an autonomous and independent individual capable of choosing a career for his/herself.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION, FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature thus far has only scratched the surface in terms of looking at how the family influences the process of career decision-making. Much of the research is now beginning to address the families processes and characteristics which influence career development. Family systems theories and various models within that broad theoretical orientation are being used to theorize how the different aspects of family functioning affect aspects of career development and decision-making.

A family's level of adaptability and cohesion appear to affect the styles, manner, and behavior one engages in when trying to choose a career. Those same constructs also seem to influence the degree of independence and autonomy one experiences and that independence and autonomy in turn affects one's career decision-making ability.

One problem experienced with this thesis was the lack of empirical studies in the literature. The hypotheses regarding family influence on career development exist but they need to be tested. Of the empirical studies which do exist, very few

have been replicated. The studies that have (i.e. Lopez, 1989 and Blustein, 1991) leave many unanswered questions and room for future research. Hesser (1984) found evidence that gave some support to the Circumplex Model within family systems theories which stated that the central levels of adaptability and cohesion were most conducive to healthy family functioning. However, that study has not been replicated to include the other extremes of cohesion and adaptability.

There are other factors which should be looked at as well in order to come to a fuller understanding of the family and its influences. One of those factors is looking at other forms of family interaction. For example, would the extent that one was involved in family decision-making enhance one's ability in make career decision-making? Another study could look at the roles one plays within a family and how clear those roles are and what those roles may call for. If an individual had a role which called for some responsibility, that individual may then be in a better position to take responsibility for behaviors which lead to career decision-making. There have also been some studies which link career self-efficacy and career decision-making (Taylor and Popma, 1990) but what may be the family factors which lead to career self-efficacy and thus aid the process?

When these family factors are uncovered and more fully understood, career counselors may be in a better position to help their clients with their career decision problems. However, using the knowledge at hand, school counselors should be able to look more closely at the family's role in their student's career decision-making. The counselor may wish to assess the family adaptability and cohesion levels. This knowledge may also help in prevention. School counselors will be better able to target those individuals who may encounter future career difficulties and intervene early enough in the process to make significant improvements.

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