

A Thesis Presented to
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Academic Exploration:
A Look at Decision-Making in College
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Introduction

I have never been very certain about my career choice. As a child, I often debated becoming a teacher, or a veterinarian. In high school, I decided that I would go to college to study something that I loved and worry about finding a career along the way.

I believe that my high school experience played a big role in my vocational indecisiveness. In our small-town, high school we were taught competition. We were pushed to focus on which of us earned the best grades in the “smart” classes. “Slackers” went to BOCES to learn hands-on skills. “Slackers” took classes in computers and accounting. The “good” kids took all of the AP science, history, math, and English classes. I was one of the “good” kids; I was one of the “smart” ones. I was always at the top of the class rankings. I competed with my friends for placement in the most advanced classes and to get the best grades. I was constantly praised for being an “achiever.” I was pushed into applying to Ivy League schools, even though we knew the chance of my acceptance was unlikely (I had good grades, but my application did not stand out in any other way). A small college was my destination. No one mentioned the entirety of life to live after college. Obviously, some of this I should have realized on my own, but our entire high school culture revolved around which classes to take, not which path to follow or which goal to work toward. Looking back, I wish that I had pursued an education at our BOCES program and learned some hands-on skills. Most of my teachers, however, emphasized that life would be much better to pursue a college-centered career path.

I am not the only “high achiever” from my high school to experience this indecisiveness. As salutatorian of my class, I am not exactly the shining beacon-of-hope that was expected. My close friend, the valedictorian, has experienced the same difficulties. She has changed her career plans even more than I have. Immediately after high school, she went to our local community

college for nursing. She quickly realized that she hated working with sick people, though, and decided to transfer to the University of Buffalo as an architecture student. After one semester, she knew an architecture career was not for her. Without knowing what she wanted to turn to next, she chose a career in the National Guard. Now, almost two years later, she knows that she does not want to spend her life in any branch of the military. She hates the structure and the authority. She now studies computer science and psychology, with hopes of ultimately working for the BAU. She sees her goal as reaching the jobs depicted on the television show, *Criminal Minds*.

We are the two most “successful” students that our high school has turned out. We set records for the highest cumulative weighted GPAs. We both expected college to be more of the same effortless good grades. We ended up being overwhelmed by the changes and had to struggle through our freshman year, teaching ourselves how to study. We feel that our high school defines success as achieving high GPAs. It was as if the school never looked past the process of applying to colleges and forgot that there would be an entire life to live after school. If that is the way that many students are pushed today, then it is no wonder so many are plagued with vocational identity crisis.

Like many students here at Alfred University, I entered my freshman year as an Academic Exploration student. My intentions were to study English and History, and I toyed with the idea of going on to law school or becoming a publisher. However, my second semester at Alfred was extremely stressful, and I began to question my choices. I knew that I would want a job that would let me live in, or at least near, my hometown. None of my career plans seemed like they would realistically land me in that area, and I knew the job market was extremely competitive in marine biology and the field of law.

During my sophomore year I changed my plans to studying Biology and Environmental Science. My new plan was to go on to graduate school for Marine Biology and ultimately work with penguins, my favorite animals. It was not until I was forced realistically to look at this plan during my junior seminar class that I panicked. I realized again that this path would not lead to me settling down in Cattaraugus County.

The job market for marine biologists is not particularly thriving, especially if one hopes to stay in western New York. I also began to realize that I absolutely hated conducting scientific research and dreaded the idea of being stuck with that outlook for the rest of my life. Panicking, I searched for a program of study at Alfred University that would allow me to complete my Bachelor's degree and not put the previous three years of study to waste. I happily settled on Interdepartmental Studies and am finishing up my degree in that area. I feel really positive about my Interdepartmental Major because it has let me do what I love, learn. I have since made the decision to participate in a second-degree program for nursing in 2016.

As I struggled personally with the minefield that choosing a lifelong career seems like today, I realized that I was not alone. I spoke with the people around me and realized that many coworkers, friends, and classmates felt the same way. I became curious about how other students handle this choice overload and wondered what resources might be available to help us make a decision. Originally, my honors thesis plan included an interview of a random sampling of Alfred University students to compare experiences with college indecision. I wanted to use my thesis to explore this generational phenomenon through a campus-wide survey and more focused follow-up interviews.

Unfortunately, this goal was not realistic for a December graduation date, so after realizing how long the approval process was taking in order to even select random participants, I

decided to modify my thesis. Instead, I will be conducting a critical literature review in order to better understand the choice-overload phenomenon as it relates to college uncertainty.

Through my research, I sought to address three main ideas that I then used to explain decision-making problems that commonly affect college students. The first concept that I tried to tackle was indecision in general. I wanted to discover what exactly goes into making a decision, and how that process can go awry.

Learning more about decision-making led me to the concept of choice overload, which has still been debated in recent years. Choice overload occurs when a decision-maker feels overwhelmed by the number of possibilities, becoming paralyzed by them in a sense. This concept especially spoke to my own experience with choosing a career, and I felt certain that more college students would agree that choice overload is a huge factor in the difficulties of choosing a career in today's society.

The other concept that I explored was identity theory. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to explore the identity development stages proposed by Erik Erikson. Particularly, I focused on his idea of Identity vs. Role Confusion. The implications of this psychosocial stage led me to focus my research onto the development of identity as it pertains to career choices.

Research into identity could not have been complete without the ideas of James Marcia. I focused on his identity development ideas of foreclosure, moratorium, identity diffusion, and identity achievement. Personally, the idea of moratorium felt like it applied to my experience the most because I put a lot of thought into every career plan change I made. I still included equal amounts of research on the ideas of foreclosure, diffusion, and achievement, however, because they likely pertain to many college students also seeking answers about their decision-making processes.

In addition to the theories of Erikson and Marcia, I also included research about several other notable theories. Such as research on the ideas of Chickering and Perry, as well as some theories from sociologists. I tried to cover as many theories of identity development as possible, as long as they pertained to the topic of decision-making in college.

In the “Decisions in College Affect Us for the Rest of Our Lives” section, I tied everything together to explain how decisions for college students are handled, and how these decisions can be difficult. For some of this section, I relied heavily on my own interpretation of research regarding choice overload and indecision. The rest of this section was completely based on information that I drew from my various sources.

Obviously, I could not present all of the problems that arise from decision-making without offering a possible reprieve. During some of my research, I stumbled across possible strategies for dealing with decision-making. Some of the strategies proposed were simple, such as reversing a decision after experiencing post-decisional regret. Other strategies were a little more complicated such as integrative life planning.

My thesis has been the product of 21 years of life experience, as well as the culmination of about 4 weeks of research into various journal articles and books. My conclusions may not be as decisive as they would have been if I had been able to follow through with an empirical research study, but they can at least shed some light on why indecisiveness occurs, and how we can possibly hope to remedy them. If even one other student besides me can be helped in feeling that they are not a total failure for not knowing exactly what they want to do, then I will consider this thesis a successful endeavor.

Main Body

Many college students today are plagued with questions and uncertainties. They are struggling to discover what values they hold most dear and other such indicators of who they are as people. Emerging adulthood is a time of change, discovery, and decision. Decisions made at this time will follow young adults for the rest of their lives. Making choices about what career to pursue and what kind of person to be can be extremely challenging. Many college students are haunted by their inability to make satisfying decisions regarding their careers and are searching for answers as to why that is.

Decisions Are Hard

Decision-making can be difficult at any age and in any situation. It is commonplace to see a person standing in the aisle at the grocery store, seemingly overwhelmed by the countless options in front of them. Most people don't stop to think about what exactly prevents them from making a simple decision. However, the bigger decisions in life, such as which career to pursue, can make us question any difficulties. In general, there are two major problems that affect our decision-making, indecision and choice overload.

In order to properly discuss problems that arise from the decision-making process, it is important to first discuss what the process is. Some experts determined that there are five stages, making up this process. The first stage involves "appraising the decision," determining what the decision involves. The second stage consists of analyzing alternatives to the chosen path. Third, we weigh alternatives against one another to determine which choice is the best for the situation at hand. The fourth stage of the decision consists of an internal debate over whether or not the commitment is worth the possible sacrifices or repercussions. The final stage allows the decision-maker to determine whether or not he or she wants to go through with their chosen path

despite possible negative feedback (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 172). Although these stages of decision-making were proposed almost forty years ago, they still seem incredibly relevant today. If most people, do not take a conscious path when making a decision, it is easy to see that these five stages do pertain to many decisions in life, in one way or another.

Problems with making decisions generally sprout up during the stages of commitment. Many people can succumb to commitment phobias at some point in their lives, whether in the form of putting off marriage or picking out a car. There seems to be logic behind the fear of commitment as it applies to major life decisions because there are inherent losses and risks associated with all major decisions (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 6). Choosing to marry one person over another can alter an individual's life path forever and that is terrifying. However, there is a subtle ripple effect from such decisions. Janis and Mann (1977) refer to this ripple effect as a "decision tree" due to the various branches that stem from one decision (p. 4). The fear of loss, regardless of whether or not there are direct negative consequences, can have a paralyzing effect.

With the ever-looming prospect of a choice taking a bad turn, or the possibility of missing another choice's benefits, many people choose not to choose. It is surprisingly easy to avoid choices in life, although not recommended. Janis and Mann (1977) propose that putting off a decision, or avoiding it altogether can be just as damaging as making the wrong choice (p. 6). The damage stems from the fact that by not making a choice, the problem is not being faced, but instead is being ignored. The concept that is used to describe this kind of indecision is *defensive avoidance* (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 6). Most of the time, however, there comes a point when the decision-maker is forced to make a decision. Unless the decider is faced with some kind of external pressure, he or she is likely to avoid thinking about the decision critically (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 51).

There are times when a decision-maker feels pangs of loss even before he or she has made a decision. Janis and Mann (1977) described this concept as *anticipatory regret* (p. 222). I experienced this feeling when I first decided to apply to the Brockport nursing program. I was receiving offers for jobs as a result of a county civil service test I had taken in April and worried that I would be missing out on a comfortable, simple life as a county keyboard specialist. I mostly forgot about my decision over the next few months. This was partly a defense mechanism because I didn't think I would be accepted into the nursing program at Brockport. However, this lack of focus meant that I was not wholly prepared for the planning I needed to do when I found out I was accepted. On the other hand, if I obsessed over the decision, I could have very well been overwhelmed with stress about everything I would need to do if I were to be accepted.

It is definitely possible, and quite common, for decision-makers to overestimate the value of a possible option. This is often referred to as bolstering, and there are six main methods commonly used by deciders in order to convince themselves that a particular choice is best. Firstly, the decision-maker tends to exaggerate the benefits that will come out of a certain choice. Secondly, the decision-maker will often trivialize the possible negative consequences associated with his or her decision (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 91). Thirdly, the decision-maker will ignore or actively deny any feelings of doubt or regret that arise from his or her decision. Fourthly, the decision-maker will imagine his or her decision's commitment deadline as a far off prospect, that is not even worthy of serious thought. The decision-maker will also try to lessen the amount of feedback from third-party observers in order to avoid any negative reactions (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 92). This also helps the decision-maker to avoid any repercussions that may come from changing his or her mind about the decision. Lastly, the decision-maker will try to reduce his or her feelings of personal responsibility regarding the decision so that he or she does not feel so

completely liable for any failure or negative consequences as a result of the decision (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 93).

Another form of bolstering, known in early indecision research as the “selective exposure hypothesis,” describes how people combine the first and fifth methods of bolstering. Decision-makers will tend to ignore opinions about their decision that point out flaws, losses, or risks. Instead, decision-makers will create an automatic filter in their minds, which allows them to focus only on feedback that paints their decision in a positive light (Janis & Mann, 1977, 203). When a decision-maker is forced to encounter negative aspects of their decision, they can become much more selective in which information they choose to internalize. This is a defense mechanism used to avoid questioning a decision.

On the flipside, a person may find everything right about a decision and still manage to doubt it enough to not choose it. In this case, the decision usually doesn't meet some sort of standard, which the decision-maker has previously set for him or herself (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 8). These standards, such as being too intelligent to settle for a minimum-wage job, can be set consciously or unconsciously.

There are still plenty of opportunities for error, even after a decision is made. If a decision is seen through only because of previous investments of time, money, or energy, then it may not be the best choice for the decision-maker (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 283). Decisions that inherently bring about some type of loss, no matter which choice is made, can be especially difficult. The losses that are inherently associated with certain choices are what cause the decision-maker to experience anticipatory regret or even a phenomenon known as “post decisional regret” (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 311). These feelings commonly arise spontaneously after the decision, most often when some new information has been encountered (Janis & Mann,

1977, p. 323). The information usually reveals either a negative consequence of this decision, or a lost positive result had the decision-maker chosen another path. If all of these missteps and possible negative feelings occur even after making a decision, no wonder many people struggle with indecision.

Many people have difficulties making a decision because they are provided with too many options. That person standing in the aisle of the grocery store is not merely plagued with indecision, but he or she feels overwhelmed. U.S. citizens are given many more options than seem necessary. The economy is in a state in which profit can be made from trying to satisfy the very different preferences of very different people. This increase in available choices can be helpful to the selective people that already know what they are looking for. However, it can be paralyzing to the people that are more easily pleased, or unfamiliar with the choice. This inundation with options has come to be known as choice overload in the realm of psychology.

While concept of choice overload is pretty self-explanatory, as an hypothesis it has come to encompass several different meanings. Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd (2010) defined choice overload as a phenomenon in which an increase in the number of possible options leads to an array of negative effects (p. 409). These negative effects could include, but not be limited to, a decline in satisfaction surrounding the choice or a more difficult time in making the choice.

The basic concept behind choice overload is that more options can lead to a more difficult decision when the differences between the options decrease and the information provided for the options increases (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010, p. 411). This seems fairly logical. Even when the selective person at the grocery store encounters an entire aisle of laundry detergent options, he or she may have difficulty discerning which detergent will best fit their needs. They may enjoy the similar scents of two kinds of detergent, both of which

claim to keep colors bright. Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd (2010) conducted a study on choice overload using data gathered from previously published research as a guide. Their study revealed some common situations in which choice overload rears its ugly head. When time pressure was instituted, the participants in the study generally were less satisfied with their final decision because they felt unable to properly analyze each of the options and information in the allotted time (p. 419). Again this makes sense. The selective person in the grocery store is not going to miraculously feel better about his or her choice simply because they chose it more quickly. In fact, the exact opposite could happen, and they could begin to question their choice and experience post-decisional regret. Similarly, a study conducted by Haynes (2009) revealed that a decision was made more difficult when the participants were exposed to a larger number of options but limited on the amount of time with which to choose (p. 210). Despite a decrease in satisfaction and an increase in decision difficulty, however, there was no significant relationship found between the time used to make the decision and the number of options present (Haynes, 2009, p. 210). This implies that a decision's quality can be affected merely by the presence of a time constraint, regardless of what that time constraint is. This may vary somewhat, based on the decision being made. The person choosing laundry detergent may be able to make a satisfying decision if the time constraint is one hour, but a person grappling with a larger decision such as deciding which house to buy will likely need more time.

There are some ways to avoid choice overload, the most common being an existence of prior preferences. If the person standing in the grocery aisle is familiar with a certain laundry detergent, he or she is likely to pick that one and give no other thought to the rest of the options. However, this can lead to problems if an alternative choice would have been preferable given more thought. Another strategy used to overcome or avoid choice overload is choice

justification. This concept is applied to help decision-makers find the best choice for their situation by analyzing the possible costs and benefits. This can be extremely difficult, however, when the number of similar options increases (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010, p. 420). It is difficult to justify one choice over another when the two choices have almost imperceptible differences. If the only apparent difference between two laundry detergents is the font used for the brand name, then the decider can be expected to have a difficult time choosing between the two.

Many consequences can arise from the difficulties encountered during choice overload. Stress can be caused by general nervous feelings regarding the choice made. The decision-maker can fear that he or she will make the wrong choice, meaning that he or she will either miss out on benefits from another choice or will encounter loss from the final choice (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 47). The losses incurred from their choice do not have to be realistic manifestations. These consequences can be merely perceived losses, meaning they may not have much of a basis in reality. As long as the decision-maker can possibly sense some loss stemming from his or her choice, then stress will occur (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 49). If the detergent shopper thinks that he or she may have an allergic reaction to a new detergent, he or she will likely avoid trying it. However, he or she can then be worried that they are missing out on something.

There are also arguments in favor of increasing the number of options. Many people feel that having a broader array of options can provide the decision-maker with more freedom (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010, p. 411). The act of choosing from a large option-set can also be beneficial to the decision-maker. This can create a sense of security for the decision-maker, which comes from a feeling of adequate analysis of the available information before making the final decision (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010, p. 411). Being able to

choose from an array of options can create a sense of control and ability. He or she may not feel as forced into whichever choice they make.

Choice overload may have some benefits for the person making a small decision like buying laundry detergent, but it can be paralyzing for the person looking to buy his or her first home. Even when there are constraints, such as financial limits, there are many times still plenty of options to choose from. Having more options than the decision-maker is used to can leave him or her feeling as though he or she is drowning.

If a small decision like picking out laundry detergent can quickly become too much handle, it is baffling to think about making larger decisions. It is no wonder that many college students struggle to make decisions about which courses to take, which major to study, and which career to pursue. Even more startling is the thought that many people do not even notice when they are facing indecision or being overloaded by choice. Like many issues today, awareness seems to be the first step towards helping those who are struggling with deciding.

Who Am I?

Problems with actual decision-making are not the only problems that may affect college decisions. There are internal factors that greatly affect the decisions that an individual makes. Many theories suggest that identity development plays a huge role in determining many aspects of life. A large body of those theories addresses the ability, or inability, of an individual to make a decision based on his or her current and past identity development.

Erik Erikson was an advocator of the “epigenetic principle,” meaning that development occurs in a sequential manner. The most important aspect of Erikson’s theory was the idea that personal environment heavily shaped an individual’s development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 19). Erikson was a student under Freud, but unlike Freud’s psychosexual stages, Erikson

theorized stages of psychosocial development. Erikson's theory showcased eight stages of development, each one defined by a characteristic crisis that the individual needed to overcome. Erikson defined a crisis as an emergency, physical or psychological, which must be addressed with serious consideration and decision (Pascarella & Terernzini, 1991, p. 19). The choices made during these crises determine the outcome of the individual's development. Generally, Erikson pointed out two opposite outcomes of each developmental crisis, but he acknowledged that results could fall anywhere in between (Berger, 2014, p. 41). Each crisis is met near the end of its stage of development, and the hurdle needed to overcome the crisis definitively closes that stage. The beginning steps to overcoming each crisis are said to occur due to a "*change in perspective*" (Erikson, 1980, p.55). Erikson also points out that the shift needed in order to approach a developmental crisis results in a distinct vulnerability to the individual, which can be swayed into the negative, or failure, side of the crisis (Erikson, 1980, p. 55).

Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development cover many aspects of personality and identity. The main psychosocial stage that deserves focus for identity exploration is identity vs. role confusion. Erikson's fifth psychosocial stage typically characterizes the ages of 12-18. In Erikson's theory, the development in this stage is focused on relationships, decisions about career, and personal values and beliefs (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 30).

In addition to the psychosocial stages of development, Erikson has theories regarding ego identity. He refers to ego identity as "continuity" between how an individual views himself or herself and how others view him or her (Erikson, 1980, p. 89). Erikson also describes the ego identity as a stepping-stone, which connects adolescence and adulthood. This connection encompasses multiple roles, social, personal and vocational (Erikson, 1980, p. 91).

Many people feel that the primary question of identity arises during late adolescence (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 29). However, even Erikson had to admit that discovering identity in late adolescence has never been an easy task. In one publication, Erikson placed blame for identity achievement difficulties on democracy in America. He claimed that the ever-changing dynamics of life in a democratic nation necessitated “*self-made identities*.” These identities had to be flexible enough to adjust to any change in the economy or war (Erikson, 1980, p. 93). Erikson also acknowledged that if decisions regarding identity become too difficult, many adolescents would find a way to escape from their choices. He points out that youths suffered from crushing pressures to find the perfect identity for themselves in society as far back as the 1970s (Erikson, 1980, p. 91). Despite the struggles encountered by adolescents over thirty-five years ago, people believe that these issues have become increasingly tougher in recent years. In particular, these people point out the problems encountered in discovering vocational identities (Berger, 2014, p. 458).

A student of Erik Erikson, James Marcia developed his own theories of identity development. Marcia defined identity as a conglomerate of the past, present, and future of an individual’s self (Marcia, 2006, p. 585). Marcia’s theories of identity development stemmed from Erikson’s identity vs. role confusion stage. Marcia addressed four different ways that individuals move through this stage of identity crisis: role confusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement (Berger, 2014, p. 458).

Marcia referred to his four proposed coping mechanisms as “identity statuses” (Marcia, 2006, p. 580). Stepping away from Erikson’s focus on polar solutions, Marcia suggested some middle ground. These two middle areas were defined by an encounter with an identity crisis or the process of identity exploration (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 30-31). Marcia referred to

constructed identities vs. *conferred identities*. *Constructed identities* are based on an attempt to resolve individual abilities with available roles in society through exploration whereas *conferred identities* are adopted from peers or parents with no exploration (Marcia, 2006, p. 579).

The first status, role confusion, is also known as identity diffusion. This status is characterized by an absence of exploration and lack of any commitments (Marcia, 2006, p. 580). People suffering from role confusion can often be described as disinterested or apathetic (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 24). These individuals typically do not exhibit any firm goals or values in most aspects of their lives. However, there are some notable benefits to the identity-diffused status. These people tend to be the most flexible when it comes to societal changes (Marcia, 2006, p. 581).

The second identity status, foreclosure, is characterized by the presence of commitments without any exploration (Marcia, 2006, p. 580). The commitments of identity-foreclosed people tend to be ones that their parents held. These commitments were taken over by the young people in an attempt to avoid exploration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 24). An alternative choice of identity-foreclosed people is that they will adapt an identity directly opposite of their parent, which is referred to by Berger (2014) as a “*negative identity*” (p. 458). Marcia again gave a reason for why people accept foreclosure as an identity status. He suggested that many people would avoid exploration due to a sense of doubt about their ability to choose wisely for themselves or to skillfully follow through with their decisions (Marcia, 2006, p. 580). However, Marcia also suggests that the foreclosed person is often unaware of his or her own doubts and will be seemingly self-assured, unable to admit failure, and exhibit unrealistic perceptions of their own abilities (Marcia, 2006, p. 581).

The third identity status described by Marcia is known as moratorium. This status is characterized by crisis, exploration, and the presence of some broad commitments (Marcia, 2006, p. 580). Berger pointed out that although the exploration of people in moratorium is often broad, it could be in depth as well. She explains that many people will quickly commit to one path and then after realizing that it is not the right choice for them, they will change to a different path and make another commitment (Berger, 2014, p. 458). Individuals in moratorium differ from identity-diffused people in that they actively search for a solution to their identity discovery issues (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 24). Berger (2014) refers to the status of moratorium as a “mature” status, which is much more common at the age of 19 or later because of the maturity that is required to enter this status (p. 458). Marcia, too, acknowledges, that moratorium can be a sign of maturity. He suggested that this status is a somewhat desirable event because it can help to reaffirm the ultimate identity achieved. Marcia (2006) notes, however, that positive effects of moratorium are only possible when the status is undergone with a sense of self-support and self-confirmation (p. 581).

Finally, the last of Marcia’s identity statuses is identity achievement. Identity achievement is reached when an individual thoroughly explores and analyzes his or her options, and then commits wholeheartedly to his or her chosen path (Marcia, 2006, p. 580). These people have undergone an identity crisis and worked their way through that crisis with an end result of independence from the paths suggested by others (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 24).

Although Marcia and Erikson’s theories of identity development prevail, many other notable theories exist. As a discipline, student development theory began in the 1960s. Largely contributing factors to this rise included unrest surrounding the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and the women’s rights movement (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 20). While there is

significant unrest today, there are not defined movements that there were 50 years ago. Unrest has defined several generations during the 20th and 21st centuries, and each generation of young adults during periods of unrest is described as tragically misinformed and lost. This is exactly how college-age young adults were thought of thirteen years ago as well. Taylor (2002) described them as being lost “because they have no moral, social, or economic compass” (p. 93). It is extremely important for young people to discover their identities, not only for their own well-being, but also for the healthy order of the world in which they live. Taylor (2002) suggests that this cause and effect relationship is due to a defining of interests so that the individual is aware of topics that he or she values (p. 37). Taylor (2002) referred to the difficulties associated with students’ identity development as “identity overload” (p. 94). Perhaps due to the important effect that a student’s identity development can have on the world around them, some theorists have suggested that a support system should be in place.

Many, such as Sanford, point to the college institution as the responsible party for providing the support and challenge that a developing student needs (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 22). Student development theorist Gergen suggested that support was needed for identity development because identity is largely shaped by the individual’s surroundings (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 38). In this way the relationship between the individual identity and the group identity is a reciprocal one.

Sociologists also have suggested that peers influence the individual’s identity development, that the individual will inherit, at least partly, some of the values and attitudes of the group he or she belongs to (Kaufman, 2014, p. 36). This reliance on a group identity in order for self-identity to develop implies that a person needs to belong to a group in order to discover his or her own identity (Kaufman, 2014, p. 37). Sociological theory also suggests that student

identity develops based on class systems, which helps them find their place in society while in the presence of various other classes (Kaufman, 2014, p. 38).

Psychologists usually do not simply develop a theory to explain how identity develops; they also provide a descriptive model or series of steps to illustrate their theory. Theorists Hardiman and Jackson developed a model that consisted of five stages in order to explain their idea of identity development. The five stages in their model are: (1) a primitive sense of social awareness, (2) premature acceptance of an assumed identity, (3) resistance of their newly adopted identity, (4) a redefining period of their identity based on their own values and ideas, and (5) internalization of those beliefs and their new identity (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 37). The first stage is expected to occur between birth and the age of four, but the rest of the stages of development in Jackson & Hardiman's model are more fluid and lack specific age associations. The most influential stages during the time of college decisions are the third and fourth stages, because individuals must develop their own beliefs in order to truly establish an identity and a purpose.

A noteworthy theorist, Chickering, developed an idea of identity development along seven "vectors." Chickering stated that these vectors would involve "cycles of differentiation... and integration" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 33). By this, he meant that an individual's identity is developed through a series of phases involving the idea of the self as a part of the surrounding environment, as well as the idea of the environment as a part of the self. The first vector described by Chickering is characterized by a new awareness about his or her place in the immediate environment. The second vector consists of a renewed lesson in controlling one's own emotions to keep them in check (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 33). This also serves as a phase in which emotions are reorganized to match the new awareness of the environment. The third

vector is characterized by a shift from autonomy, or independence, toward a stage of interdependence (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 33). This reaffirms the aforementioned theories that suggest a reciprocal relationship between the identity of the self and the identity of the group. The fourth vector involves a focus on interpersonal relationships (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 33). These relationships are intended to be a sign of more mature growth and are a large part of establishing self-identity, serving as yet another reassurance of the reciprocal relationship between self and group. The fifth vector is the actual establishment of an identity by the individual based on the vectors passed through thus far (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 33). The sixth vector is characterized by a development of a specific purpose for the individual to tackle, and the seventh vector is defined by the development of an individual's integrity (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 33).

Identity development during late adolescence and emerging adulthood focuses primarily on developing maturity. Douglas Heath developed a model for identity development based on maturation. The five dimensions described by Heath include symbolization, allocentric views, integration, stabilization, and autonomy (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 26). Symbolization involved a developing ability to apply one's experiences through different methods (i.e., writing, art, music, etc.). As an individual matures he or she begins to focus more on others, which allows him or her to more easily find his or her niche in society. The individual then applies his or her newly found allocentricity to his or her everyday life to become more integrated into society. The discovery of his or her place in society allows the individual to feel more stable in life. This stability, in turn, leads to a more self-reliant existence within the community.

Other theorists point to self-monitoring and self-awareness as major factors in student identity development. Krumboltz focused on identity development as a result of comparisons

between an individual and his or her peers (Career Development, 2006, p. 222). When a person compares his or her own abilities or actions with those that he or she sees around them, his or her self-awareness can be harmed, and future decisions can be greatly affected. Baumeister and Heatherton also focused on self-regulation and awareness. Their major contributions were in theories regarding the idea that an individual is constantly choosing between reaping small benefits immediately or large benefits later on (Taylor, 2002, p. 52).

Another notable theorist, William Perry developed a “scheme of cognitive and ethical development during college” (Berger, 2014, p. 534). The premise behind Perry’s scheme is that college students develop through nine levels of increasing complexity over their years at school. The main development that can be noticed through this scheme is a change from a concept of strict rights and wrongs, to a sense of “multiplicity of perspectives” (Berger, 2014, p. 534). This change is also known as a development through dualism into pluralism

Identity development is a process that is not fully understood. The theory of identity development is still relatively new and continues to develop everyday. Student development theory, in particular, is still being explored and defined. There may never be definitive answers to explain the contributions of individuals’ identities as students, but we at least can find some reasoning behind the difficulties we face.

Decisions in College Affect the Rest of Our Lives

Many important life-altering decisions are made during the traditional college-age years, from 18-22. These decisions create the foundation for much of an individual’s life. The usual decisions that are made at this time include where to settle down, what major to study in school, what career to pursue, and what skills are necessary for the individual’s desired lifestyle.

Perhaps the most common major decision made in college is the choice of career.

Kaufman (2014) described college as the starting point of the transition from childhood to the professional world (p. 38). The pressure that comes with the knowledge of this transition can be crushing for some people. Up until the start of college, many late adolescents had only planned for a future that included college, but no further. Some have already made the choice as to which major to study, but others have not even thought that far. Once young people enter college, they are almost immediately forced to consider the relatively new pressure of preparing for the competition they will face after graduation (Delbanco, 2012, p. 16). The ensuing panic can be unbearable for some people, which can then lead to problems with their decision-making and identity development.

Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, and Lenz in 2004 (as cited in Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014) identify three categories of indecision, which can be applied to the indecision that college students face. The first category is undecided-deferred choice, which occurs when a person postpones his or her choice for justifiable reasons. The second category is undecided developmental, which is characterized by decision-making difficulties as a result of insufficient self-knowledge. The third category is undecided multipotential, which is made up of individuals who become overwhelmed with the realistic possibilities available to them due to proficient skills or talents (p. 22-23).

According to an interview conducted by Ronan in 2005 (as cited in Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014) “up to 80% of matriculates enter college undecided on a major and up to 50% change majors at some point during their enrollment” (p. 22). These statistics may either be encouraging or discouraging, depending on the point of view. This evidence of general indecision can be encouraging in that students facing decision-making problems may not feel so

alone when they learn of the statistics. These same statistics can be discouraging to some individuals within the same group of indecisive students, if they think of these statistics as proof that there is no point in trying to make a decision because they may, again, change their decision anyway.

There are opposing viewpoints as to how students react to decision-making difficulties in college. Recently, experts suggest that undecided students do not face any deficit from their indecision regarding major or career (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014, p. 30). Although undecided students may not have their future plans as set in stone as other students, they are not completely incapable of making a decision. However, the suggestion has been made that undecided students are less likely to finish their college degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 425-426). Although a great deal of recent research has suggested that undecided individuals are likely to change their major and career plan, some research suggests exactly the opposite. Typically the theory presented by this research is referred to as the “sunk cost fallacy.” This means that if there is a perceived significant expense of time or money, which is lost by existing and previous efforts, then an individual will be likely to stand by a previously made decision in order to avoid any further waste (Berger, 2014, p. 434).

Some people have begun to think in recent years that college studies are becoming more and more obsolete in determining a lifetime career choice, as the structure of the job market changes. The ever-changing relationship between college and career has recently revealed that most employers expect their employees to exhibit specific skills, which are mainly learned on the job (Berger, 2014, p. 460). This development makes many people wonder why a degree is even necessary for earning a job in their desired field. Taylor (2002) noticed this trend early and referred to the uncertainty of which training is best to pursue for a particular job as a “maze of

confusion” (p. 99). Delbanco (2012) also admitted the unclear meaning of a college degree in today’s job market. He acknowledged the variations of degree requirements and career goals associated with each major that can be found both across and within institutions (p. 155).

Delbanco (2012) also suggested that these “drifts” were, at least in part, due to the financial crisis in 2008, which caused a shift in which majors would be most stable and profitable in the long run (p. 148).

The ensuing instability, which resulted from the 2008 financial crisis, changed the way that people pursue careers. Recently, most people can no longer expect to spend their working lives at the same job. The new trend involves multiple changes in occupation throughout life, as well as a wide range of fields in which the individual is employed (Young Adulthood, 2006, p. 1337). However, some evidence suggests that the trend of drifting has been developing for longer than originally thought. A survey conducted by the National Career Development Association (as cited in Career Development, 2006) revealed that around only two thirds of adults had consciously prepared for the careers in which they worked (p. 220).

The aforementioned category of indecision, known as undecided developmental, is a focus for many people in explaining indecision about careers. Researchers have proposed that a lack of self-knowledge can impact the ability to analyze potential careers, as well as the ability to analyze one’s own capability in pursuing those potential careers (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014, p. 23). Even when self-awareness becomes more developed in emerging adulthood, and a student is able to decide which career is best for him or herself, he or she may be unable to find employment in their chosen field (Berger, 2014, p. 547).

Choice overload seems to play a large role in the decision-making difficulties students face in college. Traditionally, college students have been able to push through choice overload

by making decisions based on potential earnings, opportunities, and demands of the careers available to them (Berger, 2014, p. 547; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 425; Soria & Stebleton, 2013, p. 30). However, given the recent state of the economy and the job market, many of those selecting factors become unhelpful because of a lack of availability (Berger, 2014, p. 460). Indeed, there was a lot more logic behind emerging adults choosing their lifelong occupations in the past. Most men entered into the same careers as their fathers, and most women became housewives, so there was little opportunity for actual decisions (Berger, 2014, p. 460).

Many universities today offer an unimaginable number of possible plans of study, among majors and minors, and students can easily be overwhelmed with the available options (Taylor, 2002, p. 100). It is most difficult for college students to make career decisions because of the seemingly endless possibilities of training, specializations, and degrees that create a hazy cloud over any clear-cut definition of their education (Taylor, 2002, p. 100). Pending deadlines hang over the heads of college student and force them into decisions they may not have made had they simply been given more time. When there are seemingly infinite possibilities before them, college students can find thorough analyzation of each possibility practically impossible (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010, p. 411). There is not enough time to make a decision based on systematic elimination of undesirable choices, which was the psychologist Piaget's ideal for allowing full developmental progress (Berger, 2014, p. 438). This type of analysis is much too wasteful when the deadline is looming ahead.

Despite the apparent confusion resulting from choice overload, some researchers argue that the phenomenon is not inherently negative. Some experts have suggested that there are specific circumstances leading to negative effects of choice overload, such as existing preferences (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010, p. 410). When a decision-maker is

familiar with the choices set before him or her, such as possible careers, he or she is better able to avoid the negative effects of choice overload. When facing an array of options specifically molded to meet the needs of a select group, college students can succumb to choice overload (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010, p. 411).

The effects of decisions made during college can be traced to the late stages of life. Today's economy and culture have created an atmosphere of freedom to choose. However, those same factors have also created an atmosphere of quick decisions. Students must try to make their lifelong decisions in approximately 18 years if they started from the time they were born. That is not realistic, however, and many young people do not actually start to think seriously about college and career until well into high school. Most young people are expected to decide on which career to work in for the next forty-plus years, within six years. It is abundantly clear that something should be done to help students who are floundering under the pressures of making lifelong decisions in too short a time.

Possible Strategies for Dealing with Decision-Making Problems

Especially in recent years, more and more evidence is turning up in support of the problems facing college students' identity development. Many institutions are taking note of these problems and are adapting in order to create the best environment possible for students to make it through this developmental crisis stage. Various universities now refer to undecided majors as "exploration" or "undeclared" in an attempt to relieve some of the negative connotations that come with the word "undecided" (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014, p. 22). The idea behind this subtle change in wording is that with less pressure to decide, students will feel more comfortable exploring what career they would like to pursue and can make decisions more easily to meet that end.

Clearly college students need a guide through the plethora of information that is out there in order to sift through the undesirable career and major options. Counselors and advisors can help ease the burden of information and choice overload by supplying students with resources to narrow down their search (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014, p. 23). However, simply presenting students with information about possible careers is not enough. Guides need to understand what goes into making a decision, and how that process can go awry. This knowledge can not only help to reassure students that they have not failed at the decision-making process, but it can also help the advisor know which course of action is best to take for each individual student (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014, p. 23).

Students can also help themselves through the decision-making process using various strategies. Being highly selective when considering possible options can help avoid some confusion that comes from choice overload (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 13). A helpful precursor in avoiding the sunken-cost fallacy is to examine exactly how much time, money, effort, and energy will be spent in the pursuit of the chosen path (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 14). One of the most recent suggestions for overcoming a lack of self-knowledge is to address that deficiency and modify the sense of self-awareness as lessons are learned (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014, p. 30). Many students may not know that they lack self-awareness, so a useful tool in helping them make decisions can be to point out common problems of self-awareness and provide various examples of how to learn and amend the problem (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014, p. 30). A study conducted by Gao and Simonson in 2008 (as cited by Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010) that suggested that choosing a group of options and then narrowing it down to a specific choice, can avoid choice overload (p. 420). Despite most theories saying that postponing a decision can worsen decision-making difficulty, Janis & Mann

(1977) suggested quite the opposite. They suggested that putting off a decision can allow for new circumstances to arise, which can help to make the decision easier (p. 239).

Another helpful method in overcoming choice overload is by using what are known as “simplifying decision heuristics” (Scheibehenne, Greifender, & Todd, 2010, p. 420). This method can be as simple as sampling classes from various majors in order to determine which fields students are most interested in (Young Adulthood, 2006, p. 1337). Ginzberg’s theory of career development explains that, starting at the age of seventeen, many people will begin to focus their choices based on interests and abilities (Career Development, 2006, p. 220). If a student does not feel comfortable in determining his or her own interests or skills, then there are many computer programs available today that can help (Hansen, 1997, p. 4). Most of these computer programs are based on Holland’s model for the six personal styles; realistic, investigative, artistic, social, entertaining, and conventional (Career Development, 2006, p. 221). This model suggested that people choose careers that reflect their personalities.

A method of career-counseling known as Integrative Life Planning (ILP), is designed to help ease the decision-making process. This method allows for career counselors to help individuals of all ages through the decision-making process in a way that is most beneficial to as many aspects of their lives as possible (Hansen, 1997, p. 17). There are six main perspectives of ILP that create the foundation of its success. The first perspective involves the individual’s view of him or herself and the world. The second perspective consists of knowledge from multiple fields of development, which are treated as one working machine. The third perspective takes a look at the goals of the individual and all other influential people or groups in their life. The fourth perspective explores connections within the individual’s life. The fifth perspective incorporates spirituality into the decision-making process, although it is traditionally ignored in

career planning. The sixth perspective helps the individual to better understand and manage his or her choices within his or her culture and society (Hansen, 1997, p. 17-18).

In addition to the six perspectives of ILP, six critical tasks are involved in the planning process. The first critical task consists of finding work that is needed, and is adaptable to the constantly changing contexts of our society. The second critical task involves consolidating the parts of the individual's life into one whole. The third critical task includes building a connection between one's family and his or her work. The fourth critical task revolves around valuing multiple perspectives and intertwining several aspects of one's life together. The fifth critical task of ILP explores the individual's life purpose. The sixth critical task of ILP sets the individual up to manage his or her own choices and the changes that will be taking place (Hansen, 1997, p. 19-21).

ILP can be extremely helpful in helping students overcome indecision and choice overload to discover his or her individual identity. The most effective part of ILP is that it combines individual identity with group identity, which (as mentioned before) was important to the theories of many identity theorists. Discovering what society lacks, and what an individual can contribute to society, allows him or her to realize their niche and makes decisions regarding career choice much easier. There are some downsides to ILP, however. The process can be quite lengthy, which is not always practical or desirable for stressed-out college students. The process also requires quite a bit of research, which can also place an extra strain on the full loads most college students are already carrying.

Two established methods of dealing with the decision-making process are much simpler than the complicated ILP. Some experts have suggested that making a decision about which career to pursue begins with the individual beginning a career (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p.

424). While this seems logical in that it could help an individual determine the attractive and abhorrent aspects that they would want to look for or avoid in a career, there seem to be other problems. By simply starting a career, a lot of time and money could be wasted working up to that career only to discover that it is completely unfavorable to the individual. Another incredibly simple method proposed for solving career-choice problems addressed post-decisional regret. Janis & Mann (1977) suggested that reversing the decision and starting over was the simplest and best way to deal with the problem (p. 317). Again, while this makes sense, it does not fully address the issues encountered when attempting to choose a career.

There is some tentative progress being made to ease the transition from late adolescence to emerging adulthood. It is increasingly important to the society and the economy that young people are aided in their quest for vocational identity. The methods and strategies that are currently in place for young people are helpful as a foundation but could certainly be improved upon. The most helpful methods that are available tend to be extremely time-consuming and can be stress-inducing. College students already have plenty of things to stress and worry about, so career planning should be made as smooth as possible. The best solution may be to make children more seriously aware of what choices they will need to make at younger ages. This will allow for more time to make these important choices, as well as more time for experimentation to narrow down possibilities.

Conclusions & Research Proposal

Every day college students question their decisions and even make changes to their previously laid-out plans. Many of these students feel like failures because they do not know that this is a relatively common thing in today's world. I certainly felt like a failure as early as senior year in high school for not knowing exactly what career plan I was going to follow in college. It

is important for students like me to know that we do not face these decision-making problems alone so that we do not give up prematurely and settle into a foreclosed identity. Changes need to be made to the way that young people are guided in making their decisions. There should be much more emphasis on comparing possible options, and less pressure to follow a specific path. Especially today, two different paths may lead to the same destination, but those paths are most certainly not identical. It is important for our society and economy that students explore their options thoroughly and make serious commitments so that the workforce is filled with motivated and enthusiastic workers. We cannot continue to ignore the decision-making struggles that young people face, or we will have a society comprised of apathetic people who contribute the bare minimum to the world in which they live.

Given enough time, I would have conducted my own study in order to better examine the points made throughout my thesis. Perhaps in the future I will revisit the project and conduct the research design that I had previously established. In the event that I do return to my research, I will retain the same foundation for my research.

The target group of participants would be the general body of undergraduate students at any institution of higher education. Ideally, there would be some cross-examination, which would include undergraduate students from several universities. In order to narrow down the participants, I would conduct a campus-wide survey, via email. This survey would include questions pertaining to number of changes to the plan of study for the student, as well as general demographic questions for the individual. The survey would take approximately 15 minutes to complete and would not pose any risk to the subject.

The individuals would be asked at the end of the survey whether or not they would be willing to participate in a more in-depth follow-up interview. The follow-up interview would be

completely on a volunteer basis, as it would take up approximately half an hour of the participant's time. The interviews would be conducted in person, or over the phone. Both the participant and myself will decide the scheduling of the interviews. The interviews would allow me to better understand the circumstances students face that lead to decision-making difficulties.

There would be minimal risk involved for the subjects in this research. No physical or psychological harm would be foreseeable for the participants. My email address would be provided for the participants to reach out to, given any questions or concerns. Using identification numbers to represent each of them would protect the anonymity of the participants. For example, #0924001 would represent the first participant to complete the initial survey on September 24th. The general demographics described in the initial survey would be the only identifying characteristics used in the research process.

I do not know whether or not I will be able to complete this research in the near future, given that I have been accepted into the accelerated nursing program at SUNY Brockport. I hope that more professional research will be completed on the subject of college decision-making, though, and that strides will be made to ease the process in the future. The amount of research conducted in recent years on student development theory is promising. Hopefully, someday soon there will be a breakthrough in the research that revolutionizes the way that college decision-making is approached.

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