

Career Decisions From the Decider's Perspective

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The authors used a phenomenological research method to investigate the career decision-making experiences of 17 employed adults. Thematic results from interview data analysis were organized within 3 overarching themes: decisions centered on relational life, decisions centered on personal meaning, and decisions centered on economic realities. Study results supported and extended contentions that career decisions are embedded in relational life and have contextual meaning. Belonging and the potential for meaningful engagement were integral to career decisions. Implications for the role of career counselors and career counseling are discussed. Recommendations for counseling that facilitates the consideration of belonging and personal meaning in career decisions are offered.

Recent career literature has delineated the central role of work in human experience (Axelrod, 1999) and has demonstrated that career decisions and personal issues (Amundson, 1995; Borgen, 1997) are inextricably intertwined. The extension of relational perspectives to the study of career decision making and development (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004) has indicated that career theory needs to take into account emerging evidence that human experience within work and nonwork domains intersects within and across relationships. Career counseling approaches that have focused on Super's life career development approach (Niles, 2003) and existentialism (Cohen, 2003) have offered alternatives to practice based on more traditional theory. Yet, despite an emphasis on more relational, contextual, and meaning-based perspectives in the professional literature, current career counseling practice often continues to reflect traditional matching and information-giving approaches (Dagley & Salter, 2004).

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This reliance on traditional trait-factor approaches mirrors the limited attention to the career decider's perspective in the career decision-making literature. Although people choose and are satisfied with occupations for reasons other than congruence, the majority of research in career choice has centered on person-environment fit models (Phillips & Jome, 2005). Newer models of career decision making (Gelatt, 1989, 1995; Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999) have focused on decision-making strategies but have not explicated factors that persons consider in making decisions. Subjective perspectives reveal that decisions have a wide variety of meanings (Blustein et al., 2004) that depend on the unique psychological experiences of the individual situated within cultural, social, historical, and economic contexts. Recent studies focused on the decider's experience have suggested that career decisions are made within contexts that are nonreflective of traditional career development theories and models (Blustein, 2001). Instead, an individual's career decisions tend to be relational (Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001), emotional (Iaquinta, 2007), and in service of the whole person (Hall, 2004). Career decision-making research that gives priority to the decider's subjective experience can foster a more relational, contextual, and meaning-based career development theory and practice.

Within the current context of rapid changes in the labor market and uncertainty (Borgen, 1997; Trevor-Roberts, 2006), people may be making career decisions differently from how they had in the past. In our review of the literature, we did not find any qualitative studies that examined the criteria that people consider when they make career decisions. In a quantitative case study investigation of factors influencing job choice under conditions of uncertainty, Athanasou (2003) concluded that there is a greater degree of individuality in career choice than that suggested by traditional theories of choice. Phillips et al.'s (2001) investigation of the relational context in which career decisions were made depicted decisions as community events in which participants actively involved others. Phillips et al. identified three overarching themes in which others are involved in the decision-making process: actions of others, recruitment of others, and pushing others away. Nevertheless, they excluded the decider's consideration of life roles, such as being a parent, in their classification. A focus on the subjective career (Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002), which places an increased emphasis on meaning making, social participation, and life planning, is of primary importance in understanding the criteria that people consider in making career decisions. The purpose of this study was to investigate career decision making from the decider's perspective, thereby addressing the career counselor's need for a subjective and nuanced understanding of career decision making.

Method

We used a phenomenological research method (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; Wertz, 2005) to elucidate participants' experiences of career decision making. Phenomenological psychology views all knowledge as perspectival and meaningful experiences as providing the basis for all knowledge and behavior. In a phenomenological study, the researcher

attempts to put aside preconceptions and empathically enter, free of value judgment, the life world of the participants, through interview transcripts, to understand a phenomenon of interest. In this study, we emphasized reflection on participants' experiences as described in their own words and on the meaning and commonality that were present in the phenomenon of career decision making. This emphasis has been categorized as a more empirical (Hein & Austin, 2001) or descriptive (van Manen, 1990) phenomenology. Within a philosophy of science, the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of this method is influenced by constructivism. The method stresses the socially constructed nature of reality and of trustworthiness and credibility rather than the truth value of the results. Respectful listening and description replace observation and measurement, and openness to participants replaces theory and measurement.

The participant's ability to articulate the experience and meaning of career decision making is critical to phenomenological research (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990). We used purposeful sampling for information-rich cases (M. Q. Patton, 1990) to select the 17 volunteer participants. We adopted a snowball method and recruitment poster to recruit volunteer participants and conducted telephone screenings to select participants from among those who responded to the recruitment poster. We placed recruitment posters on bulletin boards at community centers, church meeting rooms, community counseling centers, university and colleges, and community cafés. Some participants also distributed posters to other persons who they thought might have an interest in the study. The study participants were employed, either as full- or part-time employees or as self-employed workers, and self-identified as having contemplated and made at least three career decisions, some of which involved career changes. Participants were eight men and nine women, ages 21 to 40 years, whose education levels ranged from high school diploma to master's degree. Eight participants, ages 21 to 35 years, were also postsecondary students. Participant employment included cartographer, hospital services worker, retail sales worker, hairstylist, server, manager, youth worker, lifeguard, actor, small business owner, and clerical worker. Participants volunteered for the study with the understanding that the information shared would be kept confidential.

In this study, we adopted an expanded definition of *career*, which we defined as activities done over time, including work and other life activities. We conducted 1- to 2-hour phenomenological interviews with 17 volunteers to obtain contextually rich descriptions of career decision-making experiences. The interviews focused on two broad questions: (a) What is your experience of making career decisions? and (b) Describe any issues that might have influenced a career decision to stay or to leave. We asked participants to mark key career decision points on a lifeline (Heppner, O'Brien, Hinkelman, & Humphrey, 1994) and asked the two broad questions with the aim of encouraging participant self-reflection and to facilitate a deeper exploration of career decision-making experiences. Participants described varying career decisions, such as relocating to seek employment, leaving employment after being downsized or because of job dissatisfaction, pursuing postsecondary

studies to retrain for new employment, closing a successful business to parent, continuing in a workplace in a temporary contract position when full-time positions were eliminated, and working at day jobs to support other life endeavors.

We audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed participant interviews according to the procedural guidelines described by Colaizzi (1978) and Osborne (1990). Transcript analysis within individuals culminated in the creation of individual intraparticipant themes, idiographic psychological structures (Wertz, 2005), of the experience of career decision making for each participant. Following validation of the individual themes by each respective participant, we analyzed transcripts across individuals and compared individual themes to delineate common themes across multiple cases. We delineated common themes when individual themes from five or more participants denoted a commonality of one aspect in the experience of career decision making.

We incorporated strategies specific to phenomenological research (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; Wertz, 2005) and that are general for qualitative research (Morrow, 2005; Stiles, 1993) to establish trustworthiness of method and findings in this study. The research team, composed of a coordinator (third author) and trained researchers (including fifth author) who were involved in recruitment, interviewing, and data analysis, identified and discussed their presuppositions at the outset and throughout the research. The coordinator and two researchers (including fifth author) conducted peer reviews of three transcripts, individual themes, and the final synthesis of the common themes. Discussion of the emergent research findings during peer reviews and research meetings increased the reflexivity of the researchers and facilitated bracketing. Participant checks of the individual themes served to inform a trustworthy description of the experience of career decision making. Finally, two university professors (first and second authors), experts in career research who oversaw financial and general aspects of the project, audited the research results and concluded that the common themes provided sufficient evidence of coherence, the extent to which the thematic presentation hangs together and adds to the reader's understanding of the experience.

Results

We organized the six common themes that emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts within three broad, overarching themes: decisions centered on relational life, decisions centered on personal meaning, and decisions centered on economic realities. Themes and subthemes were equally represented across gender and age groups with the exception of the autonomy subtheme, which was primarily delineated within the individual themes validated by participants ages 20 to 29 years. All participants endorsed at least two overarching themes, whereas 53% of the participants endorsed the three overarching themes (see Table 1).

Decisions Centered on Relational Life

The relational perspective views relationships as central to healthy human functioning and the inherent tendency for people to seek out

TABLE 1
Distribution of Participant Themes and Subthemes (N = 17)

Theme and Subtheme	Participants	
	<i>n</i>	%
Decisions centered on relational life		
Connectedness	16	94
Belonging	13	76
Prioritizing family	8	47
Influence of role models and mentors	7	41
Decisions centered on personal meaning		
Importance of meaningful engagement	15	88
Purpose	9	53
Stimulation	7	41
Self-development	6	35
Alignment with values	5	29
Moving toward a new identity	9	53
Autonomy ^a	7	41
Self-awareness	5	29
Developing resilience through crisis	7	41
Decisions centered on economic realities		
Tension between needs and desires	9	53
Approach to uncertainty	7	41

^aThe autonomy subtheme was primarily delineated within the individual themes validated by participants ages 20 to 29 years.

connection, support, and intimacy as an adaptive aspect of human experience (Blustein, 2001; Blustein et al., 2004). Relational perspectives appreciate that career and work are embedded in relational life and must be considered within the relational contexts and life roles within which they occur. The major themes of connectedness and influence of role models and mentors emerged from the participants' descriptions of decisional criteria that gave priority to relationships and multiple life roles in career decisions and work life. These themes and the subthemes of belonging and prioritizing family were organized within the overarching theme of decisions centered on relational life.

Connectedness. Of the participants, 94% described the importance of connectedness with family, friends, and colleagues within and outside work as a primary factor in their career decision making. Participants prioritized relationships and intentionally made career decisions that enhanced a relational sense of connection. Connectedness involved feeling loved, nourished, and supported or nourishing, loving, and supporting others. The theme of connectedness comprised two subthemes: belonging and prioritizing family.

Regarding the belonging subtheme, 76% of the participants made career decisions on the basis of their need for camaraderie and a sense of belonging both within and outside of the work setting. Good relationships and belonging at work were more important decisional criteria than were greater earnings, upward mobility, and the pursuit of challenging and stimulating work. Participants actively sought out harmonious work environments and avoided those they perceived as toxic. A sense of belonging, a particularly significant factor for staying in a workplace, was associated with positive emotions such as excite-

ment and contentment. An important function of supportive work environments was the facilitation of career success.

Belonging at work provided a connection to society that was not available elsewhere. Participants described feelings of social alienation, devaluation, isolation, and loneliness, as well as feeling lost, as the personal costs ensuing from the loss of belonging, support, and social connection through unemployment or contingent employment. A clerical worker said,

Sometimes, I just felt like prostitution, like [the employers] are really taking pieces of me without any regard for who I am. Temp work really feels like there are a lot of people taking a piece of you. At the end of those kinds of jobs I feel diminished.

The experience of being nourished and supported, which accompanied belonging within a community, was an important consideration in many of the participants' career decisions. The sense that a "career decision is guided by people" was a common experience. Decisions to pursue challenging career goals and the attainment of these goals were attributed to the empowerment, courage, and confidence gained from supportive persons, including parents, extended family members, members of the participants' faith community, friends, and teachers. One participant, a clerical worker and parent, described the importance of having the support of others this way:

[I] really appreciate the value of [a good social support system]. I really see the necessity for that kind of connectedness and that kind of sense of belonging and the sense that what you are doing is worthy and that the people around you support you.

Besides achievement, participants were encouraged and guided by others to seek out career plans that facilitated wellness, growth, and happiness.

Belonging also involved nourishing and giving back to others. The experience of receiving support and hope from supportive communities at a time of personal need was a significant influence in career decisions to support others. For example, an athlete who later became an advocate said,

After I graduated I went back a lot. I helped coach, I helped ref because my high school was my family for my last 2 years of school. Whatever they needed, if I was available I would go just because they helped me graduate.

Regarding the prioritizing family subtheme, family relationships were a primary consideration in present and future career decisions for 47% of the participants whose priorities shifted upon becoming a parent or getting married. Participants expressed certainty and confidence in making conscious choices to pursue work that supported their families financially and that still provided the flexibility and freedom to spend significant time with their families. The following small business owner, for instance, started a home business once he became a father to spend more time with his family:

The time I was running that business I really wasn't seeing my children. I had seriously questioned why I had children in the first place. What I'm saying is that I have [children] in my hands. What am I going to do with them? Am I going to be at work all day long or what?

Influence of role models and mentors. Of the participants, 41% described relationships with role models and mentors as important decisional influences. Whereas some participants described mentorships as emerging naturally in relationships, other participants actively sought out role models upon whom to model their own careers. Role models and mentors offered affirmation and encouragement that supported participants to overcome career challenges and to feel hopeful, confident, and courageous in the pursuit of career goals. One participant, a college student employed as an event planning assistant, explained,

I wanted to be a high school teacher because there were teachers in elementary and high school who made my day better. Their teaching style made it easier to learn; their personality made it easy to be around. . . . I wanted to make a difference for someone.

Decisions Centered on Personal Meaning

Postmodern and social constructivist perspectives in career (e.g., Chen, 2003; Savickas, 1993) have emphasized the centrality of contextual meaning making that reflects subjective interpretations and the subjective meaning of career for the individual. The major themes of importance of meaningful engagement, moving toward a new identity, and developing resilience through crisis emerged from the participants' descriptions of decisional criteria that gave priority to personal meaning and personal fulfillment in career decisions and work life. These themes and the subthemes of purpose, stimulation, self-development, alignment with values, autonomy, and self-awareness were organized within the overarching theme of decisions centered on personal meaning.

Importance of meaningful engagement. Of the participants, 88% described meaningful engagement within and outside of their work as important criteria in career decision making. Meaningful activities were those that were purposeful, personally fulfilling, stimulating, challenging, or aligned with personal values. Meaningful engagement elicited positive emotions such as happiness, enthusiasm, excitement, peacefulness, contentment, and pleasure. Some participants chose work that afforded meaningful engagement at work, whereas others chose work that afforded the flexibility for meaningful engagement outside of work. Participants, particularly those who valued creative engagement, made sacrifices to attain meaningful engagement in their lives. The importance of meaningful engagement theme comprised four subthemes: purpose, stimulation, self-development, and alignment with values.

Regarding the purpose subtheme, sense of purpose and fulfillment in career were significant decisional criteria for 53% of the participants whose career decisions were motivated by the desire to make a contribution to others or to make a difference in the world. Participants, such as the following writer/server, expressed a connection between a sense of purpose and fulfillment in career:

I would like to take a more organic approach to communications, working in a grassroots political group. . . . It is important for me to be doing something that I feel sound about. I'm still trying to make the world a better place. That is an important decision factor for me.

Regarding the stimulation subtheme, 41% of the participants sought meaningful engagement by choosing work that was intellectually and emotionally stimulating, that provided opportunities for continual learning, or that allowed for variety in the types of tasks and skills required. Stimulating work was enjoyable, interesting, and motivating. Careers that offered continual learning and variety were perceived as avenues for self-growth. A cartographer described the stimulation she received from her job as follows:

You don't even notice the time going by because you're absorbed in [the work]. It has given me the chance to travel and do interesting things and be engaged in different ways. Also there's a very tangible thing of making maps so a job like that is challenging. I have to use a wide variety of skills so it keeps me busy. I'm not bored.

Regarding the self-development subtheme, flexibility and freedom on the job to pursue projects outside of work that really mattered and that contributed to self-development were important decisional criteria for 35% of the participants. This importance was underscored by the following server:

I've always really seen myself as an artist. . . . The sense of self is really important to me and the ability to be able to expand on sense of self. People get really wrapped up in careers that don't leave time for who they are. I want my definition of career to be more expansive in what we do. I've turned out multifaceted.

Regarding the alignment with values subtheme, 29% of the participants emphasized engagement in interesting work or activities that aligned with their values, ideologies, and morals. Although participants acknowledged that financial realities could hamper the ability to pursue meaningful activities, remuneration remained a secondary factor in career decisions. For example, a principal of a nongovernmental organization said,

I would rather [contract with] First Nations than a logging company because of my ideology. I never wanted to work for a company that did large scale logging because I don't happen to agree with what they are doing. First Nations [projects are] interesting to me but also I often agree with the goals of their projects.

Moving toward a new identity. The experience of moving toward a new identity was an important aspect of career decision making for 53% of the participants. This experience, most salient for participants ages 20 to 29 years, involved moving away from parental expectations and measures of success, making autonomous career decisions, and developing personal values and standards. Autonomous career decisions engendered growth; self-awareness; and, most important, facilitated a sense of self-assurance to pursue new goals with confidence. The freedom to explore and develop one's own identity was related to excitement, hope, and optimism. Participants expressed frustration over a perceived lack of choice whether because of external forces such as parental expectations or because of internal struggles such as an increasing awareness of strengths and weaknesses. The moving

toward a new identity theme comprised the subthemes of autonomy and self-awareness.

Regarding the autonomy subtheme, 41% of the participants spoke extensively about their desire for autonomy and the absence of autonomy as driving forces in their lives. Reflection and exploration of what was personally meaningful were important activities in forming and feeling at peace with one's identity. Autonomous career decisions, such as choosing an educational path or career direction without parental influence, ensured that participants defined career success on their own terms. For instance, one participant, a college student employed in student support services capacity, said,

I spent a lot of time living my life by [the parents'] decisions and doing what they wanted me to do. I wasn't really myself. I discovered myself when I moved here. . . . I stopped taking into account what my parents thought I should do.

Regarding the self-awareness subtheme, increased self-awareness, associated with personal growth, perceptual shifts in what was considered important or meaningful, and identity change, was an important decisional factor for 29% of the participants. For one participant, increased self-awareness led her to give up competitive swimming to become a student:

[A year off] was really rough but really good in that it got me back on my feet and I established who I was—not as a swimmer anymore. I really developed new interests so it was definitely a very key decision time.

Decision making based on personal growth and identity change was a rewarding but difficult experience, as described by the following participant who became a counselor after a career as an aviary technician:

It was a very hard decision. I didn't really want to give up that side of myself, the bohemian side. I didn't really want to reconcile myself to sort of stepping into middle age. That was my dilemma . . . but I made the decision. It did transform my schema in how I looked at the world.

Self-awareness and acceptance of strengths and weaknesses were important factors in career decisions. The selection of careers in which one could excel was sometimes motivated by perceived inadequacy and experienced as the loss of options. A graphic artist who did not feel "smart enough" explained that "our path in life is guided by closed doors as much as it is by open doors."

Developing resilience through crisis. Of the participants, 41% developed strength or resiliency in the face of challenges and hardships such as identity crises, financial struggles, workplace challenges, experiences of loss, job uncertainties, and environmental constraints. Initially, participants felt frustrated, infuriated, angry, and disempowered. They found fault with themselves, although problems such as being unable to find work after graduating from university were due to local labor market conditions. Participants described an internal meaning-making process through which they overcame the challenges of adversity and "still came

out with hope." A hospital services worker who had experienced multiple environmental constraints, including layoffs, downsizing, a leaky condominium, and injury, initially perceived that "fate [was] dealing me a series of bad blows." He reflected that "I'm feeling like I've not empowered myself in these decisions. I have let things happen to me." Participants such as the following business owner perceived the experience of hardship as a catalyst for the development of positive attributes, personal resources, and growth:

I moved out at 15 years old and moved into my car for two months. It was a very sad moment for me. I was scared but I think back to it now and the courage and the strength that it builds is quite amazing.

Decisions Centered on Economic Realities

Within the current societal context, career decisions are often made under conditions of continual change, uncertainty, and contingent employment (Borgen, 1997; Trevor-Roberts, 2006). When structural barriers to opportunity and financial realities constrain desired career decisions, individuals attempt to make good decisions within the realities of their life contexts (Phillips & Jome, 2005). The major themes of tension between needs and desires and approach to uncertainty emerged from the participants' descriptions of decisional criteria that addressed perceived economic and environmental barriers. We organized these themes within the overarching theme of decisions centered on economic realities.

Tension between needs and desires. The challenge of balancing opposing career needs and desires was a significant factor in the career decisions of 53% of the participants. The tension between the desire for basic financial security and the desire to pursue their passion was a recurrent factor in career decisions. When balance could not be achieved, participants felt conflicted, confused, and lost. Career decisions that favored financial security over career passion were experienced as difficult but necessary sacrifices. The experience of tension was particularly evident among participants who desired creative careers. For example, a participant pursuing a career as an actor stated,

I feel I have more an obligation to [the child], to make sure that there's a stable environment for her to grow up in. Financially, I want to be comfortable enough that I don't have to worry about how we're going to pay the next bill.

Fear, primarily fear of not being able to base career decisions on what was meaningful, was a powerful emotion for participants. The fear of becoming "a starving artist" (writer) and feeling "insecure with money" (retail sales worker) were also potent emotional factors in career decisions. Environmental forces over which participants had no control, such as downsizing, low employment rates in geographic areas, and limited employment prospects in chosen fields, contributed to participants' sense of fear, uncertainty, and personal inadequacy.

Participants managed the tension between opposing desires in two main ways. Some participants, distinguishing between job and career, chose day jobs that gave them the flexibility, time, and means to pursue their creative passions. Other participants, attempting to integrate opposing

desires, incorporated the opportunity to use creative talents within financially secure work, such as the following graphic artist:

I was more attracted to the power suit and big business. I didn't want to live in a shack in the woods with oil paint on my fingers. There is comfort in the security of business world when you know what the bottom line is.

Approach to uncertainty. Forty-one percent of the participants, some of whom had previously experienced industry layoffs and unemployment, considered uncertainty about their future in their career decision making. Participants had differing emotional responses to perceived uncertainty. Some felt uneasy and uncomfortable about ambiguity in future employment, whereas others were fearful about making the wrong decision and feeling "trapped." Still, other participants felt a sense of excitement about future possibilities. Career decisions were clearly influenced by uncertainty conditions.

Of the participants, 35% coped with uncertainty by actively moving toward their goals and taking actions to increase their employability. These participants set goals, generated options, undertook formal education, and emphasized the value of getting practical experience. They made career decisions intended to increase exposure to opportunities and that enabled them to become "well-rounded" and more "employable."

Participants incorporated an agentic stance, believing that their actions would lead to a positive outcome. Faith sustained one participant's positive expectations despite conditions of uncertainty. Although receptive to opportunities, participants also took the time to carefully evaluate the opportunities that presented themselves. One participant, a cartographer, stated,

I just wanted to check things out. I had an open mind. I didn't know what I wanted to do or I hadn't made any solid decisions about what my career was going to be. I wanted to see what was out there and what suited me.

For the most part, participants were able to tolerate ambiguity by being flexible, open-minded, resilient, and proactive in their career decision making.

Discussion

Our results clearly indicate that career decision making is embedded within the life context of the whole person. The priority that many career deciders gave to relationships across life roles affirms that attention to the relational is necessary to an understanding of career decisions (Blustein, 2001; Blustein et al., 2004). Most of the career deciders in this study actively sought supportive and relationally rich work environments and confirmed that a sense of belonging is integral to decisions to join or remain in a particular workplace. Participants valued work relationships that helped them feel connected over salary and perceived workplaces that offered connectedness as facilitating career success.

Our results illustrate that career decisions are in effect community events (Phillips et al., 2001). Deciders navigated career decisions through the feeling of belongingness and inclusion in a social network. The career deciders in this study confirmed that a sense of belonging both facili-

tated and influenced decisions and efforts in line with higher aspirations. Secure and supportive relationships provided the ground on which deciders enacted career decisions with confidence. Through connection and identification with role models and mentors, deciders made career decisions to be like valued others. Career deciders in this study highlighted the negative emotions and decisional difficulties associated with a lack of a sense of belonging. Although some deciders strove for autonomy in career decisions, a sense of belonging was still integral to these deciders. They also made career decisions within relational contexts that extended beyond the immediate family.

The three parents in this study perceived parenting as their primary vocation and prioritized family needs for connection in career decisions. The experience of receiving support and validation from others during times of personal hardship also engendered career decisions that gave priority to tending or caring for others. Tending, the human experience of connection and validation through emotional offering to others, has been related to career by Flum (2001). Schultheiss (2005) has emphasized the necessity of unraveling personal meaning and mattering, that is, the deciders' sense of meaning to others. Deciders who prioritized tending to others in their career decisions evoked the concepts of a calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005), the service career anchor (Schein, 1992), and vocation (Cochran, 1990) in which decisions are based on a sense of inner direction or purpose.

The deciders' evaluation of the potential for meaningful engagement was similarly integral to career decisions. Savickas (1993) has long argued that the role of career counseling is to assist individuals to relate their quest for meaning to career. In essence, tasks are meaningless without a personal theme that gives them meaning. Deciders' subjective perspectives and individually determined goals provided an orientation for career decisions consistent with that of the protean career (Hall, 2004). With basic economic needs met, deciders gave more weight to opportunities for stimulation, self-development, and growth than to remuneration in career decisions. Decisional criteria of stimulation were reminiscent of the absorption and complete immersion found in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) description of flow. A point of departure in our findings, however, is that individuals, particularly those who valued creativity and family, made work decisions that freed them to pursue meaningful engagement outside the workplace. For these individuals, the workplace provided the means to pursue meaningful engagement rather than the venue from which they necessarily derived stimulation, self-development, and fulfillment.

Deciders acknowledged the financial function of work and necessarily considered financial realities and pragmatic concerns in career decisions. They related difficult emotions and difficult compromises to decisional constraints imposed by structural barriers. The Systems Theory Framework (STF; W. Patton & McMahon, 1999) offers a suitable conceptualization for the economic conditions, the historical influences, the employment market, and the political decisions that influenced participants' career decisions. The STF also views individuals as active agents who influence their environment. Not specifically delineated by the STF are the strong negative emotions, such as fear of financial insecurity, that deciders ex-

perienced under difficult economic conditions. Deciders experienced the need to prioritize finances over connectedness and meaningful engagement and went to great lengths to balance these criteria when financial security became an issue. In these balancing acts, deciders displayed attitudes and approaches to uncertainty consistent with Gelatt's (1989) strategy of positive uncertainty and Mitchell et al.'s (1999) strategy of planned happenstance.

Implications for Counseling and Conclusion

The results of this study provide a window into the criteria that deciders consider as they make career decisions and into the experience of career decision making. Career counselors can no longer ignore the relational experiences of their clients and the interconnections between relational life and career decisions. Career counselors can assist clients to understand these interconnections and to capitalize on relational resources. Acknowledging the role of the relational in career decision making can be affirming to career clients (Schultheiss, 2003), and including significant others in career counseling (Amundson, 1995) can increase support for the client. The career counselor who nurtures and affirms the client and who creates a mattering climate (Amundson, 2003) offers the client a sense of belonging and place essential to career decisions. Parker (2002) argued that the role of the career counselor has shifted from matcher to nurturer, but unfortunately, this change in the counselor's role is often not yet the case in practice (Dagley & Salter, 2004). The experiences of the participants in this study point to the role of the career counselor as one who facilitates client consideration of a sense of belonging and personal meaning, along with financial circumstances, in career decision making.

Career counseling groups offer clients the opportunity to build community, to gain a sense of belonging, and to offer and receive support and validation. Within the context of group programs, counselors can help clients examine relational and other resources, value individual perspectives on meaningful engagement, and develop reality-based action plans in a supportive environment. At an organizational level, career counselors can help workplaces to develop structures that encourage connection, support, and feelings of safety. Structures that promote a sense of belonging are especially needed in workplaces where employees experience uncertainty because of rapid changes in the workplace, high employee turnover, or contingent employment. When workplaces are not conducive to the development of structures that promote a sense of belonging, counselors may support employees to develop career communities (Parker, Arthur, & Inkson, 2004), composed of work colleagues across work organizations, from which they can draw career support and connection.

On a more emotional level, career counselors can affirm the tension that many clients feel when financial needs constrain career decisions and limit opportunities for meaningful engagement and connectedness. Career counselors can help clients find meaning in structures that influence career decisions, consider alternatives that help clients meet needs for meaningful engagement and connectedness across life roles, and help

clients develop the skills and interests needed to connect with others and become engaged in activities. Finally, career counselors can help clients find meaning and hope following difficult career decisions.

Summary and Limitations

The nuanced and subjective understanding of the experience of career decision making offered in this phenomenological study invites a more relational, contextual, and meaning-based career development theory and practice. This study supports and extends contentions that career decisions are embedded in relational life and have contextual meaning. Participants clearly made career decisions that were centered on their relational lives and on their desire for meaningful engagement within the context of economic and personal realities. The role of the career counselor shifts from one who matches to one who facilitates the consideration of belonging and personal meaning in career decisions.

Although this research offers a valuable first-person perspective on career decisions, the counselor must be aware of the limitations inherent to a phenomenological study. The focus of phenomenological research is to increase understanding through a rich, local description of deciders' experiences rather than to generalize to others. Thus, this study serves to expand the career counselor's knowledge of the criteria that persons may consider in career decisions; however, as with all research, the counselor should exercise judgment in considering the information from this study for use with other groups of deciders. Additionally, the retrospective view of career decisions offered in this study may not be identical to participant perspectives at the time that career decisions were made. Future researchers could conduct multiple interviews at different periods in the career decision-making process to examine how criteria and experience may change during this process.

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