

Navigating Adversity and Complexity in Career Decision-Making: A Decision-Space Worksheet Approach

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Abstract

Challenges related to career decision-making can emerge at various stages of life (Sanusi & Ismail, 2020). One factor that affects career decision-making is negative career thoughts, which result from an individual's assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, plans, or strategies. Identifying and addressing these negative thoughts are important components of career counseling and can enhance an individual's career decision-making self-efficacy. This paper details the use of the Decision-Space Worksheet (DSW; Peterson et al., 2009), a projective assessment, to help individuals navigate challenges and barriers in career decision-making. It also discusses the application of the instrument using an illustrative case study.

Case of “Angie”

Suppose Angie, a doctoral student in counseling psychology, came to your office because she was experiencing career indecision about which path to pursue after graduation. She reported feeling overwhelmed by the various options available within the profession and seemed unable to decide, despite having training experience in clinical work, teaching, and research.

Case Conceptualization Using Cognitive Information Processing Theory

Before using the Decision-Space Worksheet (DSW), it is important to conceptualize Angie's case within a career theory framework. Cognitive Information

Processing Theory may be applicable to her case (Sampson et al., 2023). This career development model applies general information-processing principles to career choice and emphasizes that effective decision-making requires individuals to process information about themselves (self-knowledge) and available options (options knowledge); use decision-making skills such as analysis, communication, and execution; and employ executive processing (metacognition) to regulate the process. Within this framework, decision-making strategies are represented by a five-step process that guides individuals in making informed career decisions: the communication, analysis, synthesis, valuing, and execution cycle (Sampson et al., 2023).

Here, communication refers to recognizing a career concern that does not align with an individual's ideal state, whereas analysis emphasizes understanding the self, available options, and thinking patterns related to the career decision. The synthesis phase involves expanding and narrowing options, whereas the valuing phase entails prioritizing them. After these stages have been completed, the final phase, execution, involves implementing the first choice (Sampson et al., 2023). Angie's case suggests that she may be experiencing difficulty in either the synthesis or valuing phase, with certain complexity factors serving as barriers to making her final decision. After identifying the career decision-making phase in which she is experiencing difficulty, it would be helpful to determine the factors influencing her decision, which supports the use of the DSW.

DSW and its Clinical Utility

The DSW (Peterson et al., 2009) is designed to help clients identify thoughts, feelings, people, and circumstances associated with a career decision. At the beginning of career counseling, it can also be used as a diagnostic tool to help clients prioritize contextual influences. The DSW is both a cognitive mapping task and a measure of complexity and can be used with students from middle school through college, as well as with adults (Peterson et al., 2009). The DSW may reveal the following issues: cognitive distortions, disabling emotions, financial constraints, family influences, education, interests, self-doubt, employment, and quality of life. It is a projective rather than self-report assessment, providing additional insight into the thinking patterns of individuals engaged in career decision-making.

Potential Prompts and Summary for Processing the Activity

When processing the activity with an individual such as Angie, it would be important to explore her experience of completing it. For instance, the counselor might ask the client about her thoughts and feelings and request permission to explore her responses further. Next, the counselor might restate the career decision of the client and ask whether anything should be added. To facilitate further insight into the factors and their valences, the counselor might ask, "What is your impression of the list?" or "How does each item affect your career decision? Are some valences slightly stronger than others?" Next, the counselor would examine the client's drawings, identify the three main factors, and recognize relevant themes. During this step, the counselor would determine whether the factors identified by the client include affective components, interests, or indications of a negative self-concept. When discussing these themes, the counselor would collaborate with the client to ensure the accuracy of the observations and interpretations.

After processing the activity, the final step would be to summarize the common themes and observations derived from the worksheet. A sample summary for Angie is as follows:

"Based on what you have shared, three main factors appear to be influencing your decision about what to do next: engaging in meaningful work, helping others, and choosing an option that uses your strengths. Your concerns include family expectations, work-life balance, and financial constraints. Does this summary accurately reflect what you have shared? Would you add anything?"

Next Steps for Using the DSW in Career Counseling

After processing and summarizing the decision space, the counselor would consider next steps to help the client navigate the factors contributing to the complexity of the decision. These steps might include administering additional career readiness assessments or developing a treatment plan or an individual learning plan. Such plans could include further assessment, self-knowledge-building activities, information about options, and referrals for mental health concerns. Further information about the instrument is available in the assessment manual (Peterson et al., 2016).

References

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