

A Kohutian approach to indecisiveness

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Career indecision is a classic topic in vocational psychology and presently it is regarded as a multidimensional construct. Career undecided individuals have been classified into two main categories. The first corresponds to a normal phase, in development terms, of career exploration of alternatives that precedes investment in a specific career option. The second, normally called indecisiveness, is of more structural nature. For indecisive individuals, and not simply undecided, the decision making process, including career choice, tends to be a difficult task. The identification of the determinants of indecisiveness has important implications for career counseling. Based on the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut, the primary purpose of this study was to analyze the role of goal instability and self-esteem, two markers of the self's maturity according to this psychological framework of psychoanalytical orientation, in the prediction of indecisiveness. A regression analysis was applied to a Portuguese high-school sample of 314 secondary school students. Overall, the regression equation accounted for 35% of indecisiveness scores. Implications for career theory and counseling are discussed.

Key words: Career indecision, Indecisiveness, Heinz Kohut, Self-psychology.

Career indecision is, next to interests, the single most important construct in the field of vocational psychology (Kelly & Lee, 2002) and a classic topic of research (Borgen, 1991; Chartrand & Camp, 1991). Initially, research on career indecision considered the latter a unidimensional construct (decided versus undecided). However, since the 1960s, two basic types of indecision have been identified. The first was *developmental indecision*, a normal phase of the vocational decision-making process according to classical theories of psychosocial development, career development and choice (Erikson, 1968; Super, 1957; Tiedeman, 1961). This type of indecision could be considered a normal period of development that is the result of a stage of identity and career exploration. The second, *indecisiveness*, resulted from a more structural form of indecision, including decision-making difficulties in other domains of life. Indecisive individuals present a set of negative psychological characteristics, namely high levels of anxiety, low self-esteem and vocational identity, an external locus of control, and a diminished sense of their decision-making capacity (Fuqua & Hartman, 1983; Hartman & Fuqua, 1983; Heppner & Hendricks, 1995; Salomone, 1982; Santos, 2001; Santos & Ferreira, 2012).

Although the characterization of indecisiveness is now well established through the analysis of individual cases (e.g., Salomone, 1982) and of cluster analysis studies (e.g., Santos & Ferreira, 2012), it is important to expand these efforts linking indecisiveness to theories of human

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development. To the best of our knowledge, only one study by Cohen, Chartrand and Jowdy (1995) has explored the associations between several career decision groups and progress in the psychosocial development stages of Erik Erikson's theory. They conclude that indecisive individuals showed the worst resolution of the first five stages of Erikson's theory, linking for the first time progress in developmental tasks related to the stages of trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, and identity versus identity confusion and the difficulties related to indecisiveness.

We believe that is necessary to expand this line of research using other developmental theories to explore more deeply the roots of indecisiveness. In this regard, we consider that the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut is a solid and promising theory to help us to understand the development of the indecisive disposition.

Heinz Kohut's theory

The self-psychology theory of Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) is a relevant conceptual framework for the understanding of human development and behavior (for a review, see Baker & Baker, 1987; Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005; Kahn, 1985; Wolfe, 1989). Kohut developed a psychoanalytical theory of self that departs from the classic psychoanalytical approach. For this author, the self constitutes the center of the person's psychological universe, being the psychological structure responsible for the individual's adjustment and well-being. The process of maturation of the self has roots in infancy, during which the child uses the world around him/her, especially parental figures, as elements that allow him/her to anchor his/her sense of self and develop healthy narcissism. Kohut designates as self-objects the result of the relationships the child develops with others. Self-objects allow the child to develop and maintain self-cohesion and self-esteem, as well as provide feelings of security and emotional stability in his/her relationship with him/herself and with the world. The parents' response to the child's self-object needs is never perfect, since it is inevitable that occasional lapses occur. An optimal level of frustration allows the child to progressively incorporate the functions self-objects previously fulfilled through a process of internal psychological structuring that Kohut designated transmuting internalization.

Maturation of the self occurs along three lines of development, which reflect the child's needs, and configure constituents or sectors of the self. The child's exhibitionistic and grandiose needs are satisfied when self-objects mirror the child's sense of grandiosity, thus strengthening his/her self-respect and self-worth. Idealizing needs are manifested through admiration and idealization of the parental figures, which will later be translated into an internal system of principles, values, and goals. Finally, altered ego or twinship needs are related with the search for a certain degree of alikeness and closeness with other people.

When parents manifest chronic empathic failures in satisfying these needs, namely through attitudes of indifference, excessive criticism, or hostility, a greater vulnerability of the self is verified and difficulties in the development of internal regulatory and emotional control mechanisms occur. According to Kohut, this is the main cause of failures in psychological adjustment and psychopathology.

Kohut's self-psychology and goal instability

The idealizing need of the self seems particularly useful in analyzing several aspects of psychological development and behavior. Individuals with healthy idealization should be able to develop a flexible but lasting set of ideals and goals in order to analyze alternatives and to make investments, maintaining a sense of direction and continuity, especially in periods of change and life transitions (Lapan & Patton, 1986).

Robbins and Patton (1985) created the Goal Instability Scale (GIS) in order to operationalize the assessment of a specific aspect of the idealizing line of development, based on the principle that a person who experiences difficulties in the maturation of this sector of the self may come to manifest "... a lack of goal-directness, a sense of depletion, or fear of committing oneself to longer term goals" (p. 223). Research with this scale has shown the existence of theoretically consistent associations between personal adjustment indexes and goal instability. Individuals with low scores on the GIS, which reflects unhealthy idealization, reveal lower levels of self-esteem (Robbins & Patton, 1985; Smith & Robbins, 1988), personal competency (Scott & Robbins, 1985), goal commitment (Lese & Robbins, 1994), social satisfaction (Smith & Robbins, 1988) and self-efficacy (Multon, Heppner, & Lapan, 1995), and higher levels of depression (Smith & Robbins, 1988; Watson, McKinney, Hawkins, & Morris, 1988) and anxiety (Stark, Bentley, Lowther, & Shaw, 1991; Watson et al., 1988). Furthermore, goal instability is related to low school achievement, difficulties in adjustment to college (Lese & Robbins, 1994; Robbins, Lese, & Herrick, 1993; Robbins & Schwitzer, 1988), and a reduced adjustment among individuals with a physical disability (Elliott, Uswatt, Lewis, & Palmatier, 2000).

In the career development domain, several studies have revealed that high-goal instability individuals are less involved in activities of career exploration (Blustein, 1989), reveal lower levels of career decision-making self-efficacy (Blustein, 1989), are more career undecided (Chartrand, Robbins, Morril, & Boggs, 1990; Multon, Heppner, & Lapan 1995; Robbins & Patton, 1985), and are usually less satisfied with their career choices (Robinson & Cooper, 1988). More recently, a study by Bertoch et al. (2014) showed that the GIS scores were correlated with several measures of readiness for career exploration and with performance in a career course. Individuals who scored higher on goal instability revealed more dysfunctional career thoughts that inhibit career problem-solving and decision-making, were more dissatisfied with their career choices, experienced higher levels of career decision stress, and exhibited poor performance in a career course.

As a whole, the results of these studies bestow the goal instability construct significant relevance for psychological research and intervention in the field of career psychology. If a certain level of maturation in the idealizing line is necessary for the development of a set of values and goals, then it can be expected that, in cases where this maturation process does not occur adequately, greater difficulties may arise in dealing with career developmental tasks.

Kohut's self-psychology and self-esteem

When the child's exhibitionistic and grandiose needs are not satisfied we can expect a diminished sense of self-esteem and self-worth. We know that a high self-esteem is a vital ingredient for the career tasks that adolescents and young adults must fulfill to construct a vocational identity, in particular in present times when the solid social markers of the past have been eroded (Bauman, 2000). Several studies have shown that self-esteem is an important variable for career development and choice. Barret and Tinsley (1977) demonstrated that college students with high self-esteem have more highly crystallized vocational self-concepts than low self-esteem individuals and perceived themselves as more competent and need-satisfying decision makers. Munson (1992), using Donald Super's lifespan career development theory as theoretical framework, showed that students with high self-esteem scored significantly higher on vocational identity and on several career salience variables (greater participation, commitment, and values expectations in school and home/family roles). Salmela-Aro and Nurmi (2007) conducted a longitudinal study about the impact of self-esteem on several outcomes of the transition to working life and on attitudes towards work. Their sample consisted of college students. The results showed that the level of self-esteem predicted employment status 10 years after graduation. High levels of self-esteem during college predicted being in a permanent job, experiencing higher job satisfaction and work engagement,

and having a better salary. In contrast, low levels of self-esteem predicted unemployment, high levels of burnout at work, and low levels of work engagement and job satisfaction.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to analyze the influence of goal instability and self-esteem, two markers of the self's maturity according to the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut on indecisiveness. More specifically, it was expected that higher levels of goal instability and lower levels of self-esteem would be related to higher levels of indecisiveness.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 314 11th and 12th grade Portuguese students attending general courses. The participants were recruited from classes selected in a non-random manner in 3 urban schools, two public and one private. Their ages ranged between 15 and 20 years, with a mean age of 16.66 years ($SD=0.90$). There were 188 female students (59.9%) and 126 male students (40.1%).

Secondary education in the Portuguese educational system is structured into two basic types of courses: general courses, mainly directed towards higher education, and vocational courses, aimed primarily at those seeking to enter the job market after the 12th grade. Any student with a high school diploma can apply to higher education institutions. In order to apply to public universities, the most prestigious and selective of the Portuguese educational system, students have to take national examinations, which bear significant weight in the admission criteria. The great majority who are attending general courses intend to pursue their studies in higher education. However, they have to decide on specific degrees (e.g., law, mechanical engineering, psychology, sociology, medicine, etc.) and, exclusively based on their grade point average, are admitted or not to one of these options. In comparison to American college students, who usually choose a major during the first two years of undergraduate studies in university, Portuguese students face two important points of vocational decision in their educational path much earlier: at the end of basic education (9th grade) and after completing secondary education (12th grade).

We decided that our sample would only include students in general courses because we were interested in those individuals who intended to pursue their studies in higher education. We did not include 10th grade students because of the high attrition rate in the first year of secondary education.

Procedure and instruments

Administration of the instruments took place in school, during class periods, after the participants were informed that the general purpose of the research was to study several aspects of adolescent development. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized and confidentiality of the results guaranteed. Previously informed written consent was obtained from the parents of the students who agreed to take part in the study. The measures were arranged in random order to control for order effects. After the administration of the instruments, the students were debriefed.

Measurement of goal instability. Goal instability was assessed with the Goal Instability Scale (GIS; Robbins & Patton, 1985), a 10-item self-report instrument (e.g., "After a while, I lose sight

of my goals.”) with a 6-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly agree to 6=strongly disagree) that measures “... a general instability or absence of orienting goals” (p. 226). *Higher scores indicate a greater level of goal directedness.* A confirmatory factor analysis with a sample of college students suggested that this scale assesses one unitary factor (Robbins, Payne, & Chartrand, 1990). The internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) of the scale ranged from .81 to .87 (Blustein & Palladino, 1991; Multon et al., 1995; Robbins & Patton, 1985; Smith & Robbins, 1988; Stark et al., 1991) and the test-retest reliability (two-week interval) was .76 (Robbins & Patton, 1985). Evidence for the validity scale can be found in Robbins and Patton (1985) and in other studies that were mentioned previously.

In this study, we used the Portuguese version of the GIS adapted by Santos, Casillas and Robbins (2004), with a sample of secondary school students. A confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the GIS assesses one single factor. The internal consistency value (Cronbach’s alpha) was .81 and the test-retest reliability (two-week interval) was .95. High scores on the GIS were associated with psychological adjustment and career certainty. Furthermore, students who wanted to apply to college after graduation from secondary school obtained higher levels on the GIS than the group of students that were not sure of their decision. In this study, the GIS internal consistency value (Cronbach’s alpha) was .83.

Measurement of self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) was employed to assess global self-esteem, defined as “... a positive or negative attitude toward a particular object, namely the self” (p. 30). The RSES is a 10-item instrument, 5 positively-oriented (e.g., “I have a positive attitude toward myself”) and 5 negatively (e.g., “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure”) answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1=*strongly disagree* to 4=*strongly agree*). The negatively-oriented items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated higher levels of self-esteem. The RSES is the most widely-used scale in psychological research aimed at evaluating self-esteem (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). The psychometric characteristics of the RSES are excellent: the internal consistency results (Cronbach’s alpha) are higher than .80 (Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1997; Hagborg, 1996) and Fleming and Courtney (1984) indicated a test-retest reliability, with a one-week interval between evaluations, of .82. The RSES’s construct validity has been evidenced by significant correlations with other instruments of assessment of self-esteem (e.g., McCurdy & Kelly, 1997) and with a set of dimensions and psychological variables, such as depression, anxiety, and satisfaction with life (Diener & Diener, 1995; Fleming & Courtney, 1984).

A confirmatory factor analysis of the Portuguese version of the RSES (Santos & Maia, 2003) used in this study indicated that the scale assessed one single factor and the internal consistency values (Cronbach’s alpha) ranged from .84 to .90. High scores in the RSES were positively correlated with satisfaction with life (Freire & Tavares, 2011; Santos & Maia, 2003), positive social and emotional aspects of self-concept (Santos & Maia, 2003), and feelings of happiness (Freire & Tavares, 2011). In the present study, the internal consistency value (Cronbach’s alpha) was .88.

Measurement of indecisiveness. For the evaluation of indecisiveness, we used the Frost Indecisiveness Scale (FIS; Frost & Shows, 1993), a 15-item scale that evaluates the degree of difficulty in making decisions. Nine items are worded negatively (e.g., “I often worry about making the wrong decision”), and six positively (e.g., “I like to be in a position to make decisions”). A 5-point Likert-type scale was used (1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*). The positively worded items were reverse scored with higher results reflecting a greater level of indecisiveness. College students with higher scores on FIS showed greater difficulties in making choices in several aspects of their lives, including at the academic, social, and family levels (Frost

& Shows, 1993; Gayton, Clavin, Clavin, & Broida, 1994). Experimental research revealed that indecisive individuals search for more information before making a choice and take more time to reach a decision (Frost & Shows, 1993; Rassin, Muris, Booster, & Kolsloot, 2008; Rassin, Muris, Franken, Smit, & Wong, 2007). The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of FIS is high: in several studies, it ranged from .80 to .90 (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost & Shows, 1993; Gayton et al., 1994; Patalano & Wengrovitz, 2007; Rassin & Muris, 2005; Rassin et al., 2007). Rassin et al. (2007) found that temporal stability is also adequate (correlation of .88 in a 1 month interval between evaluations).

The Portuguese version of the FIS employed in this study yielded suitable psychometric characteristics in several studies with secondary school and college students: internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alphas) ranged from .77 to .83 and a .85 two-week test-retest coefficient was obtained (Santos, 1997, 2001, 2007; Santos & Ferreira, 2012). In addition, the scale scores were negatively correlated with the degree of career certainty and positively correlated with personal-emotional and information dimensions of career indecision (Santos, 1997). In the present study, the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .80.

Results

The means and standard deviations of the scores on each scale are provided in Table 1. The correlation matrix of the variables of the study is presented in Table 2. The two measures of goal instability and self-esteem were correlated in the expected directions with indecisiveness.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations of the variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Indecisiveness	40.51	8.35
Self-esteem	31.80	5.28
Goal instability	45.47	8.99

Note. The potential scores ranges for the several instruments are as follows: Indecisiveness Scale (15-75); Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (10-40), Goal Instability Scale (6-60).

Table 2

Correlation matrix of the variables

Measure	1	2	3
1. Indecisiveness (FIS)			
2. Self-esteem (RSES)	-.49		
3. Goal instability (GIS)	-.56		.61

Note. All correlations are statistically significant ($p < .01$).

To analyze the influence of goal instability and self-esteem in the manifestation of indecisiveness, we used simultaneous multiple regression, which is, according to Wampold and Freund (1987), an appropriate strategy when there is no theoretical justification to order the entry of variables. In the simultaneous regression analysis we performed, indecisiveness constituted the dependent variable, and goal instability and self-esteem formed the set of independent variables. The overall equation was statistically significant, $F(2,292)=81,136$, $p < .0001$, and accounted for 35% of the variance ($R=.60$, adjusted $R^2=.353$). An analysis of the t tests for the individual variables

indicated that the two predictors were statistically significant (see Table 3). Self-esteem and goal stability have a negative linear relationship with indecisiveness. Inspection of the beta standardized coefficients showed that goal stability was a stronger predictor ($\beta=-.42$) than self-esteem ($\beta=-.24$).

Table 3

Summary of simultaneous regression analysis for variables predicting indecisiveness

Variable	B	SE B	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Self-esteem (RSES)	-.387	.055	-.423	-7.08	.0001
Goal instability (GIS)	-.369	.094	-.235	-3.93	.0001

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that disturbances in the development of a child's idealizing, as well exhibitionistic and grandiose needs are related with the development of indecisiveness. The negative psychological characteristics that indecisive individuals exhibit, as we have already mentioned, could express a sense of a lack of self-cohesion of the self, according to the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut. This interpretation proposes that dysfunction in cases of indecisiveness has roots in infancy. Caregivers of these individuals, when they were children, were probably unable to function as good self-objects, with negative consequences on the development of global levels of affective regulation, sense of self-worth, and a set of life goals.

Given the developmental situation of indecisive individuals, we would expect psychological interventions to be more extended than the usual brief career interventions, a fact that has already received empirical support in a study by Heppner and Hendricks (1995). Interventions in cases of indecisiveness should be prolonged, and expectedly difficult, because its causes are structural, intimately linked to the individuals' personality. Before dealing with the difficulties related with career choice, career counselors should be able to work with indecisive clients the underlying causes of their problems in general, not only those circumscribed to the career domain. Until now, research on the efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions with indecisive clients is lacking and, consequently, guidelines that could help counselors in their work are missing.

However, the psychotherapeutic intervention based on Kohut's self-psychology could be helpful in this regard. As in the person-centered approach of Carl Rogers, Kohut believed that empathy was a vital ingredient in the psychotherapeutic process and change. He proposed that empathy allows the therapist to function as a self-object for mirroring and idealizing the needs of his/her clients, reproducing the role that caregivers did not fulfil in infancy. The emphatic process enables the process of transmuting internalization to occur and, as a consequence, clients experience growth in self-esteem and in the establishment of life goals. It is important to test empirically this theoretical assumption using case studies to explore the process and outcome of interventions targeted at overcoming indecisiveness, although we are aware of the difficulties of this approach in long-term interventions.

This research used a psychological developmental framework to study indecisiveness. As already mentioned previously, this type of studies is rare. However, we believe it is important to pursue this effort because it is vital to better understand the causes underlying the indecisive disposition. Furthermore, the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) could be another potential theoretical framework to study indecisiveness. There is a conceptual similarity between the works of Heinz Kohut and John Bowlby (see Banai et al., 2005), in the sense that both bestow the quality of relationships caregivers develop during infancy with children a crucial role in their

psychological adjustment and development. We believe an insecure attachment to parents could be linked to indecisiveness, a fact that only future research can corroborate.

Although the results of this study were consistent with its theoretical assumptions, some limitations must be pointed out. First, because the instruments used were self-report scales, social desirability processes may have influenced the results. Second, conclusions of a causal nature cannot be drawn, as the relationships between variables are correlational. Finally, the sample used was urban and composed of adolescents. In future studies, more diversified samples should be employed.

Despite these limitations, the present research reveals the pertinence of Kohut's theory for the understanding and intervention in indecisiveness. A future path that may be followed consists in operationalizing other relevant constructs in this theory and more systematically analyzing their relationship with several indicators of career development and behavior with indecisive individuals. Similarly, an analysis of the effectiveness of the different types of career interventions (e.g., individual career counseling, group career counseling) according to the clients' specific characteristics, especially in relation to their level of maturation of the self, is an area that warrants further study.

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A indecisão vocacional é um tópico clássico da psicologia vocacional e é presentemente considerada um constructo multidimensional. Os indivíduos vocacionalmente indecisos podem ser classificados em duas categorias principais. A primeira corresponde a uma fase normal, ao nível do desenvolvimento, de exploração de alternativas vocacionais que precede o investimento numa opção de carreira específica. A segunda, normalmente designada de indecisão generalizada, tem uma natureza mais estrutural. Para os indivíduos cronicamente indecisos, e não simplesmente vocacionalmente indecisos, o processo de tomada de decisão, incluindo a escolha vocacional, tende a ser uma tarefa difícil. A identificação dos determinantes da indecisão generalizada tem importantes implicações para a consulta de carreira. Baseado na teoria da psicologia do self de Heinz Kohut, o objetivo principal deste estudo foi o de analisar o papel da instabilidade de objetivos e da autoestima, dois marcadores da maturidade do self de acordo com esta abordagem psicológica de orientação psicanalítica, na predição da indecisão generalizada. Uma análise de regressão foi aplicada a uma amostra de 314 estudantes do ensino secundário. A equação de regressão explicou 35% da variância dos resultados da indecisão generalizada. São abordadas implicações para a teoria e consulta vocacionais.

Palavras-chave: Indecisão vocacional, Indecisão generalizada, Heinz Kohut, Psicologia do self.

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