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Exploring factors that influence students' career decision making at a South African University

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Background: Student career decision-making has attracted research attention in the last two decades especially when it comes to choosing tertiary education. Exploring current experiences that influence undergraduate students in career decision making is seen as critical to informing career counselling practice and/or intervention. Such initiatives are seen to benefit academic institutions and academic advisors.

Objectives: This study explored both individual and systemic influences through gauging the experiences of a sample of undergraduate students.

Method: Utilising a qualitative design and a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the research aimed to contribute to explore trends influencing career decision making of students in higher education, through semi-structured interviews and thematically analysing interview transcripts. The interview questions were explored in relation to the ecological systems framework.

Results: The study identified both internal and external factors (themes) influencing the decision-making process of students in higher education. The application of an ecological systems approach was found to be best aligned to understanding this phenomenon in practice.

Conclusion: Making a career decision can be a challenging task and individuals often face many difficulties prior to or during this process. Factors identified were located at both the individual level and systemic level of influences and highlighted the significance of ecological models to design intervention.

Contribution: The role of different factors that influence young people's career decision making in developing contexts such as South Africa, contributed to knowledge on informed approaches in career decision making to support career counsellors and academics in designing appropriate career counselling intervention to address contemporary realities.

Keywords: ecological systems theory; career decision making; young adults; South African context; third year psychology students.

Introduction

Globally, more young people than ever before are entering university programmes. The number of students at South African universities has doubled since the country became a democracy in 1994. Prior to the democracy, the apartheid system created disparities between racial groups, with schools for black learners being underfunded (Seabi, 2012). This increasing student population reflects a rich diversity of cultural groups and students from different social economic backgrounds. Moreover, young people have faced many socio-political changes that have opened up study opportunities and broader career options. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has imposed major challenges with individuals needing to make adjustments to their social, work, and study roles. Generational changes and differences between Gen X and Millennials and Gen Z point to changes that need to be made in the working environment. Gen X includes those born between 1965 and 1981, Millennials are individuals born between the years 1981 and 1996 and Gen Z's are individuals born between the years 1997 and 2012 (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020). All the participants fell into the Millennial and Gen Z category; therefore, it was important to identify how these generations thought, behaved, and how they are changing the work environment. These evolving adjustments have been challenging for this heterogeneous student body, resulting in the need to research career decision-making and attendant factors influencing this process.

The global literature is rich in providing empirical evidence about the factors influencing career decision-making. There has also been an increasing focus in the past two decades on investigating

career decision-making pertaining to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers in western countries (Abe & Chikoko, 2020). Recently, Abe and Chikoko (2020) have highlighted the need to explore how career decision-making is informed in the South African context to inform contemporary practice and intervention.

A career is viewed as the 'totality of an individual's lifetime of learning and work' (Falaye & Adams, 2008, p. 222). Louw and Louw (2015) similarly stated that a career contributes significantly to an individual's sense of identity. A career provides an individual with the opportunity to be creative or productive and thereby is a form of self-expression (Louw & Louw, 2015). A career also determines an individual's place and status in society (Louw & Louw, 2015). Bandura et al. (2001) purport that self-efficacy beliefs are important shapers of children's aspirations and career trajectories. Several studies also identify significant factors influencing career decision-making and include the context in which the individual lives, their educational attainment, and their personal aptitudes (Falaye & Adams, 2008).

In this study, the ecological systems theory framework was used as it includes both internal and external factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). This brings an ecological understanding of where these factors/influences are situated in an individual's environment and on their career development and choices. Broadly, the influences could be grouped into the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, and Macrosystem (Weiten & Hassim, 2016).

This study explores the different factors that affected young adults' career decision making. The literature review provides a background of the factors that previous research had identified as affecting the career decision-making of young adults. The findings from the literature review reveal that young adults faced a daunting task of choosing a career that would remain relevant in the modern technological workplace. There were a number of factors that emerged from the literature review that influenced career decision making in young adults. The ecological systems theory allowed for a systematic identification and exploration of the different levels of influence in the South African context.

Ecological systems theory framework

The ecological systems theory provides a meaningful framework to explain the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and external characteristics that play a role in an individual's choice of career. The theory identifies five environmental systems that impact how an individual acts and the decisions they make, including decisions regarding career choice (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Bronfenbrenner (1974) sees the individual as existing in several different systems, all of which interact in a complex manner. At the centre of the systems is the individual (age, gender, education level, personality traits etc.) (Buser et al., 2014). Moving outwards into the Microsystem, factors include the individual and

other people who are involved in his or her immediate environment (Weiten & Hassim, 2016). The Microsystem has a significant impact on the individual as the individual interacts with this system the most, from birth to adulthood (Darling, 2007). It relates to the people the individual has direct personal contact with, as well as, groups, such as family and schooling, with direct impact on an individual's development (Weiten & Hassim, 2016). The Mesosystem involves reciprocal interaction between various Microsystems and can include schools and neighbourhoods and interaction between parents and educators (Weiten & Hassim, 2016). The Exosystem represents the social setting surrounding the individual and the links between social settings that do not involve the individual but still influence them, such as employment opportunities (Chinyamurindi, 2016), competition in the field (Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014), and job security (Weiten & Hassim, 2016). Lastly, the Macrosystem refers to cultures and subcultures each of which has its own beliefs and value systems (Weiten & Hassim, 2016). The overarching cultural systems impact the interior systems (Darling, 2007; Dodge & Welderufael, 2014).

The interview questions in this study were structured so that answers could be examined in relation to these systems, identifying how factors given by third-year psychology students at a South African university fitted into this framework and how the findings compared to those in previous studies. This allowed the research to have an element of understanding regarding the individual and the context in which that individual lived to determine what made them choose their career path.

Students may base their choices on external influences (Exosystem and Macrosystem influences) such as monetary expectation (Chinyamurindi, 2016), employability (Quinter & Edwards, 2011), or cultural background (Mhlongo & O'Neill, 2013). Intrapersonal influences (Microsystem influences) such as personality (Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014) and interpersonal influences (Mesosystem influences) such as vocational assessments (Maree & Taylor, 2016) could be significant. In reality, a career choice is often decided with little awareness or experience of the real world (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017). Young adults are forced to make critical career decisions at a stage when they often do not realise the importance of their decision and may not be informed fully about their choices.

Despite the growing body of knowledge and evidence relating to career decision-making, research that specifically addresses South African young adults and their experiences in career decision making is lacking (Seabi, 2012). A knowledge gap exists with even less having been written about the factors used in career counselling to help individuals achieve a career, particularly in South Africa (Seabi, 2012). Given the high failure and dropout rates in South Africa, it is necessary to explore and understand the factors that lead young adults towards a certain career in order to minimise dropout and increase career satisfaction (Seabi, 2012). Manik's (2014) study also highlights the fact

that the absence of career guidance or inadequate career guidance prior to entry into university appeared to contribute to students' dropout. One individual stated that:

> [A]t school I aspired to be an accountant. I got straight A's for Accounting and Maths and thought this [career] was for me but I think I needed to know more about this career. The level of accounting at school is very different from what is taught at university. (Manik, 2014, p. 150)

This showed that students were unaware of how to select subjects or modules correctly at university level and were also unaware of what subject choices in high school would prepare them for university. This was exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic as career guidance and counselling in schools was curtailed, resulting in increased anxiety and uncertainty in students (Jäckel–Visser et al., 2021). Many students, therefore, made uninformed, random, and haphazard career choices.

Research methods and design

A qualitative research approach was used, utilising hermeneutic phenomenology and thematic analysis to analyse the interviews conducted. Both were needed to analyse the findings in this study as hermeneutic phenomenology analysis was needed to provide the researcher with a comprehensive description of the factors driving the career decision experiences of the participants and thematic analysis was needed to identify common themes throughout the interviews.

Hermeneutic phenomenological research approach: In this approach, the researcher aimed to create rich and deep accounts of a phenomenon through intuition, while focusing on uncovering the meaning of the data rather than accuracy (Oerther, 2020). According to Fuster (2019), the five principles for hermeneutic phenomenology are as follows:

1. Committing to an enduring phenomenon or concern.
2. Having a clear perspective towards the question being asked.
3. Examining the experience as it is lived by others.
4. Describing and explaining the phenomenon through writing and rewriting.
5. Considering part of the texts and the texts as a whole.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology attempts to provide the best opportunity to 'give voice' to the experiences of individuals (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1292). The focus is on understanding shared experiences by searching for themes and interpretively engaging with the data (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The shared experiences of the researcher and the participant are used to analyse what is familiar, common, and self-evident to the researcher (Abe & Chikoko, 2020). The process involves a 'hermeneutic circle' in which the researcher constantly goes back and forth between part of the text and the text as a whole, to establish truth by discovering and interpreting phenomena (Willig, 2013, p. 44). This process was achieved through semi-structured interviews between the researcher and individuals where I viewed the recordings multiple times in order to produce meaning from the entire data.

Dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability of the study

I attempted to achieve dependability and confirmability by ensuring the consistency of the research findings (Christensen et al., 2015). I used an audit trail to replicate the data to facilitate this (Merriam, 2002). An audit trail is a detailed description of how the data were collected, how the categories were derived, and the decisions made (Merriam, 2002). A pilot interview served as a practice to the interview questions and received feedback on the topic, as well as, the interview method (Griffee, 2005). The study also ensured credibility by using triangulation and member checking (Christensen et al., 2015). Credibility refers to the extent to which a study is reliable and relevant, especially with respect to the level of agreement between participants and the researcher (Griffee, 2005). Data triangulation involves comparing at least two sources of data (Christensen et al., 2015). This was achieved through member checking, when I would ask participants for their feedback on my conclusions to determine if the findings reflected their experiences (Christensen et al., 2015). This ensured credibility as the participants either confirmed or denied whether my conclusions truly reflected their experience. The study was limited to the context of the students at the university. The ideas from the study can be transferable to other populations where there is a gap in clarity and understanding of the phenomena (Moon et al., 2016).

Study population

Purposive sampling to identify participants was used. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling where individuals of the target population are chosen because of the qualities they possess (Christensen et al., 2015). This involved identification and selection of individuals who were in their third year of psychology. Both males and females from all races were chosen in this study and also those who had access to the internet. The researcher included 10 participants in their third year of psychology at a South African university in the province of Gauteng. Participants needed to be proficient in English, have access to the internet, and have a computer/ phone with Zoom. This sample size allowed for the unfolding of new ideas. It was small enough so that extensive, case-oriented analysis could still be achieved (Christensen et al., 2015).

Data collection and analysis

This study made use of semi-structured interviews. The questions posed to the participants were open-ended and non-directive so that the question itself did not influence the answers given in order to better reflect the students' personal experiences (Willig, 2013). The duration of interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min in order to understand the investigated phenomenon. The interviews took place via video calls using Zoom as a platform. The video calls were recorded. Open-ended questions were included such as:

- Are you enjoying your course and/or programme you have selected?
- What does a career mean to you? How would you define a career?
- What do you plan to do in the future with your course and/or programme?
- As a third year student in psychology, please can you tell me what factors you think influenced your career decision making as a young adult?
- What resources and/or services influenced your career decision making?
- Can you think of a situation(s) or individual(s) that influenced your career choice?

The interview recordings were transcribed by the researcher and the transcripts were then analysed by means of hermeneutic phenomenological analysis. Analysis of interview recordings was achieved by the researcher immersing herself in the data collected (Abe & Chikoko, 2020). This involved viewing the recordings multiple times in order to produce meaning from the entire data (Willig, 2013). The data were also analysed by using thematic analysis. The focus was on identifying common themes developed inductively from the data collected (Anderson, 2007). A list was made to identify connections and differences between the themes (Willig, 2013). The themes were then meaningfully categorised, together with quotations that illustrated each theme (Abe & Chikoko, 2020).

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained by the participants in writing. They were also informed that their responses during the interview would be recorded and gave their consent for audio and visual recordings to be conducted for the intended purposes of the research study. The participants were informed that they could keep their videos off if they wanted during the interview. All recordings are kept with the researcher in a file that is password-protected, which will be deleted after a period of 15 years. The use of pseudonyms in the study ensured the privacy and confidentiality of participants when the findings were reported. The participants were also informed that they had a right to withdraw from the study without the fear of being penalised. No participant had a negative reaction to the interviews as I sent all participation information sheets and consent forms that explained the interview process before interviews began. Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (study approval number HUM002/0721).

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in terms of the components of the ecological framework, that represent Microsystem, Exosystem, Mesosystem, and Macrosystem influences. The findings represent the identified common themes that occurred frequently, as well as themes that were unique to an individual interview.

Microsystem influences
Theme 1: Personality

All of the participants stated that their career matched their personality. Common remarks made were 'it's my passion' and 'I've always found it interesting'. Seven participants also stated that they wanted to 'help people'.

Theme 2: Exposure to mental illness

Eighty per cent of participants chose a career in psychology after having been exposed to mental illness or consulting with psychologists. Some participants were exposed to psychology or psychologists through their own counselling sessions. One participant stated 'I was taken to see a psychologist and I really liked it' (Participant 0, psychology student, 03/02/2022). Other participants were exposed to mental illness through either a family member, friend, or romantic partner when they stated 'I have a younger brother … he's diagnosed with ADHD' (Participant 4, psychology student, 03/04/2022), 'One lady that I was studying with … she nearly killed herself' (Participant 3, psychology student, 04/04/2022), and 'I had a couple of friends and my ex-girlfriend in school who had depression' (Participant 2, psychology student, 17/03/2022).

Theme 3: Parental influence

Half of participants stated that their family/parents played a role in their choice of career. These participants were influenced either through having a parent who had a career in the field of psychology, or through suggestions from parental figures that influenced their choice of career. Some responses were 'I saw my stepfather … he was a clinical psychologist and I got that inspiration from him' (Paticipant 1, psychology student, 08/03/022) and '… at some point in time, [*my father*] mentioned the word psychology … and from that day I was interested in [*psychology*]' (Participant 4, psychology student, 03/04/2022). In other instances, participants were not influenced by their parent's career path – '… my family, as I said, we're farmers, farm people for generations and generations … so for me going off and studying psychology … it's very strange … uncharacteristic of my family' (Participant 6, psychology student, 13/04/2022). Others were pushed into a different career by their parents/family than what they had initially been wanted:

> I wanted to become a biokineticist and everybody said to me, "no, that's a waste of your brains don't do that"… that definitely nudged me to more intellectually demanding sort of fields. (Participant 2, psychology student, 17/03/2022)

Theme 4: Career indecisiveness

A total number of four participants were undecided in their career path and as to why they chose psychology in their third year of university. Some were undecided about which field of psychology they wanted to pursue, while others were unsure about a career in psychology altogether, as shown by the statements '… I've been contemplating going into neuropsychology or health psychology … it's still a bit more on the fence' (Participant 9, psychology student, 03/06/2022) and 'I'm not sure' being used (Participant 7, psychology student, 13/05/2022).

Theme 5: Academic achievement/ psychology as a second career choice

Two participants stated that psychology was not their first choice of career. Statements such as 'I wanted to do engineering, but my marks were not good enough', 'I actually started liking psychology … but [it] wasn't my initial choice' (Participant 0, psychology student, 03/02/2022), and '… essentially I wanted to go into the Special Forces for a while, but at the time I was very unfit' (Participant 5, psychology student, 12/04/2022) were given to the researcher.

Theme 6: Gender and gender stereotyped roles

Only one participant stated that gender and gender stereotypes affected their career decision making. This participant shared that she wanted to become a detective in the police force, but was discouraged by her family as shown by the statement '… when I told my parents this…their automatic response was you're a girl … you're a girl and that's not usually a job that girls do' (Participant 8, psychology student, 13/05/2022).

Mesosystem influences
Theme 7: Interpersonal relationships

Over half of the participants stated that speaking to either their teachers, student advisors, family friends, or individuals at career expositions helped them to choose their career path. One participant stated that a career exposition helped them decide their career as:

> … I spoke to the representative of Humanities and they showed me … the requirements that you need … what it entails … and then I was hooked. That's when I decided this is what I want to do (Participant 2, psychology student, 17/03/2022).

Many other participants also took advantage of the abundance of school and university staff and resources when looking into psychology as a career and made use of the 'faculty student advisors' and spoke to a 'few practicing … psychologists'.

Theme 8: Vocational assessments

Among this category, only one participant stated that they had completed a career test. This participant completed a career assessment that helped them choose their career path:

> [… W]e did career assessments and psychology, like becoming a psychologist was … the first option for me … so I think that made a huge difference in … deciding what I want to do (Participant 8, psychology student, 13/05/2022).

Exosystem influences
Theme 9: Monetary expectation/financial stability

A small number of participants stated that financial stability was an important factor in choosing a career. Monetary expectation and being able to pay for basic necessities was prominent for two of the participants in their definition of a career. One participant stated that they made a change from a philosophy career path to psychology because of money:

> I can't be a philosopher … even someone with a degree in philosophy does not have any money. You know, they're running very short on money and all those things. So the career, the definition of a career at the time for me was something that can sustain you (Participant 2, psychology student, 17/03/2022).

Similarly, another participant stated '… a career to me would be stability. So being able to financially support yourself' (Participant 6, psychology student, 13/04/2022).

Theme 10: Employability/job security

Only one participant stated that job stability was an important factor in their choice of career. This participant stated that at the beginning of the career decision making process, they thought about which field would give the most security:

> … I considered going for a safe option in terms of studies. I thought of doing maybe a BCom … a needed job … I was even thinking of transferring to education for the sake of job security … I think job security became a big aspect of career choice. (Participant 2, psychology student, 17/03/2022)

Theme 11: Racial discrimination

One participant stated that discrimination was one factor that pushed them towards psychology as a career choice. This participant experienced racial discrimination during their youth and noted that this is what prompted them into psychology, to be able to understand why and how such discrimination occurs:

> '… I was the only Chinese there … there was a certain incident that happened that night and it … irritated me a bit and I really wanted to understand why from that day … I was, like, ridiculed for my race' (Participant 4, psychology student, 03/04/2022).

Macrosystem influences
Theme 12: Media

Approximately 90% of participants used media to find out more about their career choice. Participants stated that they were exposed to psychology through the media, either through their own research or through movies and social media. Many of the participants used Google as means to gain more information about their choice in psychology as a career, with one participant stating, '… when you hear about, let's say for example psychology, and you don't really know what it is, you open the internet, Google and get more information' (Participant 1, psychology student, 08/03/2022). Some participants were influenced by documentaries, mainly through the crime documentaries on serial killers. When asked about what situations or individuals influenced their career decision making, one participant remarked: 'I'm going to have to go back to the documentaries … I love them' (Participant 0, psychology student, 02/03/2022). Another stated '... I had this hobby of looking up on my own time, as a hobby looking into psychology things. Looking into how people's brain's work, you know, serial killers stuff' (Participant 6, psychology student, 13/04/2022). Other participants

noticed the number of mental illnesses highlighted on social media which made them want to pursue a career in psychology – '… social media has, at this point, become more aware of all the mental issues that people face on a daily basis … and it kind of puts in more in your face' (Participant 8, psychology student, 13/05/2022).

Theme 13: Familial socio-economic status

Two participants explained that their career choice was affected or hindered by familial socio-economic factors. One participant first began studying at a college, but had to leave because of a lack of funds: '… I had to drop out because my family couldn't afford it. I don't come from a particularly affluent family' (Participant 2, psychology student, 17/03/2022). This participant continued to explain that receiving a bursary from the university allowed him to follow his dream: '… I had this almost dream of studying psychology and now I had a bursary which enabled me to do that' (Participant 2, psychology student, 17/03/2022). In contrast, another participant had to put pursuing their passion and furthering their education aside as they experienced a tragedy in the family that forced them into a paying job:

> … my dad passed away. I think I was doing my final year of my general degree and then there was no one to take care of the family. So there is reason why I couldn't continue, I was already under pressure in my third year and then I had to look for a job. (Participant 3, psychology student, 04/04/2022)

Theme 14: Cultural background

A total of two participants cited their cultural background as a factor for their choice in career. The researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of an African culture perspective on mental illness as one participant explained:

> … I come from African culture, some other people who are going through stress … they are becoming sangomas. And when you look at it, it's the, it's not a spiritual gift, they are going through mental illness. (Participant 3, psychology student, 04/04/2022)

This participant continued that they lost contact with their best friend after the friend was convinced she had a 'gift' and was told by traditional spiritual leaders that her friends and family were 'bewitching' her when in fact, all the friend needed was some mental health help. Another participant spoke about the cultural stereotype of Asians and how their parents wanted them to conform to this: '… I'm Asian so my parents weren't fully on board with the idea of me studying psychology… they more preferred me doing engineering or medicine or something more Asian[y]'. (Participant 4, psychology student, 03/04/2022)

Theme 15: COVID-19

One participant reported that COVID-19 affected their career. This could possibly be because of this participant being the only one in the study who was working or had work experience prior to studying third year psychology. This participant stated: '… I've been retrenched twice … I joined a company and then COVID came … I was impacted negatively' Participant 3, psychology student, 04/04/2022. However, this participant managed to use this as an opportunity to begin studying again and decided to study psychology.

Discussion

The results of the study provided new insights into the relationship between the individual and their Microsystem influences. The results of the study supported Darling's (2007) statement that the Microsystem had a significant impact on the individual as the individual interacted with this system the most. Not only did Microsystem influences have the most themes (6), it also identified personality as the greatest career influencing factor by the participants.

Personality

This was the most decisive influence in their career decision. The participants indicated that their personality was a good match to their career choice in psychology by using words of emotion such as 'love' and 'passion'. Thus, they were aware of their personality type without being administered a test. In determining the effects of personality on choice of career as a public accountant, Dibyaguna and Budiartha's (2020) research revealed an individual who had a personality that was characterised by discipline, diligence, hard work, and willingness to accept difficult assignments, was more likely to succeed as a public accountant. Similarly, the participants in this study who had a keen interest in understanding how people think and behave were more likely to succeed in a career in psychology. The finding of this study where participants stated that they chose a career in psychology because they wanted to help people was consistent with the findings by Sinai-Glazer (2020), who investigated the trusting and loving relationship between social workers and their clients. As a result, the social workers made a positive impact on their client's lives. The participants in this study who had an innate desire to help others would therefore have a beneficial and fulfilling career in psychology.

Exposure to mental illness

The exposure to mental illness through other people or through their own experience of it was an alarming theme that emerged in this study. In a study by Huang et al. (2019), results revealed that in the past 30 years, most mental disorders became more common in China. The study supported the findings of this study as 80% of current participants were exposed to mental illness either through someone else or through having experienced it themselves. It is important to note that the results of this research indicated that the participants were exposed to mental illnesses before the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, exposure to mental illness had already influenced them to choose psychology as a career choice. Research showed that the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa increased the prevalence of mental health illness/disorders by at least 20% (Kim et al., 2020).

This suggests that exposure to mental illnesses is likely to be a significantly important factor in the career decision making of future generations.

Parental influence

Parental influence was another important factor in career decision making both in related literature and in this study. Individuals interact with their parents from birth and continue to do so into their adulthood (Darling, 2007). As a result, parents were influential figures in the participants' lives for half of the participants (50%) in the study. This was similar to Olaosebikan and Olusakin's (2014) study in which 48.36% of the respondents confirmed their parents influenced their career choice. Similarly, Dodge and Welderufael (2014) confirmed that a majority of students stated that they had conversations with their parents or had observed their parents at work to gain ideas about potential careers. However, the other 50% of the participants in this study did not support the results in the reviewed literature. Olaosebikan and Olusakin's (2014) and Dodge and Welderufael's (2014) studies revealed that individuals were often reluctant to pursue a career that their parents disapproved of and that parents' unfavourable attitudes towards a certain career impacted the students' choice of career. This proved untrue for some participants who expressed the thought that although their parents disapproved of their career choice in psychology, they still pursued it. Also, other participants chose a career completely different from their parents. This study provided a new insight into the relationship between parents and their influence over their children. Half of the participants were influenced by their parents, while the other half were not. This revealed that although parents still influenced and shaped a large part of their children's lives, parental influence was becoming less dominant than reported in previous studies conducted in the past.

Indecisiveness

Indecisiveness was an unexpected theme that emerged from the results of the study. This was disconcerting as these participants were in their third year of university and were still undecided in their career choice. Surprisingly, they were even uncertain whether psychology was a viable career option for them. Levin et al. (2022) conducted a study on the five types of career indecision. These were individuals who were unmotivated, generally indecisive, unrealistic, uninformed, and conflicted (Levin et al., 2022). The participants in this study fell into the generally indecisive type (three participants) and the conflicted type (one participant). The results of Levin et al.'s (2022) study revealed that females had a greater likelihood of being indecisive. The results of this study supported these claims as all the participants who stated they were undecided in their career choice were females. Low academic achievement was confirmed in this study as the participants who did not have the required qualifications to be accepted into their first choice of career were uncertain and undecided about an alternative career path, which builds on existing evidence from Kazi and Akhlaq (2017) where a lack of academic grades prevented students from choosing their preferred career path. In addition, Tentama and Abdillah's (2019) study was consistent with the findings in this study as individuals who had low academic achievement tended to be hesitant in choosing and determining their career path. These results suggested that academic achievement or being unable to meet the requirements of a particular career forced individuals to reconsider their career path, making the career decision process more difficult for them.

Gender and gender stereotyped roles

Gender and gender stereotyped roles demonstrated that gender was not a major influencing factor in this study. Hill and Giles (2014) stated that more men held a university degree as compared to women. This study challenged this assumption as 7 out of the 10 participants were women who were currently working on achieving a degree. According to Lourens (2014), most studies affirmed gender-matched careers in order to avoid stigmatisation, inequality, or embarrassment. The results of this study proved gender matching as insignificant as a low number of female participants stated that gender influenced their career decision making. Moreover, 3 out of the 7 female participants were studying highly scientific based subjects such as genetics and physiology which were considered more male dominant options. Very few, if any studies have been completed on the question of whether young women still feel stigmatised in the modern contemporary working world. One participant in this study stated that she was steered away from a career in the police force because of being a female. In addition, Kazi and Akhlaq's (2017) study also noted that female participants' families were against their choice of career as they felt that it was unsafe for a female. Gender stereotyping is not a thing of the past and measures should be taken to include women in all professions, as well as, provide them with a safe and professional workplace (Begeny et al., 2020).

The results of this study contributed to a clearer understanding of the reciprocal interaction between various relationships in an individual's life in the Mesosystem. It also provided a better understanding of vocational assessments and what was needed to provide students and career counsellors with adequate information about career decision making.

Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relationships proved to be the greatest influencing factor in the Mesosystem. Numerous studies have shown that individuals' perceptions of their teachers or other people in a high academic standing had an impact on their motivation, academic achievement, and engagement with that subject (Mameli et al., 2019). The results of this study supported these findings as four of the participants were influenced by their teachers/lecturers/career exposition

representative's positive and encouraging attitude towards that subject.

Vocational assessment

Vocational assessment was important to identify and evaluate the factors that could best predict career success (Maree & Taylor, 2016). One participant stated she used a vocational assessment that helped her to choose psychology as a career option. Maree and Taylor (2016) also stated that vocational assessments were important guides for individuals to have successful lives and make meaningful contributions to society. However, the results of the study contradicted this statement as 9 out of the 10 participants did not undergo any vocational assessment, yet the participants indicated that they were happy with their choice of career. This study supported Maree's (2012) claim that there was a lack of vocational and career services available to young people in South Africa. The lack of vocational assessments was evident as 90% of the participants did not complete a vocational assessment in high school to determine their aptitude, strengths, and weaknesses.

The Exosystem influences of this study built on the existing interpretation in which social settings did not involve the individual directly, but still influenced them (Weiten & Hassim, 2016).

Monetary expectations and financial stability

Monetary expectations and financial stability were influential in the decision of a career for two participants. These results confirmed existing evidence which Quinter and Edwards (2011) revealed in their study that career choice was determined by potential income. One participant made a career change to psychology because of the lack of future income. Another participant chose psychology so that they could have financial stability. These results also built on existing evidence by Moeketsi and Mgutshini's (2014) and Zainal et al. (2012) who found that individuals abandoned their first career choice because of the low financial rewards it provided. Little literature exists, if any, which states that monetary expectations or financial stability do not influence career decision making. This could be because most individuals expected that their career would be able to provide them with a comfortable life. Participants who did not state that finances were an influencing factor in their career decision, possibly did not think it was appropriate to state finances as a factor for their choice to the researcher, but in all possibility were still influenced by it.

Employability and job security

The results of Myburg (2005), Chinyamurindi (2016), and Quinter and Edwards (2011), in which all three studies suggested that these were important factors in an individual's career choice, corresponded with the results of one participant in this study who stated that job security was an important aspect of career choice. Based on the results of other studies, job security, income, and job availability were frequent factors that affected career decision making of young adults (Abdo, 2016). However, the rest of the participants did not cite employability or job security as important in their choice of career. This could possibly be because of the participants' failure to take this factor into consideration when they chose psychology as a career or they viewed psychology as already offering an extensive employment market for them.

Discrimination

Discrimination was an important factor that emerged from the results of the study. This is important as South Africa has a history of racial discrimination. Despite the end of apartheid in South Africa, racial discrimination still persists. While the results of this study showed that racial discrimination was a motivating factor for only one participant, the results of other studies revealed that people of colour suffered from more discrimination than white people in the workplace and thus, racial discrimination had an impact on job satisfaction (Shum et al., 2020). The results of this study did not align with the results of other studies. From the results of this study, racial discrimination was interpreted to be more of a motivating factor in career choice than a barrier to career decision making and job satisfaction.

The results of this study provided new insights into the Macrosystem influences on career decision making.

Media

Media is frequently used by young people frequently to learn about life-related issues, job markets, and different professions. In this study, media had ignited youngsters' interest in a particular career and motivated them to make career decisions. The media constituted the largest influencing factor in the Macrosystem. It was also the second largest influencing factor in the study as a whole with 90% of the participants citing the media as a way to obtain information about psychology as a career choice. These results were consistent with those of Yunusa et al. (2022), in which they found media to be an important factor in students' career decisions. The individuals in their study were significantly influenced by movies, characters, the internet, books, and newspapers (Yunusa et al., 2022). Similar results were obtained in this study, where many of the participants used the internet, books, and movies to choose psychology as a career choice. The power of media, as noted from the results of this study, revealed that young adults were being influenced by what the media portrayed. This was similar to Yang and Chang's (2022) research in which they also indicated that the media reflected the individual's environment. The results of this study suggested that the identity of many of the participants was tied to the media. This revealed that the media was a powerful system that not only controlled the source of information individuals were exposed to, but it also created individuals who were dependent on the media to fulfil their goals and manage how they thought and behaved (Yang & Chang, 2022).

Familial socio-economic status

This was not a major factor in the participants' career decision making. While some participants did cite a lack of money for university fees or changes in the household that caused money to become scarce, these participants did not let their family's economic troubles affect their career. Similar to these results, Kazi and Akhlaq's (2017) study also revealed that most of the participants stated that financial constraints did not prevent them from pursuing the career of their choice. These results contradicted the statements by Mhlongo and O'Neill (2013), in which they suggested that families from a low socio-economic status could have limited access to basic needs and a good education, thus, having a limiting effect on an individual's career decision. There is no current research being conducted about the effect of familial socio-economic status on the career decision making of young adults in South Africa. Therefore, this research was relevant as it provided some insight into the socio-economic status of some of the participants in this study who applied for the NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) and were granted a student loan to achieve their career goals. Some participants found employment and only after having saved enough money, continued with their career goals in psychology. This suggested that individuals who did not have a high socio-economic status did not, or no longer, relied on their family to pay for their university fees. Rather, they sought personal financial aid or were willing to delay preferred studies and work independent of their family until they could afford to study in the career of their choice.

Cultural background

Cultural background also was not a major factor in the participants' career decision making. Only two participants mentioned their culture during the interview. These results differed from those of Olaosebikan and Olusakin (2014) who stated that individuals with a strong sense of family obligation felt the need to reciprocate their parents' benevolence afforded to the community in order to maintain their family's name and reputation. The participants in this study who stated cultural background as a factor were from African and Asian cultures that tended to embrace the notion of collectivism. However, they did not feel the need to place their parents or communities above their career passion and career choice. This could be because of Westernisation and assimilation of Western attitudes in foreign cultures, as young adults were adopting a more Western culture (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2020). The results of this study refuted the results of Akosah-Twumasi et al.'s (2020) study as the participants in this study resisted their parents' desire of conforming to a more appropriate career path. This suggests that culture or assimilation of Western culture is an increasingly important factor to be studied in career decision making and in creating appropriate career approaches for individuals.

The COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in late 2019 should be taken into account when considering career decision making.

Although only one participant stated that COVID-19 affected their career, it is important to discuss this theme as the pandemic has implications for future career choice. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a 'career shock' for many individuals around the world as there was widespread job insecurity, loss of income, and social distancing (Akkermans et al., 2020, p. 1). The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact on the mental and emotional health of individuals. Researchers have agreed that the COVID-19 crisis had and continues to have a tremendous impact on society, both in the short term (a health crisis) and in the long term (an economic crisis) (Baert et al., 2020). The negative career consequences caused by COVID-19 also resulted in positive aspects such as opportunities for career development, skill upgrades, and changing work arrangements that would not have normally come about (Akkermans et al., 2020). This was true for one participant in this study who decided to further their education after losing their job because of the pandemic. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will influence career decision making among young adults for many years to come. Young adults may seek employment where they are most likely to retain their position despite negative global events.

Millennial and Gen Z generations

All the participants fell into these two generations. Millennials choose careers which provide freedom and creativity in their work (Russo et al., 2020). Millennials are socially conscious individuals who have a desire to change their society for the better (Russo et al., 2020). Gen Z are accustomed to the importance of individuality which leads them to the expectation that they can 'pick and choose' what they want to do (Chillakuri, 2020, p 1283). Many of the Gen Z individuals have not yet entered the world of work. It is predicted that Gen Z's will want to work without fixed hours or place, prefer unconventional professions, place more importance on materialistic goals and technology, look for job opportunities world-wide, and try different careers to find the one that suits them best (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020). Millennials and Gen Z's are very materialistic individuals who view money and expensive items as important to life satisfaction (Yadav & Chaudhari, 2020). Thus, financial reward in a career will be of great importance to them. Research into Millennials and Gen Z's in the workforce is important as these two generations are changing conventional workplace expectations to place more importance on their own career goals and needs. An understanding of their needs and beliefs is important to generate appropriate methods, approaches, and opportunities for their employment and satisfaction in life as more than 1.5 billion people of the world's population of 6.7 billon are between the ages of 10 and 24 years (UN, 2009). Most significant is the fact that about 70% of the young people live in developing countries where social, economic, and health challenges are greater than that of the industrialised countries (UN, 2009). Fatusi and Hindin (2010), in researching adolescents and youth in developing countries, also highlight that today's generation of young people are approaching

adulthood in a world vastly different from previous generations – a world where acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), globalisation, increasing urbanisation, electronic communication, migration, economic challenges, among other external forces, have radically transformed what it means to be young. This changed landscape is adding to the challenge of physical, psychological, economic, and social transition which ordinarily typifies the lives of adolescents as they move from childhood to adulthood (Fatusi & Hindin, 2010). This also highlighted the importance of exploring career influences from the perspectives of young people in developing contexts such as South Africa. They further indicate that while the transition from childhood to adulthood is regarded as universal in nature, the experiences of adolescence is not universal. The need to further research generational transitions and youth emerging in different developmental contexts is thus indicated as paramount. This highlights the need for academia to invest more in research and studies involving young people in developing contexts such as South Africa.

Recommendations

Future studies should engage experiences of young people in different and diverse contexts to gain a better understanding of their career decision-making. Personality tests should be administered to increase the validity of the results. Ongoing research should be conducted on the Gen Z generation's career trajectories to investigate the enabling and challenging factors affecting their career decision-making. Career tests should reflect the diverse career possibilities available in being self-employed and account for the skills and interests of Millennials and Gen Z.

Limitations

While respondents were expected to be proficient in English, they may have expressed themselves differently in their own language. The reflexivity of the researcher could have biased the interpretation of the results as the researcher used her own previous experience in career decision making. As the study's sample was purposive and not randomly selected, the results of the study cannot be generalised. Member checking was hindered as some participants did not respond to the researcher's attempts at obtaining feedback. The research was also conducted at a single tertiary-level institution. Students at different tertiary-level institutions could have dissimilar perspectives and experiences on intrapersonal and interpersonal level influences.

Conclusion

Themes that emerged reflect the influence of individual and systemic influences, with the individual level influences as being most dominant. The utility of a systemic, ecological approach to identify and intervene on different levels of influence in career decision making was highlighted. Furthermore, the research identified that young people might consult with different sources of information in order to gain some clarity and sought out alternatives to their career decision making. No one medium stands out. Young adults used their own experiences to choose a career path that would likely help their community or others in some way. They were also likely to choose a career in which they gained a better understanding of themselves even if this went against parental, cultural, and societal norms. The ecological model in identifying sources of influence for intervention was deemed as most relevant as it accommodates the dynamic nature of career decision making influences in the 21st century. Eliciting the voices and experiences of young people growing up in different, non-western societies and forging career paths require due consideration of policy makers in basic, higher education, and labour institutions in the South African context.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

The authors are the sole contributors to the study. M.R.F. is the Master's student who conducted the study and write-up of the manuscript. K.R.V. was the supervisor of the study who supported and assisted with the conceptualisation of the study, the study design, the write-up, and the submission of the manuscript for publication.

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Data availability

All data retrieved will remain in the researcher's possession at the University of Pretoria.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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