“TO DO OR NOT TO DO”: EXAMINING DECISION-MAKING STYLES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: COMPARING FAMILY STRUCTURE, GENDER AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

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Abstract

Decision-making is a process of making choices between competing courses of action. This study has focused on the way that individuals habitually approach decision problems and use information. The aim of the study was to determine whether significant differences exist between different groups of university students based on their gender, living arrangements (living in residence or with parents) and family structure (living in one-parent or two-parent families) regarding their decision-making styles. A sample of 583 university students participated in this study. The final sample comprised of 33% males and 67% females between the ages of 18 and 25 years (M= 20.67 years, SD= 1.96). Almost half of the participants lived in residences on campus (51%) and had been raised in a home with both parents (55%). The results suggested that overall, university students are thorough, controlled and hesitant in their decision-making. Significant differences were found between the different groups regarding decision-making styles, with practical implications.

Keywords: young adulthood, decision-making styles, university students, South Africa, family structure

INTRODUCTION

Young people today are faced on a daily basis with having to make decisions. These decisions can range from getting out of bed to start the day, to selecting a partner to marry. Over a period of development, young people reach a stage where they do not require parental input in their decision-making and take responsibility for their own actions, making independent decisions about their future and finances (Arnett, 2004). Independent decision-making is therefore a key indicator of moving from childhood through adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 1998). These decisions can range from minor to major. For example, a minor decision could be the choice of what clothes to wear for the day, while a major decision could be deciding whether or not to attend school or lectures for the day. Some decisions are automatic or instinctual, such as choosing a favourite drink, while others have to be carefully thought through as there could be consequences for the decision taken.

Decision-making is identified as the ability to choose alternatives based on the values and preferences for a given object (French, West, Elander & Wilding, 1993). It is also a process of making choices among competing courses of action. The ability to make decisions is the criterion for taking responsibility for actions and making independent decisions about the future (Arnett, 1998). The process of decision-making may involve following a series of steps, which begins with recognising that a decision must be made (Piaget, 1952). This is followed by understanding the goal that one hopes to attain or a problem that needs to be solved, which is then followed by making a list of options or choices as the next step. The selection of these options or choices will help determine both negative and positive consequences, which is necessary in order to proceed to the next stage after the task has been
resolved, as one cannot skip a stage (Piaget, 1952). Apart from the process of decision-making, the way in which individuals actually make decisions is the focus of this paper.

A limited number of research studies have identified the ways in which individuals make decisions, either by choice or habitually, as decision-making patterns or styles. In particular, Janis and Mann (1977) identified several basic patterns of making decisions. These were hypervigilance (frantically searching for a way out of dilemmas—hasty, disorganised, and an incomplete evaluation of information leading to faulty decisions and post-decisional regret); vigilance (defining goals, collecting information, considering alternatives, and checking alternatives); and defensive avoidance decision-making styles (escaping conflict by procrastinating, shifting responsibility to someone else, or constructing wishful rationalisations to bolster the least objectionable alternative).

Similarly, French, West, Elander and Wilding (1993, p.627) identified the following decision-making styles: thorough, hesitant, perfectionistic, controlled, socially resistant, idealistic, and instinctive. In thorough decision-making, the individual tries to find all the relevant information and carefully consider all the future consequences before making a decision. This person will also act intentionally and purposefully. Hesitant decision-making has an uncertain or indecisive nature. This decision-maker will hold back or pause because of doubt or uncertainty, and will often take the safer option. The perfectionistic decision-maker finds it extremely difficult to come to a decision, because of the dread of the possibility of failing. In controlled decision-making, individuals are frequently calm, unemotional and in control when making decisions. Socially resistant decision-making could mean "going against the grain". In other words, this person is averse to or unaffected by the decisions made by the group. This decision-maker can also be described as challenging or opposing in decision-making by going against the advice offered by others. The idealistic decision-maker is considered to be unrealistic, rigid and inflexible when making decisions regardless of the consequences. In addition, the decision is conducted quickly and is not always based on the facts. With instinctive decision-making, the individual does not anticipate future consequences and does not systematically seek information in order to make a decision. This decision-maker is emotionally self-aware and often makes decisions based on a "gut-feeling".

Decision-making is not a "one size fits all" process as circumstances, environments and individual personalities impact on the way decisions are made. In order to understand the way in which people make decisions, this study begins with group comparisons which compare the decision-making styles of males and females, students living on campus and those living with parents off campus, and students raised in one- and two-parent households. The current study will serve as the first known study in South Africa to understand decision-making styles among young adults.

Although research regarding decision-making styles is very limited, studies comparing decision-making styles of males and females suggest that there are significant differences between the sexes (d'Acremont & Van der Linden, 2005; Sanz de AcedoLizárraga, Sanz de AcedoBaquedano, Cardelle-Elawar, 2007; Sari, 2008) but that these differences could be due to social roles and not necessarily intellectual competencies (Sanz de AcedoLizárraga, Sanz de AcedoBaquedano, Cardelle-Elawar, 2007). In South Africa, a large portion of university students live with their parents while attending university. This suggests that parents may continue to play a role in the decision-making process of their young adults. In comparison, students staying in university residence would need to make their own decisions as they need to be more independent and responsible. Students living in residence may have different decision-making styles to those students living with their parents. For example, Hablemitoglu and Yildirim (2008) found that students living in dormitories make rational and efficient decisions compared to students living with their parents. In addition, having lived in a one- or two-parent family may influence the way in which decisions are made. Similarly, young adults raised in two-parent families tend to explore more than their counterparts in one-parent families (Bartoszuk & Pittman, 2010; Hanzae & Loffizadeh, 2011).

In reviewing the literature with regard to decision-making styles, challenges arise. The first challenge is that, while there are associations between
decision-making and different personal and environmental factors (as previously indicated), only limited research has examined the general styles which people use to make decisions (d’Acremont & Van der Linden, 2006; Sanz de AcedoLizárraga, Sanz de AcedoBaquedano, Cardelle-Elawar, 2007; Sari, 2008). Previous research has primarily focused on career decision-making (Gati, Landman, Davidovitch, Asulin-Peretz, & Gadassi, 2010; Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes, & Shanahan, 2002) or decision-making within organisations or consumerism (Radder, Li, & Pietersen, 2006; Winder, Ridgway, Nelson, & Baldwin, 2002). The second challenge is that the research in this study area is fairly dated, and a third challenge is that no known research has been found in South Africa with regard to general decision-making styles among either adults or the youth. Only one study has been found to focus on decision-making, and this study was in the area of consumerism (Radder, Li, & Pietersen, 2006).

Life is about making decisions, but how we make decisions has definite implications across all facets of our lives (Brown, Abdallah & Ng, 2011). This study provides a basis for examining the decision-making styles of youth in South Africa. Since different factors encourage particular behaviour and play a role in how and why people behave the way they do, this study compares the decision-making styles of youth across groups of gender, living arrangements of university students (i.e. living in residence and off university campus with parents) and family structure (i.e. being raised in a one- or two-parent household), with a sample of university students in South Africa. Thus, the aim of the study was to determine if there are significant differences between different groups of university students based on gender, living arrangements (living in residence or with parents) and family structure (living in one- and two-parent families) based on their decision-making styles.

**Method**

This study used a comparative, cross-sectional research design making use of convenient sampling. The sample was made up of 583 university students, who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

**Measurements**

The decision-making questionnaire (French, West, Elander & Wilding, 1993) used in this study is a 21-item questionnaire developed to assess the decision-making styles of individuals. The original questionnaire contained 30 items, but based on a principal components analysis (or dimensions), 21 items were retained as there were seven component loadings with eigenvalues greater than one. Together these components accounted for 54.3% of the variance. Separate component analyses were conducted to check the stability of the factor solution. The findings were similar. The current decision-making questionnaire consists of 21 items which form the seven subscales of control, thoroughness, instinctiveness, social resistance, hesitancy, perfectionism and idealism. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = Never and 5 = Always. The scores of each subscale range from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 25. This questionnaire was constructed in English as the medium of instruction at the university.

**Procedure**

Permission was granted by the University Ethics Committee (Registration number: 09/8/20) to conduct the study. The purpose of the study, as well as its aims and objectives, were explained to the students before the questionnaires were administered. Students were also informed that they could choose not to participate in the study or withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection process. In addition, students were informed that their confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained at all times. Only students between 18 and 25 years were invited to voluntarily participate. Those who participated completed a consent form before completing the questionnaire.

**Data Analysis**

SPSS version 19 was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics provided information describing the data according to frequencies, mean, and standard deviations. An ANOVA was used to compare groups according to gender, living arrangements and family structure. Statistical significance was set at p<0.05.

**Results**

The sample was made up of 583 university students, who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The final sample comprised of 33% males and 67% females between the ages of 18 and 25 years (M= 20.67 years, SD= 1.96). Almost half of the
participants lived in residences on campus (51%) and had been raised in a home with both parents (55%).

The results (Table 1) suggest that of the seven subscales, participants were thorough (M = 13.97, SD = 2.65), controlled (M = 16.97, SD = 3.12), and hesitant (M = 10.35, SD = 1.63), in their decision-making styles. When comparing family structure (being raised by a single or married parent), gender of participants and the living arrangements of the participants (living on campus or off campus) in their decision-making styles, significant main effects were found across the groups. Two significant main effects were found in terms of family structure. Participants raised in a two-parent family were more thorough, F(1, 581) = 10.81, p < .05, while those participants raised in a single-parent family were more hesitant, F(1, 581) = 4.52, p < .05, in their decision-making styles. Two significant main effects were also found with regard to gender groups. Males were more controlled, F(1, 581) = 6.76, p < .05, while females were more instinctive, F(1, 581) = 9.06, p < .05, in their decision-making styles. When comparing participants living on campus with those living off campus, three significant main effects were found. Participants living on campus were more controlled, F(1, 581) = 12.07, p < .05, socially resistant, F(1, 581) = 9.35, p < .05, and applied idealism, F(1, 581) = 6.95, p < .05, in their decision-making styles. There were no interaction effects between the groups in terms of decision-making styles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table: Decision-making Arrangements</th>
<th>Group Differences: Family Structure, Gender and Living Arrangements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variables</td>
<td>FAMILY STRUCTURE</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-parent family</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(n=260)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thoroughness</td>
<td>13.57(2.58)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>16.05(3.21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hesitancy</td>
<td>10.51(1.58)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Resistance</td>
<td>8.59(1.82)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perfectionism</td>
<td>6.16(1.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealism</td>
<td>6.28(1.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instinctiveness</td>
<td>6.62(1.46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD in parentheses
Thoroughness: Minimum score = 4; Maximum score = 20
Control: Minimum score = 5; Maximum score = 25
Hesitancy: Minimum score = 3; Maximum score = 15
Social Resistance: Minimum score = 3; Maximum score = 15
Perfectionism: Minimum score = 2; Maximum score = 10
Idealism: Minimum score = 2; Maximum score = 10
Instinctiveness: Minimum score = 2; Maximum score = 10
Discussion
This study sought to compare the decision-making styles of youth across groups of gender, living arrangements of university students (i.e., living on residence and off university campus with parents) and family structure (i.e., being raised in one- or two-parent households) in a sample of university students in South Africa. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to compare groups in terms of decision-making styles.

Decision-making can range from being very simple to being extremely complex. The variation in simple to complex decision-making can differ from student to student, especially within the university context. Students who find themselves staying in residence have to consider decisions regarding accommodation, safety and security, food as well as daily chores, while for a student who stays off campus these may be taken care of by some of the individuals or parents they live with. Regardless of the decision taken, the decisions made can have far-reaching implications (Brown, Abdullah& Ng, 2011). What is clear is that no two individuals make decisions in exactly the same way, as there are different factors which can affect the way in which individuals make decisions. These factors can be personal as well as environmental.

The results of this study suggest that university students are thorough, controlled and hesitant in their decision-making styles. When comparing students who live in residence on campus with those living off campus, the results show significant differences on three of the seven subscales. The results indicate that students living on campus are more controlled, socially resistant and idealistic when making decisions than students living off campus with family or friends. This finding suggests that university students living on campus make decisions calmly, do not consider advice from others, and are unrealistic and inflexible when making decisions. This result is in part similar to the findings of Hablemitoglu and Yildirim (2008), who concluded that students living in dormitories make rational and efficient decisions. A possible reason for this finding is that students living in residence are required to fend for themselves without the additional support of parents, friends or family. In addition, these students are required to engage in more independent decision-making and therefore need to consider different aspects through their own perceptions of ideals, rather than making instinctive decisions which could have dire consequences. This finding also suggests that divisions of student support and development at higher education institutions should consider focusing on how to assist students with the various decision-making styles they become involved in, as these have a bearing on their life decisions. Students who stay on campus could be assisted with realistic decision-making if there were programmes in place to develop the skills required for decision-making by student support services in higher education institutions.

This study also sought to examine the effect of family structure on the decision-making styles of university students. Furthermore, career decisions by young persons are often made based on the family structure, parents’ occupations and family processes across an individual’s life span (Whiston & Keller, 2004). The results of the current study suggest that students who have been raised in a two-parent household are more thorough when making decisions, while those raised in a one-parent household are more hesitant in making decisions. A substantial body of research has drawn significant differences between households of married parents and single-parent households (Ganong, 1995; Johnson, 2003). Family structure has been applied to behaviour, parenting and well-being across the lifespan (David & Roman, 2013; Kendig & Bianchi, 2008; Roman, 2011) often with negative implications for one-parent households (McKinney, 2002; Segal-Engelich & Woznier, 2005). There is, however, no conclusive evidence of this, as studies also show no significant difference between being raised by a single or a married parent (Avion, Ali & Walters, 2007; Greitemeyer, 2009; Kendig & Bianchi, 2008; Roman, 2011). The results of the current study are supported by Bartoszuk and Pittman (2010), who found that young people in married families tended to explore more than those reared in single-parent families. The results of this study could be due to influences in the married family environment, such as a spouse providing more alternatives in decision-making and therefore enabling thoroughness in making a decision. Alternatively, while growing up in a single-parent family, a child may not have been exposed to different opportunities and would therefore be cautious in making a decision. The role of family structure and parenting is of utmost
importance in decision-making, as was found in a study by Okubo, Yeh, Lin, Fujita and Shea (2007) who observed that parents’ expectations about careers and academic performance largely influenced career decisions of Chinese youth. This also suggests that the role of family structure in decision-making has implications for the decision-making employed by youth in higher education with regard to academic performance and career decisions, as proposed by Okubo et al. (2007). Hanzaee and Loffizadeh (2011) also found that the type of decision-making employed with the particular familial structure impacted on the adolescent decision-making employed among families in Iran. Isik (2007), who observed students in a higher education institution across various faculties, found that the most significant people involved in their decision-making around career choice in higher education were their parents. Very few studies have focused on the decision-making styles of adolescence; this study is one of few to have examined decision-making styles of youth. Most studies involving decision-making in adolescence, focus on career decision-making, as it is an important developmental task in this phase which is alluded to by Martinez (2007) and Savickas (2002).

A comparison of decision-making styles of males and females in the current study showed that males are more controlled, while females are more instinctive in their decision-making tendencies. These results are similar to other gender studies where significant differences have been found between male and female participants. These differences were in terms of anti-social behaviour (Human, 2010), decision-making (Sanz de AcedoLizárraga, Sanz de AcedoBaquedano, Cardelle-Elawar, 2007), identity exploration and commitment in different domains (Bartoszuk & Pittman, 2010), risk-taking behaviour (d’Acremont & Van der Linden, 2006), driving style (French, West, Elander, & Wilding, 1993), consumer-related decision-making (Kamaruddin & Mokhlis, 2003), and types of activities in which males and females participate (Sharpa, Coatsworth, Darling, Cumsillec, & Ranierid, 2007). Bakwell and Mitchell (2006) investigated the decision-making styles of undergraduate students in the United Kingdom and found that there were no significant differences in the decision-making styles between males and females. The results of the current study are supported by a study conducted by Sanz de AcedoLizárraga, Sanz de AcedoBaquedano, & Cardelle-Elawar (2007) in which females were more concerned about the consequences of the decision made, and tended to make decisions with their emotions. Females also felt pressured by others (family and friends) to make decisions. When males made decisions, they tended to feel pressure which was more work-related, and tended to analyse the information needed to make the decision, as well as the purpose of the decision. A possible reason for the finding of gender differences could be the expectation of social behavioural roles and cultural discrepancies rather than cognitive processing or abilities (Sanz de AcedoLizárraga, Sanz de AcedoBaquedano, & Cardelle-Elawar, 2007, Sari, 2008).

Implications for practice
The results suggest that there are differences in the decision-making styles employed by university students who (i) live on and off campus, (ii) come from different family structures and (iii) from different gender groups. These results suggest that the social constructs which were examined in this study have implications for higher education institutions, particularly for their student development and support services in considering programmes that look at the fostering of healthy decision-making skills to assist with decision-making across one’s lifespan. Making decisions, especially when faced with tough or difficult choices, could potentially be a challenge for young people. If young people are to be assisted, via an intervention programme, with improving the manner in which decisions are made, there should be an awareness of differences. These differences could be the context within which young people function or the context from which they come, which inevitably adds to the decision-making process.

Conclusion
The concept of decision-making styles in this study is based on French, West, Elander and Wilding (1993, p.627) which is "the way that individuals habitually approach decision problems and use information". The results suggest that there are differences in the decision-making styles of students living on residence as opposed to those living off campus with parents. Students living on campus need to depend on their own knowledge, perceptions and intuition when making decisions because they do not have the additional support of
others such as family. Thus, their decision-making styles will be more controlled and centred on the self than concerned with gathering all the facts or different perspectives when making decisions. However, future research could further examine this aspect of decision-making as well as conducting research with youth not involved in tertiary education.

This study adds to previous research regarding the differences between males and females. Females tend to be more instinctive in their decision-making than males, which could be the result of being more emotionally involved in what they do than are males. Social roles may also require males to be more “in control”, than dependent on others in comparison to females. Future research should examine the role of culture and social behavioural desirability in decision-making of youth, especially since there is so much cultural diversity in South Africa. The family is the first context in which people learn life skills, and society is always interested in the influence of different family structures, specifically the effect of being raised in a one-parent home. The results obtained in this study should be replicated, as there are different perspectives on different aspects regarding the influence of family structure on development across the lifespan. Decision-making can be considered a life skill which may have been taught in the home. As this study did not set out to examine how decision-making skills were learned or taught, this factor could be examined in future research.

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