Conflict in the Career Decision Schemes of High Aspiration Youth

Larry Cochran and Linda Giza
University of British Columbia

Résumé

Cet étude examine le degré et le domain propre des conflicts contre dix valeurs de carrière. 84 étudiants de dixième et onzième année qui possédaient des aspirations de carrière élevées ont jugé dix carrières choisies individuellement sur dix valeurs de carrière standard. On a découvert q'à peut prêt chaque troisième relation importante entre les valeurs implique le conflict, et qui'il y avait au moins un conflict pour chaque paire de valeurs.

Abstract

This study investigated the degree and scope of conflicts among ten career values. Eighty-four 10th and 11th graders with high occupational aspirations rated ten individually selected occupations on ten standard career values. It was found that about every third substantial relation among values involved conflict, and that there was at least one conflict for every pair of values.

Rational career decision models (Jepsen & Dilley, 1974) stress an appraisal of individual values; what a decider wants to realize in a career. Indeed, Katz (1973) indicated that the "basic choice is essentially a choice between arrays of values, or value systems" (p. 116). While there is ample research supporting the importance of values in career decision making (e.g., Rosenberg, 1957), research is only beginning on the many difficulties of using values in deliberation (Pitz & Harren, 1980). This study is concerned with one prominent difficulty, career value conflict.

Career value conflict arises when a person has a number of values, of which some but not all can be satisfied, given one's set of alternatives (La Fave, 1969). In the simplest case, there are two incompatible values and the person is faced with pursuing one value at the expense of another value. Given one's construing of alternatives, one cannot realize both values in any single alternative. As the number of values increases, conflict becomes increasingly complex and diverse. Potentially, a person might be confronted with two or more sets of values that are in conflict, creating an internal division of considerable scope.

As defined here, career value conflict is not concerned with compromise (Super, 1957; Gottfredson, 1981), which refers to the implementation of a decision in which one must adjust to discrepancies between expectation and reality, between what one aspires toward and what one is actually presented with. Rather, value conflict is most concerned with the "agony" of decision (Janis & Mann, 1977).

Using a sample of youth with high aspirations, this study was designed to provide beginning answers to two basic questions about career value

conflict. First, what is the degree of conflict that deciders manifest? While it is generally assumed that conflict among work values is inevitable, there is little basis for estimating how much conflict is to be expected. Is conflict rather minimal or is it extensive? Second, what is the content or nature of these conflicts? What are the values that conflict the most, and with what values do they conflict?

Degree of Conflict

In the research literature, there are only two directly relevant reports of the extent of conflict, both of which employ a measure deriving from a variant of Kelly's (1955) repertory grid. Following this line of research, a career grid is a model of a career decision scheme in which a set of occupational alternatives have been have been rated on a set of career values. In the career grid below (Table 1), a young woman rated ten occupations on ten career values, using a five-point scale ranging from 2 (very positive) to -2 (very negative). On interest, for example, veterinarian is regarded as very interesting while police woman is very uninteresting. A row of judgements indicates the relative positivity or negativity of one's occupational alternatives on a given career value.

TABLE 1

Career Grid of a Female Eleventh Grader

	Occupations									
Career Values	*Veterinarian*	*Animal Scientist*	*Photographer*	*Animal Husbander*	*Record Promoter*	*Model and Entertainer*	*Biologist*	*Mid Wife*	*Disc Jockey*	*Police Woman*
Interest	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	0	-2
Salary	2	2	-1	2	1	2	0	-1	0	2
Challenge	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	2
Use of my Talents	2	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	-2	-2
Benefit to Society	2	2	-2	2	-1	-2	2	2	-1	2
Forwards my Values	2	2	0	2	2	0	2	2	2	-1
Opportunity for Advancement	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	2
Freedom in Job	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	-2
Security	2	2	0	2	1	2	2	0	0	2
Time for other things in Life	-1	-1	2	-1	2	-2	-1	2	0	-2

For estimating the degree of conflict within a decision scheme as a whole, the most suitable measure is one developed by Cochran (1983a). A product-moment correlation can be used to measure the strength of relationship between any two values. For example, the correlation between salary and security in the grid is .85. Jobs with higher salary tend to have more security, in her view. Jobs with less salary tend to have less security. There is a harmonious basis for preferring one occupation over another. In contrast, a conflict is defined by any negative correlation between values. For example, in this particular grid, security is in conflict with time for other things in life, as evidenced by a negative correlation of -.82.

Jobs which are more secure involve less time for other things, while jobs which are less secure involve more time. A gain on one value goes with a loss on another value. There is a disharmonious basis for preferring one occupation over another.

To measure the degree of conflict in a grid, there are three steps. First, square each correlation and add them together. This score indicates the overall variance-in-common among a set of constructs, how strongly they are inter-related (Fransella & Bannister, 1977). Second, repeat this procedure with all negative correlations. This sum indicates the amount of variance-in-common that is negative. Third, divide the negative variance (step 2) by the total variance (step 1) to determine how much of the total is negative.

In a sample of twenty university students, Cochran (1977) found that the degree of conflict for supplied values was 35%. However, when the same students rated careers on personal career values, the degree of conflict reduced to 17%. It was concluded that supplying career values increases conflict. When a person is free to select values and to frame them in personal ways, conflict is minimized. To function as a whole, a scheme requires coherence; and coherence depends to some extent upon congruent relations among values and minimization of conflict. In attempting to adjust one's frame of reference to the demands of the world, it appears that maintenance of a coherent scheme might be a major challenge. In a second study (Cochran, 1983b), about 350 high school seniors rated personal career options on career values they were free to select or devise. For this sample, the degree of conflict was approximately 18%, which is quite close to the above estimate.

In the present study, career values were supplied. There was no freedom to select or frame personal values, although one could understand the meaning of each value in individual ways. Partially, the aim of this restriction is to determine if the degree of conflict approaches the proportion of 35% found in the previous study. Partially, also, it is of interest to gain an estimate for a specific population of young people with high aspirations.

METHOD

Subjects

The majority of the 10th and 11th graders of an exclusive high school in Vancouver, British Columbia, who participated in this study, excluding those who were absent, did not turn in the career grid on time, or turned in an incomplete grid. In total, 84 students, 37 males and 47 females, turned in a usable career grid. Generally, these students are the sons and daughters of highly educated professionals. Judged by the first choice, their occupational aspirations are typically very high, most requiring at least an undergraduate university education.

Procedure

As part of regular health classes (which include guidance activities), students were first helped to generate ten viable alternatives. In small groups, students brainstormed (and were supplied with a list of) occupations from different categories, which were later shared with the whole class. In this way, students became aware of a great number of occupations, which helped in selecting ten individual occupations that seemed individually suitable. Next, they were given an uncompleted grid with ten values already typed in. These ten values, listed in Table 1, were selected from a previous study as those most frequently used by high school students and which were sufficiently different from one another.

As homework for the next week, their assignment was to complete the career grid. First, they ranked their occupations from most preferred to least preferred, and placed them on the grid in this order. Second, they rated each occupation on each career value, using a 5-point scale of 2 to -2, which was explained as a way of grading occupations from A or excellent to F or flunk. Completed grids were turned in the following week.

Conflict Measure

As noted previously, overall conflict is measured as a ratio of the negative variance-in-common in a grid to the total variance-in-common. A substantial conflict is defined as any negative correlation at or over .5. Although -.5 is an arbitrary criterion, it agrees with the general norm for describing the strength of correlations (e.g., Garrett, 1966), based upon variance-in-common. But of more importance, -.5 was arrived at by examining a number of negative correlations to determine what level tended to reflect a spread of incompatible value judgements. With -.5 as a criterion, there is a reasonable assurance that two values manifiest a number of conflicting judgements across ten occupations, and seem generally to be incompatible withing a given set of occupational alternatives.

RESULTS

For each career grid individually, correlations among constructs were performed and individual measures of conflict were calculated.

Degree of Conflict

For males, the average degree of conflict was 35.7% with a standard deviation of 18.2. For females, it was 35.9% with a standard deviation of 17.9. These averages are very close to one another, and to the previously reported average (with college students) of 35% (Cochran, 1977). For males and females, the highest and lowest scores were 64.6% and 2.1%, 65.2% and 0.5%. The grid in Table 1 approximates the average with a score of 35.0%, and can be used to portray what the average is like. In this grid there were five substantial conflicts (i.e., a negative correlation at or over .5). Salary conflicted with freedom in the job and time for other things. Benefit to society conflicted with freedom as well. Security conflicted with freedom and time for other things. For this student, there were 15 correlations at or over .5, five of which were negative. Every third substantial relation involves a conflict, which is about the same for the group. For example, the males manifested a total of 436 substantial relations, 138 of which were negative (about four conflicts per person). Thirty-two per cent of the substantial relations were negative.

Types of Conflict

The frequencies of conflicts between values are recorded in Table 2. Each conflict involved a negative correlation at or over 0.5. The conflicts for males are in the upper right; those for females, in the lower left.

TABLE 2

Frequencies of Conflicts

	Career Values									
Career Values	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*
1 Interest	X	3	2	0	3	0	1	1	3	5
2 Salary	5	X	5	7	4	4	2	11	1	10
3 Challenge	2	7	X	0	1	1	2	2	5	6
4 Use of my Talents	1	9	1	X	5	0	1	1	2	5
5 Benefit to Society	3	1	2	2	X	1	1	1	0	1
6 Forwards my Values	1	7	0	2	1	X	2	3	1	4
7 Opportunity for Advancement	2	5	2	4	2	2	X	5	3	7
8 Freedom in Job	1	9	1	2	7	3	2	X	8	2
9 Security	6	1	10	10	6	5	2	10	X	6
10 Time for other things in life	7	7	12	6	9	6	9	0	8	X

NOTE: Male frequencies are above the diagonal. Female frequencies are below the diagonal.

The most striking aspect of this table is the sheer pervasiveness of conflict. Combining both male and female tables there is no pair of values which escapes conflict! All pairs involve at least one substantial negative relation. Perhaps some of these conflicts might be attributed to chance, but this sort of probabilistic speculation does little to forward the present discussion.

For males, a rank order of values from most to least number of conflicts is: salary (47), time (46), freedom (34), security (29), challenge (24), advancement (24), talents (21), interest (18), benefit (17), and personal values (16). For females, the rank order is: time (64), security (58), salary (51), challenge (37), talents (37), freedom (35), benefit (33), advancement (30), interest (28), and personal values (27). The rho correlation between these two sets of ranks if .78, which is significant, $t(8) = 3.53$, $p < .01$. Between males and females, there is substantial agreement on the relative frequency of conflict among these ten values.

For males, the five most conflicting relations involve salary and freedom (11 conflicts), salary and time (10), freedom and security (8), salary and talents, and advancement and time. For females, the most conflicting relations involve challenge and time (12), challenge and security (10), talents and security (10), and freedom and security (10). Tied for fifth place with nine conflicts are salary and talents, salary and freedom, benefit and time, and advancement and time. Generally, males seem to manifest about the same type of high frequency conflicts as females.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study analysis provide an estimate of the degree of conflict in the decision schemes of high aspiration youth and provide a frequency map of the types of conflict.

Limitations

The degree of conflict manifested in this study seems large; yet it agrees with the previous study by Cochran (1977). However, there are a number of qualifications to consider. First, the measurement of conflict is indirect. It seems unlikely that students were aware of many of their conflicts. Surely, they were aware of some but not likely to be aware of the full range. In this sense, the measure does not reflect the inner turmoil. The conflicts a person is aware of might be limited indeed and would involve a different form of measurement. The present study is concerned about values that are in conflict, latently or manifestly, in the way a person construes alternatives.

Second, not all conflicts reported here were necessarily potent to the students. For example, if one did not care about using one's talents, it would not greatly matter to a person whether it conflicted with other values or not. If values had been elicited or representative of each individual's value system, almost certainly the degree of conflict would have

been less, and each conflict could be regarded as more potent. However, the reported conflicts cannot be dismissed on this account. People change in values and value priorities. What was negligible yesterday might become potent later. Measures of conflict are limited to the conditions of measurement. There is no absolute estimate of conflict but only relative estimates for various conditions.

Regarding the particular values used in this study, they seem representative in at least three ways. One, they were among the most frequently used values in a previous sample of over 350 high school students (Cochran, 1983b). Two, the values selected are represented on at least two inventories of work values, Super's (1970) Work Values Inventory and Hall's (1976) Occupational Orientation Inventory. Three, these values seem prominent in the concerns of workers. For example, in Terkel's (1975) accounts of workers describing their jobs, these values are salient. People bemoan lack of time, violations of personal values, lack of income, lack of challenge, and so on. If so, these values possess a form of validity that matters to a decision whether or not a decider is aware at the time of their importance.

Third, different sets of values might produce different results. For example, if values were similar in meaning, we could expect a drastic reduction in conflict. Consequently, the results are limited to these particular values. While these values seem diverse and highly relevant, results could be different using other values. Only future research can resolve this issue.

The Nature of Career Conflicts

The scope of values issues confronting a young person attempting to establish a career direction is broad. Youth with high aspirations are not immune to conflict, not assured of "smooth sailing." Salary appears as a great temptation, drawing them away from their own talents, sense of challenge, personal values, interests, and so on. If salary tempts them away, insecurity can scare them away. In contrast, the more intrinsic work values such as the promise of challenge, interest, and cultivation of talents can lure them away from other values and into situations they would rather avoid. On this level, the conflicts seem very clear. That is, one can envision life on less salary, but with more challenging work, or with more interest and less time.

More complexly, in his text on axiology or the theory of values, Rescher (1969) indicates that a full exposition of evaluation involves three factors: value objects, loci of value, and values proper. The value object is that which is being evaluated. In this study, value objects are occupations. Loci of values are particularizing vehicles or more concrete means for underlying values. That is, values proper tend to be abstract and remote, requiring particular vehicles to be instantiated in situations. Otherwise, underlying values remain rather remote, insubstantial.

Most of what are here termed career values are actually loci of value or means of values. For example, salary has no value in itself. Rather it is *of* value in forwarding certain underlying values. It points beyond itself, and so do the other career values listed. Challenge, use of talents, time, freedom in a job, opportunity for advancement, and security are more clearly vehicles for something else. "Forwards my values" is an umbrella term. Interest and social benefit might be closer to values proper, but in their restricted vocational use, they also point beyond.

Values proper are intagible constituents of one's vision of how life ought to be, one's vision of the good life and what is beneficial to it. Evaluation is our instrument for discerning promising alternatives that will realize these values, in abundance if possible. The most immediate implication of this contribution is that conflicts between career values cannot adequately be resolved or understood in themselves, for they are loci of values. For example, for the young woman who completed the grid in Table 1, there is a conflict between security and time for other things, which naturally leads to a consideration of which is most important. Should one sacrifice security or time? This question cannot be adequately answered or even considered without involving one's underlying values and the vision of the good life that makes them prominent.

Career values are more concrete ways to pose fundamental questions of living. Salary, for instance, might ask if it is best to strive for the world's goods most worth having. Security might ask if it is best to avoid the calamities most worth avoiding? The cultivation of talents might ask, in part, if it is best to become the kind of person most worth being. People elaborate career values in different ways, depending upon their visions of living, and consequently different questions would be posed. However, the questions tend to take on a basic, fundamental quality, involving great depth. For example, if salary is thrust into conflict with one's talents, then one of the most fundamental questions of living might be posed: Is it better to have the goods most worth having or to become the kind of person most worth being (Feinberg, 1970)? Still as puzzling as it was to the ancient Greeks who invented it, one benefits more from the attempt to answer it than from an answer. If security is thrust into conflict with challenge, another fundamental question might be posed: Is it better to avoid the calamities most worth avoiding or to strive to approach the achievements most worth achieving? It is difficult to think of a more fundamental question for one's approach to life, or perhaps more important to the type of life that is lived.

There are, then, at least two levels for viewing the conflicts enumerated in Table 2. On a practical level, one can envision practical differences in a career with less salary, less security, or whatever. This is the safe and sane level of ordinary, practical discussion which governs much of our lives. On the level of values, however, one is invited or compelled to examine the vision of life behind the career values. Conflict is a natural

entrance or path to these more fundamental questions and personal meanings, involving a quality of discussion that is quite different than the ordinary. Each of the 45 conflicts in Table 2 pose different questions and involve different paths into this more fundamental realm.

In providing a beginning map of career conflicts, the most important practical implication is that it supplies issues for discussion. One might focus upon more widely shared conflicts or think of other forms of practice such as psychodrama or guided reading, but the major thing we do with conflict is discuss it. Conflict, once it is recognized, tends to focus attention and to be highly motivating (Janis & Mann, 1977). Negatively, it can lead to blocking, avoiding, or tunnel vision. Positively, it can lead to a variety of possible benefits. First, there is evidence that moral dilemma discussions, following Kohlberg (1976), can foster a kind of development (Beck, Sullivan, & Taylor, 1972). Surely, a discussion of fundamental value issues that are personally relevant offers an equal potential for depth and for stimulating development. Second, intense discussion of value conflict is one method of preparation for coping with conflict when it arises. Discussion might have a stabilizing influence on later life (Janis & Mann, 1977). Third, such a discussion is a vehicle for a broader and deeper exploration of oneself and career, which conflict supplies the motivation for. A searching and serious exploration would seem to offer a way to help young people establish more solid priorities with which to make wiser decisions and adjustments.

Significance

Theory construction at this time seems premature. Of more importance, the results encourage more research by showing that career value conflict matters. The sheer magnitude of conflict seems large by almost any standard. One out of every three substantial relations among values is likely to be a conflict! This degree of conflict is simply too large to dismiss although the ways in which it might prove important have yet to be investigated. Among other things, conflict might lead one to neglect values that ought not to be neglected. For example, early neglects might emerge later in crises such as Levinson (1978) has described. From this perspective, the frequency of conflicting values assumes importance as a map of practical issues to discuss or as a map of paths into a deeper level of valuation.

There seem to be a number of questions that emerge from this study. What are the sources of conflict? Why do some people have more conflict than others? How can conflicts be resolved, or should they be resolved? How does conflict influence one's pursuit of a career or satisfaction? How can conflict be constructively used in counselling? Could it help motivate people to validate judgements, seek information, clarify a personal philosophy, and so on? How is conflict related to identity formation,

reality orientation, or career maturity? The most important result of this study would seem to be the questions it stimulates rather than conclusions that can be immediately drawn.

References

Beck, C., Sullivan, E., & Taylor, N. (1972). Stimulating transition to postconventional morality: The Pickering high school study. *Interchange*, *3*, 28-37.

Cochran, L. (1977). Differences between supplied and elicited considerations in career evaluation. *Social Behavior and Personality*, *2*, 241-247.

Cochran, L. (1983a). Seven measures of the way that deciders frame their career decisions. *Measurement and Evaluation in Guidance*, *16*, 67-77.

Cochran, L. (1983b). Conflict and integration in career decision schemes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *23*, 87-97.

Feinberg, J. (1970). *Moral concepts*. London: Oxford University Press.

Fransella, F., & Bannister, D. (1977). *A manual for repertory grid technique*. New York: Academic Press.

Garrett, H. (1966). *Statistics in psychology and education*. New York: David McKay.

Gottfredson, L. (1981). Circumspection and compromise: A developmental theory of occupational aspirations. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *28*, 545-579.

Hall, L. (1976). *Hall Occupational Orientation Inventory*. Bensenville, Ill.: Scholastic Testing Service.

Janis, I., & Mann, L. (1977). *Decision making*. New York: Free Press.

Jepsen, D., & Dilley, J. (1974). Vocational decision-making models: A review and comparative analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, *44*, 331-349.

Katz, M. (1973). The name and nature of vocational guidance. In H. Borow (Ed.), *Career guidance for a new age*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Kelly, G. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: Norton.

Kohlberg, L. (1976). Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive-developmental approach. In T. Lickona (Ed.), *Moral development and behavior* (pp. 31-53). New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

La Fave, L. (1969). Reduction of conflict to one type. *Psychological Reports*, *25*, 165-166.

Levinson, D. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Pitz, G., & Harren, V. (1980). An analysis of career decision making from the point of view of information processing and decision theory. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *16*, 320-346.

Rescher, N. (1969). *Introduction to value theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Rosenberg, S. (1957). *Occupations and values*. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press.

Super, D. (1957). *The psychology of careers*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Super, D. (1970). *Work Values Inventory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Terkel, S. (1975). *Working*. New York: Avon.

About the Authors

Linda Giza is a counsellor at University Hills Secondary School in Vancouver, British Columbia. She received an M.Ed. in counselling psychology from the University of British Columbia. Her major interest involves the pragmatics of counselling with an emphasis upon career development.

Larry Cochran is an associate professor in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. He received an M.A. from the University of Oregon and a Ph.D. from the University of Utah. His interest in personal and career development has led to the publication of two books, *Position and the Nature of Personhood* and *Portrait and Story*.

Address correspondence to: Dr. Larry Cochran, University of British Columbia, Faculty of Education, Department of Counselling Psychology, 5780 Toronto Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1L2.