Research on Career Choices and Decision-Making Process among Chinese Overseas Students

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Abstract—A study was conducted to explore the influence of a range of factors on career choices and decision-making process among Chinese students in the UK, from a psychosocial perspective. The grounded theory was selected for analyzing research questions, through the use of semi-structured interviews. A theoretical scheme was framed based on the findings of eight interviews, which suggested that there was an interaction between the influences exerted by the family and cultural factors and they shaped personal aspects like self-efficiency, self-concept and career interests. Although the qualitative research approach used in this study did not allow for wider generalization, but highlighted that indirect influence of families on the impact of students’ career interests, as well as addressed the impacts of abroad cultural and learning experiences on their self-construction and career development. It was hoped, this study could be helpful for Chinese students on choosing a career and for universities on developing strategies of international career services.

1. Introduction
The growing trend of travelling to a foreign country in pursuit of higher education has come to be referred to as transcultural study. The present study is concerned with how Chinese students adapt to life in the UK and the factors that influence their career choices and decision-making, which are considered to be non-linear processes of significant complexity. It is highly relevant and justifiable to investigate international students’ living and learning experiences in the UK and how these experiences, alongside family and cultural factors, shape students’ self-concepts, their approach to decision-making, and ultimately, their career choice. The knowledge derived from such an investigation could aid academic institutions in devising more effective support strategies and approaches for students from Asia. In the process, this research is directed by three core questions: To what extent is Chinese overseas students’ career choice shaped by family and native culture? What are the experiences of Chinese students in the UK and how influential are these experiences of career development and choice? How much weight do Chinese overseas students attribute to contextual factors and experiences in their career-related decision-making?

2. Literature Review
2.1 Social Cognitive Career Theory
To gain an insight into Chinese overseas students’ career choice and decision-making, the present study has applied the social cognitive career theory as the theoretical framework. This theory is grounded in the premise that learning experiences shape not only career preferences and skills, but also career choice [1]. Genetic inheritance, environmental factors, learning experiences, and task performance skills are just some of the factors cited by the theory as affecting career decision-making [2]. Furthermore, individual interest, self-efficiency, and decision-making capacity are considered to depend on the integration of learning experiences with an individual’s capabilities. Hence, the career choice theory offers a multidimensional framework for exploring how self-efficiency, outcome expectations, aims, choice, and environmental factors are correlated [3].
2.2 Acculturation and Career Development

People nowadays are likely to interact with other cultures during their careers, as the phenomenon of globalization increasingly permeates every aspect of life. Under these circumstances, acculturation is defined as a dynamic process in which a minority group selectively adapts its values and cultural norms to those of a dominant group in order to both integrate with and differentiate from the latter [4]. In a study on how Asians in the US approached their career development, Leong and Serafica [5] stressed the importance of examining key mediating variables like acculturation, arguing that a better understanding of Asians’ self-perception and social interactions could be achieved by examining their acculturation in the US and how this affected their career development. The acculturation of Asians in the US was investigated by Leong and Chou as well [6], observing that the lower the level of acculturation, the less likely it was for individuals to express self-efficiency in career preferences, interests or expectations to avoid undermining their parents’ wishes.

2.3 Background and Family Influences

Individuals’ career development is considered to be significantly influenced by contextual factors related to personal and family background [7], as well as social interaction and development [8]. Besides influencing their personal development, background factors such as family of origin, socioeconomic status and level of education, have an impact on individuals’ career preferences and decision-making as well [9]. Studies that have addressed this issue with regard to Asian youth have reported that the individuals’ career ambitions and choices were heavily shaped by their parents [10]. As explained by Tang [11], the reason for this is that, in the context of traditional Asian cultures, an individual’s occupation reflects both on what he/she managed to achieve and on what his/her family achieved. Therefore, it is considered vital for the career chosen by an individual to be honorable to his/her family and satisfy the family’s expectations. Hence, there can be no doubt that the career choices of young Asian individuals are determined to a great extent by their families’ wishes, placing enormous pressure on these individuals to choose an academic degree or career that will be approved by their families [10].

2.4 The Implications of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficiency is believed to have a favorable influence on the career choices made by Asian individuals studying abroad [11], a close correlation being found between self-efficiency and career interests and choice. Furthermore, in their study on colored women’s career development, Byars and Hackett [6] employed the social cognitive theory and investigated the implications of various self-efficiency sources for goal accomplishment and choices. It was concluded that Asian individuals were highly influenced by external and practical career values due to reputation in society and racial discrimination. Careers in science or technology domains are highly valued and prestigious indicators of social standing in Asian culture, and therefore Asian female students in the US are likely to be encouraged to pursue such a career. However, Leung [9] warned that Asian youth’s career choices may be limited if those choices are influenced solely by reputation as this may lead to career decision-making incompatible with their interests and competences.

2.5 The Knowledge Gap

The number of people moving to other countries for work or study purposes has increased significantly as a result of globalization. Bicultural experiences are considered highly significant by numerous researchers, but they have not been thoroughly investigated in earlier studies. To examine career development and career choice in the case of individuals possessing such experiences, more research must be carried out to generate a relevant theoretical framework that could be helpful to Asian and/or Chinese students requiring advice about careers. However, the career choices made by Chinese overseas students have not been adequately studied, with significant differences in the amount of research conducted in different countries, such as the US, where more research has been conducted than in the UK. Furthermore, the majority of existing studies have employed a survey-
based quantitative research method, which is not appropriate for attaining a comprehensive understanding of Asian students’ learning and living experiences abroad and of the extent to which they are influenced by their family in their career decision-making. On the other hand, greater insight into this issue could be achieved by employing an interview-based qualitative research method, which is the approach that the present study adopts. It is hoped that the findings obtained will shed light on career decision-making among Chinese overseas students and their main career choice determinants.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

The collection of data for the research will occur via semi-structured interview, with students from the University of York. An available time will be established with participants in advance. An interview schedule will be implemented and sent to participants before formal interviews. Interviews will be conducted in a room at university library to ensure all participants are free to express their thoughts comfortably. The interview will comprise of open-ended questions, and are anticipated to take less than an hour. This time frame will allow for additional and unanticipated themes to be discussed if they should arise. All participants will be informed that they are free to leave the interview at any point prior to the interview. Tape-recording and note-takings will be utilized with participants’ permission. In the interviews, the topics of career and personal development, culture and family perspectives regarding on career choice will be addressed. This is required so as to examine how such experiences and factors can impact on career decision-making process. Questions about student’s study course, academic performance, personal interests, family backgrounds, career development and abroad study life and career choice will be asked by the researcher.

3.2 Sampling and recruitment of participants

The target population for this study is all Chinese students at the University of York, and who have been studying and living in the United Kingdom for at least two years. Potential participants will be identified through the researcher’s personal connections to existing Chinese students for the study. Project information will be published on the researcher’s personal blog, once the relevant legal permission, to start the project, is obtained. Participants who are willing to participate in interviews will contact the researcher via correspondence to communicate their interests. An informed consent form and a guide of interview questions will be emailed to all selected participants before the formal interview. The research participants will not receive any payments, reimbursement of expenses or any other incentives for taking part in the research.

4. Findings and Analysis

Throughout the research, several major themes became apparent with respect to their career decisions, these were: family, culture and personal factors. The research findings of this research are based on an in-depth qualitative interview of eight students which vary in degrees and course they carry out at the university. The characteristics of the participants, including their education information, are presented as below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Years in the UK</th>
<th>Birth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Master in Education</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Master in Engineering</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bachelor in Chemistry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bachelor in Social Policy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bachelor in Computer Science</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1995</td>
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Apart from participants S2 and S8, all the other participants stated that, although their parents had no direct influence on their career choice, they considered that their parents had an impact on their career development in that they did not express any expectations or wishes regarding their preferred career paths. These participants could choose their career according to their own interests, owing to the values derived from their family and the learning experiences they accumulated at university. In other words, parents did not influence these participants’ career decision-making directly, but only indirectly, through the values and advice they gave their children and how they brought them up.

I have always been free to do and choose as I please. However, even though my parents have never specifically favored or opposed a particular subject, they have influenced me in my career decision-making through the advice they have given me. (S1)

My parents and other family members consider engineering to be a good field where one can find a job without difficulty. I show my parents compliance and since I did not have a clear idea about what I wanted to do, I simply chose the path that they wanted. (S2)

Regarding the extent to which their career decision-making was affected by their university experiences, participants S3, S4, S5, S6, and S8 indicated that their (re)construction of self-concept benefitted from pursuing a university degree in the UK. Indeed, they had a positive attitude towards the British higher education system, stating that the accumulated learning experiences had greatly shaped their career choices and the training received had provided them with the necessary skills. The satisfaction they derived from their learning experiences contributed to make them feel more confident in themselves, especially when comparing the British system with the Chinese educational system, where independent learning and thinking are not promoted. In turn, the confidence they acquired from their university learning experiences improved these participants’ self-efficiency and sense of accomplishment.

Most participants (S2, S3, S4, S5 and S8) stated that they had managed to merge the Chinese and British cultures, but there were some who maintained strong attachment to Chinese values and culture. Of the three participants with deeply entrenched Chinese values, one had a higher level of acculturation compared to the other two. These observations confirm the influence of intercultural experiences on participants’ career decision-making, as the majority of them acknowledged that the decisions they made regarding their career had been shaped by their UK living experiences to a greater or lesser extent. In terms of the extent to which career decision-making was influenced by participants’ self-concepts, findings revealed that this had an indirect impact on participants’ personal development and career decision-making through the experiences of living and learning in the UK. These aspects are clearly evident in the following citations:

Exposure to British culture made me realize that, unlike in Chinese culture, children are not expected to have the same values and ideas as their parents, as great emphasis is placed on individuality. This realization has made me see things differently and I now know that, despite being my parents’ child, I can still make my own choices in life. (S2)

Living and studying in the UK for six years have not altered my well-entrenched native values significantly. I make an effort to be open to British culture whilst at the same time maintaining my connection to Chinese culture. I am to take the best of British culture and add it to Chinese culture. (S7)

In summary, the most important research finding was that Chinese students’ career development was influenced in more than one way by their living and learning experiences in the UK, which were underpinned by a dynamic process of identifying career interests, building self-efficiency, becoming aware of one’s personal development, self-worth, personal strengths and fulfilment, as well as

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bachelor in Maths</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bachelor in Business</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bachelor in Economics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1993</td>
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concentrating on the present and the future. In addition, the Chinese students were significantly influenced in their career choice by the contextual factors of cultural matters, family and personal factors. In short, then, the career decision-making of the overseas Chinese who were interviewed was shaped by living and learning experiences in the UK together with family, personal, and cultural factors. Accordingly, a theoretical scheme was framed, as can be seen in Figure 1. The framework points towards an interplay between the three contextual factors, with each factor having an impact on the decisions and choices made by the Chinese students regarding their career.

Figure 1. Theoretical scheme of career decision-making.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Chinese overseas students’ career choices

The family was identified by earlier studies as the variable with the greatest influence on Asian youth’s career development and decision-making, with children being expected to choose a career path in a prestigious field to honor their family. Hence, individuals with bicultural experiences are likely to be significantly influenced by their family in the decisions they make regarding their career, and therefore they frequently choose a career that is approved by their parents and other family members. However, the results obtained in the present study did not entirely corroborate those of previous research with respect to the extent to which Chinese students’ career decision-making was influenced by their family. In the case of the majority of participants, their career choices were not directly influenced by their families, but indirectly, through the impact they had on career interest development. None of the participants said that their parents had dictated what career to choose, despite the fact that some participants did admit that they had received advice from their parents regarding what academic subject and/or career to pursue. These aspects may be explained in terms of the fact that learning and living experiences in a foreign country had a significant impact of self-development and fulfilment, and therefore, personal interests, career preferences and self-expectations determined the career choices made by most participants. Furthermore, the very fact that the participants decided to study abroad is indicative that autonomy and self-fulfillment mattered greatly to them.

Many previous studies have addressed the importance of cultural values and acculturation and their impact on Asian students’ living and learning experiences abroad. The findings of the present study were consistent with this observation. In the case of some participants, their career choices were not directly impacted by the process of acculturation, but through the fact that they were aware of the differences between the Chinese and British cultures and this awareness shaped their self-concept construction and the manner in which they interacted with local students. With respect to personal factors, previous studies found that Asian youth, particularly college students, were not very independent in their decision-making, did not score highly on the career maturity scale, and their career values were decidedly extrinsic and pragmatic. By contrast to these earlier studies, the current
study discovered that all participants knew exactly what they were interested in and passionate about and their career preferences reflected their skills and competencies, career interests, and personal needs.

5.2 Research association with social cognitive career theory

The social cognitive career theory was useful in understanding the living and learning experiences of Chinese students in the UK because, in addition to dealing with the factors shaping career development and decision-making, it also highlights the interaction between individuals’ learning experiences and their personal abilities to promote personal interests and self-efficiency. The findings further suggested that participants’ learning experiences, self-efficiency and career values, the main elements highlighted in the social cognitive career theory, were heavily influenced not only by cultural factors, family, and educational background and the interplay between them, but also by academic supervisors and tutors. This is due to the fact that participants stated that positive learning experiences, performance accomplishments, and favorable feedback from supervisors and tutors made them feel happy and fulfilled, which in turn improved their self-efficiency, strengthening their conviction in their career interests and shaping the decisions made regarding their career. Indeed, the theoretical propositions were clearly reflected in the interplay between participants’ self-efficiency, career interests, and career choices. Moreover, there were close interconnections between all the influential factors that were identified with regard to participants’ career choices and decision-making. Social cognitive career theory places great significance on such interplay between factors as it further clarifies how different factors shape individuals’ career decision-making.

5.3 Conclusion

This study has helped shed more light on Chinese overseas students’ career development, decision-making process, and other aspects related to their living experiences in the UK. The findings obtained formed the basis for a theoretical framework, which showed how significantly Chinese overseas students’ career choice and decision-making were influenced by family, cultural and personal factors. Indeed, the impact of these contextual factors on Chinese students’ career choices manifested in more than one way. This study has achieved its purpose of filling the gap in the available literature and is significant for future research on this topic, given that not many comprehensive investigations have been conducted on the career choices and development of international students in the UK and the current individualistic career theories may be of limited relevance in the case of individuals with transcultural experiences. Last but not least, it is hoped that this exploratory study will spark other explorations of the career development of international students with transcultural experience.

References


