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Life Concept Scale – Measuring influencing Factors for Sector Choice

Abstract

The nonprofit sector employs foremost people having a background in social work, public health, psychology, or other social sciences. The for-profit sector on the other hand employs predominantly people with a background in economics or management. Thus, the profit sector is more likely to attract graduates who are mostly interested in high salaries, whereas the nonprofit sector appeals more to those least interested in high pay. However, the composition of the nonprofit workforce is changing given the fact that more and more people who hold a degree in business or management strive to work for nonprofit organizations. While applying a more holistic focus on sector choice, this paper develops a scale that reliably assesses students' expectations, wishes, and fantasies about the content and role of one's professional, family, and private life. The Life Concept Scale consists of three dimensions Orientation toward Professional Life ($\alpha=.80$), Family Orientation ($\alpha=.75$), and Future Life Orientation ($\alpha=.76$). Proportion of variance analysis indicates a unique interpretation of each dimension.

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Introduction to the Research Question, Significance and Rationale

It generally comes as no surprise that different societal sectors attract different types of employees. Indeed, studies have shown that self-selection into different employment sectors often occurs due to individual differences as well as the socio-economic and private background (Tschirhart, Reed, Freeman, & Anker, 2008; De Cooman, De Gieter, R., & Jegers, 2011).

Even though the sectors boundaries are blurring, the nonprofit sector employs foremost people having a background in social work, public health, psychology, or other social sciences (Burmester, 2005). The for-profit sector on the other hand due to the nature of its undertakings, employs predominantly people with a background in economics or management. Furthermore, the for-profit sector is more likely to attract individuals interested in high salaries, while the nonprofit sector is found to appeal more to individuals less interested in payment levels (Tschirhart, Reed, Freeman, & Anker, 2008). In addition to differences in wage expectations, employees in nonprofit organizations are found to be more driven by values and are attracted by the doing-good nature of nonprofit work (Benz, 2005; Mirvis & Hackett, 1983). They are also more likely to be motivated by relational and intrinsic rewards, whereas their counterparts in for-profit firms tend to be motivated extrinsically (Benz, 2005; Borzaga & Depedri, 2005; De Cooman, De Gieter, R., & Jegers, 2011). Therefore it is not surprising that similar differences apply when we compare business students to social work students (Buchanan, Kong-Hee Kim, & Basham, 2007; Marsh, 1988).

However, while looking into the reality of the nonprofit sector, we do *not* find a homogenous workforce, but a highly heterogeneous mix of people working for nonprofits (Burmester, 2005). Professions range from helping professions (e.g. nurses, social- and welfare workers) to commercial employees (managers, attorneys, or administrators) (Neumann, 2004; Vilain, 2002) with a tendency toward increasing the share of employees with degrees in business management due to the need for nonprofit organizations to be more effective and efficient (Boeßenecker, 2003; Gmür, 1999). Also, graduates of business schools increasingly aim toward employment in the nonprofit sector and hope to implement social change throughout their career (Rawls, Ullrich, & Nelson, 1975).

Against the background of the heterogeneous mix of professions in the nonprofit sector, it is not entirely clear why people holding professions that were found to be foremost driven by extrinsic motivation (e.g. business management) self-select into the nonprofit sector or if they are, in fact, mainly motivated extrinsically at all. Past research shows that individual's sector choice depends on their perceived competence and the desire to work in a specific sector (Tschirhart, et al.,

2008), personal values (Judge & Bretz, 1991), work motivations (Lee & Wilkins, 2011), and life experiences (Kunreuther, 2003). But other aspects of life might also influence the decision toward a particular employment sector or a particular job. For instance, Hall (2002) identifies a “growing reluctance to sacrifice personal and family gratifications for the sake of one’s career” (p.14). While the professional life is a major part of life, it is not the only part. A more holistic perspective on the person as a whole is missing. Therefore it is important to consider all aspects of life that potentially contribute toward choosing an employment sector.

This paper looks at life concepts of graduate students in social work and business management. Life concepts are defined as the expectations, wishes, and fantasies about the content and role of one's professional, family, and private life (Ifflaender & Kletzing, 2002). It is possible that underlying reasons for decisions to pursue work in a particular sector may be better understood by examining individual perceptions of private or family life. By investigating the broader life concepts of graduate students in business and social work, employers in both sectors may be sensitized to the expectations of the applicants and their personal needs. They, then, may be enabled to facilitate a better fit between the applicant’s personality and the organizational needs. This research will inform both theory and practice with new insights into sector choice of students. The aim of this project is to better understand sector choice of students while considering a holistic perspective of a person’s life and his/her expectations of future life. Using exploratory factor analytic methods, this study develops an instrument that reliably assesses different aspects of life that might influence sector choice of social work and business management students.

Literature Review

Besides personal and social identities, work is another defining element of the self (Ostrove, Stewart, & Curtin, 2011). Work obtains a large fraction of life and is, thus, a means through which people are enabled to express their individuality (Corneo & Jeanne, 2010). Individual’s meaning of work is influenced by his/her socialization, the experience of the world of work as well as personal work values (Super & Sverko, 1995). Therefore, an individual’s self-concept has several components that are essential to consider in terms of their likelihood of choosing occupations, employment sectors, and essentially a career.

Hansen (1997) criticizes the overemphasis on work in life, and thus “incorporates changing contexts, career development, life transitions gender-role-socialization, cultural diversity, and social change in a unified framework” (p. 82) what she calls Integrative Life Planning (ILP). While being

another viable approach toward career development, Hansen (1997) proposes ILP to examine the role of work in relation to other aspects of life such as family, education, and citizenship.

Super's (1980) research on life roles of individuals goes in a similar direction showing that everyone plays a variety of roles throughout one's life (e.g. child, or student, leisurite, citizen, worker, parent, and pensioner). Some of those roles might exist simultaneously and impact each other. Super (1990) carries his research further in presenting a career development model. He emphasizes that a lot of personal (e.g. personality, interests, values, motivations) and contextual (e.g. economy, labor market) factors affect career choice. The most widely studied factors that influence student's career decision making are vocational interests, skills, personality, perceived abilities, and work values (Luzzo, 2000; Niles, Erford, Hunt, & Watts, 1997). More concrete, past research on study program choice found that the prestige attached to the occupation as well as the values that parents transfer to their children influence their personal view of the particular occupation and subsequently their decisions (Fershtman, Murphy, & Weiss, 1996).

While applying a holistic approach in their quantitative study, Ifflaender and Kletzing (2002) were looking at life concepts of female university students in Germany. Life concepts are defined as expectations, wishes and fantasies about the content and role of the family, professional and private life. They distinguish those three main areas of life (family, private, and professional) and argue that those three fall into five types of life concepts—professional-oriented, family-oriented, personal-oriented, professional-family-oriented, and a threefold oriented concept that includes all three areas of life (Ifflaender & Kletzing, 2002).

Often business students are found to differ in their personal characteristics, motivations and attitudes toward work compared to social work students (De Cooman, De Gieter, R., & Jegers, 2011; Tschirhart, Reed, Freeman, & Anker, 2008). Business students, on one hand, are classified as profit-seekers who, with an opportunistic and highly ambitious orientation, pursue their degree to be financially and materially successful and to make a good career (Buchanan, et al., 2007; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002). Social work students on the other hand often see their jobs as a “calling” and wish to work with and help people (Marsh, 1988). Furthermore, social workers are regarded as being altruistic, highly intrinsically motivated and willing to accept low pay for their work (Csikai & Rozensky, 1997; Buchanan et al., 2007). Hackett and colleagues in their study of social work students in four European countries focused on the personal motivations for choosing to study social work. They found that besides “wanting to help people”, which was the dominant factor,

personal experiences that those students had in their lives contributed as second most dominant factor for choosing social work as career path (Hackett, Marjo Kuronen, Matthies, & Kresal, 2003).

Linking that to the work life after graduation, we also find an extensive literature about the differences in motivation and attitudes toward work between nonprofit and for-profit employees. Research suggests nonprofit employees are intrinsically motivated, value-driven, and attracted by the doing-good nature of nonprofit work (Mirvis & Hackett, 1983; Benz, 2005). Compared to employees in the for-profit sector, nonprofit employees are more likely to accept lower pay due to their attachment to the organizational mission (Benz, 2005; Borzaga & Depedri, 2005; De Cooman, De Gieter, R., & Jegers, 2011). Organizational values and missions are prime reasons for individuals to choose nonprofit work (Buchanan, Kong-Hee Kim, & Basham, 2007; Marsh, 1988). In contrast, their counterparts in for-profit organizations are more motivated by extrinsic rewards such as level of payment or perks (De Cooman, et al., 2011).

According to the research, then, the profit sector is more likely to attract graduates who are mostly interested in high salaries, whereas the nonprofit sector appeals more to those least interested in high pay (Tschirhart et al., 2008). Moreover, the nonprofit sector is most successful at employing individuals who want to have boundaryless or protean career paths (Tschirhart, et al., 2008). The protean career attitude is driven by the individual's needs while striving toward work success (Hall, 2002). The wish for a boundaryless career is routed in high flexibility and mobility; frequent changes of employers are regarded as opportunities to advance faster while gaining more experience (Arthur & Rousseau, 1994). Given the fact that more and more people who pursue or hold a degree in business or management strive to work for nonprofit organizations (Burmester, 2005; Rawls, Ullrich, & Nelson, 1975), this dichotomy, however, falls short on several regards. Putting people in conceptual boxes named 'nonprofit' or 'for-profit' does not account for the diversity existing in both sectors. In the past, there was a clear cut between nonprofit and for-profit organizations, which is increasingly diluting due to the tendency toward mixed industries. In mixed industries, nonprofit organizations compete with other public or for-profit organizations in the provision of services (Young & Steinberg, 1995). Thus, their services are comparable; differences however might exist in payment levels, organizational culture, and the concrete organizational mission.

Previous studies of sector and job choice are predominantly quantitative in nature. They focused either on: specific groups, e.g. MBA and MPA students, without considering undergraduate education or programs explicitly focused toward employment in the nonprofit sector (e.g. social work, nonprofit management) (Tschirhart, et al., 2008); people who already had joined the

workforce; or specific attributes of personality (e.g. work motivation) (Lee & Wilkins, 2011). This research explicitly builds on Ifflaender and Kletzing's (2002) holistic approach. While incorporating both undergraduate and graduate students, the objective is to develop one instrument that reliably measures both business management and social work students' life concepts. While drawing on Ifflaender and Kletzing's initial survey, this project considers the person as a whole, his/her professional career attitudes as well as private and family aspects.

Methods

Participants

A sample of convenience (N=200) of students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate degrees in social work and business management at a German university in the northern part of the country comprised the development sample of the scale. Data were collected in a classroom setting using a paper-and-pencil survey. Students ranged from 19 to 43 in age ($M=24.62$, $SD=4.24$, 7 missing values) with 68% females and 32% males. 58% were enrolled in social work programs and 42% in business management programs¹.

The sample is comparable to similar samples. More female students are enrolled in social work compared to business management programs ($t(198) = -4.53$, $p < 0.0001$). Students enrolled in social work programs tend to be older than students in business management programs ($t(191) = -3.56$, $p = 0.0005$).

Procedure

Scale development: Items were generated in a manner intended to cover aspects of a person's professional, family and leisure life. Nineteen of the 40 initial items were taken from Iffländer and Kletzing's (2002) survey on female university students, additionally 7 of their items were adapted to the specific context of the survey with 14 items additionally generated by the author and a student research assistant, who helped in administering the survey. Two native German speakers checked items for wording and grammar independently.

Item analysis: Three items were worded in opposite direction and have been re-valenced before any analysis was done. Item analysis suggested the deletion of 10 items that produced negative item-total correlations. Those items have been removed stepwise from the scale starting

¹ For ease of reading we refer to social work programs and business management programs only. Social work programs include undergraduate students in social work as well as graduate students in nonprofit management and health care management. Business management programs refer to both international business management as well as business management and include both undergraduate as well as graduate level degrees.

with the highest negative values (Dawis, 1987; Goldstein & Hersen, 1984; DeVellis, 2003). Internal consistency analysis was rerun after every deletion and improved significantly (40 items: $\alpha = .60$, 30 items: $\alpha = .75$). Deleted items were not intentionally worded negatively. It is assumed that negative item total correlations occurred due to ambiguous wording (e.g. “Having time to do other things besides my job and my family is important for me”).

Missing data: Missing values were imputed using multiple imputation (Rubin, 1987).

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA): Consistent with the empirical findings by Snook and Gorsuch (1989) for smaller variable sets, we applied common factor analysis with squared multiple correlations as initial communality estimates for three to five factor models rotated according to varimax, equamax, and promax criteria. Each model was evaluated for its ability to produce dimensions that a) satisfy the minimum constraints for Cattell's scree test (Cattell, 1966), Velicer's minimum-average partialing test (MAP; Velicer, 1976), and parallel factoring of normal random variables (Buja & Eyuboglu, 1992) on the basis of 100 replications²; b) retain at least three items with salient loadings, where loadings $\geq .40$ are considered salient; c) yield high internal consistency ($\alpha \geq .70$); d) remain invariant across models; e) produce the highest hyperplane count (Yates, 1987; Gorsuch, 1983), and f) make theoretical sense in terms of parsimonious coverage (mutually exclusive assignment of items to factors, maximum numbers of items retained) (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999). Furthermore, factor correlations will be explored as well as the proportion of their specific, common and error variance.

Findings

Parallel analysis tends to overestimate the factors to retain (9 in this case), therefore this study started to retain 5 factors, as suggested by MAP. Iterative factor solutions were, hence, tested for one to five factors and assessed against the stated criteria. The three-factor promax ($k = 2$) model was found superior and to satisfy all criteria, whereas the four-factor model produced unreliable factor scores with too few salient markers. Saliency was found for 20 of the 30 items.

Table 1 lists the final factor solution, component items, factor loadings, and communalities. Following ascending factor loadings, the factors were named Orientation toward Professional Life (9 items, e.g. “Professional development is important for me”), Family Orientation (7 items, e.g. “I am

² Both MAP and parallel analysis are less well known compared to the scree test or the eigenvalue-greater-than-one rule, but are statistically based rather than rules of thumb (e.g. Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999; O'Connor, 2000).

a family-oriented person”), and Future Life Orientation (4 items, e.g. “Having a concrete concept of my future life is important for me”).

Table 1. Life Concept Scale

Variable	Labels	Factor Loadings ^a		Communalities ^b
		Equamax	Promax	
Factor 1: Family orientation ($\alpha = .80$)				
v0204	I am a family-oriented person.	.77	.77	.61
v0213	I can imagine not starting a family (RV ^c).	.67	.66	.50
v0226	Having children is part of my future life plan.	.67	.66	.52
v0231	My own family will be important to me.	.64	.64	.43
v0227	My family of origin will always be important to me.	.55	.56	.31
v0208	I aim for a life-long relationship.	.55	.54	.36
v0211	If possible, I want to live close to my parents.	.43	.42	.20
v0220	If my parents needed my help, I would defer everything else.	.	.40	.18
v0235	If I had children in the future, I would be sharing their upbringing and education with my partner.	.	.40	.16
Factor 2: Orientation toward professional life ($\alpha = .75$)				
v0203	Professional development is important for me.	.60	.61	.38
v0212	For success in my job, I am willing to contribute more than others.	.61	.61	.41
v0234	To develop professionally, I am willing to invest a lot of time.	.60	.58	.45
v0222	I would give up personal, job-unrelated interests in favor of my professional life.	.51	.50	.29
v0214	A life-long career without interruption is what I aim for.	.50	.48	.30
v0209	I am career-oriented.	.46	.46	.22
v0238	Doing overtime is a natural part of the job for me.	.44	.45	.19
Factor 3: Future life orientation ($\alpha=.76$)				
v0223	My ideas of the future are rather imprecise. (RV ^c)	.79	.81	.63
v0229	Having a concrete concept of my future life is important for me.	.70	.69	.54
v0233	I know what I want to do with my life.	.60	.59	.41
v0216	I know with certainty what kind of work I want to do after graduation.	.51	.52	.28

Note: N=200.

a. Factor loadings are promaxian pattern loadings at k=2 where hyperplane count is optimized, where an equamax structure matrix served as the initial orthogonal solution. Loadings <.4 are omitted for convenient presentation. Factor loadings were rounded to two decimals.

b. Final communality estimates reflect the proportion of the item variance explained by the common factors. Total communality for the factor solution = 8.04. Communalities were rounded to two decimals.

c. RV = reverse scored.

Table 2 displays the correlations between the factors as well as their respective proportions of common, specific, and error variance. The family and professional orientation dimensions show

low negative correlations with future life orientations, whereas family life and professional orientation are positively correlated. More than one third of the overall variance is both specific and reliable, supporting the unique interpretation of each dimension.

Table 2. Correlations between Common Factor Scores and Proportion of Variance

	Correlations between Common Factor Scores		Proportion of Variance		
	II.	III.	Common ^a	Specific ^b	Error
I. Family Life	.21	-.24	.32	.48	.20
II. Professional Life		-.23	.38	.37	.25
III. Future Life			.46	.30	.24
Average			.30	.38	.23

Note: Values are rounded to two decimals.

a. Common reflects the total proportion of common variance conveyed by a dimension.

b. Specific variance indicates the proportion of variance, which is both reliable and unique to a particular dimension. Specific variance is calculated by subtracting communality for a dimension from its alpha coefficient. Specific variance values that exceed error variance (where error variance = 1 - coefficient alpha) are considered significant and are italicized.

Discussion and Conclusion

The nonprofit sector becomes increasingly diverse; people holding a variety of professions decide to take on jobs in social services and health care. Past research focuses foremost on motivational aspects that distinguish the typical nonprofit employee from the typical person working in for-profit firms. However, those approaches seem not to accurately reflect people’s rationale for choosing one employment sector over the other.

It was the goal of this project to develop a measure that has a more holistic approach; the instrument was designed to describe individual life concepts. Life concepts are defined as the expectations, wishes, and fantasies about the content and role of one's professional, family, and private life (Ifflaender & Kletzing, 2002). Therefore, an initial scale was developed containing 40 items addressing dimensions of professional, family and private life/leisure time. The final scale contains 20 items and reliably measures three distinct dimensions of a person’s life: Family Orientation, Orientation toward Professional Life, and Future Life Orientation.

This research is, however, not without limitations. First, almost all items intended to measure people’s attitude toward their leisure time were either deleted during item analysis or during exploratory factor analysis. Future research might investigate already existing items that pertain to this area. Second, students in this sample were diverse in terms of future sector choice. About one-third decided to pursue work in the nonprofit sector, where as 42% aimed toward employment in

the for-profit sector. The rest of the sample wanted to work in the public sector (11%) or was undecided (14%). Therefore, it might be recommendable for future research to study a more homogenous sample. Third, the development sample was a sample of convenience consisting of students enrolled in social work and business management programs at a German university. Future research might consider validating the scale on students of different programs or internationally. Finally, the sample size was relatively small (N=200). It was therefore not possible to establish generality for the Life Concept Scale, as a minimum of 100 subjects are needed for EFA (Gorsuch, 1983). Future research should therefore 1) establish generality for sub-groups (e.g. gender, age range, study program) and 2) confirm the factor structure using oblique item clustering and confirmatory structural equation modeling with a different and sufficiently larger sample.

Nevertheless, the Life Concept Scale developed and presented in this paper adds valuable knowledge aspects besides extrinsic or intrinsic motivation to the research of sector choice among students. After generality of the scale has been assessed and after the factor structure was confirmed, future research might investigate the following research questions: To what extent do life concepts of business and social work students differ? Is there a relationship between life concepts and sector choice?

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