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## Understanding The Relationship Between Commitment Anxiety And Career Tension

J. Tyler Finklea and Debra S. Osborn

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**Abstract**

Many college students experience a degree of anxiety and indecision related to choosing a major or career path. This study examined the relationship between commitment anxiety as defined by Cognitive Information Processing theory and career tension in 101 undergraduate college students enrolled in a career planning class. Pearson Product-Moment Correlations found a significant positive relationship and medium effect size between a student's commitment anxiety and career tension levels. The results suggest commitment anxiety and career tension are distinct but related constructs and that career practitioners can help clients by reducing and managing these emotional concerns that often accompany career concerns.

*Keywords:* Career Thoughts Inventory, cognitive information processing theory, commitment anxiety, career tension, college students

## **Understanding Relationships Among Commitment Anxiety and Career Tension**

### **Introduction**

The number of college students undecided about their educational and vocational futures has been estimated between 20 and 50% (McAuliffe, 2008). Leonard (2006) indicated that as many as 80% of entering college students indicated uncertainty about a preferred major, even if they had decided on a path to pursue, and 50% changed their major at least once. The most recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2012) supports this estimate, with 465,000 or 76.8% of students under the age of 25 being undecided about their major. Uncertainty about a college major can lead to an increased costs for the student, as changing majors can add to length of time in school (Ronan, 2005). In addition, only 50% of students starting a four year program will earn a degree within five years, with that number increasing to only 60% by year six (NCES; 2015). The impact of not earning a college degree in a timely manner has financial implications as well: federal student loan borrowers leaving school prior to earning a degree struggled more with repayment of loans, with 33% becoming delinquent without default and 26% defaulting compared with college graduates at 21% and 16% respectively (Cunningham & Kienzl, 2011). Additionally, among the issues of rising tuition, tremendous student loan debt and overbearing parents (all reported as concerns of college students), student satisfaction with choice of major was the most important concern noted in a study by Smith and Fleming (2006). Further, students with declared academic majors and career goals persist in school, graduate at higher levels than their undecided peers (Chen, 2005, Leppel, 2001; Willcoxin & Wynder, 2010), and have more “stopouts” for four months or longer (versus “stay outs”) as compared to other majors (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Cognitive information processing theory (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson & Lenz, 2004) posits that internal factors such as commitment anxiety and career tension can also increase the difficulty of a student's career problem-solving process and warrant the attention of career practitioners. Fouad et al. (2006) found that among 694 students, those who indicated needing to make a career decision had significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression when compared to a normative sample population. In addition, those who reported having difficulty making that decision indicated that negative thinking was the greatest difficulty. In the sections that follow, outcome research on commitment anxiety and career tension will be examined as related to career decision making. This will be followed by a critical analysis of existing findings and a rationale for the current study.

### **Commitment Anxiety**

Commitment anxiety (CA), identified as a component of dysfunctional career thinking, is characterized as one's inability to commit to a specific career choice, accompanied by the presence of generalized anxiety about the implications of making a career decision (Thrift, Ulloa-Heath, Reardon, & Peterson, 2012; Sampson et al., 2004). Further, this anxiety may perpetuate the state of career indecision and can result in a repetitive cycle of an awareness of the need to commit to a career choice, failing to commit to the "best" choice, and increasing anxiety or emotional stress as the individual returns to an awareness that the problem has not been solved (Sampson et al., 2004). In fact, multiple studies (e.g., Braunstein-Bercovitz, Benjamin, Asor, & Lev, 2012; Nauta, 2012; Thrift et al., 2012) have demonstrated significant relationships between commitment anxiety and anxiety.

CA has been significantly correlated with many variables such as career indecision, personality traits, and negative career thoughts. Specifically, higher CA levels have been

significantly correlated with lower vocational identity, higher needs for occupational information, and more barriers to choosing an occupation (Sampson, et. al., 1996b). In the same study, other significant inverse correlations were found among CA and certainty, career indecision, comfort, decidedness, decisiveness, and self-clarity. CA has also been positively correlated with a number of career decision-making difficulties (Kleiman et al., 2004), including general indecisiveness, lack of information about stages of the career decision-making process, lack of information about self, lack of information about occupations, inconsistent information, and overall career decision-making difficulties. Career choice anxiety has also been negatively correlated with academic major satisfaction and career decision self-efficacy, and positively correlated with generalized indecisiveness among 244 university students (Nauta, 2007). In the next section, we review empirical research on a related topic, career tension.

### **Career Tension**

Career tension has been defined by Reed (2005) as pressure to make a career decision, most recently defined by Bullock-Yowell et al. (2011) as “the emotions experienced when being called on to make a career decision” (p. 303). A similar construct, “career stress,” has been shown to mediate career maturity, especially when caused by ambiguity related to one’s career plans (Park, Choi, Nam & Lee, 2011). When anxiety or tension morphs into a fixed, pervasive mindset, career tension becomes nearly impossible to move past (Heslin & Keating, 2016). For the purposes of the current study, career tension was defined as the mental, emotional, or nervous strain experienced when being called on to make a career decision and the resultant physical and emotional symptoms.

In a study of 232 college students enrolled in ten sections of a career planning class, Career tension was positively correlated with commitment anxiety, neuroticism, decision making

confusion, and external conflict. (Bullock-Yowell, et al., 2011). Bertoch et al. (2014) also found career tension to be positively related to overall dysfunctional career thoughts, decision making confusion, commitment anxiety, external conflict, and goal instability in 258 college students. These correlations suggest that career tension may fit into the context of the Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) theory, which espouses that career decision making is affected by cognitive and emotional processes (Sampson et al., 2004). More specifically, the theory highlights mental health concerns, such as experiencing anxiety, that can develop “as we think through our career problems and make decisions, our emotions can help motivate us to choose and follow through or cause us to act too slowly, too quickly, or too randomly to make an appropriate choice,” (Sampson et al., 2004, p. 3). An implication of the study by Bullock-Yowell, et al. (2011) is that high levels of career tension that can lead to somatic symptoms, such as feeling fidgety or nervous when trying to make a career decision, and that this correlation needs to be examined as distressing emotions and dysfunctional career thoughts at the beginning of the counseling relationship to facilitate forward progress in the career decision making process.

### **Rationale for the Study**

In the previous sections, we described research that demonstrated how specific variables of commitment anxiety and career tension impact the career decision making process of college students. This present, ex post facto study aimed to examine how these constructs interact within a population of undergraduate students. Thus, the research question guiding this study was, Are there significant correlations among the variables of commitment anxiety and career tension as measured by the CTI (Sampson et al., 1996a) and the CTS (Reed, 2005), respectively? The

working hypothesis was that individuals with elevated levels of career tension would have accompanying commitment anxiety scores.

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to examine relationships among commitment anxiety and career tension. Ex post facto data were used for this study. Institutional research board approval was given for this study.

#### **Participants/sample**

Participants included 101 students enrolled in five sections of an undergraduate career course during one semester at a large, public, research university in the Southeastern United States in 2012-2013. A power analysis using G\*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) with power set at .85, and error at .05, revealed a sufficient sample size to be  $n = 77$ . Thus, our sample size was sufficient to run the analyses. Students enrolled in this course as an elective and ranged in class level from freshmen through seniors, representing a broad range of academic majors. Demographics about the sample and the representative population can be found in Table 1 (“Forbes - [REDACTED],” 2013). The study sample appeared to be generally representative of the study’s university population as far as mean age and gender. In considering ethnic breakdown, the White or Caucasian population was statistically very similar to the university as is the Asian population. However, the study sample had nearly three times the number of Black/African American identified participants, and an underrepresented Hispanic/Latino university population as well. Statistics representing the breakdown of the university population by year in college were not available, so it is unknown whether the study’s sample is representative in this regard.

#### **Instruments**

Students completed a demographic information form to provide information about the composition of the study's sample through gathering relevant personal characteristics.

Additionally, the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI) and the Career Tension Scale (CTS) were administered at the same time to participants as part of the course to measure negative career thinking and career tension.

**Demographic information form.** Students completed a demographic information form consisting of 15 questions that collected specific information on college major, age, year in school, gender, ethnic group, involvement with on-campus groups, and career choice. A sample of questions included on the form include: "Outline your previous employment or work experience" and "Major (print major or 'undecided')."

**Career Thoughts Inventory.** The Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson et al., 1996a), was used to measure commitment anxiety. The overall inventory is a 48 item assessment designed to measure negative career thoughts that may impede career decision making. The CTI is scored based on responses on a 4 point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree = 0, Disagree = 1, Agree = 2, Strongly Agree = 3. In the present study, we specifically focused on the subscale, Commitment Anxiety, with possible scores ranging from zero to 30. A sample statement of the Commitment Anxiety scale is "I'm afraid if I try out my chosen occupation, I won't be successful," (Sampson et al., 1996a). Dieringer (2013) found an alpha coefficient of .882 ( $n = 154$ ), and significant correlations between CA and depression, and CA and hopelessness among college students. Internal consistency for the CA scale reported as .88 (Sampson et al., 1996b), with similar alpha coefficients reported by Reed (2005) at .85 and Chason (2011), at .87.

**Career Tension Scale.** The Career Tension Scale (CTS; Reed, 2005) was used to obtain a measure of the mental, emotional, or nervous strain experienced when making a career decision



and resultant physical and emotional symptoms of the participants. Bertoch et al. (2014) found that “the higher one’s CTS score, the greater the degree of stress or tension experienced in making a career decision,” (p. 39). The CTS is a scale modified in a study by Reed (2005) from the Job Tension Scale developed by House and Rizzo (1972). In a study involving career decisions of 232 undergraduate students (Reed, 2005), participants self-rated the seven items on a seven point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree) with scores ranging from 7 to 46 out of a possible 49 points (mean score of 21.4 with a standard deviation of 8.8). In explaining this score, Reed stated that most students appeared to be choosing neutral to disagree options on career tension options. Examples of statements included in the CTS include, “I have felt fidgety or nervous as a result of having to make career decisions” and “Decisions about my career tend to directly affect my health” (Reed, 2005). Two previous studies using the same sample did not include extensive reliability or validity information of the CTS but found an internal consistency of .81 (Bullock-Yowell, et al., 2011; Reed, 2005). Additionally, a Cronbach’s alpha of .75 was calculated for the CTS (Reed, 2005) which can be considered acceptable based on the guidelines suggested by George and Mallery (2003): “ $\alpha > .9$  - Excellent,  $\alpha > .8$  - Good,  $\alpha > .7$  - Acceptable,  $\alpha > .6$  - Questionable,  $\alpha > .5$  - Poor, and  $\alpha < .5$  - Unacceptable” (p. 231). Additionally, very little validity and reliability have been established in the research using the CTS and in the development of the CTS: however, a participant alpha level of .81 was reported for the variable of career tension in two studies utilizing the same sample (Bullock-Yowell, et al., 2011; Reed, 2005), and an alpha coefficient of .82 in a third (Bertoch et al., 2014) are considered strong internal consistency values.

## **Procedures**

On the first day of several sections of an undergraduate career planning class, students were asked to complete a demographics form, then given the option of completing a folder of the other assessments. The order of assessments was randomized to prevent order effects. Participants were offered five points extra credit (less than 1-2% of total possible points) added to their final course grade. For the purposes of this study, data were collected on the following scores: Commitment Anxiety subscale of the Career Thoughts Inventory (Sampson et al., 1996a), and the overall score from the Career Tension Scale (Reed, 2005).

### **Data Analysis and Results**

The data were first examined for any outliers and non-normality, and then analyzed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients to investigate the relationships among commitment anxiety and career tension. Commitment anxiety mean score for the present study was 13.52 (SD = 5.78), which is near the median score (13) reported in the CTI manual (Sampson et al., 1996b) for CA for college students. A reliability alpha of .81 for the Career Tension Scale was found, with a mean of 22.6 (SD = 7.92), similar to the scores reported by Reed (2005). Thus, students in this sample scored similarly on the CTI CA subscale and the CTS as compared to those in the norming sample on commitment anxiety, and suggesting that they were experiencing average amounts of career anxiety and career tension.

The working hypothesis was that individuals with elevated levels of career tension would have accompanying commitment anxiety scores. The correlation between commitment anxiety and career tension was significant ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ), and thus, the working hypothesis was supported by these results as a significant relationship was found between commitment anxiety and career tension. According to Cohen (1992), this constitutes a medium effect size.

### **Discussion**

This study sought to investigate the relationships among commitment anxiety and career tension among students enrolled in an undergraduate career planning course. The results of the correlational analysis show a connection between commitment anxiety and career tension, suggesting that individuals with high levels of commitment anxiety may also have high levels of career tension. The medium effect size echoes those found in other studies that such as that of Bullock-Yowell et al. (2011), which demonstrated a .28 correlation between the constructs of commitment anxiety and career tension, and Bertoch et al. (2014), who found a .39 correlation between those constructs. The sample in current study enhances our confidence in exploring these two constructs for students in career planning classes, as our study had more equal representation across year in school and nearly equal gender representation. Taking those two studies and the current study into consideration, it is apparent that a significant relationship between career tension and commitment anxiety exists, and that the scales are measuring slightly different constructs. Cognitive Information Processing Theory (CIP; Sampson et al., 2004) offers some conceptualization for this phenomenon, in that emotional concerns, such as anxiety, can develop “as we think through our career problems and make decisions, our emotions can help motivate us to choose and follow through or cause us to act too slowly, too quickly, or too randomly to make an appropriate choice,” (Sampson et al., 2004, p. 3). CIP theory suggests that career decision making is affected by not just cognitive but emotional processes as well, and describes commitment anxiety as a type of dysfunctional career thinking (Sampson et al., 2004).

Studies (Kleiman et al., 2004; Sampson et al., 1996b) have shown the relationship between commitment anxiety and career indecision. Career tension was defined in this study as the mental, emotional, or nervous strain experienced when being called on to make a career decision and the resultant physical and emotional symptoms, and represents a type of anxiety

that can become fixed and pervasive, as described by Heslin and Keating, 2016), which is persistent and difficult to move beyond. Career tension has been previously correlated to dysfunctional career thoughts, goal instability, and commitment anxiety (Bertoch et al., 2014). Both commitment anxiety and career tension have been previously correlated with career decision-making difficulties (Kleiman, 2004; Sampson 1996b). Taken together, it appears that career tension and commitment anxiety are related but measure two distinct constructs. In looking at the items on the CA scale, most focus on finding the best or perfect choice, whereas CTS items focus on the physical experience such as staying awake at night, feeling nervous, or fidgety.

The results of this study provide career professionals with a more concrete understanding when helping individuals who are trying to choose a college major or career who are showing high levels of commitment anxiety or career tension. Specifically, if a client shows elevated CA scores, a practitioner should also ask about emotional feelings of stress and nervousness, as well as physical experiences of sleeplessness, general health, and so on. If a client begins by presenting with symptoms of career tension, a career practitioners might explore for negative career thoughts associated with choosing “the best” or the “one” career, and might also consider administering the Career Thoughts Inventory (Sampson et al., 1996a) to determine the degree of negative thinking, and consider using cognitive restructuring techniques to challenge and alter the specific dysfunctional thoughts, perhaps through the use of the CTI Workbook (Sampson et al., 1996c). In cases with extremely high scores, mental health counseling or cognitive behavioral therapy techniques might be recommended (Zunker, 2008). A career practitioner should ensure that the client is able to manage these negative career thoughts prior to beginning the career exploration process (Bullock et al., 2011).

This study was conducted at one university in the southeast on a diverse group of undergraduate students enrolled in a career planning class, and thus generalizability may be limited to similar populations. Future research should extend the study to client populations. The Career Tension Scale, while a reliable instrument, has undergone many modifications throughout studies and has minimal reliability and validity evidence. However, a strong internal consistency was found in the present study. Further validation studies are needed on the CTS to enable researchers to better understand the construct it is measuring. In addition, future research should explore interventions for addressing commitment anxiety and career tension, to determine which interventions might effectively decrease both, and what types of interventions might be targeted to address the unique characteristics of these two constructs. In addition, studies should examine how interventions on commitment anxiety and career tension in turn affect career decision-making problems and outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

The current study sought to examine relationships between commitment anxiety and career tension, a relationship that was confirmed through the results. The results provide additional support to initial findings from other studies for the discussion of commitment anxiety and career tension in working with undergraduates making a career decision. Knowledge of this relationship may also assist career professionals in their work with individuals who are having difficulty making career decisions.

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Table 1

*Demographic information for total sample (n = 101) as size and percentage*

Characteristic	Study Sample		University Population
	Total Sample (n = 101)	Percentage	Percentage
Mean Age	20.35	100%	21.1
Gender			
Male	50	49.5%	45%
Female	50	49.5%	55%
Did not respond	1	1%	
Ethnicity			
White	66	65.3%	67.6%
Black/African American	26	25.7%	9.4%
Hispanic/Latino	4	4%	14.9%
Other/Prefer not to Respond	3	3%	8.1%
Asian	2	2%	2.8%
Year in college			
Freshman	20	19.8%	
Sophomore	26	25.7%	
Junior	18	17.8%	
Senior	37	36.6%	

*Note.* Information about the university population was gathered from “Forbes: [REDACTED] y,” (2013).