I, Jessica Bloomer, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Educational Studies.

It is entitled:
A Narrative Reflection of an Undergraduate Student's Career Exploration and Decision-Making Process throughout College

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Abstract

This study addresses a need in the literature for a more complex and individual understanding of college student career exploration and decision-making (Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Zikic & Hall, 2009). After a literature review; self-concept, motivation, and self-efficacy were found to be linked to positive career exploratory behavior (Bandura, 1977; Powell, 2009; Shin & Kelly, 2013). Career exploration is beneficial to students and can increase mental health, sense of belongingness, satisfaction with major, and persistence in college (Bubic, 2014; Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2012).

An undergraduate student’s personal narrative and two follow-up interviews on experience with career exploration in college were conducted to demonstrate how a student can develop self-concept and reflect on experiences in order to make meaningful career decisions. Four superordinate themes were identified through analysis of the narrative and interviews: social influences in education, environmental effect on decision-making, development of self-concept through experience, and making meaning of experience and decisions.

Many factors were found to be influential of the student’s decision-making process. These factors are explored in the findings and further research needs on the subject are presented. Inclusion of self-concept and past experience were found to be important for making meaningful decisions as well as aligning identity with social and environmental interactions to produce meaningful behavior.
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Introduction

Choosing a major and future career path is one of the most difficult decisions for college students, often causing anxiety and stress (Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, & Schedin, 2014; Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007). There are many factors that affect students’ decision-making and yet the complexities of individual motives for making choices are relatively unexplored in the literature (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). In order to gain access to the complexities of college student career exploration, individual experiences need to be incorporated into the existing body of research (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007; Kraus & Hughey, 1999; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Zikic & Hall, 2009). A need to explore undergraduate experiences guided the structure of this study. A framework was formed through a literature review of characteristics that have been shown to assist in college career exploration and decision-making. The framework assists in identifying key concepts in student career development and demonstrates how individual student experiences can be incorporated. The structure presented in chapter two will allow future students to examine their personal experience and learn how to make connections to career exploration and chose a path that is right for them. The incorporation of personal experience is necessary because self-concept and identity (both individual characteristics) are essential to career development (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011).

There are multiple variables that influence how well students make decisions, how confident they are in their decisions, and the positive and negative results of good or bad decision-making. Identity is an essential piece that allows for individuals to connect with their social environment and engage in meaningful actions and behaviors (Burke, 2007). Identity and self-concept are both distinguishing factors in career development theories that help individuals construct meaning about their career choices (Burke, 1991; Burke, 2007; Burke & Reitzes, 1991;
Savickas, 2002; Swanson & Fouad, 2014). Having high self-concept can increase self-efficacy and motivation, which both influence autonomy in exploration of career options and decision-making (Powell, 2009; Shin & Kelly, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Engaging in exploratory behavior informs choices that students make about their careers (Dietrich, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Kracke, 2013). The motives behind students’ choices should be further explored as they can have positive and negative impacts, which will be detailed in the next chapter. These variables may all influence a student’s personal experience but they may not all be included in every experience. There may be different combinations for some or variables that weigh more heavily on some students’ decisions than others. Making generalizations such as, which decision-making tools are weighed more heavily among college students, should be explored in further research studies. The framework is intended to present the characteristics of career exploration and decision-making found in the literature and use them as a guide to detail how individual student experience and meaning-making can be influenced by larger concepts.

Another issue in the literature is a lack of institutional support that incorporates a more holistic approach to help students make connections through their own experiences (Thompson & Feldman, 2010). Ideally the exploration of a student’s individual experience will help address both problems by learning about the complexities of student career exploration, demonstrating how to connect the individual experience to the theoretical framework, and how to assist students through this process in the future by using this study as an example. More research will be needed on how to incorporate this approach on a larger scale in terms of developing programs for all students and universities. However, the first step needs to be taken by including more personal experiences in the literature, through qualitative research studies, to detail undergraduate student decision-making experiences on an individual level.
The purpose of this study is to detail how a student can make meaning of personal experiences and connect it to career decision-making processes in college. Exploring an individual college student’s experience will allow for a deeper understanding of how a student can make meaning of personal experiences and how to use that meaning to encourage deeper career exploration and decision-making self-efficacy. This exploration aims to uncover complex influences on the career decision-making process, demonstrate how a student can reflect on the meaning of prior experiences to make college and career decisions, and use the complexities to produce ideas for how colleges can better assist students during this difficult process.
Chapter 1: Background Theories

This chapter is intended to provide an in-depth presentation of the background literature on the topic of college student career exploration, decision-making, and development. Career development literature includes theories on career as well as connections to motivation, self-efficacy, identity, and self-concept; all of which are important to include in the framework and literature review.

Career Development Foundations

A brief overview of some founding career development theories is necessary to understand the influences that led to identity control theory (ICT), the primary theory informing this study. An understanding of the history and theories is needed first to make the connections to the framework. The following theories presented in this chapter are Donald Super’s career development theory because it provides the historical perspective of the shift to viewing career as a process rather than as a singular event (Super, 1980; Swanson & Fouad, 2014). Career construction theory (CCT) is also included as a foundational theory in this chapter because it uses identity and self-concept as essential elements of career development (Savickas, 2002). Both theories were imperative in the emergence of career development and both informed ICT.

Career development theories shifted in perspective with the development of Super’s theory which was the original and most influential theory that viewed career as a process not a singular event (Swanson & Fouad, 2014). Super’s theory was introduced in 1953 and according to Swanson and Fouad (2014); “one of the hallmarks of Super’s theory is that vocational development is a process of making several decisions, which culminate in vocational choices that represent an implementation of the self-concept” (p. 179). The significance of focusing on developing self-concept acknowledges that individual differences are necessary to consider in relation to career development.
According to Super (1980), individuals have multiple roles, or life spaces, that vary during their life span. These life spaces play an essential part in how an individual develops during the current stage they are in. The life span stages are composed in five cycles including; Growth (ages 4-13), Exploration (ages 14-24), Establishment (ages 25-44), Maintenance (ages 45-65), and Disengagement (over age 65) (Swanson & Fouad, 2014). The stages represent where an individual is in the process of their career development starting at a young age and following them throughout their family, personal, and professional life. In this study’s context, the individual is in the exploration stage, which is typically the age range of 14-24 and the overlapping roles or life spaces might be those of student, child, leisurite, and citizen (Super, 1980; Swanson & Fouad, 2014). An individual in the exploration phase who is figuring out career options may also be trying to balance multiple life space roles at once. For example a person exploring careers might also have student obligations in college, be concerned about parents’ expectations, tying to maintain hobbies and a social life, and figuring out political and social views. These are just examples of potential life space influences that will change depending on the individual but regardless of what roles one is balancing, all will likely have an influence on how they explore career options.

Super’s life span, life space approach is represented in his life-career rainbow which is intended to show the different stages of life and how the combination of roles vary; it is used as a counseling tool to analyze careers and determine appropriate development plans (Super, 1980). The importance of this theory in relation to college student development is that, as Swanson and Fouad (2014) suggest, when discussing career plans, counselors need to include a person’s subjective view of themselves and what work means to their life as a whole. Swanson and Fouad (2014) also suggest using a contextual view of career exploration to help “broaden our
understanding of the ways in which exploratory behavior influences life roles and decisions” (p.183). These suggestions further influence the push towards understanding individuals in their context and how to use that understanding to equip people with tools to apply their self-concept to career planning and decision-making activities.

After Super (1980) suggested that self-concept is important for individuals to understand how they view themselves in relation to their careers, Savickas (2002) developed career construction theory (CCT) with self-concept as one of the key ingredients. Self-concept is described as the overall view of the self that includes different identities, which are individualized based on personal schemas of experience (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011). The individual identities are developed through schemas of experience or the different roles in one’s life, such as a person’s role as a worker and how a career identity is developed through that experience (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011). Student identity will be addressed in this study in order to explore how an individual develops a vocational identity based on personal schemas of experience, as well as the role of overall self-concept in exploration and decision-making.

Schema of experience is important for the construction piece of CCT, meaning students can construct their vocational identity through examining past memories, experiences, aspirations, and social interactions to form a ‘life theme’ that identifies patterns of a person’s work life (Savickas, 2004). An important idea stressed in CCT is that vocational behavior and identity is reflected upon and constructed by an individual and does not rely on objective vocational behavior in itself (Savickas, 2002). Like Super, Savickas incorporated life roles into CCT because people can construct their careers by reflecting on their important roles and the degree to which their work role defines personality and takes up space in life (Savickas, 2002). Constructing meaning of experiences and roles is incorporated in this study as an essential part in
understanding college students’ personal experiences and how they make meaning of their career path.

Savickas’s (2002) development of CCT included vocational identity and shifted towards a more subjective view of career development. CCT focused on reflecting on one’s own vocational experiences that shape identity, the meaning of those events, and “it tells one’s ‘own story,’ usually by emphasizing a sense of purpose that coherently explains the continuity and change in oneself across time,” (Savickas, 2002, p. 152). Vondracek and Porfeli (2011) discussed the importance of environment on one’s experience when explaining Savickas’s shift towards a developmental-contextual perspective. This perspective means that people are shaped by the environment that they are in while also making meaning of said environment (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011). The phenomenon of how college students make meaning of environment and experience needs to be further explored and is addressed in this study. This perspective could be moving forward with what Pintrich (2003) suggested in regards to motivation; that context and the individual should both be considered to create a comprehensive theory rather than polarizing the two and suggesting contextual influences are more important than individual or visa-versa.

*Identity Control Theory*

Super and Savickas both incorporated some form of identity and self-concept in their theories; for identity control theory (ICT), identity is the main component (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). ICT theorizes that people regulate and produce meaningful behavior based on their social interactions and personal identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). Identity is described by Burke and Reitzes (1991) as including social interactions and meaning-making that a person attributes to themselves in various roles, such as student, and these attributions influence how a person behaves. After people engage in behaviors that they feel are attributed to their identity, they
become committed, meaning they commit to their identity by maintaining behaviors and perceptions that contribute to their meaning of the self (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). Burke and Reitzes (1991) emphasize commitment in ICT because it results in individuals pursuing activities that they feel maintain and support their identities, which provides agency in their decision-making. Agency in decision-making should be essential for college student career decisions and will be explored in this study in relation to how career choices support identity.

As part of ICT, Burke (1991) also describes a feedback loop which explains the necessities to achieve identity congruence. The loop consists of four components that make up a cycle: the standard set of self-meaning the individual possesses (standard); environmental and social perceptions (input); a process of comparing the standard and input (comparator); how the person makes meaningful behavior in the environment after comparisons (output) (Burke, 1991). Burke (1991) states that the individual’s personal identity must match the environmental input in order to have identity congruence.

The primary focus of ICT is to understand individuals’ identities and how they relate to their behavior within a specific social structure where their identity is embedded (Burke, 2007). Essentially, individuals have an identity or a belief about who they are and because that identity is a part of the social environment they are in, it should match how they perceive themselves in that environment. The set meaning (standard) of a person is what Burke (2007) describes as multiple meanings that define a person’s identity in a social environment or role. For example, a college student might produce responses like attending class, choosing a major, being educated, etc., and these behaviors define what it means to be a student, then make up part of the student’s identity. The second component of the loop is the input, which Burke (2007) elaborates on as how people perceive meaning in a situation that interacts with their identity and most of these
perceptions are obtained through the feedback of others. The comparator component is the process where the standard identity is compared with the interactions and meaning that one makes in a given environment (Burke, 2007). The final component is the output of the comparison where action is decided. Burke (2007) describes this output process as discrepancies; if there is zero discrepancy then people will continue to behave how they were but if there is discrepancy then people have to change their behavior and meanings in the situation in order to correct the discrepancy. The loop essentially provides the process for how people verify and control their identities by engaging in situations that have relevant meanings consistent with their standard. For career related behaviors among college students, exploring their own standard identity could be essential in order to make meaning of situations (majors and career paths) that align with their identity.

The ICT loop is thought to provide a stable identity, help make meaning of experience, and indicates a further need for understanding an individual’s identity (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011). This means that students have personal identities that develop through various experiences and when they start interacting in a new environment (college) they will gain a new understanding of how others view them, how they perceive themselves in the environment, and will have to compare their identity with how they perceive their interaction in the new environment to ensure congruence. This congruence is important when considering major and career options because the career path selected may be a part of a student’s identity. Their career or major identity should then align with the perceptions of social influences in that environment, which in turn will produce meaningful behavior in that environment.
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Framework

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the structure of the framework that I developed after the literature review, as well as to make connections with each component of the framework to college student career exploration. Some of the concepts, such as motivation and self-efficacy, are broad and are relevant in many different subjects but for the purposes of this study, the connections are specific to college students and their career paths.

Figure 1: Visual Representation of Theoretical Framework. This figure provides a map of the key concepts found in the literature relating to college student career exploration.

The table presented above is a visual representation of the connections made through the literature review. Each component represents areas where research has been done on college student career development and how they could fit together. Developing self-concept and making meaning of experiences are important in career development but have been unexplored in the research from an individual perspective (Savickas, 2015; Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011; Zikic & Hall, 2009). This study addresses the importance of integrating personal experience and self-concept into career exploration research and gaining a better perspective on how a student might navigate this process.
Self-Concept and Identity

Self-concept and identity formation play a beginning role in the framework of understanding variables of career exploration. Erikson (1994) explored identity in adolescence thoroughly and identified issues that greatly impact, what he called, the identity crisis which is a difficult phase but necessary to experience. One issue identified by Erikson (1994) is the choice of career that is “both socially recognized and personally expressive,” (Waterman, 1982, p. 341). The idea of identity has been tested often to understand how it develops during the period of adolescence to adulthood, in this case, college students. Waterman (1982) elaborated on Erikson’s identity theories and found that college “clearly facilitates identity development in the area of vocational plans,” (p. 347). The relationship to identity development is key to understanding how college students explore career options and interests. Individuals view personal identity as unique to themselves (Hitlin, 2003) and therefore individual exploration of career options and decision-making is essential in better assisting students with the exploration process.

According to Savickas (2004) and career construction theory (CCT), the vocational identity of a person is an essential part of career construction because it is subjective and reflective about oneself. Unfortunately, most students are not prepared to make decisions and reflect on their own identity upon beginning college (Freedman, 2013). To help college students gain these skills, it is necessary to research the identity development and exploration process of students in regards to how they explore career options. Developing a positive sense of self is necessary in adapting to change and the ability to make decisions (Powell, 2009). Because college is a drastic change and time for exploration for many students (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007), researching how college students explore career options on an individual level could
demonstrate how their vocational identity was formed. Anderson and Mounts (2012) note that adolescents do not explore well based on the evidence that most graduates are not in careers that directly relate to their major and chose them based on obligation rather than satisfaction. This suggests that students may be unaware of career options that relate to their major and are working jobs after college for financial stability, not because of interest. However, college students are in an optimal phase to explore vocational identity because they are in the appropriate cognitive stage that allows for reflection about the self and future plans (Anderson & Mounts, 2012). Which is why it is imperative to focus on improving the exploration process to create better career/major congruence and happiness in the future.

Through college students’ experiences they develop a sense of self including their interests and goals (Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999). The connection to sense of self and career is described by Powell (2009) as;

The attributes of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence are interrelated and how they interact is important in one’s educational and career development. As a result of research studies the concept of self can be defined in terms of both stability of self and adaptability to a changing environment as individuals develop. (p. 39).

This reflects the ideas behind CCT and identity control theory (ICT) which discuss the importance of identity and self-concept awareness in order to find congruence in a different environment such as college. Understanding the development of a student’s self-concept in relation to their career exploration could lead to a holistic approach in assisting students with the decision-making process. Career counselors, academic advisors, and other university personnel could use self-concept and exploration to identify environmental and contextual factors that have impacted students that they may not have realized or thought to apply in terms of their career search. As Super (1980) suggested, using his life-career rainbow tool is influential in
understanding vocational choice and self-concept of individuals based on their roles. Decision-making is integrated in self-concept and helps explain how people make successful choices (Powell, 2009). Self-concept in decision-making stresses the importance of Super’s theory as explained by Swanson and Fouad (2014):

Individuals construct their careers in a continuing self-evaluation within their social context. Individuals begin to consider work roles that fit their self-concepts. Their self-concepts are shaped by feedback from the external world (e.g., parents, teachers, employers), and in turn, the evolving self-concept begins to be implemented in different work roles. (p. 182).

The self-concept explored in the context of Super’s career development theory is essential to understanding how, in this case, college students consider the importance of their roles, stage of life, environmental factors, and self-concept, when they explore career options.

Focusing on the individual student, rather than a collective group, is where qualitative analysis is necessary. Savickas (2015) discusses the paradigm shift in career development to a life design approach, or more individualistic view of career. The shift happened because people no longer stay in the same career for their entire adult life and Savickas (2015) suggests focusing on meaning-making through the self and in a social realm, interacting with others to construct their career path. A need for qualitative research and individual experiences is emphasized by Hitlin (2003) who studied the relationship between values and identity. Hitlin (2003) found that a group of students can have similar goals like graduating, but those goals vary because of an individual’s personal values and identity that make up one’s sense of self. Studies of career development scales such as the research done by Guerra and Braungart-Rieker (1999), have suggested that the exploration that occurs in identity formation is directly related to career decisions. There is an understanding that the exploration of identity and self-concept in college is
linked to vocational aspirations but a lack of deeper exploration of what students might experience when they are developing their self-concept in relation to their career goals.

**Motivation and Self-Efficacy**

Self-concept is at the top of the illustrated framework because it can influence career decisions but also helps develop motivation and self-efficacy, both of which facilitate better exploration and decision-making (Bandura, 1977; Hitlin, 2003; Shin & Kelly, 2013). The concept of self-efficacy was developed by Bandura (1977) to explain how mastery and performances of an individual effect cognitive changes and motivations. Bandura (1977) explains self-efficacy as the degree to which people believe they will be successful on a certain task or goal. Efficacy beliefs influence persistence, motivation, and behavior regarding a particular task or set of goals (Bandura, 1982). In this case, those tasks and goals are related to what kind of courses and careers students believe they will be successful at, which can be explored through reflection on past experiences and various environments that students inhibit during their career decision-making process. For example, a student that has always been successful in math subjects may be more likely to consider a math-based career (such as engineering) in their career exploration process than a student that has struggled in math and therefore may have lower self-efficacy beliefs about their math skills. These beliefs need to be understood in the context of career exploration to assist students in evaluating their skills and values and what kind of careers those might translate to.

Self-efficacy connects to motivation and achievement for many students regardless of subject or age/grade level (Chen & Pajares, 2010). Self-efficacy is a characteristic of self-concept and career decision-making and also increases motivation to attempt a difficult task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). As demonstrated in a study done by Komarraju, Swanson, and
Nadler (2014) on college psychology majors; increased career self-efficacy increases self-determined motivation as well as confidence in ability assessment, career planning, and decision-making. Studies on psychology majors found that students are often unsure about their major, resistant to use career resources, and may not fully develop skills to transition to the job market or graduate school (Komarraju et al., 2014; Roscoe & Strapp, 2009). This lack of preparation could be resolved by improving decision-making skills through motivation and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy in relation to career decision-making is not well measured but can be influential in understanding the specific domain of career decision-making self-efficacy (Betz & Hackett, 2006). Students with career decision-making self-efficacy are better prepared and more likely to explore career options and alternatives (Bullock-Yowell, et al., 2014; Bullock-Yowell, Katz, Reardon, & Peterson, 2012). Understanding that motivation and self-efficacy both stem from self-concept and identity is important to the next step because being motivated and efficacious in regards to career development transitions to career exploratory behavior which is where the research is lacking.

According to Bandura (1982), self-efficacy increases motivation and therefore motivation is a key concept in understanding why and how students choose to explore career options. There is a wealth of research on motivation such as expectancy-value theory (EVT) (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Both are incorporated in this framework to provide a theoretical understanding of motivation and demonstrate how motivation theories can be incorporated into career exploration/decision-making processes. Motivation is defined as involving “all aspects of activation and intention” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69), therefore it is key to understanding how people explore career options and make-decisions.
EVT consists of student expectations for their success as well as the value in the tasks they perform. Wigfield and Eccles (2000) discuss their expectancy-value model and connect expectancies and values to predict achievement as well as persistence, effort, and performance. Specifically, the variables in EVT are influenced by a person’s perceptions of “their own previous experiences and a variety of socialization influences” (p. 69). Their theory also indicates the importance of efficacy beliefs relating to EVT and other motivation theories. Efficacy beliefs tend to be domain specific (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) meaning that individuals have different efficacy beliefs for different subject or skill areas so those efficacy beliefs could suggest why people are motivated in some areas and not others. The domain specific efficacy beliefs indicate a need for researchers to consider specific measurements in regards to self-efficacy and motivation, in this case for career decision-making efficacy and motivation.

Motivation theories are often directly related to self-efficacy because beliefs about success or failure lead to greater motivation to perform a task and to select a more challenging task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Eccles and Wigfield (2002) also theorize that expectancies and values are influenced by self-schema such as “perceptions of other peoples’ attitudes and expectations, by affective memories, and by personal interpretations of previous achievement outcomes,” (p. 118). Ability beliefs are found to influence broader beliefs in a domain rather than expectancy of a specific task within a given domain (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Domain specific ability, in this case career/academic ability, has also shown to influence identity because it links “attainment value to the relevance of engaging in a task for confirming or disconfirming salient aspects of one’s self-schema,” (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 119). Self-schema is also brought up in CCT as a key to identity development. The self-schemas are individualized and are essential to understand how students used their experiences to form their identity and motives. Domain
specific motivation and self-efficacy could be a great influence in what might motivate students to choose a certain career path in a domain in which they foresee success.

Certain values in EVT presented by Eccles and Wigfield (2002) are attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost value, all of which influence a person’s motives. Attainment value is the importance a person places on doing well on a given task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Intrinsic value is the inherent enjoyment an individual gets from an activity (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Cost values are how an individual assesses the cost of performing an activity, i.e. the negative consequences, as well as the effort needed to complete the task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Utility values were found to be helpful in understanding career goals because they help individuals determine how a task will relate to future career goals even if the task itself is not exciting or interesting (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Utility values should be a consideration of most college students in their motivation to complete schoolwork, assuming the tasks relate to a career that they actually want to be involved in, emphasizing the importance of career choice in relation to motivation to succeed in school.

Eccles and Wigfield (2002) indicate a need for understanding motivation because “it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand students’ motivation without understanding the contexts they are experiencing. The complex interactions of context and the individual need further explication,” (p. 128). As indicated in career identity theories and motivation theories, there is a need for individual influences to be incorporated, along with contextual influences, in order to gain a complete understanding of career exploratory behaviors and motivations. The importance of EVT, in relation to student career development, is understanding the values (attainment, intrinsic, utility, and cost) in terms of how a student might weigh each of them when making decisions regarding future careers.
SDT is also an important theory to discuss when studying college student motivation. Intrinsic motivation is emphasized by Ryan and Deci (2000) because when individuals are motivated by intrinsic reasons they are more likely to seek challenging activities as well as be more willing to explore and learn. Deci and Ryan (2008) also indicate that intrinsic goals are more often related to psychological health as well as well-being, persistence, and performance. In this case, SDT is important to career development in terms of how varying motives of students might influence how much they choose to explore different career options as well as not avoid career options just because they are challenging.

SDT is comprised of three psychological needs that inspire behavior; competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2013). These three needs are said to motivate behavior and the self-determination of an individual. Self-determination is useful when studying motivation because it “requires that people accept their strengths and limitations, be cognizant of forces acting on them, make choices, and determine ways to satisfy needs,” (Schunk et al., 2013, p. 251). Ryan and Deci (2000) acknowledge that motivation is often treated as a single entity when, in reality, people chose to act and are motivated by many variables based on experiences. The three psychological needs; competence, autonomy, and relatedness, are said to increase mental health when all three are satisfied by an individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence is needed for an individual to feel confident in a task and achieve mastery (Schunk et al., 2013). Autonomy is the need to feel control or agency of a specific situation or environment such as making choices (Schunk et al., 2013). Relatedness fulfills the need to belong or have a sense of belongingness to a group (Schunk et al., 2013), which was emphasized as an important factor for college students (Soria & Stebleton, 2013).
SDT is a popular theory that specifically focuses on intrinsic motivation. The need for intrinsic motivation has many benefits and enhances individuals’ will and self-determination (Schunk et al., 2013). Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation as human nature that reflects “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn,” (p. 70). Research in many different fields applying SDT has shown to improve individual well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). SDT is used often to support the three psychological needs and increase intrinsic motivation to better belongingness, mental health, achievement, and satisfaction with choices (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Schunk et al., 2013; Shin & Kelly, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). The purpose of exploring this theory in relation to career exploration is because intrinsic motivation is shown to lead to satisfaction with major and career choice because students found their pursuits inherently interesting and enjoyable (Shin & Kelly, 2013). The importance of the three psychological needs, especially autonomy in decision-making and career exploration, will likely be influential in how students feel about the decisions they make while in school and how well they make them; especially decisions of such a high caliber like future career.

In regards to motivation influencing career exploration, there is some research that connects intrinsic motivation to exploratory behavior. A study on motivation and optimism among American and Korean students demonstrated that intrinsic motivation is universal in its link to exploratory behavior because students engaged in career planning when their career decisions were personally enjoyable (Shin & Kelly, 2013). Motivation accounts for a large portion of exploratory beliefs because the individuals who are motivated believe in the usefulness of the activities that lead to career decision-making (Blustein, 1988). This is also demonstrated by Battle and Wigfield (2003) in a study that found college women who had
stronger commitment to their careers had higher intrinsic-attainment and utility value, meaning they had stronger connections to inherent interests, ideal self-image, and the usefulness of their education in relation to goals. Another study by Soria and Stebleton (2013) on SDT, specifically intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, found that intrinsic motivation for selecting a major led to sense of belonging and satisfaction. Students benefit when they select a major for intrinsic reasons (Soria & Stebleton, 2013) and more individual-person research can be done to explore how to determine what a person’s motives are when they make career-related choices.

*Career Exploration and Decision-making*

While there are many fields where self-concept, motivation, and self-efficacy are applicable, this study focuses on these features of human development in relation to career exploration and decision-making among college students. A career perspective is significant because the focus and concern of many college students is what they want to do after graduation and many still are unprepared for job searches or graduate school upon completion of their degrees (Bubic, 2014; Chuang, Walker, & Caine-Bish, 2009; Komarraju et al., 2014; Roscoe & Strapp, 2009; Thompson & Feldman, 2010).

There are significant benefits for students making the right career choices for themselves and detriments to making incorrect or poor career choices. Regretting career choice can have consequences such as financial strain if more college is needed, or psychological stress (Gati & Amir, 2010). The consequences and benefits of career choice are part of what can cause stress and anxiety when it comes time for students to make these decisions. Based on a study comparing undecided and decided students, undecided students showed significant decision-making difficulties due to low decision-making self-efficacy and negative career thinking, though both groups were equally motivated to make a choice (Bullock-Yowell, et al., 2014).
Also undecided students can show symptoms of depression or anxiety (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007). These issues are why it is imperative for institutions to not only encourage exploratory behavior but also understand what influences impact students through the process of exploration. The decision-making process is a stressful one and more knowledge regarding the specific influences related to career exploration is necessary (Zikic & Hall, 2009).

The issues above are negative consequences of poor career decision-making skills that warrant researching exploratory factors and influences. There are also a lot of positive benefits for students who have strong self-efficacy and motivation that leads to exploratory behavior and career decision-making skills. According to Soria & Stebleton (2013) college students showed an increase in their sense of belonging on campus and also their satisfaction with their major choice when they made the decision based on intrinsic factors such as, interest, enjoying the tasks involved with the major, and satisfying intellectual curiosity. Satisfaction with major choice is important to students because the pressure for choosing a career is intense and feeling good about major selection is a good first step in career decision-making (Chuang et al., 2009). Having a sense of belonging is also important because it would fulfill a student’s psychological need of relatedness in SDT, therefore potentially increasing motivation. Confidence in decision-making can also play a role in satisfaction with academics as well as directly affecting students’ lifestyles (Kraus & Hughey, 1999). In the study done by Bubic (2014) adolescents were more likely to be satisfied with their decisions in regards to career if they were confident in their decision-making skills. Research on career outcomes is valuable when exploring decision styles of adolescents and how to aid them to be confident in their decisions regarding their future professions. This exploration done by Bubic (2014) starts to address variables in decision-making but is examining high school students rather than college. A need for a closer look at college students is
demonstrated in some estimations by Gordon (1995) that 20-50% of students begin college undecided and then 75% change their major at least once (as cited in Freedman, 2013). There are implications in these statistics that college students lack the skills necessary to make important decisions regarding their career upon entering college and perhaps there should be a change in how institutions view the exploration process and identity development in regards to career.

Another benefit of strong decision-making is persistence and achievement in college. These benefits stem from self-efficacy because students with self-confidence in their skills will become more likely to persist in school and achieve their tasks, in this case related to their career goals (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Wright et al., 2012). Students who feel like they made a good decision in regards to their major and career goals will be more likely to persist and succeed in school (Chuang et al., 2009). This should be a motivating factor for institutions to improve career decision-making skills in order to increase retention and satisfaction.

The benefits and consequences listed above point to the importance of students developing a self-concept and understanding how it relates to the careers they explore and ultimately decide on. There is a lack of effective career development in relation to exploration (Thompson & Feldman, 2010), therefore more research should be done to understand the complexities in the exploration process and better assist students in their career decision-making. University assistance with career exploration varies in usefulness and current research has pointed to a need for understanding exploration processes of college students. According to Zikic and Hall (2009) there is “very little known about the specific contextual and unplanned influences on the career exploration experiences of various populations” (p.181). The lack of knowledge on the influences that impact college students’ exploration is troubling because without attempting to understand individual influences, career development assistance may not
have a complete picture of the needs of students. Also, planned exploration often has positive impacts but a more inclusive approach to career exploration is needed (Zikic & Hall, 2009). The more inclusive approach would ideally consider individual students in the context of their environment as well as personal and social issues that have impacted their decisions.

A study by Thompson and Feldman (2010) demonstrated that students are asking themselves questions about their purpose and calling, indicating a desire for a meaningful career, not just a successful one. This desire for meaning in career choice calls for new development in career assistance that involves a deeper understanding of each student’s self-concept and experiences to help them make choices that guide them to a career they will find meaningful. To begin developing this holistic approach to career exploration, qualitative research has been suggested to aid researchers in understanding the influences. There is a need for more qualitative research that captures lived experiences of the variables that influence college students (Soria & Stebleton, 2013) as well as students’ personal issues that arise (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007) to understand the ability to explore career options successfully (Zikic & Hall, 2009). Career guidance should focus more on the student as an individual once variables are explored because, as explained by Kraus and Hughey (1999), each student has unique experiences that effect their behavior and decision-making. A qualitative narrative design will aid in understanding exploration through a more thorough approach as explained by Zikic and Hall (2009) that entails “taking into consideration different populations: the total life context in which individuals live; and how different aspects of their life, just like different pieces of a puzzle, are all part of their life and career” (p. 189). By exploring a student’s personal experience, an individual understanding will emerge to help make meaningful connections throughout a student’s history.
to increase self-concept, motivation, self-efficacy, and career decision-making that makes sense to each student.

**Statement of Problem and Research Question**

There are many characteristics that lead to exploratory behavior that have been identified in the literature review. Characteristics of students that lead to exploration are self-concept which effects motivation and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Hitlin, 2003; Shin & Kelly, 2013). These three concepts are at the top of the framework because they influence career exploration and development. The exploration process in the framework then leads to decision-making where students determine their academic major and career goals that coincide with it. Being confident in their career decision-making has benefits to students as well, such as a sense of belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Soria & Stebleton, 2013), mental health (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000), satisfaction with career choice (Bubic, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013), and persistence and achievement (Wright et al., 2012). The gap in the literature lies between the exploration and decision-making, specifically; how students integrate their self-concept to make meaning of their experience and exploration process in order to confidently make decisions. Savickas (2015) references a life design career counseling method that focuses on a person’s autobiography and then constructing meaning through the individual’s story. This method could prove to be useful to uncover the meaningful connections college students make in their career development process. Research is needed on this topic to understand what influences individual students during their exploration into making important career decisions, how they can reflect on their experiences to make meaningful decisions, and how colleges can better assist them through the difficult process. There is a lack of programs and tools that help students make these decisions (Cunningham & Smothers, 2014) and a lack of qualitative lived-experience research
that reveals the variables that students consider in the process (Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Zikic & Hall, 2009).

This research will help better understand the exploration process from an individual perspective and demonstrate how to assist students by connecting their individual experiences to components of the framework. Further goals of qualitative research on individual experiences are to gain a greater perspective on the meaning behind a student exploring career options throughout school and incorporate a student’s self-concept into career exploration and decision-making. Universities can use this process to develop programs or courses to help students through the exploration and decision-making processes with a more individualized approach. Also, students can gain a better self-concept when they realize what has influenced them in their decision-making.

This gap needs to be addressed through a qualitative lens, as this study has done, because understanding students’ lived experiences and viewing them as individuals with complex influences in specific environments will help understand how they make meaningful decisions using their experience and how they can be assisted in the exploration process. To address this need in the literature, this study was guided by the following research question: By focusing on an individual lived experience, specifically how a student develops self-concept and makes meaning of experiences, what new information can be gained about the undergraduate college student career exploration and decision-making process?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Qualitative design

The methodology used for this study is qualitative phenomenology and narrative inquiry. Phenomenological inquiry is used to explore the subjective experiences of people and how they understand the world in their own context (Trochim, 2006). Phenomenology as well as narrative inquiry were useful for this study to access a subjective individual experience and make meaningful connections. Narrative inquiry is used to capture a diversity of perspectives and emphasize lived experiences within varying contexts (Eaves & Walton, 2013) as well as understanding a phenomena by examining how people create meaning and connection through experiences (Klein & Myers, 1999; Seidman, 2013). Narrative reflection allowed me to explore the complexities of undergraduate student career exploration because it assists in “mapping complex, hidden dimensions of experience” (Holley & Colyar, 2012, p. 120). The complexities and dimensions are lacking in the current literature and therefore a narrative approach was necessary to offer a new contribution to the field.

Some career theories stress the importance of narrative inquiry as well. Super (1980), as discussed in chapter one, created a developmental approach to career exploration that included narrative methods. These narrative methods were used to understand a student’s life story and themes, then assess how that individual attached meaning to experiences, and how self-concept was developed and implemented in career exploration (Swanson & Fouad, 2014). The research question for this study was best suited to narrative inquiry because it allowed for an understanding of the student’s experience and the ability to reflect on the meaning of personal career development events as well as for the researcher to make connections to the framework. Bruner (1991) highlighted the benefits of narrative inquiry as a way to organize experiences and memory. The methodology for this study was inspired by Savickas’s description of life design
(2015), which is a career counseling method that focuses on a person’s autobiography and how to help incorporate personal identity to craft “moves in meaning to produce a unifying message that signals and compels a choice” (p. 139). For this study, I used a personal narrative of career exploration to understand life experiences, events that were meaningful to career decisions, and examine how the development of self-concept effected career decisions.

Setting, population, sampling

The setting for this study was a public research university in the Midwest. While the population is undergraduate students attending college, there was not a generalizable nature to the student’s responses because subjective experience and meaning is based on the individual. The intention of qualitative methodology is “not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2011, p. 206). The goal of this study was to detail how a student makes meaningful connections through career exploration rather than to assume students have similar ways of interpreting their experiences and self-concept. All student experiences are different, therefore the purpose of this study was to demonstrate, using a student’s experience as an example, how to guide students in their exploration by understanding their personal experience and self-concept and how to apply those when choosing a career path.

The sample size was one undergraduate student because the number of narratives does not have an effect on the research question. It was more useful to gain a more in-depth understanding of one student’s experience than to have more students participate and therefore, shorter narratives. This student’s experience should not be used to assume any other student will be the same but rather to see the benefits of an individual approach to career exploration and demonstrate how meaning-making benefits career decision-making.
The sampling for this study is purposive sampling, specifically theory or concept sampling. This sampling method was used to “select individuals or sites because they help you understand a concept or a theory” (Creswell, 2011, p. 208). The student selected was Heather (she agreed for me to use her first name in my thesis) and she was in her last year of undergraduate school, which was her fifth year in college. She graduated at the end of Spring Semester 2016 with a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology. During her college education, Heather changed majors multiple times, generally having difficulty with career exploration and decision-making. She began as a biology major and also considered genetics, special education, and engineering before graduating as a sociology major. Heather also discussed a sleep disorder and a reading comprehension disability that she dealt with throughout her education. These two factors were influential in her experience but are not the main focus of the narrative in chapter four. It was important to access a student’s experience that involved difficulty exploring careers because Heather’s process was complex and allowed for the examination of various issues college students might face. Also, many students experience some issue in selecting a major and career (Freedman, 2013) so it was necessary to analyze an experience that did include that problem. In order to demonstrate how self-concept and experience would help in the exploration process it was beneficial to discuss the experience of a student who would have benefited from more career guidance at the start of college.

Ethical reflection

The proposal for this study was submitted to the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval and was approved and designated as non-human subjects research, meaning it was not generalizable to a large population. Because of this designation, this study was not under
the standard ethical procedures for IRB but my committee and I felt that ethical guidelines were needed to help guide me and protect and support the student participating in the study.

A process was adapted using structured ethical reflection (Brydon-Miller, Aranda, & Stevens, 2015). This reflection is used to help guide the researcher in determining their values as they work with participants and how to assure they remain committed to those values throughout the research study (Brydon-Miller et al., 2015). Through this process I was able to create an ethical reflection chart that highlighted the values of research at each stage in the process and serve as a guide to ensure I was following my ethical principles and that Heather felt protected participating in the study (Brydon-Miller et al., 2015). Though a consent form was not required as a non-human subject’s designation, I developed one as part of the ethical reflection to be sure Heather understood her rights as a participant in the study and that she did not have to participate or could withdraw at any time. The structured ethical reflection is the first appendix and the consent form is the second appendix included at the end of this paper.

**Data collection**

There were two data collection methods employed for this study. The first was based on interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA often uses semi-structured interviews, as well as personal accounts and diaries, in order to collect qualitative data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The semi-structured interviews as well as a personal account were used in this study in order to explore Heather’s personal history and allow for flexibility with the conversations between us. Flexibility is important to allow the participant to determine the direction of the conversation, as it is their experience and their meaning-making (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Therefore, I began with guiding questions but encouraged Heather to talk with little prompting and direct the conversation to what she felt was important in regards to her career exploration experience.
In order to create a specific structure for the interviews, Seidman’s (2013) structure for in-depth phenomenological interviewing was used. The original structure that Seidman (2013) presents consists of three interviews; a life history, details of experience, and reflection on meaning with three days to a week in between each. This structure was adjusted slightly for the purpose of this study and used a written narrative in place of the first interview. I felt it was beneficial to have Heather write down her experience thus far without having any prompting from me and to give her a chance to reflect on her experience without the pressure of an in-person interview. The next two interviews were the same as Seidman (2013) suggests, I focused on gaining more detail from the narrative in the second interview and the third focused on the Heather reflecting on the meaning of her experience and how she felt it affected her career exploration in college. The interview prompts are included as the third appendix at the end of the paper. Again, they were meant to serve as prompts not strict question and answer surveys. The original questions were often altered or removed in place of different questions during the interviews as the conversations were guided by what Heather felt was important.

Analysis Methods

The methods I used to analyze the data were also adopted from Seidman (2013) and IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2007). First, as part of the ethical reflection, it was important for me to keep some ideas in mind to capture Heather’s full experience and not let any biases interfere. Seidman (2013) suggests the researcher refrains from any type of analysis until all three interviews are complete in order to keep researcher preconceptions out of the follow-up interviews and analysis process. It is also important for the researcher to come to the analysis process with an open mind about what themes might emerge (Seidman, 2013). It is difficult to plan ahead for qualitative research because it may be unknown how many or what types of themes will be present in the
data. Because of this, and the fact that no two experiences are alike, it is important for the researcher to have confidence that they can recognize the essential themes to the topic and pick them out during analysis (Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013) also notes that it is impossible to identify every possible theme in one study so it’s the researcher’s job to have confidence in identifying what is essential for a particular study.

With these ideas in mind, I used IPA to analyze the data. The first step in IPA is reading through the interview transcripts to get an overall sense of the data and write down general thoughts on the left side of the margin (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The general read-throughs are meant to be more open and are done to gain a sense of the overall experience without rules on what should or shouldn’t be commented on (Smith & Osborn, 2007). After the initial read-throughs, the next step is to read through the data again and in the right margin make more comments that are concise words, phrases and themes, more specific than the comments in the left margin from the general readings (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

After reading through the data and taking notes in the margins, the researcher is able to identify themes from their notes and the transcripts. These themes can be listed and grouped how the researcher feels they make sense and categorized under superordinate themes (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The superordinate themes and themes I’ve identified will be presented in the next chapter as a narrative account. Each theme is presented and expanded upon while distinguishing between Heather’s meaning-making and my connections to the theoretical framework (Smith & Osborn, 2007). It is essential in IPA to include and distinguish between the meaning-making of the individual as well as the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The findings chapter will present and discuss each theme I’ve identified through the process of IPA.
Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter I present the findings I’ve identified through analysis of one written narrative and two interviews with Heather. As discussed in the methodology chapter, I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to determine the themes (Smith & Osborn, 2007). After reading through the transcripts and making comments I grouped the words or phrases together as themes and, based on the overall message of each themed group, I identified the superordinate themes (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Four superordinate themes emerged as I analyzed the data and they are each discussed in detail in this chapter. The grouping table of themes and superordinate themes is included as Table 1 at the end of this paper.

The first two superordinate themes are social influences in education and environmental effect on decision-making. The second two are development of self-concept through experience and making meaning of experience and decisions. They are discussed in this order because the first two deal with external influences such as peers, teachers, and the college environment while the second two are more internal themes that deal with the self like self-efficacy, emotions, and personal meaning-making. This is further evidence of what Powell (2009) suggested; that students face various challenges when making academic and career decisions that are both internal and external. As I present and discuss each theme I will be sure to distinguish between my inferences and connection to the framework and what Heather personally said during the interviews.

Social Influences in Education

As I read through the interview transcripts and my notes, I noticed Heather frequently brought up social interactions when discussing her experiences. At various times in her
experience she was swayed by different people including peers, family members, academic advisors, high school teachers, and college professors.

*Teachers and Professors*

Some of the first influences Heather mentioned were negative perceptions from her teachers in high school:

My teachers just assumed I was lazy and that I did not care, until my physics teacher my senior year finally said something to me.

Here Heather was referring to her sleep disorder, narcolepsy, which she was not diagnosed with until later in college. These negative teacher assumptions eventually led to decreased academic self-efficacy as Heather describes:

It’s important they [teachers] take interest in their students because as soon as they just label them, as lazy, that gets put into the student’s mind, it affects them with school, their decisions, and… everything, it affects them immensely.

Before college started, Heather was affected by teacher perceptions that may have influenced some of her decisions. Social influences can effect motivation and self-efficacy beliefs as Eccles and Wigfield (2002) suggest; a person’s perceptions of what others expect of them can be incorporated into their self-schema. Heather’s self-efficacy and motivation may have decreased in academics because she felt her teachers thought she was lazy. I asked Heather if these teacher perceptions stayed with her throughout her education in college as well or if it changed after being diagnosed with narcolepsy:

Jessica: so you got, you think it got better in college and…
Heather: once I found it out…
J: being diagnosed and…?
H: nowadays I don’t really have teachers telling me I’m lazy or anything… that narcolepsy stuff has gotten a lot better

The diagnosis likely helped Heather remove the label of ‘lazy’ from her self-concept because there was a specific reason that explained why she struggled to stay awake in class. However,
those teacher perceptions from high school could have influenced her original major and college
decisions before finding out about her narcolepsy. The most significant interaction that she
describes in high school was with a math teacher that she felt also perceived her as lazy and
hindered her learning:

She used to wake me up and embarrass me and then when she saw that I still couldn’t
stay awake even though I was embarrassed… then she just let me sleep in class and
wouldn’t wake me up and like one of my friends tried to wake me up and she was like
‘don’t wake her up, if she doesn’t want to learn, she doesn’t have to learn’ and I was
like… so that’s one of the biggest things that I was like okay so you, definitely influenced
my learning and not for the better.

In this experience Heather describes embarrassment as a result of one of her teachers and how
her teacher had a negative influence on her learning. This teacher influence could have effected
Heather’s motivation as it relates to self-determination theory research. A study by Lavigne,
Vallerand, and Miquelon (2007), found that teacher support of a student’s perceived autonomy
and competence increased the student’s motivation in school. Heather’s learning was negatively
influenced in this experience due to lack of competence support from her teacher.

Though Heather’s self-concept improved after being diagnosed with narcolepsy, she still
had challenges with some of her college professors being supportive and understanding. I asked
Heather to talk about some of the people who may have influenced her career decisions in
college and she brought up two negative experiences with different professors. One was at the
beginning of her college career at a small private college and one was later when she had
changed majors and transferred to a large public university. The first experience she describes
was when she tried to talk to a professor about falling asleep in class, again before being
diagnosed with narcolepsy:

I tried to tell one of my professors like, ‘I’m sorry I’m falling asleep in your class but, I,
I’m trying to stay awake and I don’t know what it is, I’m going to get tested for a
sleeping disorder’ and he just immediately was like, ‘well, are you sure you get enough
sleep at night?’ and I was like ‘…yea, I’m getting my 8 hours of sleep that I’m supposed
to do, sometimes more’ and he’s like ‘well, maybe you just need to eat better’ and stuff
like that and it was just like, okay… not helping a college student, like tearing them
down.

This experience, though it is specific to a sleeping disorder, still says more about the professor in
general, not understanding struggles students may be facing and causing Heather to feel ‘torn
down’ by him. Heather also struggled with a reading comprehension disability that she again
tried to tell a professor about and was still faced with a lack of support and embarrassment:

There was one professor I had, in the education department, who… she’s the one that
embarrassed me, that one time… I like raised my hand for once in class and was like, you
know it’s really hard for me to like, read all these at night, and then come in and have a
quiz each day, because she, she asked us ‘why aren’t you guys doing well on these
quizzes?’ and then I told her, I was like, well it’s tough because I have a reading
comprehension disability and, and she was just like okay, well that’s not really anything
like, that’s not a reason and I was like ‘okay…’

…and she was like ‘you know, sometime when you get like a house or an apartment,
you’re going to need to read the contract, and you’re going to have to understand it’ and I
was just ‘Oh my gosh!’

Here Heather discusses feelings of embarrassment brought on by a professor, similar to her
experience with some teachers in high school. Students desire support from faculty and O’Reilly-
Knapp (1994) found that if students don’t receive the support they desire, it may cause them to
stop seeking help. Student perceptions of faculty support have been shown to influence
persistence in college as well as their psychological needs found in SDT; competence, autonomy,
and relatedness (Shelton, 2003). Without this support from faculty, Heather may have lost some
motivation to pursue the majors these professors were involved with and affected her desire to
continue to ask for help, ultimately effecting the outcome of her college experience and future
career.

Heather often mentioned the influence of her teachers and professors and determined that
she would have had an easier time had there been more support and understanding from them.
Here Heather talks about originally being a biology major but the chemistry department and courses deterred her from pursuing a science major, partly due to lack of professor support:

I think that these chemistry classes are so big and it’s such an important and tough like, subject, that it just, freaked me out. And I didn’t find that the teachers or professors or anything were very helpful or like wanting to reach out and offer help and stuff.

In this case, Heather actually had an interest in the major she was pursuing but felt she couldn’t succeed in the chemistry course without professor support and decided to change majors, ultimately effecting her career pursuits in a science field. A student’s self-concept in relation to their career plans is partly influenced by feedback from social influences (Swanson & Fouad, 2014) and Heather’s narrative suggests that she had trouble integrating a science career into her self-concept without support from the professors in that field.

I asked Heather if these experiences with teachers affected her current outcome and she felt they had:

I think that my, if my high school experiences were… not necessarily easier, but if my teachers understood about my learning disability and my sleep disorder earlier on, they would’ve been able to help me and help me understand what I liked back then rather than just struggling to make it through high school or just being pushed into college.

Heather reflected on her interactions with teachers and said that she may have had a better idea about her interests and a stronger self-concept had her teachers taken the time to understand her struggles in school. Identity control theory (ICT) can be applied in Heather’s situation because it theorizes that an individual’s self-meaning needs to match the environmental feedback in order to achieve congruence (Burke, 1991). Heather may have had inconsistencies with how she viewed herself as a student and how she felt teachers viewed her as a student, potentially causing difficulties in making career decisions that are attributed to her identity. As she suggests, had her teachers viewed her differently, she may have developed her academic interests earlier on, instead of struggling with self-efficacy and motivation in high school and early college.
Advisors

Teachers and professors were a large part of Heather’s social influences. Academic advisors were another influence she brought up throughout the interviews. She mentions her advisors and peers the most when talking about trying to figure out a career she’d like:

There’s the time where I was like trying to figure out what I want to do so like, constantly trying to meet with advisors, and looking up stuff online, and talking with a bunch of like friends and stuff about what they think I would be good at.

I asked her more about what her advisors did during her career exploration and she mentioned her sociology advisor for her final major was the best one but her exploratory advisor was not as helpful.

I found that my advisor for sociology, was by far, the best advisor I’ve ever had. He originally like helped me decide to do sociology and helped me look at other places when, even my exploratory advisor wasn’t as helpful as that so…

When I met with him, it was, the exploratory advisor, I mean he always had my stuff ready to go [snaps] but like, it was more so like, ‘well, what do you want to do?’ ‘I don’t know, help me figure it out!’

The difference Heather describes with her two advisors was that the sociology one helped her understand more what the major would be about and possible other majors that might fit with similar interest while the exploratory advisor assumed she already knew what she wanted to do.

As cited in Dedmon (2012) in a report done by Noel-Levitz (2005), students at four-year public universities rated academic advising to be the most important aspect of their college experience. This is indicative of how important an advisor relationship is to help students set goals and make career decisions. In Heather’s experience above, she did not receive much exploratory assistance with her career planning from advisors. This issue could have been another contributing factor to Heather’s difficulty finding a career.
She did have a positive experience with her sociology advisor that may have helped understand part of her past experiences and how it relates to her academic and career path:

He has helped me understand that my parents kind of, pushed me in this, and I didn’t, I kind of wasn’t ready for it. And he sort of helped me understand that, I didn’t really get it. And he was like ‘are you sure… like do your parents push you to do this?’ and I was like ‘yea… kinda’ because I was like explaining my anxiety, because I have anxiety about school. And it’s just… it’s because I don’t know if this is what I should be doing.

Students may not have the skills to reflect on their identity and experience upon entering college (Freedman, 2013) so it is important to assist them in developing those skills and learn to realize how their past experience has affected them. In this situation, Heather’s advisor helped her understand that there may have been pressure to enter college and that is part of the reason she’s had difficulty deciding on a career. The effect of parental pressure to attend college is explored further in the following subsection.

Parents and Peers

Two other social influences Heather brought up were her parents and peers. As mentioned above, she realized she had some pressure to attend college from her parents. Heather’s family influence on her experience was, again, based on other’s perceptions of her which is evident when she discusses how she would raise a child differently:

I will try to show them the world of other trades, and other opportunities, and if they want to take a year off to figure out what they really want to do in college, I will not look at them as a dropout, like my family would have done for me.

Heather mentions that figuring out a path before going to college might have been helpful but said her family would have viewed her negatively if she did not go to college after high school. This experience is similar to what Guay, Senécal, Guathier, and Fernet (2003) found; that parents and peers can influence a person’s career decision-making and can help alleviate their indecision by supporting their autonomy. In this instance, Heather may have felt that she didn’t have the
autonomy to make her own decision regarding college because of the pressure by her family, ultimately causing career indecision.

Heather also thinks that some career options were not available to her because of pressure from her parents to attend college:

I would say, like, not knowing anything about any like, other possibilities, besides college, and stuff. My parents kind of just pushed college and that’s all I knew. But, now I like hear about people doing like wood-working and craftsmanship and stuff, just… I don’t know, I feel like I would’ve been better at something like that because school’s not really my thing.

Heather talks about her interest and self-efficacy in career options that may not have required a college degree. Due to parental pressure she may not have felt she had autonomy to make the decision to forgo college in pursuit of other career options. Heather’s experience with her parents is an example of how social influences can directly affect a person’s career decision-making. There is also some evidence that amotivation i.e. lack of motivation, regarding entering college is a result of many factors that Heather may have considered such as lack of interest, lack of expecting a future occupation and financial rewards, lack of expectation for success, and lack of social influences (Jung, 2013). Had these factors been addressed with Heather in high school, she may have been able to make a more informed decision about whether or not college was right for her.

Heather’s peers also had some influence on her career exploration. They seemed to be the source she turned to most often when trying to figure out what she should do as a career. She mentions a few times that she would ask other people what she might be good at when exploring careers.

I would talk to like friends and stuff and they were like ‘oh you’d be a good teacher for like, little kids, and stuff” and, I love working with kids so I would look online for things like that…
Everyone kind of just pushed things on me and I would just listen to what everybody said and I didn’t really think about what I wanted to do. And I mean I did that too, I was like ‘what do you, what can you see me doing? What can you see me doing?’ because I didn’t know what I wanted to do.

Guay et al. (2003) found that peers who support their friends autonomy by being involved in their life and allowing them to make choices can decrease career indecision and support the individual’s perceived autonomy. Heather’s friends suggested an occupation for her but it could have been more helpful for her autonomy had they pointed out her strengths without telling her what career she should pursue.

There were also some negative peer perceptions that Heather dealt with during her college experience. Her original major interests were in science fields but after changing majors several times, she finished school as a sociology major. Some of the interactions she had with friends were negative regarding her major choice.

A lot of my friends at [public university] are engineering majors, and can be very sarcastic at times. They have said things to me like, ‘Sociology isn’t a REAL major.’ ‘Your homework should be done really soon, because it is just sociology work.’ ‘You don’t even understand homework, or a project or an exam until you have been any other major but a sociology major.’ Whether they were kidding or not, these phrases killed me.

There is evidence in self-determination research that suggests peers can be influential of a person’s motivation. For example, studies on college students demonstrate that peers can help undecided students with career decisions by supporting autonomy, competence, and self-efficacy (Guay et al., 2003; Guay, Ratelle, Senécal, Larose, & Deschênes, 2006). Self-efficacy and confidence can be promoted by feedback from others, especially when the individual doesn’t have accurate self-evaluation skills (Usher & Pajares, 2006). In this situation, Heather’s friends were not supporting her competence by belittling her major choice and potentially decreasing her self-efficacy in decision-making and math fields as well. This lack of support from peers could have effected Heather’s career decision to major in math or science fields.
Though Heather had some negative experiences with social influences, she did learn more about herself in the process. She figured out through her experience that social influences were not always beneficial to her career decision-making:

When people tell me something I take it heart and I think I need to think more about myself and what I want, rather than what everybody else wants or what everyone else wants for me.

This is a valuable lesson that can help Heather be more autonomous with decision-making in the future. Part of the process of ICT is for a person to include social influence and meaning-making as part of their identity in specific roles (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). Heather seemed to have some trouble integrating her identity and interests with what she felt others thought about her or what they said to her. Social influences could help students be more autonomous in their career exploration by supporting their self-efficacy and motivation, making it easier to align personal identity with social interactions.

Environmental Effect on Decision-Making

The second superordinate theme concerns how Heather’s college environment (e.g. classes, campus, and resources) influenced some of her major and career decisions. Individuals shape their lives partly through experiences within their environment (Cook, Heppner, & O’Brien, 2005). From an ecological perspective, there were several complications Heather faced throughout her college experience. Unfortunately, Heather did not always get to make the decisions that changed her career course due to environmental challenges.

Learning Environment

The first environmental factor I noticed was how Heather interacted in various learning environments throughout college. She had originally started at a small private college and had to transfer to a large public university due to losing her scholarship and financial constraints. She
discussed the differences in learning environment and how the change negatively affected her career path as a biology major when she first transferred:

I ended up dropping out of my chemistry class. It was too big of a lecture class, I had a hard time understanding the professor, and I overall did not feel comfortable in the class.

The class size of her chemistry course at the large university ultimately caused her to drop out and pursue a different major, which she also felt turned her away from any science majors.

With my biology, I really enjoyed biology a lot. But, the chemistry part of it, which I was fine at [private college] but when I went to [public university], not going to lie, their chemistry department kind of deterred me from any science majors.

Self-efficacy has been shown to decrease in college students as class size increases (Velez, Sorenson, McKim, & Cano, 2013). Self-efficacy beliefs have also been shown to predict college major and career decisions (Hackett, 1995). Heather actually still enjoyed biology and was interested in the subject but the learning environment for one chemistry class decreased her self-efficacy enough to cause her to change majors and eliminate science fields from her career options.

Heather also had similar problems with the learning environment in her sociology major. She discusses the differences in course content once she transferred to the large university:

There’s a lot of reading involved in the course, which I wasn’t aware of, because my very first sociology course I ever took was actually at [private college], and… I mean obviously we did some reading but it was more like lecture material and watching videos and seeing this stuff that was like different, and doing like, projects on it and stuff like that, I really enjoyed that but more so I’ve found some of the sociology classes it’s like specifically reading and just trying to, figure out what these people mean or what they say about society and… I don’t really like it anymore.

Heather had trouble adjusting to the large university in sociology courses. She mentions that there was more variation in the sociology course structure at the private college where the public university was mostly reading, which she did not like.
Heather realized during the interviews that her transfer to the large university ultimately affected her career path because she did not want to change from a biology major.

If I would have stayed at [private college] it would be completely different, like if I had stayed at [private college] I’m pretty sure I would still be a biology major because I, to this day, I always like, when I’m talking to friends or something… they’re like ‘oh!’, I should probably still be a biology major like I love this stuff, and I think that would have changed that incredibly, because I wouldn’t have had to go through chemistry at [public university].

The reason for Heather changing majors from biology was not due to any intrinsic interest in another subject but rather decreased self-efficacy from one course. Students who chose a major for intrinsic motives have been shown to be more satisfied with their experience in college (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Had Heather been able to choose a major for intrinsic reasons, perhaps she would have been more satisfied with her education.

Academic major is also essential to career choice and because Heather did not like her choice to leave biology she likely lost some career decision self-efficacy and commitment to exploring alternative career options (Chuang et al., 2009). As stated in the prior superordinate theme, autonomy in decision-making is essential to promote in college students (Guay et al., 2003), which Heather did not have in this situation due to external environmental factors that pushed her into making decisions.

Financial and Disability Resources

Another factor Heather faced when making decisions was financial limitations. Financial limitations were part of the reason she transferred schools and part of the reason she did not decide to pursue an education major once at the public university.

I was very happy at [private college]. I was on the dance team, interested in what I was learning about, and very happy with the all-around education and environment my first year of college. Unfortunately, my GPA fell lower than what it was in high school, and I lost my scholarship I had for [private college], making it unaffordable for me to attend my second year of college there.
Even though Heather enjoyed her initial college experience, finances informed her decision to transfer schools and impacted her future career path. Once again, environmental factors eliminated the opportunity for Heather to make decisions for intrinsic reasons and it negatively affected her future college experience.

Once Heather transferred and decided not to pursue a biology major, she considered education because she liked working with kids and thought teaching would be a good career. However, requirements to be in a cohort and the length of time she’d been in college led her to move away from education as an option as well:

Education, I really liked those courses and I would’ve done it but, to, in order to get into cohort it would’ve been like two more years or something, and I was already in my like third year and I was like, I can’t afford to be in college for like 7 years and only get a bachelor’s, so…

The cost to spend extra time in college limited Heather’s decision as well as her current feelings about college. Changing from a biology major that she liked and having to find something else, may have lowered her self-efficacy and motivation at this point in her experience:

I was so upset, because I did well in my chemistry class at [private college]. This brought me down about my educational abilities even more.

Career decision self-efficacy is essential for students to have self-determination and be satisfied with their major (Komarraju et al., 2014). Had Heather had a more positive experience with choosing a major and increasing her self-efficacy, she could have had an easier time making career decisions and be more motivated to plan her future career.

Heather also mentioned her narcolepsy and reading comprehension disability having an impact on her learning. Because of this, she initially sought out learning disability resources for assistance but found the process to be too cumbersome.
In college it’s like… it’s a lot harder to get that, and I mean, I know they have disability services but, that’s another thing, is [private college] it was a lot easier to use those resources, at [public university] it’s just so hard, I mean you have to get everything signed, you have to get tested like, each year and stuff and it’s just, so frustrating, so… I’ve been going through without any of the resources because it’s just, if they were to make that easier for these students, I think that would be… definitely helpful.

She again compared her experience at her original private college to be a lot easier before she transferred. Her decision to stop using the resources was based on the difficult process even though they may have helped her.

Heather discussed wanting more support with some of her challenges in college, including her learning disability which impacted her sociology major the most.

With learning disabilities, I mean, just the resources need to be easier to get to, like I don’t know, I don’t even know how I would fix it but, if I could find ways I would, because it’s just… like… having to travel from one class to the next and having to make sure that your tests get sent here and you have to take it at a different place or, like and reading at night, I can’t just have someone read to me every night, like… especially in the sociology major where they have to read over 100 or 200 pages a night, like, I mean, you can’t have someone just read that to you.

The college environment could have improved Heather’s decision-making had there been more support with finances and her learning disability. Her reading comprehension caused some of her negative experiences with teachers, as discussed in the previous superordinate theme, effecting her academic self-efficacy. Ultimately the decision to transfer was not entirely her own choice and that decision led to her changing majors from biology, due to the learning environment and not being able to pursue her second choice of education because of financial limitations. Satisfaction with major choice has been shown to improve students’ mental health during college (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007). Heather did not end up liking her final major her, in part due to lack of support with her reading disability. Her happiness with college in general may have decreased throughout her experience because she was not satisfied with her final major.
Major/Career Awareness and Education

There were some issues Heather mentioned about choosing a major and career in regards to the college environment. The first problem she acknowledged was she did not receive enough information about different majors before committing to one.

Sociology is a lot of reading, and I almost wish there would have been a “warning label” on the major description. As someone with learning disabilities in reading, this major has been very tough for me.

Heather mentions wanting a warning label about her major. More information on the curriculum and how the major relates to career options likely would have helped Heather make a more informed decision. She made a point to bring this up again in the final interview to emphasize the importance of giving students more information before they chose a major.

I also think that the university should, kind of put like how much reading or how much math or something is in each subject, like with sociology I didn’t expect to be reading as much as I am which is what kind of messed me up, I thought I was going to be doing more like experiments.

It is apparent that Heather’s expectations were not addressed by any university personnel before she committed time and money to a major that she later realized was challenging for her with her reading disability and that she did not like. More flexibility in major selection and exploration is necessary for students who have uncertainty about their abilities or major-specific attributes (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2013). In this case Heather was not sure what some majors involved and had there been more opportunity to learn about different majors and her interests, she may have made a different choice.

Similar to a lack of information about majors, Heather also said there was a lack of education about different careers in her high school and college education. She describes her decision to attend college wishing she’d had more career awareness at the time:
All I knew as an 18 year old was that I was to graduate high school and move on to college. I was not shown any other routes such as trades like, welding, carpentry, plumbing, auto-mechanics, etc. Looking back, I wish I had been given the opportunity to realize all of my options.

Reflecting on her experience, Heather said she was not given all the tools needed to make an informed decision about her college and career path. Bubic (2014) stressed the importance of helping high school students explore careers to be confident in their decisions. In order for students to be confident in their decisions they will need education about all types of professions before they can decide. Heather’s experience was lacking in career education and likely contributed to her difficult decision-making later in college.

Heather also mentions several things that universities could provide students that she thought would have assisted her to make informed career decisions. The first is career assessments that give students recommendations based on their interests:

I know there’s like those tests and stuff that students can take on their own but nobody actually really thinks to do it and nobody really knows if they’re like actually good tests or not, because there’s good ones and then there’s really dumb ones.

Heather was aware of the tests when we were talking but mentioned not knowing how to interpret the results or have thought to take one when she was first starting college. Assessment can be beneficial for college student’s exploration and self-concept and it is important to have a professional who understands the results to help explain them accurately to students (Swanson & Fouad, 2014). Heather may have increased her career exploration had someone helped her assess her interests and abilities before making a decision.

The other resource Heather would have liked from the university was some kind of career fair in the beginning of college:

I know there’s like career fair at the end of college to help you find a job but like if they had some sort of like career fair in the beginning of college like talk to these people, see what they do, see if this is what you would want to do, otherwise… like that would’ve
been helpful too, to like talk to people like ‘oh, what do you do?’ ‘oh, that sounds really cool’ I mean I know it’s still 18 years old and you might not know what you want to do, but anybody could go to that throughout their college years and I think that would be a lot better and helpful.

Heather talks about benefiting from career education at the beginning of college, especially being able to speak directly with people in each profession. Undergraduate students are often uncertain about career options at the beginning of college (Komaraju et al., 2014) and perhaps a resource like the career fair Heather mentioned, would help undecided students gain more career awareness and career self-efficacy.

The environmental factors in this section appeared to have hindered Heather’s decision-making in some way, whether it was due to financial limitations or not enough career education provided by the university. Career choices can be effected by a person’s environment (Zikic & Hall, 2009). In Heather’s experience, some of her decisions were dictated by environmental constraints rather than by evaluating her own interests and self-concept. Because she was not always able to be autonomous in her decisions, she may have lost some motivation and self-efficacy (Guay et al., 2003) regarding her college experience, resulting in her unhappiness with her final major decision.

**Development of Self-Concept through Experience**

As stated in the introduction, these final two superordinate themes move away from external influences on Heather’s decision-making and focus on her personal influence and development. The first internal theme discusses how Heather developed her self-concept throughout her education experience and how it influenced her career decision-making.

Disabilities Influencing Self-Concept

It has been mentioned throughout each theme that Heather had a few challenges in education like her narcolepsy and reading comprehension disability. She mentioned that
understanding both disabilities helped her later in education but they were still somewhat ingrained in her self-concept:

Finding these disabilities and disorders was beneficial to my education, but the affect it had on mind and how I felt about myself in a school setting was still hurt by the idea in my head that I was lazy, dumb, and can’t read.

Even though Heather did not always talk about herself that way, it still seems that those feelings from high school were part of her early self-concept and may have affected her academic self-efficacy. Decision-making is influenced by a person’s self-concept because if it is positive, they will make choices that increase their self-confidence (Powell, 2009). If Heather had not felt these negative things about herself due to learning disabilities, she may have been able to pursue challenging career paths that she was interested in after high school.

I enjoy many of the ideas that can go along with engineering, and I used to want to do that with my life, but as I progressed through school and realized how much of a hard time I had with school and learning, I told myself I wasn’t smart enough to be an engineering major and I would never make it through.

This is an example of how Heather’s self-concept from her high school experience led her to believe she wouldn’t succeed in engineering, even though she had interest in the subject. When I asked her how her narcolepsy and reading comprehension affected her decisions she brought up engineering again.

They definitely affected my decisions because I don’t really do that well in school, I’m either an average student or like, it’s really tough for me to get through, so that influenced my decisions in ways that, things that I would have liked to have done, like I, I think that engineering is very interesting, it’s a very hands-on thing, and my friends have gone through, and they talk about it and I’m like ‘oh, that’s so interesting’ and like they’ll tell me things and I’ll like tell them back like that I understand, like show them, and they’re like ‘wow, you get it’ and I’m like… but because of that and because of my grades I would have never considered myself like good enough, or anything, to be… an engineering major.

Even at the end of her undergraduate experience she still discussed engineering and thought it was an interesting subject but was steered away from it due to her self-concept. A strong sense of
self plays an important role in developing self-esteem and making successful choices (Powell, 2009), with a stronger sense of self, perhaps Heather would have felt more confident in choosing an engineering career.

Heather discussed how her learning experience might have been different had she learned earlier on about her narcolepsy and reading comprehension disability:

I don’t think I ever really fully understood everything because I was half asleep in class all the time so… but and I also think that I would’ve had a better look on myself, even with my learning disability, if my teachers hadn’t just… thrown that I was lazy at me and stuff like that. And if they hadn’t embarrassed me in times where they would be like calling on me in class when I was sleeping so clearly I can’t answer the question. So yea… I think if, I think my experiences in the past have completely influenced my, my frustration and stuff with college.

Heather’s past experiences with her learning disabilities affected her self-concept in high school and seemed to have carried into college and made her frustrated with the process. Self-concept and self-esteem are related in how successful a person is in exploring career options (Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999; Powell, 2009). Part of Heather’s self-concept included negative characteristics that influenced her ability to explore careers and contributed to her elimination of career options that she liked because she did not anticipate success.

Identity in Education

Heather’s overall self-concept was influenced somewhat by her learning disabilities. However, this section focuses on her identity in the specific domain of education. Self-concept and identity differ slightly; self-concept being the overall idea a person has of the self, where identity can focus on different domains like education, work, and social interactions (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011). In this section, I focus on Heather’s identity development specific to her educational experience.
There was a common theme when Heather talked about her educational experience. When she used positive words to describe subjects, they were related to her science and math interests. She had originally had a plan at the start off college and knew what she wanted to pursue:

I thought I knew exactly what I had wanted to do. I knew that biology for PT [physical therapy] would not be an easy career path, but I had talked to many schools specifically about these programs and they made me feel more comfortable about it.

Her interest in science remained as part of her educational identity, even after struggling with some negative self-concept ideas in high school. This influenced her original major decision. Research has suggested that a person’s interests and career decisions are influenced through identity development in college (Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999). Therefore, Heather’s identity development and knowing her interest in science, may have influenced her decision-making at first.

Though she was somewhat disappointed when she transferred to the public university, she still attempted to pursue a science field, “I knew that I still loved science and wanted to stay a biology major.” Her love for science continued to influence her decisions when she transferred and her description of science subjects were the only times throughout the interviews that she described loving a subject, “I loved genetics any time I had ever learned about it!” Due to the chemistry course, discussed in previous sections, she dropped out of biology and was ultimately deterred from science fields. This is another example of how the ICT feedback loop applies (Burke, 1991) because part of Heather’s identity was that she loved science but her interaction in the environment did not match her own personal view of herself and therefore caused her to change her behavior (i.e. changing majors and stop pursuing science fields).
Part of Heather’s educational identity was also how she felt about herself in the school environment and how she interacted in classrooms:

I have a hard time speaking up in class because I’m one of those people who sit back and listen. I don’t really like to talk out.

Heather was talking about her sociology courses and how she does not like speaking up, partly due to teacher interactions and the embarrassment she faced, which was described in the first superordinate theme. Not speaking up in class may also be due to lack of self-efficacy in the subject. If students are not confident in their abilities on a task (answering a question in class), then their motivation and achievement in that class may be effected (Chen & Pajares, 2010). Perhaps, Heather’s assessment of her abilities led her to believe she should not speak up in class, therefore influencing how she identified herself in class.

It seemed her motivation involving education was diminished by the time we spoke. In the first narrative Heather seems to be ready to get her education over with and not return to school:

Currently, since I’m not really liking college so much, I would say that it’s just… not a burden right now but more so like I just need to get though it so I can do what I really want to do or figure it out.

I tell people I may go back to get my masters when they ask, but that will never happen, because I am so done with school.

Heather says she is done with school. Unfortunately her motivation seems to have decreased due to a negative experience in college. Self-schemas represent a student’s experience and explain how they developed their identity and motives (Savickas, 2002). Heather’s self-schema or experience may have altered her identity because she was unable to succeed in a science field. Science subjects seemed to be incorporated into her educational identity but due to outside influences and a sometimes negative self-concept, her decision was changed. Again, autonomy is
important for a student’s motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and due to her experience shaping her educational identity, she lacked some autonomy in her decision-making, effecting her career outcomes and motivation to continue in higher education.

Another influence in Heather’s identity and college experience was her lack of feeling like she belonged in college, “I don’t know… I just feel like… I feel like college wasn’t for me.” Sense of belonging on college campuses has been shown to increase when students are satisfied with the major they chose and chose their major based on intrinsic interest rather than external motivations (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Heather has said she did not end up liking her final major, especially after finding out about all the reading that would be required of her. Perhaps her educational identity and feeling like she didn’t belong, was in part due to being in a major she did not enjoy.

How she viewed herself in a college environment affected her sense of belongingness as well. Here she describes feeling better at a smaller school environment:

I would’ve changed coming to [public university], because I worked a lot better in the smaller school and they were a lot more helpful with my reading learning disability.

[Public university] is a great college, it’s just so big for someone who, like me, is used to small environments. Like I went to private school for grade school and high school so I’m not used to the whole big environment.

Heather’s sense of belonging on campus may have changed when she transferred schools. It is possible that her educational identity included being successful in smaller environments, therefore altering how she viewed herself when she transferred to a large environment. Relatedness is also a component of self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), without feeling like she could relate to people or a large school environment, Heather may have lost some of her motivation and ability to identify with the college environment.
Realizing the Self

The final section in this superordinate theme discusses how Heather processed her experience and how it helped her realize more about herself. When I asked what Heather’s college experience meant to her, she seemed to have incorporated being educated into her identity:

I would also say that it means, like… I mean… I’m considering myself like an educated person.

Even though Heather did not quite figure out what she wanted to do for a career during college, she does mention several times that she’s learned more about herself through the experience and hopes that will help her in the future:

The education itself, just like… I don’t know I guess it would just like mainly come from my experience in college and that I’ve kind of already found out who I am now when it comes to this kind of stuff, so that’ll help me look for what job fits me best.

Here, Heather describes having a better sense of self through her college experience, which will hopefully assist her in exploring career options in the future. Savickas (2015) discusses the importance of individuals making meaningful connections about their self and social influences in order to choose a career path. With a stronger sense of self, Heather will hopefully move a few steps closer to be able to identify a pattern in her life and construct her career path.

When I reflected on what I heard Heather say about herself, it seems that she has differing self-efficacy for work versus school. She discussed the many jobs she’s held (dance teacher, lifeguard, and working at a preschool) and with all her work experience she sounded very confident, “I have many abilities, and have been good and successful at many of these different jobs with many different duties.” This description of herself felt very different to when she described herself in a school setting which was usually involving school not being “her thing” as she said, or feeling like she couldn’t succeed in engineering. Students who do have
high career self-efficacy increase in motivation, career planning, and decision-making (Komarraju et al., 2014). Heather does seem to have high self-efficacy in her prior work experience and interest when she describes working in hands-on science or math related fields. If she had chosen one of these paths based on her self-efficacy, she may have had more motivation in her career planning and school pursuits.

It seems her college experience has helped her realize more about herself and that sense of self will guide her in her future career decision-making:

I would say learning about myself too, because I learned a lot about myself. Before I was just listening to what my parents said and having gone through college and not being able to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, I’ve learned more about myself that I, I really like to do other things that aren’t necessarily a “learned” concept from college it’s more like a, like a trade, or something like that, like a craftsmanship.

She discusses here that college was partly her parents’ decision and that may be why she struggled making a career choice. Realizing this may help her be more autonomous in her decision-making in the future. Increasing autonomy is a part of self-determined motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which is linked to exploratory career behavior because students who are intrinsically motivated in their career decisions have been shown to plan better and find their career choices enjoyable (Shin & Kelly, 2013). In order for Heather to choose something based on intrinsic interest, she will have to know about herself and what interests her as well as build positive social relationships that support her competence and allow for to have agency in her decision-making. She seems to be moving towards that realization of self that will help her choose a career path she enjoys after college.

Making Meaning of Experience and Decisions

The fourth and final superordinate theme is most related to the overall theme in the literature; college students making meaning of their own experience in order to make career
decisions. Each section in this chapter is related to how Heather made career decisions and this final section discusses the process she went through trying to making meaningful connections that would help her decide on a career.

*Emotions in Decision-Making*

Heather had uncertainty with her final major and what career she wanted to pursue, which produced emotional reactions when describing her decision-making process. She said she is still unsure of a career and this has evoked negative emotions about school and her abilities in school:

> Now that I am graduating with a sociology degree, I am still unaware of what career I would like to pursue.

[Regarding perceptions of her sociology major] They tore me down, and the fact that I was still struggling in my classes because of all the reading just made me hate school and my abilities in school even more. I was also very envious that they were able, and smart enough to pursue engineering careers.

The lack of a decision about her career, even at the end of college, could have caused some of the negative feelings Heather describes. Due to work and life being integrated, Blustein (2008) stresses the importance of mental health being considered during career development. This section describes some of Heather’s psychological distress when trying to make decisions. There were many moments in the interviews where I noticed Heather’s use of strong language to describe looking back on her experience in college:

> I do not want my children or nieces and nephews going through the same hell I went through, and ending in so much debt with no clue where to go next, except for not school, because it has torn you down so much.

This comment stood out to me because she described her college process as going through hell and being torn down. Having a negative perception of college is likely related to Heather’s struggles she described earlier, especially her lack of being able to make her own
decisions due to the environment or social influences pushing decisions on her and negative perceptions from peers, teachers, and professors. Savickas (2004) discusses the importance of people constructing their own vocational identity based on reflection. It seems that Heather did not get the opportunity to reflect on her own experience to develop a vocational identity and make decisions that she wanted.

Heather describes other emotions when reflecting on her experience and present situation such as anger and sadness:

I think it is sad that I am in this position, and that I currently still have no clue what I want to do with my life.

It made me feel like, kind of angry, like I’m kind of mad that I’m still in college but I’ve come so far that I’m not going to waste my money and not actually get a degree.

Both of these statements were when Heather was discussing how she felt about where she is now in her life. Anger and sadness both seem to come from the fact that she has gone through college and still can’t decide on a career path. Psychological stress can come from college students regretting their career choice (Gati & Amir, 2010). Though Heather is still undecided on a career, there may be some regret with her choices in general because, as she mentioned before, she’s not sure that college was right for her in the first place. She does mention regret and questioning her decisions in the interviews:

So there was a time when I was like… should I really even be in college to try to get a degree when I could just like, do something else?

[Sighs] Once I graduate I will feel fine, I still feel like I kind of wasted time and money on college when I could have been doing something else, but I can’t live that way or else I’ll just regret everything I ever do so…

It seems she has some regret due to her college experience but discusses feeling better once she’s finished and trying not to look back on her experiences with regret. Financial strain and psychological stress have both been reported as issues student’s face when they regret their
career choices (Gati & Amir, 2010). Heather touches on both of these issues in this statement with worrying about how she spent her money on college and possibly regretting her choice to go to college. Autonomy is stressed as an important factor in career decision-making and mental health (Blustein, 2008), suggesting if Heather was able to make more autonomous decisions, it may have decreased psychological stress regarding career pursuits.

Mental health has been linked to career indecision due to the stress and anxiety further exacerbating a student’s career indecision (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007). There are several instances where Heather mentions stress and frustration being the main things she felt when trying to decide on a career path:

Stressful is probably the most important and… just, like… all over the place, not really been organized at all. And… I guess that’s about it, just very stressful and frustrating, too.

I am so frustrated with our education system, and career paths, but one thing I have learned is that I will not force my children into college right after high school.

Heather’s reflection often involved her talking about stress and frustration with college. Her uncertainty of a future career may be the cause of some of her negative emotions. Work is a main part of a person’s life which is why success in the work world influences a person’s well-being (Swanson & Fouad, 2014). Blustein (2008) views work as the “lifeblood” of an individual which includes a meaningful career that fits with their life; this explains why well-being and work are strongly linked. Mental health is clearly effected by career indecision and lack of autonomy, which could explain some of Heather’s emotions in her decision-making process.

**Major and Career Congruence**

Heather’s college experience involved changing majors multiple times as well as transferring schools after her freshman year. These changes were described in previous sections but it seems that change had a negative effect on Heather’s decisions. She said she was originally
happy at her first school and loved her biology major but the change to a different school ultimately affected her career path.

This section discusses Heather’s attempt at finding congruence between her major to help her pick a future career path. However, part of the issue seems to come from the changes forced upon her, eventually leading to her difficulty making connections throughout her experience. Career exploration from an ICT lens involves a person understanding their identity but also receiving confirmation from their environment that their identity makes sense in the context to commit to a decision (Burke, 1991). Heather’s experience in college started positively but she continued to receive lack of confirmation from her environment (transferring schools, lack of support in chemistry, negative social interactions) that kept informing her behavior and led to unhappiness with her final major decision.

Heather discussed the difficulty when trying to make connections with her experience and choosing a career path:

I’ve had a bunch of different jobs in my life that have like completely different [laughs] backgrounds and I’ve also like managed and stuff like that too, so… that, I had that experience that I was like, I just didn’t know where to put it all. So, I really didn’t know what I wanted to do.

It seems that Heather tried to draw from her prior work experience but it all seemed to be different and she had trouble seeing a pattern. Savickas (2004) calls this pattern a “life theme” where individuals are able to reflect on past experiences to construct a career path and find a pattern. Being able to identify a pattern is where Heather struggled at times, which could have affected her confidence in decision-making. She also had some concerns about her major connecting to her future career:

I have no idea what’s going to happen but… I know that I have jobs now, like I mean I work all the time when I’m not at school so I have plenty of jobs that I, I’ll be fine living if I don’t find a job with my career but if I didn’t, like or with my major, but if I didn’t
would be… really mad because I would be like ‘I wasted so much money and time’ and I, just doing what I used to do, making the same amount, so… my main thing is, I’m scared.

Many students face difficulty when transitioning their college major to a career plan (Roscoe & Strapp, 2009). In this passage, Heather describes wanting her major to have a role in her future career path, otherwise college would be a waste of her time and money. College students who are happy with their major often have an easier time choosing a career path (Chuang et al., 2009). Heather’s dislike of her final major may have influenced some of her confusion when trying to connect her experience to a future career.

At the end of our interviews, Heather did start to discuss trying to relate her major to a future career path:

I used to want to work with children with autism and be like a, kind of like an in-home person where you just help families cope with the autism and stuff like that so, that is still a possibility because I’ve seen that there’s jobs that you can get with a sociology degree.

It seems she is beginning to search for jobs that are linked to her major and is also incorporating her interest in working with children. She discusses what she plans to do to further explore career options after receiving her degree:

Something online that is like a website where you can type in your degree and it gives you possibilities of jobs. So… I mean I’m probably going to look at that and I’m probably just going to do some research online and ask around and I might actually go to my [public university] advisor, the sociology one, and see what he says, what jobs are possible, and just see, but… yea.

While there is still some uncertainty, Heather is beginning to form a plan to find a career path that she likes. Though she wasn’t completely satisfied with her major, she was able to learn about herself in the process of her college experience that will likely help her make future decisions:
It has… made me feel like I need to be more open in general about things, and not, I need to be more independent and not count on so much of what my parents say and what everybody else says.

One of the issues I noticed was Heather lacking autonomy in her decisions because she listened to what others said or because of environmental problems. Realizing that she wants to be more independent will hopefully help her make autonomous career decisions in the future, satisfying one of her psychological needs and improving her well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*Connecting Experiences*

The final conclusion I came to, after analyzing Heather’s interviews, was that she had a difficult time answering questions that were concerned with making meaning of her experience. The third interview was all about meaning-making so the first questions I asked were about what her college experience meant to her and what connections she could see throughout. She struggled answering as shown in each response below:

[Long pause] I don’t know… Like, like what does it mean, like why am I in college?

[Long pause]… I don’t know… I have no idea, because I really don’t know what I’m doing, so…

I don’t know… [long pause] I’m not sure, just the fact that I like, I don’t know… like are you thinking a common theme between each of the possible majors that I had or…?

Heather eventually figured out how to answer and she talked easily after the initial questions but it stood out to me that the only time she paused or didn’t know how to answer during all of our interviews was when I asked about making connections to experience and meaning. This is the last section because I believe Heather’s difficulty answering this question was due to a culmination of all the findings presented earlier. Her final decision on her major, after biology and education, was not based on any intrinsic interest as she describes here:
At this point I then went back to my exploratory advisor and talked to him about what I could do with the credits I had. I explained that I did not have the financial ability to be in school much longer. He explained that psychology or sociology would be my only way of possibly making it out almost on time. I realized I had more credits toward the sociology major which I took into consideration to getting out quicker than with a psychology degree.

Heather’s final major decision was not based on her interest but she had been in school for years already and described being frustrated with the process so decided based on finances and the credits she already had to graduate as soon as she could. This would explain some of Heather’s inability to make career decisions and her stress/frustration with college.

From an ICT perspective, it is possible that sociology was not congruent with Heather’s identity, like science seemed to be, and therefore she struggled making connections to it and the environment she was in (Burke, 1991). It could also explain her emotional reactions because intrinsic interest when choosing a major has been shown to increase many factors in a student like well-being, satisfaction, motivation, and achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schunk et al., 2013; Shin & Kelly, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Intrinsic motives have also been shown to lead to more career exploratory behavior in students like seeking out challenges, engaging in job searching, and engaging in tasks that will help them make career decisions (Blustein, 1988; Shin & Kelly, 2013). Heather’s struggles with making career decisions very well may have come from her major choice not being based on intrinsic interest.

In terms of making meaningful connections to experience, it is important for individuals to be able to understand themselves but also to identify patterns in their experience that help them make decisions (Savickas, 2002). Heather struggled making connections throughout her experience and this could be due to the fact that she did not receive support in identifying a pattern but also her final decision seems to have a lot to do with her meaning-making. It’s possible that because Heather did not chose her major for intrinsic reasons she still doesn’t see a
career pattern throughout her experience that aligns with her self-concept. The ICT loop helps a person stabilize their identity in order to make meaning of their experience (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011). In Heather’s experience, it seems that she was unable to complete the loop because her identity may not have fit with her final major and therefore did not make sense in her overall experience and lacked cohesion.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This section discusses how Heather’s experience supports the framework presented in chapter two. The first important concepts in the career exploration literature and career development theories are self-concept and identity. Both of these were evident in Heather’s experience as well. Personal identity is an essential part of identity control theory (ICT) in terms of how one’s identity is supported or deterred by their environment and social influences (Burke, 1991). Heather often did not receive support when she was in her biology major even though she was interested in science and it was part of her education identity. The ability to reflect and realize one’s vocational identity needs to be supported among students because they do not always have the skills to reflect on their experience at the beginning of college (Freedman, 2013). The chemistry department, faculty, and her peers all proved to be negative influences in terms of her abilities in science and math subjects, ultimately not supporting her academic identity or competence.

Different identities, interests, and experiences are incorporated to compose an individual’s self-concept (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011). Positive self-concept is developed through self-esteem and confidence and allows one to adapt to changing environments and make decisions (Powell, 2009). Heather had difficulty adapting to the large public university when she transferred, which was evident in her struggles with chemistry even though she did well at the small private college. She also had difficulty making career-related decisions throughout college. The narcolepsy and reading comprehension disability caused negative perceptions in high school and early college, which affected Heather’s self-concept when she talked about thinking she was lazy and didn’t belong in school. These perceptions affected her self-concept initially and may
have been some of the sources of her career indecision and struggle to adapt to changing environments.

Motivation and self-efficacy were both represented in the framework and Heather’s experience as well. Both have been shown to increase career exploratory behavior, such as researching different career options (Shin & Kelly, 2013). One major effect on Heather’s exploration was her lack of self-efficacy in engineering. She talked multiple times about being interested in the topic and jealous of her friends who were in engineering but then said she didn’t think she would have been successful in engineering. Clearly, her lack of self-efficacy in engineering deterred her from exploring careers in that field.

Intrinsic motivation is incorporated in both motivation theories discussed in the literature review; expectancy-value theory (EVT) and self-determination theory (SDT). Intrinsic value is described as having inherent enjoyment in a task or activity (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) and intrinsic goals more often lead to psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Heather’s original choice to pursue a biology major was based off of intrinsic motivation as she said multiple times that she was always interested in science and subjects that involved experiments. However, once she was deterred from chemistry and had to change majors from biology she chose sociology because the time commitment for special education was too long and she wanted to graduate as soon as possible. Heather’s final choice was based on external motives and could have caused some of her dissatisfaction with her final major and college experience in general, as well as her lack of motivation to engage in career exploration activities.

Various positive and negative effects of career decision-making were included in the framework. Heather experienced several of the negative effects due to social and environmental factors contributing to her career indecision. Psychological stress and anxiety can result from
regretting career choice and also further exacerbate career indecision (Gati & Amir, 2010; Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007). Heather reported experiencing many negative emotions that contributed to her psychological well-being such as anger, stress, frustration, and anxiety. Some of these emotions came from finishing college and still not knowing what career path to pursue and others were brought on by negative experiences with teachers, faculty, peers, and classroom environment; all of which contributed to her overall frustration with her college experience. Satisfaction with one’s major assists with exploring career options and feeling a sense of belongingness (Chuang et al., 2009). Heather lacked satisfaction with her final major and therefore remained undecided about her future career path and said college was not for her.

Implications

Heather’s experience throughout her education has been difficult and her interviews demonstrated how complex a student’s college major and career decisions can be. There were multiple factors that influenced Heather’s decision-making besides her own exploration and interest. Unfortunately Heather’s influences were often negative and demonstrate a need for more individual attention to each student when helping them discover career options.

Heather did not receive enough support from social influences in order to develop a positive self-concept. Instead, she perceived that her teachers and sometimes peers had negative assumptions about her academic abilities. Self-concept is unique to each person and developing a positive self-concept is imperative to a person’s career choices (Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999; Savickas, 2015; Super, 1980; Swanson & Fouad, 2014; Powell, 2009), which is further indication of a need to focus on developing a positive self-concept through social support and individual attention to each student’s experience.
The damage of making assumptions about students was clear based on how Heather described her self-concept development as being negative at times. The negative perceptions from parents, peers, teachers, and advisors affected her self-concept, self-efficacy, and motivation. Self-efficacy can increase self-determination in students, specifically with their career planning and decision-making (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Komarraju et al., 2014). For Heather, it seems that negative social perceptions of her abilities decreased her self-efficacy and motivation in school. This further supports the work done by Guay et al. (2003) and Guay et al. (2006); students need their autonomy and competence supported by social influences in order to make meaningful decisions about college and career.

Without her psychological needs being met, Heather’s decision-making may not have been based on her own competence or interest in a field but rather social influences and environment. The importance of intrinsic interest in relation to motivation is a key component in both EVT and SDT motivation theories (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Lack of intrinsic decision-making likely contributed to Heather’s unhappiness with her final major decision and lack of motivation and inability to decide on a career path (Gati & Amir, 2010; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Intrinsic motivation is important for a student’s sense of belongingness on campus and satisfaction with decision-making (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Soria & Stebleton, 2013) as well as mental health (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007). Heather was deterred from her original field of interest [science] due to learning environment and lack of support from social influences which led her to choose her final major based on financial limitations and when she could graduate with her current credits. Clearly, her final major was not based on intrinsic interest in sociology and may have been the cause of the stress, frustration, and anxiety that she describes in her experience. Heather’s experience demonstrates the need for university personnel
to understand a student’s interests and preferred environment in order to help guide them to make intrinsically motivated decisions as well as chose a major that supports their preference for learning.

There is a connection between Heather’s dissatisfaction with her final major and her difficulty incorporating her major into career exploration, making meaning of her experience, and deciding on a future career. This is where the need for personal identity and social congruence as described in ICT (Burke & Reitzes, 1991), is most evident. In order for Heather to achieve congruence, her personal identity would need to match the feedback she received from her social world, therefore producing meaningful behavior in her environment (Burke, 1991). Unfortunately, Heather’s educational identity seemed to be focused on science fields but her social influences (professors and peers) and environmental factors (classroom size and financial limitations) did not support that identity so she was unable to achieve congruence. Individuals often determine their behavior and meaningful experiences based on interactions between the person and environment (Cook et al., 2005). Heather graduated as a sociology major but likely had difficulty producing meaningful behavior in that environment (exploring careers and making meaning of experience) because it did not align with how she viewed herself academically. Swanson and Fouad (2014) further explain Super’s theory that self-evaluation and social influences are both imperative to how people shape their self-concept and see career fitting into that self-concept. Reflecting on past experiences and social interactions (Savickas, 2004) as well as achieving identity and social congruence are necessary to form a stable identity and make meaningful decisions (Burke, 1991). All three background theories are represented in Heather’s experience and indicate a need to help students incorporate their experience and self-concept in decisions, support them in their learning environment, and help them make meaning of their
experience so they can achieve self and social/environmental congruence and make career decisions that align with their identity.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it cannot be generalized in terms of the experience to any other student. Every student will have a unique self-concept and experience (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011) so using Heather’s experience to explain another student’s will not be useful. However, this study should serve as an example to help understand an individual student’s experience and learn how they make meaningful connections to choose a career path. This study should also demonstrate a need for individual attention to each student in order for them to incorporate their self-concept and experience into their career decisions.

Another limitation is that the study was done at the end of Heather’s undergraduate career and does not show how more individualized career assistance would have benefited her from the beginning of her undergraduate career. It is clear that there were many negative influences in Heather’s experience but unclear how changing those influences would have impacted her outcome. I hypothesize that, with more individual attention early on, she would have been more satisfied with her major choice and been able to make a meaningful career decision but further study would need to be done to determine the degree of impact each influence can have on students’ experiences and how more positive influences can change their career decision outcome.

Future study

This study demonstrates that there are barriers in high school and college that will likely affect a larger group of students’ career decision-making. For example, Heather was faced with negative assumptions from teachers and peers as well as parents pushing college on her. There
were also environmental influences such as preferred environment, disability resources, and financial limitations that altered Heather’s course. These factors likely affect other students as well and further quantitative study could provide more generalizable results on the impact of these influences.

Further qualitative study could also be beneficial in order to uncover other factors that were not involved in Heather’s experience. This study begins to address career exploration from a qualitative lens but more research in the area would further advance the inclusion of individual experiences in college career development (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Also, this study has demonstrated a need for individual focus on a student’s experience and self-concept to make meaningful career choices but further studies will need to find specific ways advisors, professors, and other college personnel can help students make meaningful career decisions. These specific methods will need to be tested with various samples of undergraduate students and then implemented in college programs to provide better career exploration opportunities and support for students.

Conclusion

Preferred environment, finances, access to resources, social influences, self-concept, motivation, and self-efficacy were all influences in Heather’s career exploration and decision-making. Her experience demonstrates that a student’s decisions in college can be complex and influenced by many different factors, sometimes out of the student’s control. With more individual attention, some of these issues could have been minimized and Heather would have been able to have more autonomy in her decisions. This study demonstrates that a student’s experience is based on many different influences that should be explored when assisting with major and career decision-making.
At the end of her undergraduate career, Heather’s sociology major did not align with her identity or past experience as was evident with her dissatisfaction of her major, stress, uncertainty, frustration, and the fact that she had difficulty making connections and choosing a meaningful career. In order for students to make meaningful career decisions that align with their identity, they will need more assistance connecting their past experience and self-concept to career exploration as well as tailoring assistance to the individual students in order to understand their personal influences, challenges, and how they make meaningful connections. Heather’s story emphasized the importance of making meaning of experience in order to realize one’s identity and self-concept in the context of planning a future career path.
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**Table 1**

Table 1: Grouping of Themes and Superordinate Themes in Data Analysis

Superordinate theme 1: Social influences in education
*Teachers and Professors*
- Negative teacher perceptions
- Embarrassment in education settings
- Lack of teacher support/understanding
- Perceptions of learning disability

*Advisors*
- Lack of advisor support/understanding
- Advisor help making connections

*Parents and Peers*
- Judgements from others
- Negative peer perceptions
- Pressure to attend college/college bias
- Negative family perceptions

Superordinate theme 2: Environmental effect on decision-making

*Learning environment*
- Lack of support
- Unsupportive learning environment
- Inconsistent learning environment
- Effect of environment on decisions

*Financial and disability resources*
- Access to resources
- Time and money spent on college
- Financial limitations

*Major/career education and awareness*
- Lack information about different majors
• Lack of career education and awareness
• Lack of career exploration opportunities
• Lack of assistance in exploring career options

Superordinate theme 3: Development of self-concept through experience

*Learning disability*
• Learning disability in identity
• Difficulty asking for and receiving help
• Disability affecting self-efficacy

*Education identity*
• Belongingness in college
• Interest and love for subjects
• Academic self-efficacy

*Realizing the self*
• Realizing own identity and self-concept
• Differing domain self-efficacy
• Intelligence in self-concept

Superordinate theme 4: Making meaning of experience and decisions

*Emotions*
• Uncertainty
• Stress and frustration
• Strong negative emotions about final major/decision
• Confusion
• Negative emotions about experience and decisions
• Emotions from decision-making

*Major and Career Congruence*
• Negative effects of change (major/college)
• Connecting major to career path

*Connecting Experiences*
• Problem making connections to experience
• Problem making meaning of experience

**Appendix 1: Ethical Reflection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Planning project and research questions</th>
<th>Recruiting participants</th>
<th>Collecting data</th>
<th>Analyzing data</th>
<th>Giving back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Keep the individual experiences</td>
<td>Respect the perspective, thoughts,</td>
<td>Determine meeting times that</td>
<td>Don't make assumptions about</td>
<td>Be clear about the differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Incorporate consent process into project plan</td>
<td>Develop a consent form to make sure the participant knows they aren't under any pressure and to establish an equal research relationship</td>
<td>Continue an equal research relationship by maintaining the initial agreements between the participant and researcher</td>
<td>Keep my own preconceptions of student experience out of the analysis process and trust the participant's story</td>
<td>When sharing results I will uphold the privacy conditions agreed upon with the participant</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-mindedness</td>
<td>Consider feedback from committee members</td>
<td>Be open about participant’s experiences that may not resemble my own or that I may not understand</td>
<td>Gently prompt without guiding participant in a certain direction and let the interviews be guided more by the participant</td>
<td>Look at the data with an open mind, let the interviews and narrative speak for themselves</td>
<td>Examine and consider using various channels to disseminate results of the study (i.e. career counselors, academic advisors, journals, college students, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Keep committee aware of progress</td>
<td>Be clear about the purpose of the study, what will be asked of the participant, and listen to what the participant has to say or</td>
<td>Allow for participant to fully answer interview questions in their own time and prompt them if they are stuck</td>
<td>Maintain open communication with committee to gain different perspectives of the data in the analysis process</td>
<td>Share resources, thoughts, and information with participant that might help them with future career planning or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Consent Form

Consent Form
Developed by the researcher: Jessica Bloomer
Affiliated with the University of Cincinnati
Faculty advisor: Marcus Johnson, PhD

Title of Study: A Narrative Reflection of an Undergraduate Student’s Career Exploration and Decision-Making Process throughout College

Purpose: The purpose of this research study is to explore the decision-making process of an undergraduate student in regards to career exploration throughout college. The focus on individual lived experience will be to demonstrate how a student can make meaningful connections from personal experiences to find an appropriate career path.

What will be asked of the participant?

You will be asked to write a narrative telling the story of how you explored major/career options throughout college and made decisions regarding your future career path. After the written portion we will meet for two interviews in one week. The first interview will focus on details of your experience and the second will focus on the meaning of your experience. The interviews will likely be 30 minutes to an hour and can be conducted in a location that is comfortable for you.

Consent

You are not required to participate in this study and can choose not to answer any questions at any time or remove yourself from the study at any time. There will be no consequences to you (academic or other) if you chose not to participate in or withdraw from this study.

Privacy

This data will be confidential and depending on your preference I will only use your first name or use a pseudonym when I write about this process in my thesis.

Please circle your preference for privacy: full name / first name only / pseudonym / other

Questions or concerns

If you have questions or concerns at any time, feel free to contact me or my faculty advisor using the information below:
[Insert contact information of researcher and researcher’s faculty advisor]

**Any additional requests:**

Please feel free to bring up any additional requests or terms you’d like to add to this consent form before signing and I will add them below. I want to be sure you feel comfortable as a participant and that we have open communication throughout this process.

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

Please sign below if you consent to participate and agree to the terms we discussed to maintain an equal research relationship. I will sign to indicate that terms were agreed upon after any alterations at your request.

Participant signature: _______________________

Participant printed name and contact information (phone number/email):

______________________________________________________________________________

Researcher signature: _______________________

**Appendix 3: Interview Prompts**

**Narrative writing prompt:**
Tell the story of your experience exploring major/career options and making decisions for your future career path.

**Interview 1 Details of experience:**
1. What was the career and major exploration process like for you?
2. What was your daily life like as an undergraduate student?
3. How did you feel about your current college major? Previous majors?
4. How did you feel about the students and professors in your major/area of interest?
5. Tell me about the people you met in college. Did they make a difference in your career exploration?
6. How did you feel about the college campus environment?

**Interview 2 Meaning of experience:**
1. Based on the story you’ve told about your exploration and decision-making experience in college, what sense does it make to you?
2. How do you think your experience led you to your present situation?
3. How do you feel about your exploration and decisions?
4. How do you feel about where you are now?
5. How do you feel about how you see your future career path going?
6. How would you describe your overall experience as an undergraduate student?