



# Career choice in management: findings from US MBA students

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This research aims to explore the role of values, family, and non-family influences on career choice in management among a sample of US MBA students.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data were collected using self-reported questionnaires from 109 students in a mid-sized university located on the west coast of the USA. The respondents were in the first semester of their MBA program. Males and females were almost equally represented in the sample.

**Findings** – This study did not find people (family and non-family) to be a predictor of career decisions. Instead, these decisions reflect the independent-self among US students in the career choice and exploration process. In particular, the students placed a strong emphasis on self-development (i.e. education). Most of the respondents aspired to careers, and not jobs or callings, reflecting a desire for career benefits and becoming wealthy. Men and women, with few exceptions, appear to have similar patterns in the factors affecting their career choice. Many of the factors found to have relationships with variables related to career choice in management also have strong cultural influences.

**Practical implications** – The predictor variables generally accounted for modest variance on most career outcomes, suggesting complexity of the career choice process. There were country differences in several predictor variables associated with a career choice in management. The US sample was different from other countries, suggesting the importance of national cultures and values in career choice and career expectations.

**Originality/value** – This study builds upon the factors previously reported to influence career choice in management.

**Keywords** Careers, Master of business administration, United States of America, Students

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Over 1,500,000 MBAs have been awarded in the United States since 1970 (US Department of Education, 2006).

An increasing number of students have chosen to pursue their university education in professional programs such as business, engineering, and law. Students receiving their degrees in these specializations are thought to have an advantage in obtaining jobs,

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and obtaining jobs that allow opportunities for career advancement and substantial levels of pay (Baruch *et al.*, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2002). Historically, counseling psychologists have emphasized the acquisition of occupational knowledge and knowledge about the self in career exploration and development (Blustein and Noumair, 1996; Gottfredson, 2002; Super, 1957; Ketterson and Blustein, 1997). In this study, we extend the theories and practice of career exploration and apply them to the multidimensional conceptualization of careers in the twenty-first century. This study is part of a larger research project on examining career choice in management, and represents responses from American students.

The present study seeks to examine the factors that were previously reported to influence career choice in management (Özbilgin *et al.*, 2005), among a sample of US students. In keeping with the theme of this special issue, we focus our research on graduate business (MBA) students. MBA students are generally thought to have realistic self-concepts and some career directions (Simmering and Wilcox, 1995). However, it is unclear whether it is an individual's values and priorities that result in their pursuit of an MBA, or whether pursuing an MBA provides one with values and priorities. What is known is that MBA students are "self-interested, utility-maximizers", and the pursuit of one's self-interest should not be obstructed (Walker, 1992). Consequently, many students are looking to an MBA degree to enhance their employability and to fast track their careers (Hay and Hodgkinson, 2006; Mihail and Elefterie, 2006).

Traditionally, MBA programs are expected to provide graduates with the knowledge and competencies to make them better managers and leaders, and also with occupational attainment and career success (Baruch *et al.*, 2005; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). In recent years, however, the role of MBA programs has increasingly been questioned (Starkey and Tempest, 2005). There are suggestions that a business education does not correlate with career success (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Employers are also complaining that business students are more interested in achieving their personal career goals than in learning and development (Pfeffer and Fong, 2004). Therefore, it remains unclear whether students pursue a business education for career advancement and the promise of a large salary, or for the mastery of the knowledge and competencies in pursuit of a management career as a profession. In order to understand the career choices of US students, it is important to go "inside their heads" to explore what factors influence their career choice in management, who may influence that choice, and how their values may affect their career decisions.

#### *Career exploration*

Career exploration involves the exploration of the "self" (self-exploration), and the environment (environmental exploration), in determining one's career choice (Flum and Blustein, 2000; Jordaan, 1963). Self-exploration is about exploring one's own interests, values, and experiences to obtain a deeper understanding of oneself in order to search for a career match. Environmental exploration, on the other hand, involves exploring career options by collecting information on jobs, organizations, occupations, and industries to allow for more informed career decisions (Zikic and Richardson, 2007). Together, self and environmental explorations provide information about how well one's interests and abilities match specific occupations, and thus facilitating person-environmental (P-E) fit, and career attainment (Ballout, 2007).

What is often neglected in the career exploration process is the notion of (cultural) self-construal. "Construal" is defined as "the relationship between the self and others" (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), and the influence of these relationships may be more important than the self, depending on the context of one's culture. For example, although an individual's career choice is a function of the individual's self-concept (Super *et al.*, 1963), the career decision is often considered a family matter in collectivist cultures (Ma and Yeh, 2005; Rehfuss and Borges, 2006; Shea *et al.*, 2007). Markus and Kitayama (1991) further constructed the idea of independent and interdependent self-construal to refer to the independent view of the self, and the view of the self with others. The independent-self is comprised of a unique set of internal attributes (e.g. traits, abilities, motives, values), and the individual behaves primarily as a consequence of these attributes. On the other hand, the interdependent-self takes into consideration the relevant other in the social context, and both the experience and expression of motives and emotions may be significantly shaped and governed by a consideration of others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) contended that the American culture as well as some Western European cultures exemplify the independent-self, while the Asian, African and Latino cultures exemplify the interdependent-self. For example, Pohlmann and Hannover (2006) reported that the role of family members was more strongly associated with the interdependent-self rather than the independent-self. This notion also parallels that of the cultural distinction between individualism and collectivism (Yang *et al.*, 2006).

The concept of independent and interdependent-self construal has been shown to be related to career choice and decisions. For example, Ketterson and Blustein (1997) found no association between career exploration and parental attachment (interdependent self-construal) among US students. Similarly, Downie *et al.* (2006) found individuals with an independent self-construal orient towards personal-goal pursuit, whereas individuals with an interdependent self-construal prioritize group goals over personal ones. Rehfuss and Borges (2006) also argued that career decisions that are based upon others' expectations can be problematic in contemporary American society.

The American culture of attending to the self, the freedom of choice, and the importance of asserting one's self is deeply rooted in individualism (Hofstede, 1983; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, it should come as no surprise for US MBA students to make career choices consistent with this cultural orientation. In contrast, those from a more collectivist culture are more likely to attend to the others, emphasize the importance of harmony, and as a result receive influence from other sources, such as family members and relatives, in their career decisions. Furthermore, Özbilgin *et al.* (2005) also found that chance, luck, and faith played a role in career choice among Turkish respondents, suggesting that collectivist cultures may also place more emphasis on external circumstances.

Therefore, it is only logical to find a difference in cross-national career choice and development, considering the predominant role of cultures in regulating the cognition and motivation of individuals (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Consistent with this view, it is expected that students from more individualistic societies, such as Americans, will place a greater emphasis on self-concepts, such as relying on oneself and assigning personal responsibility for the direction of their careers (Bright *et al.*, 2005). This usually involves taking charge and setting personal goals (self-determination process),

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and having expectations when selecting management as a career choice (Bright *et al.*, 2005; Downie *et al.*, 2006; Flum and Blustein, 2000).

### *Career goals and success*

One of the fundamental goals of career exploration is to find career success and a personally meaningful work life (Flum and Blustein, 2000). Career success is defined as the accumulation of positive work and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Seibert and Kraimer, 2001). Researchers (e.g. Feldman and Ng, 2007; Heslin, 2005a, b; Ng *et al.*, 2005) often operationalize career success as either objective or subjective success. Objective career success is directly observable, measurable, and verifiable (Hughes, 1937, 1958), and includes such things as pay, promotions, and occupational status. This form of success often typifies MBAs, where the degree itself is widely promoted as the credential for access to a "successful managerial career, characterized by mobility up a corporate ladder" (*cf.* Heslin, 2005b).

In contrast, subjective career success can only be experienced by the person engaged in his or her career. It is defined by an individual's reactions to his or her unfolding career experiences, and is often typified by how satisfied one is with one's job (Hughes, 1937, 1958). Although most research on career success has focused on objective measures of success (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), there is increasing awareness that subjective measures of success are equally important with the emergence of protean careers (e.g. Granrose and Baccili, 2005; Quigley and Tymon, 2006), and with the changing nature of work (e.g. independent work, global careers, work-life balance) (Feldman and Ng, 2007; Sargent and Domberger, 2007; also see Burke and Ng, 2006, for a review). For example, several large-scale studies conducted in the USA found that managers and professionals tend to ultimately value work-life balance and contributing to a worthwhile cause much more than power, prestige, money, and advancement (Heslin, 2005b).

Given the subjective nature in which people are attaching meaning to their work and defining their career success, researchers (e.g. Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Duffy and Sedlacek, 2007; Heslin, 2005b; Wrzesniewski, 2002) have also labeled an individual's experience with work as either a job, a career, or a calling. Each of these work orientations brings different meanings of work to individuals. For example, those with a job orientation work primarily for money. It is seen as a means to an end, and the goal is to obtain sufficient financial resources in order to enjoy time away from work. In contrast, those with a career orientation make a deeper investment in their work, and mark their achievements not only through financial returns, but also through advancements through the occupational ladder. This advancement brings with it power, prestige, and status, which is often the *raison d'être* of MBAs. Finally, those with a calling orientation work not for financial gains or career advancement, but instead for the fulfillment that the work brings the individual. The goal of a calling is to gain fulfillment from the work performed, which is not unlike the psychological success described in a protean career. Those with a calling also often want to make a personal impact, and feel their work makes the world a better place (*cf.* Wrzesniewski, 2002).

In addition, Douglas Hall's (1976) *Careers in Organizations* described the twenty-first century career as a "Protean career" in which the individual, and not the organization, is in charge of managing the career process. A protean career is a lifelong series of experiences, skills, learnings, transitions, and identity changes. Career

decisions are driven by an individual's personal values, and a major characteristic of a protean career is that an individual's career choice and the search for career fulfillment is internal (i.e. psychological success) rather than external (Hall, 1996; Hall and Moss, 1998). This is in contrast with the old career contract, in which the goal was climbing the corporate ladder, and making a lot of money. Although the emergence of protean careers is supported by a number of studies (see McDonald *et al.*, 2005, for a review), the question is whether a traditional career, characterized by vertical advancement and external rewards and aspired to by MBA students, is dead.

#### *The present study*

In light of the changing nature of work, it is important to understand the career choice and exploration and how they relate to the multidimensional conceptualizations of careers in the twenty-first century. This study is part of a larger research project which seeks to explore the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of people's career choice in management. The project represents an undertaking of an international, interdisciplinary group of scholars who jointly constructed the research questionnaire. The instrument included factors and people that influenced the choice of a career in management, including culture (such as individualism versus collectivism), the influence of relationships with certain people (in one's family and work), and various goals and aspirations from a management career. Given that the American view of the "self" is most typical of men, and less descriptive of women in general (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Hardin *et al.*, 2006), we extend this investigation to examining the possibility of gender differences in career choice and goals. Thus, this study explores the following research questions:

*RQ1.* What factors influence aspects of the career choice process and career goals among US MBA students?

*RQ2.* Do men and women in the USA exhibit a similar pattern of relationships?

### **Methodology**

#### *Procedure*

One hundred and nine MBA students participated in the study during the fall term of 2006. The students were enrolled in introductory graduate management courses (MBA) at two large universities in the USA. A majority of students were beginning the first term of their respective MBA programs. The course instructors administered the questionnaire surveys during class time. Participation was voluntary and the students did not receive course credit for participation. The students also provided their contact information (e-mail address) and expected date of graduation on a separate sheet for a follow-up (final term) study.

#### *Respondents*

Table I presents selected demographic characteristics of the sample. Slightly over half (51 percent) were male, most were 25 years of age or older (45 percent), single (72 percent), full-time students (65 percent), in their first year (77 percent), and had varied career goals. In addition, the sample included various nationalities and respondents had mothers and fathers in a wide range of occupations (e.g. employees, managers, self-employed).

	<i>n</i>	Percentage	Career choice in management	
<i>Sex</i>				
Male	52	51.4	<b>351</b>	
Female	49	48.6		
<i>Student status</i>				
Full-time, no job	46	43.8		
Full-time, part-time job	22	21.0		
Part-time, part-time job	37	35.2		
<i>Year of study</i>				
Starting first year	76	77.6		
Starting second year	15	15.3		
Third year	7	7.1		
<i>Future career</i>				
A job	12	11.9		
A career	76	75.2		
A calling	11	10.9		
Other	2	2.0		
<i>Age</i>				
21-25	46	44.7		
26-30	25	24.2		
31-35	26	15.6		
36 or older	16	15.6		
<i>Marital status</i>				
Single	74	71.8		
Married	29	28.2		
<i>Career goal</i>				
Management	30	29.4		
Own own business	28	27.5		
Entrepreneurship	4	3.9		
Career	17	16.7		
Career change	5	4.9		
Financial	15	14.7		
Other	3	2.9		

**Table I.**  
Demographic characteristics

### Measures

*Personal demographic characteristics.* A number of personal demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, year of study) were measured by single items (see Table I).

*Citizenship.* This was measured by a five-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.53$ ) developed by Vigoda (2002). Respondents indicated how frequently they had taken part in each activity in their day-to-day life (e.g. "I have done volunteer work for the community") on a seven-point scale (1 = never, 7 = regularly).

*Individualism-collectivism.* These were measured using a scale developed by Triandis and Gelfand (1998). Individualism was measured by eight items ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ); respondents

indicated their agreement with each item (e.g. "I'd rather depend on myself than on others") on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Collectivism was also measured by eight items ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ). One item was "I feel good when I cooperate with others". Responses were made on the same seven-point agree-disagree scale.

*Individual influences on career choice*

Respondents rated the influence of nine individuals (e.g. father, mother, another relative, friends, teacher/mentor) on their career choice on a seven-point scale (1 = no influence at all, 7 = great influence). Factor analysis using the principal components procedure with Varimax rotation yielded two factors having eigenvalues greater than 1.0 accounting for 58 percent of the common variance. One factor, "Family", had five items ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ); the second factor, "Non-family", had four items ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ).

*Expectations of MBA program.* Respondents indicated their expectations of receiving ten different benefits from their business education (e.g. knowledge, managerial competency, social prestige, salary gain, career advancement) on a seven-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = definitely). Factor analysis of these responses yielded two factors accounting for 52 percent of the common variance. One factor, "Salary and advancement", had 45 items ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ); the second factor, "Knowledge and competence", had four items ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ).

*Types of career.* Two types of career (protean, traditional) were assessed by scales developed by Hall and Mirvis (1996) and Hall and Moss (1998). The protean career ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ) was measured by six items (e.g. "I navigate my own career according to my plans"). The traditional career ( $\alpha = 0.26$ ) was measured by four items (e.g. "Career success means having job security within one organization"). Respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The measure of the traditional career was not considered in the analyses that follow due to its low reliability.

*Factors influencing career choice*

Respondents indicated their agreement with the extent to which 14 factors (excluding the direct influence of other people) influenced their career choice. These items were developed by Özbilgin *et al.* (2005). Responses were made on a seven-point scale of importance (1 = not at all important, 7 = very important). Factor analysis using the principal components procedure with Varimax rotation produced four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 accounting for 60 percent of the common variance. These were:

- (1) "Own education" (five items,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ), which included "my education and training", and "training and education opportunities in the career";
- (2) "Career benefits" (four items,  $\alpha = 0.72$ ), which included "quality of life associated with this career", and "promotion opportunities associated with this career";
- (3) "Chance" (three items,  $\alpha = 0.63$ ), which included "chance, luck or circumstances" and "lack of access to other career outcomes"; and
- (4) "Free choice" (two items,  $\alpha = 0.39$ ), which included "I believe I have a free choice in making my career decisions".

This last measure was dropped from further analysis given its low reliability.

*Value and success in the MBA program.* Respondents indicated how accurately eight items described their school program and school work on a seven-point scale (1 = definitely no, 7 = definitely yes). Items included "I feel that my school work is important", "My efforts are well rewarded", and "I am committed to my school work". Factor analysis of these responses indicated two factors having eigenvalues greater than 1.0 accounting for 62 percent of the common variance. The second factor had only one item and it was dropped from further consideration. The remaining factor that was relevant, "School value", had seven items ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ).

*Other career outcomes.* The survey contained four other single items that could be considered important career outcomes. These were: "Career success means making my mark", "Career success means becoming very wealthy", "I thrive on change", and "Do you view your future career as (1) a job, (2) a career, or (3) a calling?". Respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table II presents the means, standard deviations, sample sizes and inter-correlations of all variables used in the study.

### *Gender differences*

Male and female respondents were compared on all measures used in the study using one-way ANOVA. Only one difference reached statistical significance at the 0.05 level of confidence; females scored significantly higher on chance as a factor in explaining their career choice. Two of the differences approached statistical significance at the 0.10 level of confidence: men were more likely to be married, and they were also more like to want to be wealthy. In light of the minor differences, the two groups of respondents were combined in all further analyses.

### *Managers versus entrepreneurs*

Students indicating a desire for a managerial career and those desiring an entrepreneurial career were compared on all study variables using one-way ANOVA. No statistically significant differences were found, reflecting in part the relatively small sample sizes ( $n = 30$  and  $32$ , respectively).

### *Regression analyses*

A number of hierarchical regression analyses were undertaken to better understand predictors of various career outcomes. In all cases, two blocks of predictors were entered in a specified order. The first block of predictors included personal demographic characteristics ( $n = 5$ ): age, sex, marital status, work status, and year in the MBA program. The second block of predictors varied in different analyses. It included the two personal influences (family, non-family), the two expectations from their educational program (salary and advancement, knowledge and competence), the measures of value and success in their MBA program, the three individual values (individualism, collectivism, citizenship), and the three non-people influences on their career choice (education, career benefits and free choice). The career outcome variables



**Table II.**  
Means, standard  
deviations, and  
correlations

	<i>n</i>	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Non-family	108	18.42	6.43	1.00									
2 Family	108	15.89	5.78	0.410**	1.00								
3 School value	108	43.45	6.95	0.155	0.282**	1.00							
4 Salary	108	28.81	4.74	0.052	0.039	0.190*	1.00						
5 Knowledge	108	22.83	4.47	0.131	0.172	0.334**	0.247**	1.00					
6 Education	108	28.31	4.48	0.017	0.187	0.140	0.208**	0.259**	1.00				
7 Quality of life	108	22.71	3.87	0.189	0.037	0.043	0.422**	0.199*	0.346**	1.00			
8 Love	108	11.06	2.54	0.106	0.206*	0.176	0.088	0.206*	0.233	0.302**	1.00		
9 Access	108	13.46	3.93	0.037	0.095	0.063	0.174	-0.058	0.144	0.305**	0.049	1.00	
10 Charity	108	23.39	4.76	0.069	0.147	0.284**	0.128	0.287**	0.093	0.120	0.218*	-0.088	1.00
11 Individualism	108	40.19	6.41	-0.003	0.389**	0.389**	0.093	0.312**	0.312**	0.281	0.304**	0.025	0.454**
12 Protean career	107	35.07	4.68	0.034	0.114	0.457**	0.225*	0.267**	0.310**	0.256**	0.129	0.077	0.282**
13 Traditional career	107	2.96	1.91	-0.052	-0.042	0.063	0.024	-0.113	-0.171	0.210*	0.124	0.140	-0.016
14 Gender	101	22.07	7.27	0.108	0.032	0.076	0.129	0.096	-0.037	0.093	0.057	0.246*	0.105
15 Age	103	1.49	0.502	0.062	-0.180	0.132	-0.054	0.038	-0.008	-0.086	-0.022	-0.147	0.049
16 Current employment	105	28.77	6.38	-0.103	-0.137	0.092	-0.006	-0.088	0.015	-0.117	-0.139	0.035	0.144
17 Future career	99	1.91	0.89	-0.020	-0.035	0.145	-0.129	-0.015	-0.127	-0.045	0.321**	-0.112	0.110
18 Marital status	103	1.99	0.48	-0.074	-0.050	-0.029	-0.016	-0.154	0.028	-0.003	0.044	-0.065	0.117
19 School status	92	1.30	0.48	-0.118	0.012	-0.029	-0.048	-0.001	0.060	-0.065	-0.118	-0.157	0.091
20 Making mark	107	1.68	1.32	0.051	0.087	0.292**	0.214*	0.110	0.255**	0.199**	0.293**	0.019	0.195*
21 Be wealthy	106	5.82	1.29	0.032	-0.010	-0.038	0.204*	-0.043	0.224*	0.434**	0.111	0.164	-0.109
22 Thrive change	106	5.15	1.51	0.009	-0.072	0.106	0.126	0.116	0.308**	0.278**	0.214*	0.023	0.204*

(continued)

	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
1 Non-family												
2 Family												
3 School value												
4 Salary												
5 Knowledge												
6 Education												
7 Quality of life												
8 Love												
9 Access												
10 Charity												
11 Individualism	1.00											
12 Protean career	0.420**	1.00										
13 Traditional career	0.040	0.132	1.00									
14 Gender	0.015	-0.116	-0.066	1.00								
15 Age	0.073	0.123	0.045	-0.155	1.00							
16 Current employment	-0.154	0.102	0.019	-0.071	0.403**	1.00						
17 Future career	0.036	0.085	-0.033	0.044	0.061	0.165	1.00					
18 Marital status	0.145	-0.030	0.153	-0.187	0.448**	0.196*	-0.081	1.00				
19 School status	0.096	-0.047	0.012	0.012	0.258*	0.174	-0.047	0.204	1.00			
20 Making mark	0.193*	0.354**	.197*	-0.090	-0.109	-0.010	0.276**	-0.045	-0.126	1.00		
21 Be wealthy	-0.031	0.173	0.399**	-0.183	-0.168	-0.138	-0.221*	-0.031	-0.115	0.338**	1.00	
22 Thrive change	0.293**	0.309**	0.151	-0.143	0.137	0.008	0.175	0.038	-0.113	0.400**	0.277**	1.00

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed); \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed)

Table II.

were protean career, making a mark, becoming wealthy, thriving on change, and their work orientation (i.e. a job, a career, or a calling).

When a block of predictors accounted for a significant amount of incremental explained variance on a given variable, individual measures within these blocks having significant and independent relationships with the dependent variable were identified ( $p < 0.05$ ).

#### *Influence of people*

Family and non-family relationships were found to have no significant relationship with any of the five career outcomes considered.

#### *Expectations from an MBA program*

Expectations showed an increment in explained variance on only one of the five career outcomes: the endorsement of a protean career ( $R^2 = 0.028$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.135$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Respondents rating knowledge and competence more highly indicated stronger endorsement of a protean career ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

#### *Value and success in the MBA program*

Respondents' assessments of their value and success in their educational program showed an increment in explained variance on two of the five career outcomes (protean career ( $R^2 = 0.028$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.155$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and making one's mark ( $R^2 = 0.055$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.047$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Respondents reporting greater value and success in their academic program also endorsed the protean career more strongly ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and rated making their mark more highly ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

#### *Individual values*

The individual values block (individualism, collectivism, citizenship) accounted for a significant increment in explained variance on three of the five career outcomes (endorsing a protean career ( $R^2 = 0.028$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.341$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), making your mark ( $R^2 = 0.055$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.193$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and thriving on change). Students scoring higher on individualism and students scoring higher on collectivism more strongly endorsed the protean career ( $\beta = 0.32$  and  $0.35$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , respectively). Students scoring higher on individualism more strongly endorsed making your mark ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Although the individual values block accounted for a significant increment in explained variance on thriving on change, none of the individual values had an independent and significant relationship with this career outcome, however.

#### *Other factors influencing career choice*

The three non-people factors influencing career choice (education, career benefits, and chance) showed a significant increment in explained variance on four of the five career outcome measures (protean career ( $R^2 = 0.028$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.192$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), career benefits ( $R^2 = 0.055$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.097$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), becoming wealthy ( $R^2 = 0.060$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.158$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and thriving on change ( $R^2 = 0.049$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.099$ ,  $p < 0.05$ )), all except the nature of the career goal (a job, a career, or a calling). First, respondents rating education more highly endorsed a protean career more strongly ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Second, respondents rating education more highly also endorsed making a mark more strongly ( $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Third, respondents rating career

benefits more highly also endorsed becoming wealthy more strongly ( $\beta = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Finally, respondents rating education more highly also believed they thrived on change ( $\beta = 0.239$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus ratings of education had a significant relationship with four of the five career outcomes.

### Discussion

Contrary to studies done in other countries, and even in North America (e.g. Punnett *et al.*, 2007), the male and female students in this sample were highly similar, with two exceptions:

- (1) women scored higher than men on the role of chance in explaining their career choice; and
- (2) men were more likely than women to want to be wealthy.

These findings should not come as a surprise, as they have been reported previously in other studies. For example, Hardin *et al.* (2006) found that women, scoring higher on interdependence, emphasize interpersonal relationships more than men, including embracing traditional gender roles (Kirchmeyer, 2006), and thus place less emphasis on career orientation. Men, on the other hand, focus more on material success and less on relationships than women even at similar occupational attainments (Dyke and Murphy, 2006). Taken together, these findings suggest that men may be more career-oriented than women, arising in part out of differences in the independent-interdependent selves (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Despite the other similarities observed between men and women in this study, caution should be given when interpreting the findings in light of the small sample size.

There were some effects of predictor variables on the various career outcomes, but not on others, suggesting perhaps the complexity in understanding the choice of management as a career. People (both family and relatives, and non-family members) had relatively limited effects on the various career outcomes. This finding is consistent with more individualistic societies and the emphasis on the "self" (see Blustein and Noumair, 1996), given the sample was comprised of US students. On the other hand, non-people factors influencing career choice (particularly education) had relationships with several measures of career outcomes (protean career, making a mark, and thriving on change). This finding is not surprising, since students who pursue an MBA are a self-select group with some career directions and expectations for positive career outcomes (Simmering and Wilcox, 1995). It is also noteworthy to find that students who scored higher on own education ("my own education and training") also endorsed a protean career (defined as a career that is self-managed, and self-directed), further reinforcing the individualism and self-concepts (relying on oneself and assigning personal responsibility for one's career directions) of US students.

Respondents who indicated knowledge and competence as key expectations from their MBA programs, as well as those reporting greater value and success in their programs, also endorsed a protean career and making their mark, while those who indicated career benefits as key expectations aspired to become wealthy. This finding is in line with those reported by Sargent and Domberger (2007). Specifically, they found young adults who endorsed a protean career also emphasized making a contribution to society and maintaining work-life balance, while those who valued a traditional career

rejected such values (and instead preferring vertical advancements and financial rewards).

Finally, most respondents also indicated their work orientation as a career, suggesting that most aspire to occupational advancement, increased personal power, prestige, and social status, and higher esteem (Wrzesniewski, 2002). Additionally, respondents who are more individualistic also desired making a mark and thriving on change, characteristics of a career orientation. Employers are, therefore, quite correct in criticizing business schools for overemphasizing the “career enhancing” and “salary increasing” aspects of business education, and not placing quite enough emphasis on the learning and development of management knowledge (Pfeffer and Fong, 2004).

In summary, this study did not find people (both family and non-family) to be a predictor of students’ career decisions. These decisions reflect the independent-self among US students in the career choice and exploration process. Students also place a strong emphasis on self-development (e.g. education) in their search for occupational attainment and in achieving their career goals, suggesting a trend towards a protean career. The types of success aspired by MBA students are indicative of a career orientation, characterized by a desire for career benefits and becoming wealthy. Men and women appear to have more similar patterns in the factors affecting their career choice, suggesting few gender differences. Many of the factors found to have relationships with variables related to career choice in management have strong cultural influences. Therefore, the potential importance of cultural values and expectations in career choices cannot be underscored.

#### *Limitations and directions for future research*

Some limitations of the study should be noted to put the findings into a larger context. First, all data were collected using self-reported questionnaires, raising the possibility that the findings were affected by common method variance. Second, some of the measures, although found to be reliable in other studies, had low reliabilities here. This could be due in part to translation issues experienced in cross-national and cross-cultural research. Third, the sample was relatively small ( $n = 109$ ), limiting some of the analyses that were undertaken. Hence, caution should be taken when interpreting the findings from this study. Fourth, students attending this business school may not be representative of US MBA students in general. There is a need to replicate the findings, both here and in other countries, to provide a more complete understanding of management as a career choice among MBA students. Future research should involve a larger number of MBA students from a wider array of universities. In addition, given increasing worker immigration and the cultural diversity of the workforce, attention should be paid to race and ethnicity as potential factors in career exploration and development.

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