Vocational Identity Formation of College Students in Macau

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Forming a vocational identity is a main developmental task during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This study examined identity formation of college students in Macau, China, based on a neo-Eriksonian identity formation framework. Data were collected through semistructured in-depth interviews of 19 college students in Macau. All data were transcribed and analyzed by thematic analysis. Results indicated 2 themes, each with several subthemes that describe participants’ vocational identity formation process. This study contributes to the vocational identity literature by integrating a collaborative perspective into the discussion of vocational exploration and revealing unique issues of vocational identity formation in a non-Western and developing society.

Keywords: vocational identity formation, vocational exploration, college students, Macau, Chinese culture

Macau, a Special Administrative Region of China, consists of Macau Peninsula (attached to mainland China) and two islands. With very limited natural resources, Macau’s economic development is centered on luxury casinos. It is now touted as the “Las Vegas of the East” because of its prosperous development in its gambling industry. Many high school students graduate or even drop out of school to work in casinos to earn a living (Chang, Jin, Vong, & Sze, 2009; So, Chan, & Hong, 2006). Within this context, we examine how Macau’s adolescents form their personal career identities in a rapidly changing society.

Economic and Social Context in Macau

Macau, with a population of 646,800 (Statistics and Census Service, 2015), was a former Portuguese colony until its handover to China in 1998. Macau provides a typical context for examining a mixture of Western and Chinese values in a changing economic and social environment. The liberalization of the gambling sector since 2003 has resulted in dramatic economic growth and massive expansion. The dynamic nature and growing complexity of adult roles in modern societies, including
Macau, have made it more difficult and stressful for emerging adults to develop a vocational identity (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

The career development of emerging adults in Macau has become a critical and challenging issue. Environmental factors have been found to impose barriers but also offer opportunities to an individual’s identity formation (Archer, 1992, 1994; Goossens & Phinney, 1996; Yoder, 2000). For example, Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes, and Shanahan (2002) found that emerging adults’ vocational development is very sensitive to macroenvironmental factors, such as the economic structure and labor market. Leung (2002) argued that the specific educational tracking system and strict college entrance policy in Chinese societies have created indigenous challenges to vocational education and counseling. Thus, investigations on how collective values and environmental factors influence college students’ vocational identity formation can guide career education, counseling, and policy making for development of emerging adults in these areas.

**Individual Versus Collective Values**

Cultural differences in people’s daily lives yield differences in their identity processes (Hesketh & Rounds, 1995; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Some researchers have argued that individualistic cultures tend to result in an emphasis on the use of private self-evaluations, reinforcing autonomy and independence in the development of identity. By contrast, in collectivist cultures, self-evaluation and identity are fostered through group membership, whereby private or individual goals are subordinated to those of the group (Hesketh & Rounds, 1995; Ho, 1995). It seems that people from collectivist cultures prefer to view identity more often as a group project than do people from individualistic cultures (Savickas, 2011a). Personal identity for people in Eastern cultures seems easier to be influenced by group values.

The unique social orientation of Chinese people has been discussed as a typical reflection of collectivism and social behavior in Chinese societies (Yang, 1995, 2003; Yang & Lu, 2008). As supportive evidence, research indicates that in Chinese societies, significant others can be highly involved in the vocational exploration and decision-making process of emerging adults (Cheung & Arnold, 2010). Interpersonal considerations are valued more than person-centered factors in choosing one’s vocational path (Lin, Huang, Chiu, & Jiang, 2007).

According to Yang, Liu, Chang, and Wang (2010), individuals in changing modern Chinese societies embrace individualistic values and hold a traditional social orientation in the process of globalization. They may develop a self-system compatible with both collectivism and individualism in their daily behaviors. In contrast, Kwan (2000, 2009) emphasized that increased psychological tension may exist between forsaking/asserting individualistic aspects of self and confronting/conforming to perceived expectations or constraints of the collective group. Empirical studies have shown that coexistence, integration, and conflict between individualistic values and social orientation all now exist in career and identity formation among emerging adults and adults in Chinese societies (Leung, Hou, Gati, & Li, 2011; Lu, 2003; C. K. Wang & Luo, 2010; H. H. Wang, 2002). Although the interaction between collectivist and individualistic values in
Chinese emerging adults’ vocational development has been initially discussed, rarely have discussions been made on how social orientation influences the vocational exploration process from the perspective of identity formation.

**Need for Investigating Vocational Identity Formation in Non-Western Societies**

Forming a solid vocational identity is well recognized as one of the main developmental tasks during the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Blustein, 1994; Kroger, 2007; Savickas, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Vondracek, 1995). Identity reflects how individuals think of themselves in relation to various social roles, including occupation, ideology, and family (Erikson, 1968, 1956/2008; Schwartz, 2001). The construct of vocational identity has been incorporated into many major career development theories with divergent perspectives on its conceptualization (e.g., Holland, 1985; Savickas, 2005; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996; Tiedeman & O’Hara, 1963). In general, vocational identity can be defined as how the self is related to an individual’s vocational role that contributes to a sense of personal continuity and connections with the environments in which the individual exists (Erikson, 1968, 1956/2008; Savickas, 2011a, 2011b).

There is a need to explore identity formation in non-Western societies to enrich understanding of identity formation in multicultural societies (Schwartz, 2001, 2005). More and more scholars have pointed out that identity formation in developing countries with collectivist values is different from that in developed Western societies that emphasize individualistic values. Empirical studies on vocational identity formation have been focused mainly on Western societies in the last decades. Little has been done in other sociocultural contexts (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

Existing literature on Western societies also tended to conceptualize vocational exploration as an individual project, often neglecting the interaction between individuals and the communities in which they live and relevant cultural and environmental contexts (Schwartz, 2001; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). To capture the complexity of vocational identity formation in developing societies emphasizing collectivist values, researchers have advocated a collaborative perspective on vocational exploration as both a personal psychological process and a social interaction shaped by various social contexts (Flum, 2001; Mortimer et al., 2002; Vignoles et al., 2011). Therefore, we aimed to investigate vocational identity formation of college students in Macau through their vocational exploration experiences using a collaborative perspective. We also examined the influence of collective cultural values and the changing social and economic contexts.

**Exploration as a Collaborative Vocational Identity Formation Process**

On the basis of Marcia’s (1966) identity status paradigm, Grotevant (1987) first considered exploration in career decision making as the core process of identity formation. Meijers (1998) and Savickas (2005, 2011a) pointed out that one not only collects information about self and the world of work in this problem-solving process, but also interprets facts or situations encountered with regard to one’s whole life story. They believed that one needs to make meaning with exploration.
experiences and locate these experiences in one’s life story to construct a vocational role. Reconstructing the meaning of those experiences would facilitate an individual’s maturity to balance self-requirement and external social demands.

Flum (2001) posited that interdependence is essential to individual career development. From an interdependent perspective, individuals connect to each other in the process of becoming members of a work group or work community on which they depend. Autonomy and relatedness in identity formation should not be opposed to each other. Therefore, “boundary issues” are even more important for individuals in Chinese society, wherein collaboration is emphasized. Compared with traditional Chinese society, individuals of today must learn how to keep an appropriate balance between their personal lives and their relationships with others.

On the basis of Grotevant’s (1987) conceptualization of identity formation, we considered vocational exploration as the main process of vocational identity formation. The exploration tasks include collecting information and evaluating options to make meaning of experiences. We sought to examine college students’ identity formation based on a neo-Eriksonian identity formation process. Specifically, we investigated the important themes that emerge in the process of career identity formation for college students in Macau.

Method

Participants
The sample included 19 college students (10 women, nine men) who were all Macau citizens for over 15 years. Their ages ranged from 19 to 24 years. All participants were registered in universities of Macau, mainland China, or Taiwan. Potential participants were approached through nine student associations of local universities. Twenty-five students agreed to participate, and 17 were selected to balance gender and obtain a diversity of majors. These 17 participants helped the research team to invite two additional individuals, for a total of 19 participants.

Data Collection
In-depth interviews (Hayes, 2000) and vocational card sorts (Tyler, 1961) were adopted as the main data collection methods. The process of data collection included two stages. In the first stage, participants were interviewed for about 1.5 to 2 hours. Interview questions were focused on participants’ plans for future vocation and their vocational exploration process during their college years. Sample questions included the following: (a) During the college years, what have you done and what did you do to choose your future vocation? Could you tell me the process in detail? (b) When did you start thinking about your vocation? (c) What difficulties and challenges did you encounter, and how did you resolve them? A complete list of interview questions are available from the third author. The second stage of the interview started with a 5- to 10-minute ice-breaking conversation, followed by a 40-minute interview, a 30- to 50-minute card sort activity, and a 15-minute debriefing interview. However, not all participants attended the card sort session. In the card
sort activity, participants classified the cards according to their interest in each occupation on the card. The final comprehensive description for the results would show the participants’ unique characteristics, which might be related to their choice behavior. All the recordings of the conversations were transcribed and analyzed immediately after the interview.

Cantonese was adopted as the main language during the interview to put participants more at ease and to ensure that they were able to express subtle meanings in their mother tongue. Only two participants who studied in mainland China chose Mandarin for most of the interview. All participants were fully informed of the procedure and content of the research, issues of confidentiality, and data access and ownership. All participants signed the inform consent before the interview.

**Data Analysis**

A six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) method was adopted to analyze the data. The six steps are (a) familiarizing yourself with your data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, we followed the criteria proposed by Morrow (2005) for qualitative research: social validity, subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation. Throughout the study, we worked together to complete the meaning construction, coding, theme development, classification, and interpretation. Our continuous discussion increased the consistency and accuracy of the inductive results.

**Results**

Two general themes were derived to depict participants’ perceptions and interpretations of vocational exploration processes and outcomes: (a) perceiving and negotiating within socioeconomic constraints and (b) creating and evaluating vocational options. These two themes and their subthemes are described in the following sections in relation to participants and the socioeconomic context.

**Perceiving and Negotiating Within Socioeconomic Constraints**

This first theme describes participants’ perceptions and negotiations with constraints formed by both economic and social contexts. College students who are realistic during their vocational explorations made compromises to fit into the local labor market and stay connected to their community. Their perceptions and negotiations focused mainly on job opportunities (“developmental space”), social customs (“general trend”), and family expectations (“good job”).

“Fighting for space”: Perceiving and negotiating job opportunities. “Fighting for space” was the exact wording used by participants to refer to opportunities to obtain a satisfying career in the local labor market. Participants believed it would not be difficult for college graduates to be employed in Macau because of the tremendous employment opportunities provided by the booming job market in the “mainstream” industries, including gaming, hotel, and tourism. However, they also perceived that options of a satisfying future career were very limited.
Seventeen students provided their opinions and consequential coping strategies.

According to the participants, accessibilities, income level, and degree of professionalism of vocations in mainstream industries were obviously higher than in nonmainstream industries, such as creative and media industries. They were confident that mainstream vocations would provide them with more reasonable incomes than vocations in other industries. A reasonable income was crucial for these college students to have an independent life and to take responsibilities as adults after graduation. As one participant said, “I think everyone cares about money in [today’s] society. . . . In this society you need money for everything.” Furthermore, the college students regarded the small-scale and nonmainstream industries as lacking in reputation and a promising future. Thus, it seemed that only the mainstream industries could provide sound opportunities for students to satisfy their expectations of both financial stability and self-realization.

The participants who were not interested in mainstream industries often felt in a disadvantaged position when negotiating for their future career. One participant said, “There is no space for further negotiation between the vocations we were really interested in and those that could give us a living in Macau.” Many of them intended to give up or had already given up the idea of entering a nonmainstream vocation. Some of them attributed this dilemma to resource allocation among industries and the support of local people, and they believed that both the government and local communities should provide young people with sufficient development opportunities. Unfortunately, few of them were able to step out of the constraints of vocational opportunities.

“Popular mainstream”: Perceiving and negotiating social customs. Another facet of being realistic was to confront vocational options preferred by the majority in society, which the participants called “mainstream.” Specifically, participants mentioned that there are certain fields, such as civil service and casinos, that are preferred by the majority of the population in Macau, and all are very popular among peers. Seven participants described the overriding impact of the social customs on their vocational choices.

Participants complained about the mainstream society, yet they felt obligated to follow it. On the one hand, participants did not totally agree with the general trend of a “stable” lifestyle and the pursuit of monetary rewards in choosing vocations. As one participant said, “I think nowadays graduates dislike bearing low salaries, so they always change their jobs and prefer working in the government or things like that.” On the other hand, participants considered that these popular vocations were reasonable options for college graduates’ career choices in response to increasing daily economic pressures and limited vocational opportunities in Macau, especially when they doubted that they could come up with better options.

Participants admitted to feeling strong social pressure when considering their vocational decisions. Close friends and even acquaintances might suggest they take mainstream jobs, and they often felt out of tune if they did not go with the crowd. A participant explained, “You know, a lot of people around you will tell you that you are capable of finding a
more comfortable job, why don’t you try to get one with higher salary and better benefits.”

“Good jobs”: Perceiving and negotiating family expectations. The last facet of being realistic encountered by participants was to negotiate family expectations. Some participants considered that their family expected them to obtain financial stability and social approval through finding “good jobs” rather than pursuing self-growth or self-realizations through a personal career of their choice. Eight participants described similar experiences.

Family expectations directly affected participants’ vocational decisions because of the close financial and emotional attachments between two generations. All of the participants believed that it was their responsibility to provide financial support for their parents. For some participants, pleasing their family and obtaining the family’s approval and emotional support were linked to their personal career development. Thus, they felt obligated to ease their parents’ minds by finding jobs that offered their parents and themselves a favorable life situation, and they felt guilty even communicating different opinions with parents because of the fear of raising any conflicts. One participant gave the following scenario:

I am living together with you [her parents], and you have a huge influence on my emotions. So, because of my family, I can’t do whatever I want . . . until people around you have no worries or are all happy, you could keep your spirits up to deal with your own stuff. . . . I think people have to merge themselves into this world and into this society, because we can’t live for ourselves and do whatever we want to do. THIS is called a society. So even though it is hard to make everyone happy, it is a very important precondition. . . . Unless life is fairly good and people around you are all happy, I don’t think that can be called a meaningful life. Life is meaningful only when they are around.

Some participants could easily fulfill their families’ expectations because they agreed with their family’s opinions, put financial reliability as their priority, or felt comfortable putting their family’s expectation before their own desires when choosing a career. Participants with different ideas also tried to satisfy their family as much as possible, although they realized it was hard to satisfy everyone and realized that their vocational exploration would remain stagnant. One participant shared the following:

My unrealistic idea is . . . to find a balance . . . my realistic idea is . . . to consider the salary when choosing a vocation. When you are thinking . . . how to achieve my dream and also to take care of my parents, there will be conflicts. . . . I have no idea how to resolve the conflicts . . . it is inevitable for my parents to oppose my choice, and it is hard to please everyone . . . there won’t be such a perfect situation in the world.

Participants’ insistence on pleasing and taking care of their family indicated the strong Confucian ethic of family and collective values. In other words, when personal goals or interests are incompatible with those of others, the individual should follow the ethical principles of social order and maintain harmony as the first priority (Chen, 2009; Yang, 1995, 2003).
Creating and Evaluating Vocational Options

When negotiating within socioeconomic constraints, participants also tried to create and evaluate options with accessible resources. They used the word *trials* to refer to various, and sometimes chaotic, efforts in exploring and making tentative career decisions. Generally, these efforts included managing the relevance of future vocation and college majors, taking part in vocational practices (“getting exposure”), and exchange ideas with people (“others”).

*Handling college major*: Managing academic investment. All 19 participants mentioned their experiences in managing the relevance of vocational education. Although some of the general capabilities of professional skills obtained through major studies were transferable, the range of transferability varied among majors and also depended on participants’ understanding of the features and applications of the majors in the local society. Only one participant considered his college major to not affect his future vocation: “A college degree is no more than a stepping stone to enter the workforce.” The other 18 participants believed that college equipped them with professional capabilities and gave them a competitive edge in the job market but might limit the scope of options:

> I think no one can make this rule that you have to take your major as your future vocation. But there are lots of pressures around you persuading you to take your major as your vocation, and you will think maybe they are right.

Although college major was influential for one’s future vocation, the decision-making process can be quite challenging and sometimes chaotic. The high school education system and college entrance policy require students in Macau, as in many Asian countries, to choose their academic tracks (e.g., arts or science track) before the end of the 2nd year of high school and college majors before entering college. Because many college majors admit only one specific academic track and changing track before college entrance examination will disadvantage a student for lack of preparation for the other tracks, this education mechanism challenges students to have a clear plan for their future education and vocation in the early years of high school. Meanwhile, because of constraints of university recourse and regulations, only a certain number of top-performing students on the college entrance examination can be admitted to their target majors, and the rest will be assigned to other majors by the university.

Under such a strict college entrance system, only eight participants were fortunate to be admitted into their planned majors; for these students, their plans and academic investments matched their future vocational explorations. For example, one participant had set his mind on pursuing a career in business administration since middle school. Thus, he chose the arts track in high school and smoothly majored in business in college, which made him more confident to continue with his commitment. Other participants either made arbitrary decisions because of the pressure of family expectations or a superficial knowledge of the major, or had clear targets but failed to be admitted. It is usually extremely difficult for students to change their majors in most Chinese universities,
and only one participant had the chance to change his major. Students dissatisfied with their early choices or assigned to majors completely different from their original interests had to face the dilemma of the assigned education investment. One participant said, “I haven’t had any training for my vocational interests up to now. I want to develop in other directions, but I don’t know how to do so.”

“Getting exposure”: Participating in vocational practice. Thirteen participants frequently used the phrase “getting exposure” to describe their vocational practices as exploration in real work circumstances. Some vocational practices were encouraged mainly by external reasons, such as suggestions from parents, internships for college majors, and part-time jobs for monetary rewards. No matter the situation, vocational practices provided participants a chance to identify their vocational aspirations and face uncertainties in vocational planning. As one participant said,

I took a part-time job in my mom’s real estate agency. . . . To be honest, I did that part-time job all for the money. . . . When you are doing a job, you might look at it and think about what do you want to do and would like to do. And gradually, with more experience, you might have more sense of what you really would like to do.

Some participants intentionally took part in vocational practices to obtain first-hand experience of real working environments. Through well-planned vocational practices, they tested their primary vocational commitments and considered their practices as a learning process for basic ability as well as attitudes in the world of work. For example, one participant planned internships and part-time jobs in several different institutions for herself, such as in colleges and various commercial organizations, to prepare herself for her “dream” vocation as an administrative executive. Team projects in course work were also opportunities to practice her leadership and management skills through role-play and consciously cooperating with various team members.

Exposure to the practical work environment can stimulate an individual to reevaluate personal strengths and weaknesses through the work roles. For example, one participant was challenged to improve his communication and conflict resolution skills. These self-evaluations usually raised in-depth self-reflections. Some participants found they needed to deal with personal issues and mature psychologically before fully committing to a vocation. One participant who initially aimed to be a professional journalist and news reporter realized her fear of being judged by the public on her appearance and professional performance. She acknowledged the need to overcome her “inferiority complex” or to “work back stage.”

Vocational practices also made participants realize that, besides understanding the work flow and work patterns of a certain job position, they needed to deal with complicated interpersonal processes when trying to fit into the work environment. Six participants were shocked and unable to cope with hierarchical working cultures and complicated interpersonal relationship problems, and they thus hesitated to commit to certain vocations:

I went to several of this kind of organizations, and the environment might not be what I expected. It is kind of boring and inflexible. People just follow the rules, only mind their own business and make no offence to people.
These participants tended to complain that it was hard to find a “supportive and open teamwork relationship” in working environments. It seemed that they were not ready to deal with distant working relationships and a business-style interaction between colleagues that was different from their daily lives.

On a more macro level, participants were aware of and tried to deal with unwritten rules of entry when fitting themselves into their target vocations. For example, one participant sensed an unwritten rule shared among several industries such as law, food services, and retail while he was working part time that local Macau people were hardly promoted to high administrative positions. He understood that this unwritten rule was related to the business models of the companies, with Macau being only the regional office, and little could be done about it. This participant refused to accept this and aimed to break through the glass ceiling for local administrative professionals. This suggested that today’s youth experience a difficult journey of adaptation to the workplace and keeping an inner consistency and continuity of self.

Although active exposure to vocational practices was necessary and helpful to finding their ideal vocations, three participants mentioned that the exploration process could be quite time consuming. They recognized their responsibility to make vocational decisions but believed they could limit the exploration process to the 4 years of college life. It seemed that an extended period of exploration after college proved a luxury they could not afford socially or economically.

“Respecting others”: Cherishing interpersonal interactions. Eleven participants frequently involved “others” when searching for vocational direction. Interpersonal interaction expanded vocational options and enhanced participants’ confidence in making vocational commitments, but it also prompted them to better deal with divergent opinions.

Many participants were encouraged to consider options that they had seldom thought of before or to reframe their original perceptions of specific vocations through observing and exchanging ideas with others. Old classmates, friends, professors, and people from work settings could all be influential in this way. For example, one participant had felt lost for some time after giving up her vocational plan on journalism for financial reasons. When taking an internship at a famous mega-casino, she had a chance to cooperate with a public relations specialist and was impressed and inspired by this colleague. Through observing this colleague’s daily performance and exchanging ideas with him, this participant realized being a journalist was not the only option to fulfill her aspiration of “being helpful and professional,” and that being a public relations specialist could also make it possible for her to be helpful to her colleagues. A deeper understanding of the vocation of public relations showed her some new directions and encouraged her work through her vocational identity crisis.

When participants felt anxious and frustrated, they often preferred to look for tangible information, suggestions, and emotional support from people they considered to have more life and career experiences. They also needed to learn to deal with divergent suggestions. For example, one participant who was unsure whether she would fit in the occupation she liked consulted “everyone” around her for suggestions. However,
because she cared about everyone’s opinions, she became even more confused by all the divergent viewpoints. The inconsistent values held by everyone aggravated the difficulties for her to form her personal career identity (Ianni, 1989). We, as career practitioners, need to improve this participant’s ability to deal with conflicting suggestions.

**Discussion**

We found that social orientation salient among participants’ vocational exploration experiences was embodied in their perceptions and negotiations with social customs, rules, family expectations, and interpersonal relationships. The impact of social customs was rarely discussed in existing research on young adults in Chinese societies, compared with the influences from significant others (Cheung & Arnold, 2010; Lin et al., 2007). Participants in our study believed it was important to obtain social approval and hesitated to challenge vocational options conferred by others. This can be considered an expression of social orientation values (Yang, 1995, 2003). The convention of prioritizing financial stability and adhering to social norms in Macau presented participants with limited space or appreciation for individual uniqueness, although they had the period during college years before taking the role of an adult. This finding contrasts with the general trend in modern Western society of increased freedom for emerging adults in making personal choices and decreased conformity to social values (Baumeister, 1986; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; FAME Consortium, 2007).

A strong social orientation also existed in the heavy involvement of other people in the participants’ vocational explorations. Compared with Western societies, in which emerging adults were independent in making career choices (Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001), participants in our study tended to construct vocational identities as an interdependent process, making career choices while encouraged and guided by others. However, on the family level, failing to balance parents’ approval and their own desires would stagnate participants’ vocational identity formation. This finding was supported by Cheung and Arnold’s (2010) finding that Hong Kong college students’ relational supports were an antecedent of vocational exploration. Confucian virtues of taking care of the family and maintaining normative family relations were found among Chinese participants when dealing with the psychological tensions in forsaking individualistic aspects of selves and conforming to expectations of the family (Chen, 2009; Kwan, 2009).

Consistent with prior research, we found that individuals in late adolescence and young adulthood may need to experience a long and difficult period of vocational moratorium when dealing with a college major (Vondracek & Skorikov, 1997). However, the combination of the tracking education system, college entrance policy, professionalism of higher education philosophy, and college students’ coping strategies found in the current study was unique. The strict tracking education system and highly competitive college entrance system require students in Macau to make crucial vocational decisions at a very young age. Therefore, higher education becomes a time of preparation and gaining
credentials for specific professions (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). The educational system more or less locks students into a fairly rigid occupational path early in their teens. Those with assigned majors or unformed vocational directions in high school experienced a tougher transformation to manage their academic investments. Unfortunately, although school life was a core part of adolescents’ identity formation (Vondracek & Skorikov, 1997), our participants seldom mentioned educational supports in facing these challenges.

Implications for Practice
Our findings suggest that career decision making and self-exploration interventions should be culturally appropriate to individuals living within collectivist cultures (Leung, 1999). Especially considering the significant influence of social orientation, counselors working with adolescents and emerging adults in Macau should focus on helping them develop appropriate attitudes and skills at resolving inner and interpersonal conflicts in vocational decision making (Chen, 2009). Role models can also be considered an influential medium of career intervention for expanding limited options and interpersonal conflicts. In addition, our findings suggest that it is important to use indigenous career interventions to help students cope with the impact of the education system in Macau and other Asian societies (Leung, 2002). Our findings also suggest that strengthening college students’ coping strategies in dealing with the inconsistencies between their perceived and expected working relationships and work-related cultural issues could further their commitment and vocational exploration during the school-to-work transition.

Limitation and Future Research Directions
The present study has some limitations. First, although data were collected through two rounds of in-depth interviews, only one third of the sample participated in both rounds because of time limitations. Participants who engaged in both interviews were able to provide rich data. However, the themes extracted were limited for participants who were interviewed just once; therefore, it is difficult to reach any firm conclusions related to identity formation for these participants. Second, the interview process, data analysis, and results were all retrospective; thus, the evolution of participants’ vocational expectations, exploration, and meanings underlying commitments cannot be fully understood. Although it is not the main purpose of this study to examine personal evolutions in vocational search, several participants implied such experiences existed, and it is worth further exploration in a longitudinal manner.

Future studies may do well to take a longitudinal narrative approach on individual participants’ stories of vocational identity formation. This could enable examination of the transformation of college students’ vocational exploration strategies and the impact of their prior exploration activities on subsequent explorations, along with their personal growth. Future studies examining emerging adults’ vocational identity formation in other social contexts with different economic environments and traditions should be encouraged. Doing so may further reveal social orientations in different contexts of vocational identity formation and
provide a more comprehensive picture of college students’ vocational development in Chinese societies.

References


