

A few suggestions based on “The Choice! The challenges of trying to improve medical students’ satisfaction with their specialty choices”

Quelques suggestions basées sur « Le choix ! Les défis à relever pour améliorer la satisfaction des étudiants en médecine quant à leur choix de spécialité »

Adam Neufeld¹

¹Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Correspondence to: Adam Neufeld, MSc, MD, CCFP; email: adam.neufeld@ucalgary.ca

Published ahead of issue: Apr 29, 2024; published: May 1, 2024. CMEJ 2024, 15(2) Available at <https://doi.org/10.36834/cmej.78845>

© 2024 Neufeld; licensee Synergies Partners. This is an Open Journal Systems article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Dear Editor,

Recently, Davis et al.¹ argued that, to support medical students’ career satisfaction, we must first decide how to define it, and when and how to assess it. I agree and ask: why not draw on existing frameworks and assessment tools to do this? Informed by Goal Contents Theory (GCT)—a sub-theory within Self-Determination Theory (SDT)—this letter provides a few insights.

GCT outlines different kinds of life goals—extrinsic (e.g., wealth, image, fame) and intrinsic (e.g., community, relationships, personal growth)—and their unique antecedents and consequences.² Intrinsic goals inherently satisfy what SDT refers to as people’s *basic psychological needs* for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and thus directly support their well-being.² Conversely, extrinsic goals rely on external contingencies of reinforcement and thus only temporarily satisfy (and often frustrate) these needs, resulting in stress and ill-being.²

Research on people’s life goals, career commitment, career satisfaction, and happiness, supports these principles.^{3,4} To Davis et al.’s¹ points, I therefore suggest that we do the following:

1. **Consider a definition of career satisfaction that taps intrinsic/extrinsic goals and basic psychological needs.** Does your career offer you autonomy, mastery,

and connection? Do you feel that you are growing, making a difference, and that you belong? Satisfaction of these needs, and prioritization of these goals, consistently predict better engagement, persistence, development, and well-being.²

2. **Use quantitative and qualitative methods.** Life goals and need fulfillment are measurable via validated scales. Combined with qualitative methods (e.g., interviews), we could measure doctors’ career satisfaction in sophisticated, theory-informed ways.
3. **Assess at “milestone” stages in a physician’s career.** This could be yearly in residency, in the first five years in practice, and every five years thereafter. Both cross-sectional and repeated measures studies could be leveraged to help us understand and mitigate career regret, across medical specialties and times.
4. **Bring GCT into undergraduate curricula.** Medical learners deserve to know what their *basic psychological needs* are and how different careers might support vs. hinder them. Teaching students this—e.g., through career advising and mentoring channels—would help them make self-concordant career choices that foster their well-being.

SDT offers a well-evidenced framework that medical educators can use to define and assess career satisfaction

for physicians. Its mini-theory, GCT, may be particularly useful in this context, given its focus on life aspirations and how they satisfy vs. frustrate people's basic psychological needs for motivation and well-being.

Conflicts of Interest: The author is on the editorial board for the CMEJ. He has adhered to the CMEJ policy regarding authorship.

Edited by: Marcel D'Eon (editor-in-chief)

References

1. Davis M, Desy J, Kassam A, McLaughlin K. The Choice! The challenges of trying to improve medical students' satisfaction with their specialty choices. *Can Med Educ J.* 2023; 14(5). <https://doi.org/10.36834/cmej.73643>
2. Ryan RM, Deci EL. *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation Development and Wellness.* Guilford Publishing; 2017.
3. Hirschi A, Pang D. Pursuing money and power, prosocial contributions, or personal growth: measurement and nomological net of different career strivings. *J Career Dev.* 2023;50(6). <https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453231182928>
4. Sheldon KM, Houser-Marko L. Self-concordance, goal attainment, and the pursuit of happiness: Can there be an upward spiral? *J Pers Soc Psychol.* Published online 2001. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.80.1.152>