

Decision Space Worksheet (DSW) Activity Manual

Gary Peterson, PhD
Janet Lenz, PhD
Debra Osborn, PhD

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Table of Contents

Introduction		3
Readiness for career decision making		3
Purpose of the DSW		3
Recommended Procedures for Administering the DSW		4
Five Phases in Interpreting the DSW		4
References		8
Appendices		9
Appendix A	Blank DSW Form	10
Appendix B	Sample DSWs	12
Appendix C	Sample ILP	13

Introduction

The Decision Space Worksheet (DSW) activity, focused on understanding clients' career concerns, is a projective assessment that reveals the elements in the personal, social, and economic context of a career problem that clients are perceiving in the moment. The activity (see Appendix A) consists of a list-making task in which individuals identify and record elements associated with a presenting career problem (e.g., thoughts, feelings, people, relationships, financial aspects), followed by a cognitive-mapping task that enables individuals to prioritize the relative importance of the respective elements as they bear on the career decision. The map itself provides a visual representation in working memory of the Career Decision Space (CDS). According to cognitive information processing (CIP) theory (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004), the DSW activity is typically administered in the Communication phase of the CASVE cycle, and facilitates clients (as well as career counselors) becoming aware of the complexity of a presenting career problem as they engage in career exploration and decision making. For information on CIP theory, visit the following web site: <http://www.career.fsu.edu/Tech-Center>.

Readiness for career decision making

Readiness (Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, & Lenz, 2000; Sampson, McClain, Musch, & Reardon, 2013) alludes to the extent of one's preparation for deliberate and effortful career problem solving and decision making, and it consists of two independent, but interrelated, dimensions, capability and complexity. *Capability* refers to one's ability to solve a career problem and make a career decision, and includes personal characteristics, motivation, emotions, previous experience with career interventions, and related factors. *Complexity* alludes to personal and social contexts in which career decisions are made, and includes such things as societal, organizational, and economic factors. A state of high readiness occurs when one's capability exceeds the complexity of life circumstances, and vice versa for low readiness. In CIP theory, we assume that individuals, under normal circumstances, are capable of making career decisions with a minimal amount of professional assistance. However, individuals' capability for career decision making can become limited when they become overwhelmed or confused by negative thoughts and emotional predispositions or by extraordinarily challenging life circumstances. The Decision Space Worksheet (DSW) is an instrument that assesses the complexity component of readiness for effective career problem solving and decision making.

Purpose of the DSW

The Decision Space Worksheet (DSW) activity helps clients to conceptualize, organize, and clarify all the elements associated with their career problem. Typical issues that may arise through the DSW activity are highlighted in Table 1 (Peterson, Leasure, Carr, & Lenz, 2010). Be aware that the DSW is a "state" instrument, as opposed to a "trait" instrument, in that its results are valid only at the moment of administration. We have found in case studies that the lists and maps typically change as individuals progress through the CASVE cycle. Thus, test-retest reliability data are irrelevant regarding the DSW activity. Further, the DSW can be used in various service delivery formats, including brief staff-assisted, individual counseling, curricular interventions, and group counseling (Sampson, et al. 2004).

Use of the DSW helps define the career decision space (CDS), that is, all cognitive and affective components contained in what is referred to as "working memory" (a combination of short-term and long term memory associations in the moment). Working memory comprises all the information individuals

have to solve a problem, what's affecting the solving of a career problem, competing issues, influences, including other life factors that influence the consideration of options. If there are too many things going on in a person's life, this can potentially overwhelm or "jam" the CDS. In these types of situations, the DSW activity can help clients isolate, label, and evaluate the relative importance of various elements in the CDS, thereby helping to reduce some of the confusion and anxiety involved in making a career decision.

This DSW activity also facilitates becoming mindful of denied experience. Clients may not be fully aware of all the issues going on in their life situation. This activity helps to put data in working memory that needs to be there in order to fully engage the career problem. It may also reveal clients' mental health issues that are con-current with the presenting career issue, which could be taking more attention space in working memory than the career issue itself. See sample DSWs in Appendix B.

Having clients complete the DSW provides a quick, effective way for clients to grasp the comprehensiveness of what is happening in their life in the moment. The DSW activity enables clients to step outside of themselves and look inward at all the elements and how they relate to each other in relation to the career decision at hand. Ultimately, the information gained from this activity can contribute to the development of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) (see sample in Appendix C).

Recommended Procedures for Administering the DSW

Setting: If possible, the DSW should be administered in a quiet area of the main career advising and counseling room. In keeping with the CIP theory-based approach, it may be used during drop-in, brief staff assisted services and/or individual counseling. Practitioners should be sensitive to the fact that the DSW often invokes private and sensitive information and some clients may prefer not to be overheard when "thinking aloud" (i.e., verbalizing their thoughts to the career practitioner as they work through the activity) or when discussing the completed results with a career advisor or counselor.

Directive to clients. "The Decision Space Worksheet is an instrument that can help you identify and prioritize the elements in your life today that are related to your career problem or decision. Most clients enjoy participating in this activity. You will notice there is a front page and a back page. The front page is where you state your career problem or decision in your own words and list all thoughts, feelings, people, relationships, financial factors, or anything else that may have an influence on your career decision on the lines provided. You also rate each item in terms of whether it is a positive, neutral, or negative influence on the career problem. The second page consists of a circle in which you draw small circles of different sizes in proportion to the importance of each element listed on the first page. If you feel like it, you may talk aloud as you perform the respective tasks. When you finish, we can discuss the list and the map. Do you have any questions?" In some cases, clients may prefer to work alone and not have a counselor or career advisor watch them while they complete the activity.

Five Phases in Interpreting the DSW

Interpreting the DSW is a joint endeavor between the career practitioner and the client and can be approached in five sequential phases.

Phase 1: Preparation for interpretation.

When clients finish the DSW, career practitioners can first ask about their experience in completing the DSW by asking, “How was the experience of completing this activity? What are some of your thoughts and feelings about the task itself?” Asking about their experience encourages clients to begin expressing themselves as well as providing valuable information regarding their attitudes toward the process of inquiry.

Following this, career practitioners can ask clients, “To help me better understand you and the career decision you are making, could I ask you a few questions about the responses you made to the Decision Space Worksheet?” Assuming the answer is “Yes,” the career practitioner helps clients explore the possible meanings and implications of the respective DSW elements, while employing sound counseling techniques, such as active listening, using open-ended questions, reflecting feelings, clarifying elements, and drawing associations between elements. As you go through the process of interpretation, be sure to explore how each decision space element affects or influences the career decision. Does an element interfere or facilitate the career decision? If so, how?

Phase 2: Stating the decision.

The first line of the DSW asks the client to record, “The career decision you are considering.” This is an important first step in that clients articulate the decision they hope to make in their own words. A career practitioner may ask the client, “Do you have anything to add to this statement?” After completing the DSW, clients may have acquired a new perspective on the decision at hand. It can also prepare them for formulating the goals on their Individual Learning Plan (ILP). See Appendix C.

Phase 3: Eliciting elements of the career decision space.

This task calls for scanning episodic memory (i.e., memory of personal experiences) and constructing a list of all thoughts, feelings, circumstances, persons or events that associated with the career decision and then rating them with respect to whether each element is a positive, neutral and negative influence on it. Here, a career practitioner should look at the length of the list as an indicator of complexity and ask the client, “What is your impression of the list of elements?” Now take note of the valence (+, 0, -) of the respective elements and ask, “How does each item affect your career decision?” Are some of the valences stronger than others, i.e., slightly positive vs. strongly positive. Finally, look for erasures or cross outs or messiness of elements as signs of possible confusion or disturbance and ask the client about them.

Phase 4: Constructing a map of the career decision space.

This is somewhat of a challenging cognitive task that calls for clients to create a spatial representation of the relationship among the elements, as well as to evaluate the relative importance among them as they bear on the career decision. The directions ask the client to create smaller circles within the large circle in proportion to the relative importance of the element. Here, a career practitioner may first note the top 3 elements in terms of importance and ask, “Why are these so important?” A career practitioner may note whether there is a theme among them, e.g., they are affective in nature, or concern areas of interest, or indicators of a negative self-concept?

Next, a career practitioner may note whether any circles overlap, possibly indicating a strong association between them? How much of the career decision space is blank? Consider the amount of space around each of the circles. How close together are they? One interpretation is that unused space represents life space not devoted to the career problem. Finally, look for unusual maps such as bull's eyes, unusual art work, use of color, or circles that extend beyond the limits of the large circle. The center of a bull's eye could represent a singular high priority item, while elaborate art work might be an indicator of unusual thinking or OCD tendencies, and circles beyond the big circle could signal control issues related to the making of the career decision.

Phase 5: Further assessment and development of the ILP.

Following the exploration of the DSW results with a client, a career practitioner is faced with two important questions: (a) Is there a need for further readiness assessment related to career problem solving and decision making? And (b) what aspects of the DSW results might be addressed through the development of an ILP?

- (a) Further assessment of readiness. Indicators of a need for further assessment on the DSW might include the following:
1. Allusions to negative affect, such as depression, anxiety, hopelessness, anger, fear;
 2. Statements connoting self-doubt;
 3. Statements alluding confusion related to identity, such as interests, abilities, values, talents; and
 4. Unusual or bizarre responses in constructing the map.

The presence of any of the above might suggest the use of the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI) to identify negative thoughts that could interfere with self-knowledge, formulation and evaluation of plausible alternatives, and decision making.

- (b) The DSW and the development of the ILP. Responses to the DSW that could be included as items on the ILP may be the following:
1. Readiness activities such as taking the CTI and employing the CTI Workbook;
 2. Taking a career assessment such as the Self-Directed Search to enhance self-knowledge;
 3. Gathering educational, occupational, or employment information to enhance option knowledge;
 4. Consulting with campus or community based counseling services when mental health aspects of the presenting problem, such as moderate to severe depression or anxiety, sleep disorders, addictions, etc., are overwhelming the career decision space
 5. Consulting with student or community services, when financial matters (including the need for emergency funds), disability assistance, housing, etc., are aspects of the career decision space; and
 6. Student-parent, or couples counseling when family or personal relationship issues are part of the career decision space.

It is important for career practitioners to be mindful of the fact that completing an ILP can help enhance career problem-solving skills (e.g., defining a problem, developing and prioritizing alternatives, developing and carrying out a plan) as well as meta-cognitive skills (developing cognitive strategies, developing self-efficacy as career decision maker, acquiring capacity for self-awareness and self-monitoring).

Table 1: *Classification Code of Thoughts, Feelings, Events, Circumstances, and Individuals Listed on the Problem Space Worksheet.*

Principle Dimension	Construct Definition	Examples
Quality of Life	The manifestation of values in the work environment to which an individual aspires.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Happiness – Prestige – Leisure Time – Travel – Variety
Money	Factors pertaining to the financial costs and benefits associated with a given career choice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Salary – Benefit packages – Cost of Education
Family	Issues surrounding members of the nuclear or extended family, individually or as a unit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mother – Parents – Uncles
Education	All factors relating to the acquisition of the knowledge necessary for a given career choice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Major – Length of program – Difficulty of coursework
Interests	The emotional arousal associated with the career domain being considered.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Interesting – Not boring – I enjoy working with computers
Self-Doubt	Any statements that reflect individuals' insecurity regarding their character or abilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Can I do the job? – Am I smart enough? – I always change my mind.
Employment	All statements referring to obtaining the desired career position.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Job market – Can I get a job after graduation? – Advancement opportunities

Source: Peterson, G. W., Leasure, K. K., Carr, D. L., & Lenz, J. G. (2010). The Decision Space Worksheet: An assessment of context in career decision making. *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, 25, 87-100.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Blank DSW

Name _____

Decision Space Worksheet (DSW)

The career decision you are considering _____

Please list all thoughts, feelings, circumstances, people, or events that bear on the career decision you are making. Then, for each thought, feeling, circumstance, person, or event, please indicate whether each is having a negative, positive, or neutral impact on your decision by circling the corresponding symbol at the end of each line.

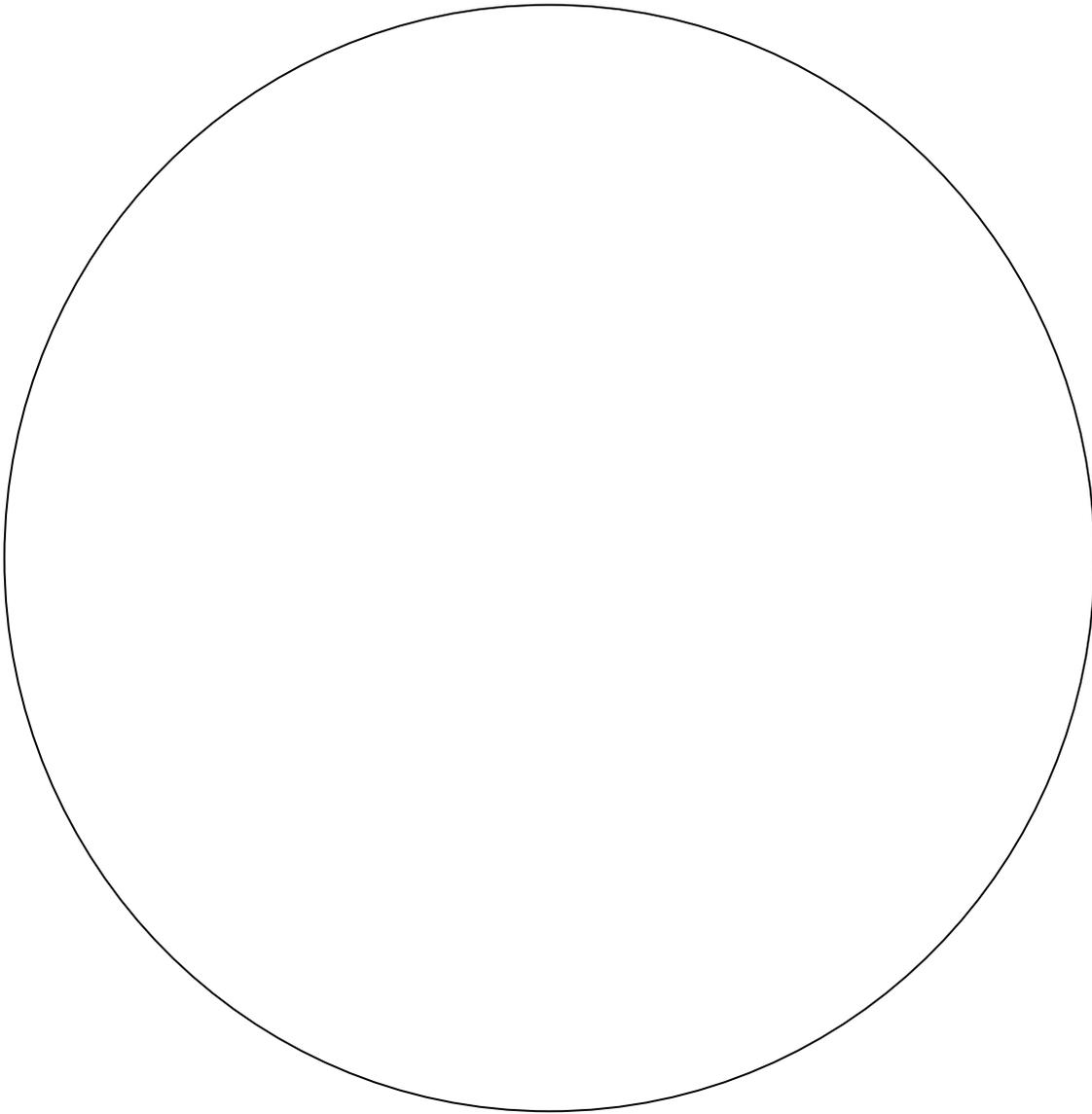
1. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
2. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
3. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
4. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
5. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
6. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
7. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
8. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
9. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+
10. _____	Negative	Neutral	Positive
	--	0	+

DIRECTIONS CONTINUED ON THE REVERSE SIDE

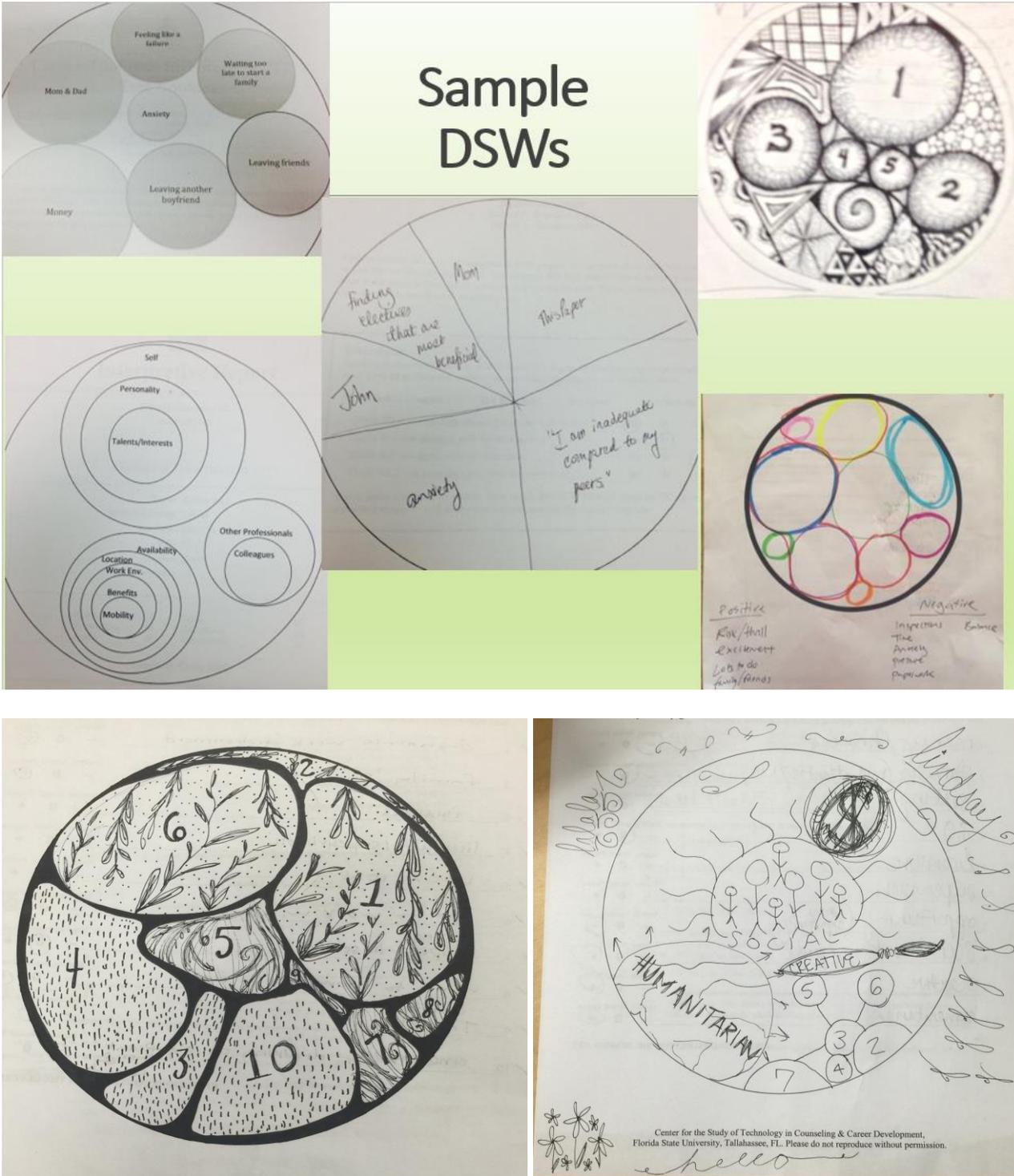
The Decision Space

Directions:

- The large circle below represents the total decision space of your career decision.
- Draw circles within the large circle to represent each item on your list. Use the size of the circles you draw to represent the relative importance of each item to your career decision.
- Be sure to label each circle according to the corresponding item number from the list you made.



Appendix B Sample DSWs



Appendix C Sample ILP

Individual Career Learning Plan

- Goal(s): 1. explore options for a graduate degree
 2. improve networking skills
 3. increase social interactions

Activity	Purpose / Outcome	Time Needed	Goal #	Priority
indiv career counseling	enhance self-optim knowledge, networking skills	ongoing	1-3	3
Complete CTI	understanding how thoughts are influencing career decision	7 mins	1	1
Complete DSW	understand all the factors influencing my career decision	20 mins	1	2
Explore graduate program options	Narrow down choices of options	ongoing	1	5
Use CTI workbook	to reform negative thoughts related to career decision	ongoing	1+2	4
Practice interacting w/ people at work & in social situations	Gain experience of networking and social interactions	ongoing	2+3	6
Use Guide to Good Dec Making Exercise	help structure Dec making process	ongoing	1	7

This plan can be modified by either party based upon new information learned in the activities of the action plan. The purpose of the plan is to work toward a mutually agreed upon career goal. Activities may be added or subtracted as needed.

Terry 4/10/16
 Student/Client Date

[Signature] 4/10/16
 Career Advisor Date