

Academic and Career Advising of Scanners

Arvid J. Bloom, West Chester University

Philip R. Tripp, West Chester University

Leigh S. Shaffer, Downingtown, Pennsylvania

Scanners has become a common term for a recently identified category of people who find choosing just one interest or career path difficult (Sher, 2006). Academic and career advisors who work with scanners will likely find that these students have difficulty selecting an academic major or career path and that they seem to suffer anxiety and a palpable sense of loss with each attempt to make a final selection. We introduce the concept of scanners and describe a new self-report instrument called The Scanner Self Inventory (Bloom, 2009; Bloom & Tripp, 2011) that academic and career advisors can use to work with students who display unusual anxiety associated with major selection or career decision making.

KEYWORDS: decision making, instruments, multipotentiality, *The Scanner Self Inventory*, student anxiety, student characteristics

Scanners has become a common term for a recently identified category of people who find choosing just one interest or career path to be difficult (Sher, 2006). Scanners have attracted this label because of their apparent vigilance for new and intriguing areas of interest upon which to direct their energies. Over time, scanners typically pursue a wide variety of interests, leading some to label them *Renaissance Souls* (Lobenstine, 2006). These two labels typically refer to the same people but emphasize two different attributes: The first entails the seemingly relentless desire to pursue new interests or passions, and the second is the resultant accumulation of numerous, and often mutually incompatible, interests.

Scanners share many qualities with individuals who show *multipotentiality*, a term used to describe academically and artistically talented students of high ability who are able to perform a wide variety of tasks and skills successfully and with high levels of enjoyment (Achter, Lubinski, & Benbow, 1996; Carduner, Padak, & Reynolds, 2011; Cross, 1997; Greene, 2006; Jordan & Blevins, 2009; Robinson, 1997; Rysiew, Shore, & Leeb, 1999; Sajjadi, Rejskind, & Shore, 2001). Academically gifted students are identified by a record of outstanding achievement, and many gifted students show signs

of early success in more than one field. When gifted students are encouraged to pursue all of their talents, especially throughout the early grades, they often display a pattern of anxiety about making decisions about academic majors or careers that is called the *overchoice syndrome* (Carduner et al., 2011; Rysiew, Shore, & Carson, 1994; Rysiew et al., 1999). At the college level, these gifted students report perseverating over choices among majors or careers for fear of making the wrong choice (Achter et al., 1996; Carduner et al., 2011; Greene, 2006; Rysiew et al., 1999; Sajjadi et al., 2001), and they sometimes cope with their anxieties either by foreclosing on a safe or convenient choice to avoid facing their anxieties or by dropping out of college altogether (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011c).

Gifted students often have difficulty making choices because of their reluctance to abandon interests that they have enjoyed cultivating in the past. However, interests and aptitudes or abilities are psychologically independent variables: Scoring high on measures of scanner characteristics does not necessarily imply that a person has a high level of aptitude for each of his or her competing interests. In fact, scanners are often attracted to pursuits in which their aptitude is largely unknown and untested; by seeking out the steepest part of the learning curve, the scanner attempts to indulge curiosity and stay challenged.

Scanners have recently attracted attention because their condition can be self-defeating. Their penchant for developing an expanding set of interests often prevents them from concentrating on any one of them and from developing the related skills and special knowledge needed to transform interests into traditionally successful and satisfying careers. Academic and career advisors who work with scanners will likely find that these students have difficulty selecting an academic major or career path: Scanners display many of the characteristics of *chronically indecisive* students (Gordon, 1998). Furthermore, scanners will often experience anxiety and a palpable sense of loss with each attempt to make a choice that excludes other appealing possibilities. Millennial generation students are widely reported to demonstrate these difficulties (Jordan & Blevins, 2009), making

advisors highly likely to encounter scanners. The apprehension experienced by scanners when they try to narrow choices exemplifies the more general paradox of choice (Schwartz, 2004) in which peoples' desire to keep options open often competes with their desire for closure and commitment.

Scanners as a Psychological Construct

In everyday descriptions of adult personality, the breadth of a person's interests is often seen as a defining characteristic. Everyone acknowledges that individuals' interests can be roughly scaled from narrow to broad, although the labels people apply to the poles of this dimension are often value laden. For example, the word *narrow* itself often carries a negative connotation, while terms like *focused* carry a more positive tone. Indeed, the importance of evaluating the impact of this dimension on a person's life and career choices is reflected in the multiplication of idiomatic expressions and figures of speech invented to serve as synonyms. Commentators who value breadth of interests can use such expressions as a *Renaissance*, *polymathic*, *well-rounded*, or *erudite* man or woman, while those who do not share those values will use such expressions as *dilettante*, *dabbler*, or *jack-of-all-trades*, *master-of-none* to describe the same individuals. Recently the significance of this trait has been called into question because of the perception that breadth of interest can be the source of educational and vocational problems.

In 2006, two popular books drew public attention to the perception that some people experience chronic problems related to the breadth and intensity of their interests: Margaret Lobenstine's (2006) *The Renaissance Soul: Life Design for People with Too Many Passions to Pick Just One* and Barbara Sher's (2006) *Refuse to Choose! A Revolutionary Program for Doing Everything that You Love*. While each author chose a different term to describe the category of individuals with multiple interests, both emphasized in their titles that the problems arising from developing many passions are predicated on the assumption that one needs to commit to a single choice of interest area to pursue. Each author addressed the conflict these people felt when their curiosity and desire for new experiences were pitted against the pressure to choose just one interest, one college major, or one career at a time. Both authors argued that these individuals want variety and ongoing change in their lives but fear becoming bored with having restricted ranges of activities or experiences available. Also, both authors agreed that scanners commonly suffered

some measure of social disapproval for their apparent lack of willingness to settle down and to make something of their lives and careers.

Lobenstine (2006) and Sher (2006) appealed to many of their readers by empathizing with their situations and offering visions of ways to develop satisfying and productive lifestyles without having to give in to the pressure to choose only one interest at a time. The self-help advice offered to readers led many of them to own up to their unique, personal conflicts and seek out one another's support—often through workshops, social media, or the Internet. While the two book authors cited different names for the condition, the term *scanners* has gained more popularity.

Both Lobenstine (2006) and Sher (2006) offered readers help in determining if their individual constellations of preferences and motivations fit the pattern identified with scanners, and so they developed informal self-report questions as a guide to self-diagnosis. Bloom (2009) believed that the self-identification tools for the concept that each author developed could be improved and expanded by developing a psychometrically sound instrument—one that also supports guiding individuals who possess a mix of both scanner and nonscanner characteristics. In the first step toward developing the instrument, Bloom linked popular descriptions of scanner personality characteristics to more established measures of personality traits; we refer to this step as the *domain modeling process*.

Lobenstine (2006) and Sher (2006) originally defined high scanner tendencies as primarily involving a) restlessness with the status quo, b) an attitude of been there, done that, c) difficulty choosing between attractive options or interests, and d) a desire to broaden into new experiences rather than deepen expertise with existing pursuits when certain levels of accomplishment or experience are reached. Bloom's (2009) list of some famous individuals who fit the scanner profile includes Ben Franklin, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, Michael Jordan, Isaac Newton, and Itzhak Perlman.

According to Lobenstine (2006) and Sher (2006), those with low scanner tendencies tend to a) have long-term aspirations that provide lasting or long-term life satisfaction; b) pursue increasing competence at a job, career, or hobby for relatively long periods of time; and c) prefer relatively predictable structures and activities while minimizing experiences of change and newness. Bloom's (2009) list of some famous individuals with relatively low scanner tendencies (labeled *divers* by Sher [2006]) includes Wolfgang Mozart, Claude

Monet, and Tiger Woods. Sher (2006) and Lobenstine (2006) are somewhat unclear about whether having scanner or Renaissance tendencies refers more to possessing multiple passions or to experiencing difficulty choosing among them. Bloom chose to incorporate both aspects into the scanner construct while placing more emphasis on the former.

Bloom began the domain modeling by identifying existing personality scales and subscales with content that seemed congruent with characteristics of scanners. Four traits were deemed central to scanners:

- sensation seeking (Eysenck & Zuckerman, 1978; Stephenson, Hoyle, Palmgreen, & Slater, 2003; Zuckerman, 1979, 2000),
- boredom susceptibility (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986),
- openness to experience (Goldberg, 1993, 2009; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003; McCrae, 1994; "Openness to Experience," 2009; "Revised NEO Personality Inventory," 2009), and
- creativity/originality and desire for learning/growth (Bloom, Yorges, & Ruhl, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Bloom tentatively labeled this total group of characteristics *expansiveness* and posited that it is the most important dimension for defining the scanner measure and construct. He also theorized that present moment awareness, or *mindfulness*, would be especially important to people with multifaceted and shifting interests. Sher (2006), in particular, noted how scanners tend to become highly absorbed in whatever they are doing. Toward this end, Bloom incorporated the concepts of

- flow proneness (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990),
- tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity (Keirse & Bates, 1984; Potter, 1995),
- ability to maintain attention and present moment awareness (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004; Lau et al., 2006; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmüller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006), and
- propensity to act with awareness (Baer et al., 2004).

Based on the works of Sher (2006) and Lobenstine (2006), Bloom also hypothesized that the capacity for *self-guidance* was a crucial element of scanner characteristics. In the domain model, he portrayed this factor in terms of

- the tendency to employ intuition and organic decision making in evaluating options (Keirse & Bates, 1984; Lobenstine, 2006; Potter, 1995),
- autotelism and self-leadership (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Lobenstine, 2006; Potter, 1995), and
- flexibility in thinking (Potter, 1995).

Having identified these traits as a basis for modeling the motivational qualities of scanners, Bloom then used Sher's and Lobenstine's original scales, Internet content, and various published scales as a starting point for developing a total scanner scale. His initial pilot instrument, consisting of 93 items presented along a 6-point Likert-type scale, became the basis for developing *The Scanner Self Inventory*.

Development of *The Scanner Self Inventory*

A complete description of the procedure for creating and developing *The Scanner Self Inventory* is available in Bloom's (2009) manuscript; therefore, we summarize the process briefly here. Step one was the domain modeling process described in the previous section. Step two involved pilot testing the 93-item initial instrument by administering it to colleagues at West Chester University. The pilot allowed Bloom to assess the completion time and ask colleagues for item-by-item feedback on the wording of the items as well as about the face validity of the instrument as a whole. This testing resulted in minor rewordings of some of pilot instrument items.

In step three, Bloom administered the slightly modified 93-item instrument to 166 undergraduate and graduate students at West Chester University during regularly scheduled classes, and then submitted their responses for psychometric evaluation; completion was both voluntary and anonymous. The evaluation included item analyses on the data and a principal-components factor analysis (followed by normalized Varimax rotation) to identify reliable and meaningful subscales. The total number of items was reduced by an iterative process of optimizing Cronbach's α for both the subscales and the total scale. In the process, several of the original subscales were omitted from inclusion in the final instrument. The overall analysis resulted in a 29-item instrument with high internal-consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$) and good reliability values (Cronbach's α ranging from .75 to .82) for the five subscales that emerged. All of the subscales were positively and moderately

intercorrelated and each exhibited strong, positive loadings on a unitary common factor. This pattern of subscale intercorrelations and factor loadings is consistent with the contention that the overall instrument measures one psychological construct (i.e., scanner tendencies).

Preliminary indications of validity for the refined 29-item *Scanner Self Inventory* were subsequently observed by noting positive correlations between respondents' scores on the final instrument and scores from measures not included in the final set but expected to show a relationship. These measures included flow proneness, tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity, present moment awareness, acting with awareness, and intuition/organic decision making (Bloom, 2009; Bloom & Tripp, 2011). Clearly, additional investigations of convergent and discriminant validity would be useful, including comparisons with results from the temperament assessment by Keirsey and Bates (1984).

In the final major step in instrument development, members of the Delaware Valley Career Planners at Villanova University provided feedback on the refined 29-item version of *The Scanner Self Inventory* during a one-hour workshop. This input was particularly valuable for constructing the score interpretation guidelines (see Bloom, 2009).

The development process resulted in an empirically refined, 29-item final scale with five dimensions or subconstructs that together reflect a revised scanner construct that is somewhat more expansive than that portrayed by Sher (2006) and Lobenstine (2006). In addition, the subconstructs are tightly interrelated conceptually, correlationally, and in terms of robust psychometric scale properties (i.e., contributions to overall internal consistency): The five dimensions are

- openness to experience (propensity to seek out new experiences and interests),
- learning and growth (valuing ongoing learning and challenge),
- originality (propensity to come up with new and original means of accomplishing tasks),
- self-leadership (valuing taking responsibility and personal initiative), and
- flexibility (willingness to change thinking patterns).

Academic and Career Advising Using *The Scanner Self Inventory*

Based on our experience using *The Scanner Self Inventory*, we believe it can be of great benefit to individuals with relatively high overall scores and

who express anxiety about their inability to live up to others' advice about focusing on a single path. A few typical responses from students and others who have completed and self-scored the instrument follow:

I filled out this test and right away I felt like it was written for me. It describes me to a "T." This weekend I went to the library and checked out Barbara Sher's book *I Could Do Anything if I Only Knew What it Was* and I have *Refuse to Choose* on reserve. I went out and asked for and got a waiter position so I could have some income, but it also gives me time to interview and systematically explore a few possibilities. I actually feel like I can make some progress since I know I'm not the only one with that point of view.

I think the most helpful things were knowing that having this many interests doesn't make me defective! Secondly, the *Inventory* gave me a framework within which to analyze some of the characteristics that should be in a future position (as well as knowing what other interests I can fulfill in other spheres of my life).

The biggest realization for me is that I need to apply the idea of having flexibility in planning to all areas of my life. In some ways, I already do this. For example, I keep some days open when planning a trip, where I don't even know what city or maybe even country I'll be in. That way I can make adjustments along the way. I can stay longer in one location or try somewhere new. I chose to be an English major because I thought it would be useful (despite what many people think). I had the option of teaching, writing, marketing, PR, and so on. It didn't lock me into a specific career as other majors might have done.

I appreciate that career development will rarely be an event for a scanner. Rather, it will be a developing process. By understanding that being a scanner is a preferred style, this approach to life can be normalized.

Many individuals are anxious about their inability to make choices of major or career as others do, and their anxiety often leads them to ask "What's wrong with me?" and attempt to diagnose themselves. This process often cumulates in inaccurate and self-defeating misattributions as well as shame, self-doubt, and reluctance to discuss their con-

cerns with others. One common misattribution is attaching the label of attention deficit or attention deficit–hyperactivity disorder (ADD or ADHD). (In our exploratory research, we found no relationship between scanner tendencies and individuals' reports of an ADD or ADHD diagnosis.) Besides the desire to develop a psychometrically sound instrument to more validly identify scanners and measure the strength of their preferences, we were also motivated to present the preferences of scanners as a range of possible positions rather than as a categorical identification. Self-report inventories available on Internet sites typically present the notion of a scanner within a dichotomy: an individual is either a scanner or is not. *The Scanner Self Inventory* conceptualizes student preferences along a range of potential scores, and advisors can effectively work with any students regardless of their motivations or attitudes.

We also tell students with high scores on the *Inventory* that their scanner characteristics can be strengths in the current knowledge-driven, postindustrial economy. Shaffer and Zalewski (2011a, 2011b) have recently described the range of new career trajectories called *boundaryless careers* or *portfolio careers*, where the willingness and motivation to develop new interests, skills, and special knowledge over a working lifetime gives job seekers advantages in the new economy. We encourage scanners to realize that their preferences are often a better fit for 21st century careers than those characterizing people who desire—and expect—to choose one career path and pursue it throughout their working lifetime. Indeed foreclosure students (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011 [pp. 62–77]), whose relative inflexibility and disinterest in growing their skill sets as they pursue traditional careers that are rapidly vanishing from the workplace, may struggle more in the new economy than scanners. In fact, the two types of students are such polar opposites that perhaps very low scores on *The Scanner Self Inventory* indicate a foreclosure status; this line of questioning calls for empirical research that would further advance advisors' understanding of students struggling with or prematurely deciding on a life path.

In practical terms, use of *The Scanner Self Inventory*, coupled with appropriate guidance from academic and career professionals, could generate new options for students who display characteristics of undecidedness. Scanners may benefit from changing majors; pursuing multiple majors; exploring one or more minor concentrations; enrolling in special interdisciplinary, honors, or customized

programs; taking time off from school; pursuing cooperative or internship arrangements with local employers; shifting to a vocational school; assembling several part-time jobs into a multi-faceted custom career path; or even leaving school to pursue a particular calling.

Career development professionals can expand substantially on the role of academic advisors in administering *The Scanner Self Inventory*. Typically, career development professionals will have more resources at their disposal (e.g., books, articles, links to Internet sites, assessment tools, self-inventories, skills in conducting focused career discussions, knowledge about the job market, etc.) and less bias than academic department advisors toward specific majors or fields of study. Advisors helping advisees need to allow for flexibility in pursuing multiple interests concurrently or sequentially (see Carduner et al., 2011), allow for multiple discussions, and not assume that college is the optimal place for them (see Crawford, 2009; Robbins, 1998). Lobenstine (2006) also encourages multipassioned individuals to maintain ongoing lists of potentially interesting pursuits, adding to them whenever new inspirations surface. Furthermore, she advocates that scanners assemble a set of about three to five interests (focal points) from this list to pursue concurrently, revising the set as interests are outgrown or new interests become more compelling.

Advisors should advocate that students with strong scanner profiles think about subsequent careers and jobs, or sequences of them, rather than ultimate ones; pressure to identify a perfect job or calling can feel oppressive to multipassioned individuals. Steering scanners toward Sher's (2006) and Lobenstine's (2006) books can also be valuable, especially Sher's incomplete but valuable taxonomy of life design models. More generally, for career development purposes, scores along the five *Scanner Self Inventory* scale dimensions can furnish guideposts for helping students examine the potential congruence between scanner tendencies (or lack of them) and contemplated jobs, careers, or majors.

Readers who wish to inquire about the instrument development process in greater detail, or to request use of the 29-item *The Scanner Self Inventory* and scoring rubric, can email us at abloom@wcupa.edu.

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Authors’ Notes

Arvid J. Bloom is in the Department of Psychology, West Chester University. Philip R. Tripp is in the Twardowski Career Development Center, West Chester University. Leigh S. Shaffer is retired from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, West Chester University, and is now living in Downingtown, Pennsylvania.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Arvid J. Bloom at abloom@wcupa.edu.