Influences on Career Choice During Adolescence

Many theorists have investigated various aspects of career development during adolescence; however, most of these studies have involved college-aged students. The present study specifically investigated career choice and future plans among high school students. To see what factors influence students' career aspirations, high school students from two high schools completed a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked students about their academic future, career aspirations and expectations, as well as who had been influential in the students' lives. As hypothesized, academic risk reported by the student influenced future plan aspirations. For example, those students who were at a high academic risk had low aspirations for future plans. Also as predicted, there were no differences between parental occupation and children's reported job plans. Theoretical implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Parenting styles and parent-child relationships are linked to identity development during adolescence. Parents who encourage their adolescent in decision making for the family tend to promote identity achievement. Parents who do not encourage this type of decision making tend to promote identity foreclosure. Passive and lenient parents, on the other hand, who allow their children to make their own decisions, promote identity diffusion. Families that offer support and allow for individual decision making allow for the advancement of the most effective atmosphere for positive identity development (Santrock, 2007; Berzonsky, Branje, & Meeus 2007).

Other psychosocial resources, such as personal effectiveness and adaptability, are also related to identity development, because they allow for an individual to develop a committed sense of purpose and the capability to have control of his or her life. This commitment serves as the template for how an individual will perform in life in everyday situations and solving problems. Individuals are likely to have high levels of academic achievement, be capable of adapting to situations, and have low levels of problem behaviors when they have high levels of self-regulatory resources. Psychosocial resources are correlated with these desirable outcomes (Berzonsky, 2003).

The socialization of work is another factor affecting occupational choice in adolescence. Long before individuals enter the work force, they are being socialized to work by various sources. This process of socialization continues throughout their career. People begin accumulating their knowledge about the work force in early childhood, primarily from their parents, friends, and schools (Levine & Hoffner, 2006).

Parents are a primary source of socialization and also serve as influential factors in their children's career choices. In the family, children are first exposed to social and gender role behavior through chores around the house and through the power differences amongst family members. This gives children information about future interactions of superior-subordinate relationships (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). At home, children are made aware of the importance of education and school in their household. This in turn affects the attitudes and motivation children have towards school, which can be either positive or negative. (Koutsoulis & Campbell, 2001).

According to Levine and Hoffner (2006), friends are another influential socialization source for children and adolescents. Through interactions with friends, adolescents can discuss career goals and receive feedback on their career choices. Information on career aspira-
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Tions can be shared amongst friends who have similar interests. After-school activities, sports in particular, provide a great deal of socialization through decision making and problem solving (Levine & Hoffner).

Furthermore, schools are an important source of socialization for children and adolescents. Schools serve to socialize students by giving them the skills necessary to be effective in the work force. They also give students exposure to hierarchical relationships other than those displayed in the family. Interactions between students, teachers, principals, and counselors can be observed. Schools also allow the students to observe and participate in activities with others in their age group (Levine & Hoffner, 2006).

One major influential source of motivation for children and adolescents that Levine leaves out of his study, are the children and adolescents themselves. The way students perceive their abilities has an impact on their behavior and attitudes. Likewise, the students' perception of their school and teachers will have an impact on their academic performance as well. A positive attitude is linked with higher education aspirations because the more able students feel in a particular subject, the more positive their attitude toward that subject, and the more likely students will want to continue to engage in these types of settings (Koutsolis & Campbell, 2001).

Many studies have been conducted investigating the various aspects of career development during adolescence. One study of particular significance to the present study investigates parental expectations and the barriers to career aspirations. According to the researchers, there are several barriers that can affect the occupational choices of adolescents. These barriers include socioeconomic status, family attitude, and poor school engagement (Creed, Conlon, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). The researchers note that although there are barriers to occupational choice, the relationship between these barriers and actual occupational functioning is difficult to understand. Some individuals may be restricted by these barriers, while others use them as motivation for achievement (2007).

The results of Creed et al.'s (2007) study demonstrated that adolescents and their parents typically hold high career expectations; they found a correlation between the child's individual expectations for the career development and their parent's expectations for the child. These findings are reflective of previous findings indicating that parents are influential and have an impact on their children's future career aspirations.

Recent research conducted by Dreher and Dreher (as cited in Kracke, 2002) on German middle school students suggests that one of the most important activities adolescents engage in concerning their future career plans involves information gathering. This process allows students to discover several different career choices, while considering internal factors such as individual abilities, goals, and their plans to achieve such goals. The results of this study showed that adolescents are heavily influenced by their exploration of their environment and the self when selecting a future occupation. This study illustrates Super's idea of career development. Super (1990) found that the exploration of external and internal environments is crucial in selecting an occupation. This choice parallels individual interest, ability, and job availability in the work force.

Berrios-Allison (2005) investigated college students' occupational choice and its relation to connectedness and separateness using a family systems perspective. The results of this study indicate that the students who were most likely to achieve came from families with a higher income. The researchers connect this to Weinger's (1998) theory that children who come from lower income families will have a more difficult time obtaining their career goals. They also suggest that this supports the idea that both material and emotional support is required for individuals to make rewarding decisions.

The purpose of the present study was to increase the body of knowledge concerning the influences on career choices and future plans during adolescence. While many studies have examined these influences, they were often explored using college student samples. Although typical college students are still in late adolescence, the fact that they are in college already indicates some premeditation of future career choice. The current study specifically investigates career choice and future plans in high school students. It was hypothesized that students will aspire to a job with a similar level of job prestige as parents' current occupations. In addition, it was hypothesized that students who have more problems in school will be less likely to plan to go to college after high school. Because there are several factors that play into career choice, influences of specific relationships were also explored.

Method

Participants

Two high schools in a Western Colorado school district were asked to participate in a study which surveyed students about their future aspirations. One-hundred and eleven high school students chose to participate in the study from classes taught by one math, one English, and one science teacher from each school (48% boys and 52% girls). Thirty-two percent were freshmen, 21% sophomores, 21% juniors, and 25% were seniors. The mean age of the male participants was 16.02 (SD =1.34 years), and the mean age of the female participants...
was 15.38 (SD = 1.21 years). Of the sample taken, 85% of the students were White, 12% Hispanic, 1% African American, and 1% were Native American. Participants were treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002).

**Materials**

Students from both high schools were given a questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire asked about students’ academic future, career aspirations and expectations, as well as who has been influential in the students’ lives. The students were asked to state their real job and job they aspire to do. Real job was defined as what job the student realistically think they will end up doing, where are the job they aspire to was defined as what job the student realistically think they will end up doing. Students were also asked about trouble in school in order to assess academic risk. Students were asked to state their parents’ occupations and to rate the influence that certain individuals had on their lives. All occupations (parents current and students’ career aspirations and expectations) were rated by prestige scores given by the National Opinion Research Center (Davis & Smith, 2002). Those scores were then further categorized based on the standards set by the National Opinion Research Center by level of prestige. This level was high, medium, or low prestige with scores of 3 (high), 2 (medium), or 1 (low). Examples of high, medium, and low prestige jobs are presented in Table 1. Nine questionnaires were not used because they were incomplete. Those questions which were given multiple answers were assigned the answer with the highest number scored.

How confident the students’ felt about reported plans, ideal job, and real job were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very confident) to 7 (not at all confident). Students used a Likert scale to rate different people in terms of their influence over the student. Questions left blank on the questionnaire were left blank during data entry. Those who indicated an “other” category under the influential section were entered only if they also assigned a number with their stated written answer.

**Procedure**

Parental and student consent was required. Each teacher participating in the study was given an outline of instructions. These instructions gave directions to administer the questionnaire during class time. For incentive purposes, a candy bar was given to those students who returned their consent form regardless of whether or not the parent gave consent. Students who were 18 years of age or older were not required to obtain parental permission to participate in the study.

**Results**

To examine if student plans after high school varied by sex of the participant, an ANOVA was performed. The result was statistically significant, F(1, 110) = 4.07, p < .05. Female participants (M = 7.22, SD = 1.43) reported having higher aspirations than the male participants (M = 6.58, SD = 1.90). Due to this significance, males and females were separated for further statistical analysis. Correlations revealed that the students’ real job and plans were positively correlated for males, r = .30, p < .05. Plans and mother’s influence were also positively correlated for males, r = .30, p < .05. Trouble in school and plans were negatively correlated for males, r = -.32, p < .05. Confidence and plans were negatively correlated for females, r = -.30, p < .05. Although there was no significant difference found between students’ level of chosen job prestige and their parents’ level of job prestige, there was a trend showing students aspiring to a slightly higher level of prestige than their parents. Figure 1 shows this trend.

**Discussion**

**Parental Occupational Status**

As predicted, there were no significant differences found between the level of prestige for parents’ job and level of prestige for their children’s reported real job. Although there was no significant difference between the level of prestige for parent and student jobs, the trend showed children aspiring to a slightly higher level of prestige for the students’ reported real job. This could be due to the career barriers in students’ lives acting as motivation to achieve more highly than their parents, rather than restricting them (Creed et al., 2007). It could also be that these students achieve well in school, and therefore have higher career aspirations then those who do not.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Job Prestige</th>
<th>Example of Job</th>
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<tr>
<td>Low (12-41)</td>
<td>House Cleaner</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bus Driver</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Janitor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medium (42-59)</td>
<td>Police Officer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>School Teacher</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bank Teller</td>
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<tr>
<td>High (60+)</td>
<td>Physician</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Accountant</td>
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Although parental occupational status was not directly correlated with the students' reported occupation in this study, it has been found that parental involvement is twice as predictive of their children's achievement as the family's socioeconomic status (Chavkin, 1989). Maternal interaction with her pre-school child has been found to influence the development of the child's cognitive proficiencies. This study shows that poor minority mothers interact differently with their children than middle-class white mothers. However, in a study done by Chavkin and Williams (1985), a survey of more than 3,000 parents and 4,000 educators showed that regardless of ethnicity, all parents are concerned about their children's education (as cited in Chavkin, 1989). However in a study comparing middle-class and working-class students, middle-class mothers' expectations for their sons did influence the son's expectations more than those of daughters. They found that middle-class mothers' expectations have a more positive effect on their sons than their daughters (Baker & Entwisle, 2001). This supports the present finding regarding the mothers' influence on their son's achievement.

Problems in School
In concurrence with our hypothesis, academic risk reported by the students influenced future plan aspirations. However, this was only significant with male students. This may be due to the students' level of self-esteem. Self-esteem is an important factor which plays a role in the career decision process. Adolescents will have the least amount of confusion regarding their future career objectives when they have high self-esteem during this explanatory period of identity development (Santrock, 2007). High self-esteem is correlated with more conforming behavior than low self-esteem. Therefore it is tacit that those students with low self-esteem will not only be higher in academic risk, but will also have lower expectations and this low expectation will correlate with lower prestige jobs. Several studies (e.g., Dupeyrat & Marine, 2005), (as cited in Hardre, Crowson, Debacker, & White, 2007) have found that motivation for a specific subject in school can be influenced by the students' individual perception of ability. When the perceived ability is high, students will be more performance-oriented and therefore be more competitive. However, when the perceived ability is low, students will be more likely to avoid public displays of their low ability (Hardre et al., 2007). Elliot (1999), (as cited in Hardre, Crowson, Debacker, & White, 2007) describes two performance goals which differ in valence. Performance-approach goals, as indicated by Elliot, indicate positive valence and high ability. This type of approach includes high aspirations, and high academic achievement. The other type of approach is the performance-avoidance goal, which has a negative valence and has been linked to poor academic achievement and reduced motivation.

Other Findings
Another result we found statistically significant was the mothers' influence on their sons' future aspirations. A study conducted by Baker and Entwisle (2001) found that mothers with students in middle-class schools expected more from their sons than mothers with students in working-class schools.

The present finding that girls have higher career aspirations than boys is consistent with findings of previous research conducted by Wallace-Broschus, Serafica, and Ospow (1994). They found a significant gender difference in the reported career exploration and planning of high school students with girls engaging in greater career exploration and planning. They also found that male participants reported higher levels of career indecision than females.

Wallace-Broschus et al. (1994) investigated the relationship between grade differences and self-concept and identity statuses. Their results suggested that scholastic ability was related to career maturity and varied by grade. For example, freshman students were found to have a significant relationship between career maturity, scholastic ability, job ability, and behavioral conduct. Seniors, on the other hand, only had one domain related to self-perception and career decidedness. That domain was their scholastic ability. One reason for this could be that seniors have a better understanding that scholastic achievements have more of an impact.
on their future jobs than their current job or current behavioral conduct.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations in this study that need to be addressed. First, this study is vulnerable to possible response bias. Those plans reported after high school involving more education (e.g., entering a university) were rated higher than plans that did not involve more education (e.g., entering the military). These scores were determined using the prestige scores given by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC; Davis & Smith, 2002). In addition, because this information was obtained only from the self-report of students and these students will not be followed longitudinally, it is hard to obtain good evidence of the validity of the students’ responses. It is important to remember that correlation does not imply causation. Future research needs to inquire about the students’ family structure. The family structure could impact the amount of influence each parent has on career development.

To have a better representation of adolescents nationwide, future research needs to include a bigger sample size and be conducted in both rural and urban high schools. Also, further examination and expansion on identity development and its relation to career choice during adolescence needs to be addressed. While many studies have examined this relationship, this area needs to be expanded to include the complete age range of adolescence. Future studies also need to examine any major shifts in career choice and during which stages of adolescent development that this occurs.

Finally, future research should make this study longitudinal. This will allow the researchers to follow the students throughout high school and early adulthood to determine if they follow through with their original aspirations.

**References**


