The Influence of Family on the Career Interests and Choices of Youth

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The economy and along with it the employment chances and options for our adolescents entering adulthood have worsened in recent years (Buchholz & Blossfeld, 2012). There is increasing uncertainty in the lives of our adolescents as they search for what career options they would like to pursue. In any day and age an adolescent's family of origin might knowingly or unknowingly hold some sway over the direction the adolescent takes in career pursuits. However, given the reality of the economic times we are currently encountering (Buchholz & Blossfeld, 2012) along with the changing composition, structure, and dynamics of families, including recent increases in divorce rates, the increase in single-parent households including parents who have always been single, and the increase in grandparents living with grandchildren (Demo & Acock, 1996; Kreider & Ellis, 2011), recognizing and understanding family influence on adolescent career choice may be more important now than in the past.

What it is about their family of origin that may influence our youth in career choice is not just important from a social science standpoint, but also from the standpoint of practical application. The more families and their adolescents know and recognize how their family and their family's dynamics may influence their adolescents, the more that family can understand these influences and assert affirmative control to use those positive influences or, conversely, overcome any negative influences, to increase their chance of successful career choices for their adolescents. This paper will examine some of the potential influences of family composition, structure, and dynamics upon the career interests and choices of youth, along with how family systems theory may help in the recognition and understanding of family influence on those interests and choices. Although out of practical necessity this paper will discuss only some of the various potential family influences, and those only as a brief overview, it may spark an interest for more in-depth study and examination of this topic.

In particular we should view the question of family of origin influence on the career development and occupational choice of an adolescent through the lens of family systems theory. No adolescent exists in a vacuum. The influence and impact of the family of origin undoubtedly has significant. This can include family composition, such as number of members and structure; parenting style or styles, including parental involvement in their children's career development; the personal characteristics of every family member, such as level of education and occupation; and family constellation, such as the number of siblings, birth order, and the gender of the children; along with a host of other factors and attributes. We should keep in mind that family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; White & Klein, 2008) teaches us that we are not researching about adolescents or working with an individual adolescent in a vacuum. A child or adolescent is, of course, influenced by his or her family, but the family also is influenced by the child or adolescent. Although this is sometimes referred to as the whole being greater than the parts, we should keep in mind that the whole is not static and every individual in the family changes the dynamics of that family with their entrance or exit and their behavior in between. From a positive youth development perspective, we are often interested in studying the family from the focal point of the adolescents in the family, but family systems theory teaches us that there are many other angles available for study, and every change in, and every attribute of each family member must be acknowledged as a part of what makes the family what it is and the adolescent a dynamic part of his or her family (Cox & Paley, 1997; White & Klein, 2008). We will recognize the interworking of systems family theory in the studies reviewed and the conclusions reached.

Parenting styles and family dynamics. Parenting styles and family dynamics may very well influence adolescent career choice. One study that serves as a good general introduction to this issue was conducted through the use of interviews, to determine how family of origin relationships and experiences might influence career development (Altman, 1997). This study indicates family experiences can be very relevant. Sometimes the correlations are not extremely strong and there are many intervening factors involved.

However, the researcher's conclusion is that the environment of the family of origin, particularly if very positive or very negative, can make a difference in career outcomes. For example, there is a reasoned argument that lack of support in choices, discouragement at "higher" career choices by family members, or the need to choose an occupation sooner than later because of need to escape the family of origin because of the living situation is correlated with more negative outcomes in career development for adolescents. A positive environment in the family of origin, however, such as support in career choices and guidance in them is correlated with more positive outcomes in career development. What further specific correlates does the literature indicate?

Is there a relationship between the parent-child relationship and the children's careers? One study hypothesized that a high-quality parent-offspring relationship would be associated with similar careers (or career aspirations) of parent and child (Tziner, Loverman, Dekel, & Sharoni, 2012). In fact, no direct correlation was found. However, a correlation was found between a high-quality parent-child relationship and job characteristics (though not exactly the same jobs) between the characteristics of the parents' jobs and the job characteristics of the jobs the children expressed an interest in pursuing. Characteristics are those attributes of a job including skills, knowledge, and abilities to do a job, along with the type of interests and personality that might go well with job performance. So, one may argue there is some influence of parenting style on the type of career the children are interested in, even if not a lock-step correlation of the actual occupation of the parents and that which the child wishes to pursue.

Such family dynamics as the roles that family members take on may correlate to eventual career choices, whether an actual occupation or at least the general type of occupation. One study of early family experiences compared a sample of trainee counseling psychologists with a matched sample of those not going into a counseling profession (DiCaccavo, 2002). The results indicated counseling psychology trainees reported significantly lower levels of care from their mothers, but reported higher levels of self-efficacy toward caring. Counseling psychologists, as one of the professions related to helping and assisting, along with personal contact, may attract those who did not receive a great deal of warmth in their own young lives, which may then have driven the child or adolescent to want to exhibit that type of behavior in their occupation.

Games are sometimes developed for the purposes of social research and they are a unique method for families to maintain their interest in their participation in the study being conducted. In one such study family members used a game to interact with each other, making family decisions to address the career goals of the family adolescents, while researchers observed their behavior (Peterson, Rollins, Thomas, & Heaps, 1982). The study focused on 96 families that had two adolescents, one male and one female. The researchers concluded that family decisions regarding career choices for the two adolescents favored the male adolescents' goals over the female adolescents' goals by a ratio of 4 to 1. This was true even after controlling for other factors that one might think would have an influence, such as the ordinal position of the adolescents, the employment status of the mothers and the education of the fathers. A limitation of this study is that it was conducted over thirty years ago. It would be interesting to find out, by performing further research, as to how much we have progressed since 1982.

Although many people have concerns regarding the issue of girls growing up without the same level of career aspirations as boys, this concern was arguably more acute 20 or 30 years ago. One study, conducted in the 1980's, examining the family influence on the career aspirations of girls examined the question of girls aspiring to careers that could be viewed as a higher level and traditionally dominated by males (Sandberg, Ehrhardt, Mellins, Ince, & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1987). This study calls females entering such careers "Pioneers". For the most part there was no strong correlation found between most family factors and the willingness and interest of girls to become pioneers. The chief factor in adolescence predicting girls becoming pioneers was the correlation with parental higher education. To a smaller degree femininity tended to be emphasized less for these pioneer girls during their childhood and adolescence, and these girls more frequently had mothers who had worked outside the home when growing up. This perhaps provided a role model (even if in a more traditionally female occupation) for the pioneer girl. Therefore, although one would need to concede that there are few absolute predictors, at least a higher level parental education and the mother working outside the home are correlated with girls seeking occupations traditionally filled by men. As with any research performed regarding gender roles more than 15 or 20 years ago, it raises curiosity about whether the results would be replicated today.

Do youth seek advice and assistance from their family regarding career development?   Yes, to some extent they do (Whitson & Keller, 2004). According to the authors youth will most likely seek assistance from family members.

Although parents are more frequently sought after than siblings, that may be a natural reaction to the greater work experience of parents versus siblings, parents being assumed to know more about the topic. How parents respond to these requests for assistance, however, may have an impact on adolescent career choices as well.

Parental involvement in career choices. Parental involvement in their children's career choices can be considered closely linked to parenting styles, in that the degree of involvement in supporting and assisting versus hindering, or at least not supporting, one's children in their career development would, one can logically argue, tend to match the parenting styles in other areas in which parents are developing their children. There were studies, in fact, that researched parenting styles in one manner or another related to their children's career development and aspirations, so these studies are worthy of some discussion.

One Finnish study interrelates how the adolescents' motivation (autonomous versus a high degree of parental control) and what the adolescents thought about the career development process (e.g. is their goal realistic, how much stress are they enduring, what kind of progress are they making) compared with the degree of their parents involvement in their career preparation (e.g. support versus lack of engagement – note actual discouragement was not measured) (Dietrich & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Parental warmth and career preparation involvement (from a support standpoint) was correlated to less stress by the adolescents in later years regarding their career decisions. Adolescents were more likely able to pursue the careers they were interested in and motivated to pursue if their parents were involved in supporting and assisting them in their aspirations, and those youth had less stress related to their career decisions. These are of course Finnish adolescents and young adults, which may or may not be descriptive of the same or similar situations in the U.S.

A study was performed regarding what factors influenced an aspiration for a science career by 14-15 year old youth, (Rodrigues, Jindal-Snape, & Snape, 2011). The study concluded that the most important factor influencing the aspiration of a science career by the adolescents is their perception as to whether their parents want them to pursue such a career. This study illustrates the difficulty of trying to determine if career development and choice in the youth is influenced by the specific parental involvement in (for better or worse) the career development of their children, or in the style the parents use in the general overall raising of their children. We do not know if there is causation involved here in which parents wish for their children to pursue a science career, so the children aspire to such a career, or if these parents would be supportive of whatever career choice their children expressed (at least within a generally acceptable range).

Some influence of parental support and encouragement for career choices of adolescents may also be discerned from another recent study, indicating the type of involvement the parents have is correlated with the willingness of adolescents and young adults to be comfortable trekking down an occupational path that might not be the first choice of one or both parents (Cuiting & Kerpelman, 2007). Questionnaires were administered to 304 female undergraduates regarding parental feedback to the young adults, and their parents' willingness to discuss and support their career choices. The researchers concluded that this willingness for the parent to positively engage in career discussions may influence young women's certainty about pursuing particular careers – as opposed to changing their career decisions to fit parental expectations. Mothers and fathers may in fact have different levels and types of influences regarding this area. Having a close relationship with the mother and discussing career goals with her increases her influence, but decreased the father's influence – at least in the area of the daughter's certainty to pursue a particular career even if the father disagrees with that choice. In other words, a close relationship with the mother can reduce the daughter's distress and increase her certainty on a career, even if her parents may disagree with that choice.

As might be expected, the type of relationship with the parents does influence the willingness of young women to disagree with them – or agree with them. For example, if the father has a higher than average education level and has held discussions with his daughter, the daughter is more willing to change her mind. Above all else, this study emphasizes deep parental influence, yet generally not overwhelming control on adolescents in their career choice.

Sibling influence. Do siblings influence occupational choices and aspirations of other siblings? There is some indication that although not large, there can still be some influence made by siblings, either intentionally or simply through circumstances. An Ohio State University study examined whether there were sibling influences on career plans, including specifically for male and female youth (Morgan, 1983). This study, using data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience, 1979-82, focused on career aspirations of youth.

These adolescents had not yet entered their aspirational careers, although many had taken steps from an academic standpoint to begin their pursuit. The study indicated no influence could be found linking girls to the career choices of their sisters. However, the study did indicate that brothers reinforce each other's career aspirations, particularly during the high school and early college years when these youth are formulating their occupational ideas and goals and beginning the transition to full-time employment. Why is this? With the research performed the study can only offer a hypothesis. Some families may tolerate, or even subtly or outright encourage, more sibling rivalry and competition in brothers than they allow in sisters. If true, that may result in boys and young men using their brother's career aspirations to influence their own career aspirations. As family systems theory indicates, adolescents do not live in a vacuum – others in their family, including siblings may have an influence on their actions.

The research results of one study, covering multiple factors and examined in more detail elsewhere in this paper, found that, although statistically borderline, girls aspiring to higher level careers, particularly those transitionally dominated by males, had somewhat fewer older brothers than girls not aspiring to those careers (Sandberg, Ehrhardt, Mellins, Ince, & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1987). One may speculate on why this correlation exists. For example, families without, or at least with fewer, older brothers may allow their aspirations for children obtaining post-secondary education and attaining higher level careers fall more on their daughter or daughters.

Future research. There are correlations between family dynamics and characteristics and adolescent career development and occupation selection. Yet, there are still numerous questions as to how these dynamics interact. Answers to our questions will continue to be developed and refined, through research using a growing number methodologies and techniques. This includes the use of "family genograms", more often used in family counseling, to map out the patterns and influences of an adolescent's or young adult's extended family, recording the family dynamics that could influence a young career-seekers decision-making (Malott & Magnuson, 2004). A well-mapped career genogram applied to a specific adolescent, indicating education level, degrees or professional certifications, occupations and related information, going back three or four generations, can be a valuable tool for analyzing that youth's career interests and possible development from a family systems theory perspective.

Practical Implications. A practical question is, why do many, perhaps even most, current and proposed career exploration and development programs targeted at youth appear to not involve the parents and families of the youth? For example, a recent issue of *New Dimensions for Youth Development* (Hynes & Hirsch, 2012) featured the topic of career programing for youth, linking youth to and preparing them for the world of work. Yet, family of origin members are only mentioned once in the entire issue of nine articles, that being one sentence in one article recognizing parents and siblings as an influence on career choice, with no actual family dynamics mentioned (Klein, 2012). No career programing article mentioned families as being useful or worthwhile to work with in the career development of youth, or that family dynamics and composition of youth may either reinforce or discourage what most of the youth programing is trying to accomplish. Now that we are aware that family of origin composition, dynamics, and parenting style are correlated with various career considerations of a family's adolescents, we should consider those factors in order to best determine if and how those factors should be considered in youth career programing. We should not treat career development programs as if they work with the youth in a vacuum. Some progress on this issue has arguably been made. For example, one career development program for youth engages the youth by trying to engender a sense of purpose in their career seeking (Dik, Steger, Gibson & Peisner, 2011). The program involves family, by having youth interview their parents regarding sense of purpose in their work, as a method to introduce and keep the parents involved and informed about the program.

Conclusion. Youth development and family relations go hand-in-hand, and it is throught the lens of family systems theory that we can observe that connection. Yet, there is still much work to be done, and much more to be understood on the topic of the influences of family of origin and their dynamics on adolescent career development and occupation choice. For example, although a number of research studies have been conducted on several factors regarding family composition and dynamics, there has been inadequate attention to social class and socioeconomic status in the studies thus far, particularly in the United States, in evaluating family influences on career development (Whitson & Keller, 2004).

Although our conclusion is that family relationship factors and family dynamics influence the career choice and career development process of our youth, our inevitable conclusion is that the influence is likely to a modest degree (Whitson & Keller, 2004). No decisions by youth, on any subject, are made in a vacuum, however.

There are many intervening influences other than factors and attributes of the family of origin that may guide an adolescent's career choice, and it is difficult to isolate one from another. Yet, the use of systems theory allows a more rich examination of how complex family dynamics are, and a greater ability to sort through direct and competing influences. More research is needed (Blustein, 2004), but with that greater understanding we may better apply policy regarding adolescent career development in the future.

From a policy perspective, although many factors associated with families and the dynamics within the family may influence career choice, our goal as a society may legitimately be to encourage the access and attainment of any career by any adolescent in our society, to the degree the youth is capable and interested enough to pursue that occupation. So, we must examine ways to use the positive dynamics of a family while finding ways to "get around" what appear to be factors and dynamics in an adolescent's family that may discourage that sort of free flow and access to their career of choice.

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