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Socio-demographic Factors Influencing Career Decision-making among Undergraduate Psychology Students in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The study explored the socio-demographic factors that anchor career choice among psychology students at the University of Venda in South Africa. *Ex post facto* research design was employed. A questionnaire was used to collect data. The chi-square and t-test were used to test differences in the data profiles. Response frequencies and corresponding percentages were calculated. Results showed that the participants attended rural-situated public schools. Most had either both parents with post secondary education or both parents with below secondary education. The majority of the participants made delayed career decisions. The participants were mainly influenced by parents, teachers and friends to choose psychology as a career. The most common method of funding was the bursary. The majority of students chose psychology after completing their secondary education. The present study needs to be replicated with a larger sample drawn from diverse academic disciplines and institutions of higher learning for generalisability of the findings.

INTRODUCTION

Today, young people face a complex and rapidly changing society. It has been reported that regardless of great effort put forth by families, government agencies and non-government agencies, many young people encounter difficulties in the transition from the world of school to that of work (Atchoarena 2005; Nykanen et al. 2010). Investigating and better understanding the myriad factors that contribute to career choice is a topic of recurring interest in higher education. Some studies suggest that the factors that anchor career preferences include parental support (Wims 1994) and gender, socio-economic status (Mathombela 1997). To guide young people in their career decision- making, socio-demographic factors play a central role in this lifelong process. The factors include family, school, career guidance program, media and peers.

Family

Family involvement was found to be the most significant predictor of career choice in gender-dominated occupations (Salami 2006). Family involvement refers to the extent to which the parents or family members are involved in the career plans of children (Salami 2006). According to Kniveton (2004), the family can provide information and guidance directly or indirectly, to influence a young person's career choice. For example, parents offer appropriate support for certain occupational choices which tend to follow their own (Small and McClean 2002). Family involvement also includes the extent to which parents give encouragement, responsiveness, approval and financial support in matters concerned with the career plans of their children (Salami 2006).

Families treat boys and girls differently. Boys are shaped and groomed into stereotypic masculine careers and are given more status in the family (Grant 2004). However, Carter and Wojtkiewicz (2000) argue that female children receive more attention from parents than male offsprings. They attribute the parents' behaviour to the current emphasis on educational attainment for females. Students identify parents as the strongest influence on career and course decisions (Mapfumo et al. 2002; Barnett 2007). Teachers or counselors cannot replace the influence parents have on their sons' and daughters' career plans.

Research shows that parents and caregivers influence children's career choices (Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008) with the mother being

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the most influential person the adolescent talks to concerning career choice (Otto 2000). Mothers were cited as particularly influential because they provided support that eased the children's apprehensions about careers (Hairston 2000). A sample of South African students reported that their parents had a significant influence on their career decisions but mothers were more influential (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006).

In South Africa, Ngesi (2003) notes that poor financial base of students from disadvantaged communities deter choices of appropriate educational programmes and careers. Such students tend to avoid careers which appear to them to require long period of training their finance cannot support (Ngesi 2003). This suggests that students from lower socio-economic families are not given adequate space to make independent decisions on their careers. For instance, a study by Salami (2006) shows that the higher the attitude towards religion, socio-economic status, achievement motivation and family involvement, the more the female students tended to choose gender dominated careers like nursing and engineering. Most of the females who chose engineering were from high socio-economic status homes while feminine stereotyped occupations were chosen by females from lower socio-economic status homes (Salami 2006). The trend suggests that parents in higher socio-economic status homes have more opportunity structures like financial and material resources, wider information and horizons about occupations (Salami 2006).

School

The school where one is educated is an important influence on career choice (Weishew and Penk 1993). Similarly, Garrahy (2001) notes that schools are social institutions that reinforce gender- appropriate behaviour, interests and occupations. Constructs that include curricular subjects, quality of teaching, student participation in school activities, school practices and policies and learning materials for the student seriously impact on career choice among learners (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006). A study by Spade (2001) shows that gender difference in the learners' experiences starts at pre-school and continues throughout their educational careers.

Teachers like parents are viewed as key players in the career paths that young people eventually pursue especially girls (Barnett 2007). Empirical research shows that schools formalise stereotypes by reinforcing rather than correcting the problem of gender imbalance in career choice (for example, Erinosho 1997 with Nigerian students; Foster 2005 with South African students). Also in Nigeria, Denga (2004) notes that sex-role stereotypes exist among boys and girls in primary schools as they aspire to traditional occupations. The parents' and teachers' beliefs influence their children's self-perceptions of ability and consequently career choice. In addition, teachers encourage students to take certain subject options that are congruent with aptitudes and abilities that they identify.

The type of school (public and private) influences the decisions students make about their future career (Arsenovic et al. 2005; Falaye and Adams 2008). Home- schooled females tend to be more stereotypical regarding female roles (Arsenivic et al. 2005). This suggests that perhaps children are differently prepared to explore career opportunities by the school they attend. Private schools seem to provide more comprehensive information and counseling on career choices (Falaye and Adams 2008). The education in private schools orients children towards making informed decisions about their future career. A related observation is that people from rural settings, for example from Southern United States, tend to express more traditional gender role orientations than those from more urban settings (Rice and Coates 1995).

Career Guidance Programme

Career guidance services are needed to react to economic, employment patterns and globalisation changes in the society (Savickas 2003; Tang 2003).

In South Africa, as part of curriculum transformation, the goals of the education system were reviewed to redress the inequalities of past apartheid policies and to equip learners with adequate information about various career fields to enable them to make informed career decisions. The career and vocational guidance of the old education system were incorporated into the new school curriculum as part of the life orientation area (Department of Education 2001). Further evaluation of the school career guidance shows that in the Life Orientation programme, career counseling constitutes only

20 percent of the syllabus and is facilitated by teachers with little or no training in basic psychology to handle the task (Department of Education 2002). A survey of schools in previously disadvantaged communities shows that career guidance programme is non-existent following the abandonment of career counseling in schools due to the downgrading of the role and position of guidance teachers by the National Department of Education after 1994.

Career opportunities in South Africa are disproportionately distributed (Maree 2009). The career patterns are skewed in favour of previously privileged groups and the majority of black persons are still not receiving adequate career counseling (Maree 2009). Giving credence to this, Akhurst and Mkhize (2006) note that, in the post apartheid realm, career guidance remains the privilege of affluent white urban citizens.

Similarly, a recent study by Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) found that career choices of tertiary students from previously disadvantaged schools are negatively impacted by lack of finance, lack of career information, poor academic performance and unsatisfactory career counseling services. Another study by Maree and Beck (2004) indicates that in disadvantaged communities, schools with career counseling programme were underutilising the facility which was also viewed as too expensive. More recently, Maree (2009) contends that in 2009, many learners passed Grade 12 without having received career counseling in any form and consequently denied the opportunity to apply for acceptance into sought-after fields of study at tertiary training institutions. Earlier, first-year students who took part in a study by Nicholas, Pretorious and Naidoo (1999) indicate that they were not satisfied with the level and extent of career counseling that they received at secondary education.

Media

Media is considered to be among the major factors that moderate career choice decisions among students (McGarraugh and von Wellshein 2009; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008). The types of media include television, radio, magazines, movies, dramas and advertising. Borchert (2002) says that US high school students indicated that someone they saw on television may have influenced their career decision making. In the United States of America, Kloosterman (1994) who conducted a study with fifth and sixth grade Hispanic girls notes that there were few appropriate role models in non-traditional careers that they could emulate. The media through television, advertisements and music projected expectations and roles that influence girls to prefer "feminine stereotyped" careers and avoid "masculine appropriate" ones. In Nigeria, mass media was reported as one of the major factors that influenced students to choose a career in librarianship (Bello 1992).

Hesse-Biber and Carter (2005) assert that the media as an agent of gender role socialisation reflect the relationships and behaviours of males and females in dominant society and influence people's perceptions and expectations of gender roles. Girls seem to be more influenced than boys by the media (Issa and Nwalo 2008). They are influenced particularly by media advertising and they pay attention to the information about jobs the computer science industry provides. In Southern Africa, A study by Pillay et al. (2008) with Mauritian and South African psychology students shows that the majority learned about the profession from the media than from all other sources combined. However, gender differences were not shown.

Peers

Stuart (2000) contends that peers' attitudes toward gender and ethnicity may increase or decrease a person's confidence in pursuing a career. Adolescents are easily influenced by their peers because they rely on their friends to provide validation of the choices that they make including career decisions. Peers were reported not to be marginally influential in career decision making among university students (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006).

Although boys and girls are positively influenced in equal measure by their friends' interest in computer science, boys seem not to be affected negatively by their friends' lack of interest in the discipline (Issa and Nwalo 2008). Another study by Berndt et al. (1990) indicates that the best friend exerts strong influence on individuals and their choices. The finding led them to conclude that peer influence leads to an increase in friends' similarity of decisions.

Age

Gottfredson's (1996) study suggests that at the age range of six to eight years, children develop their "tolerable sex type occupational boundaries". They believe that certain occupations are only for boys while others are only for girls. Subsequently, from nine to thirteen years of age, children and adolescents develop a zone of acceptable occupations based on their ability and social class (Gottfredson 1996; Helwig 2001). According to Super (1957), by the age of ten years, children begin to develop career preferences determined by their interests and shaped by their enjoyable experiences. There is no agreed age of the onset of career decision making. Cook et al. (1996) contend that young adolescents, even before they enter high school, use their concrete knowledge about jobs and their social context to make career choices. In the same token, McGee and Stockard (1991) note that children have a well-developed understanding of careers and their roles. This is in line with Otto's (2000) finding that high school students discuss their career plans with parents, and that girls more than boys hold more discussions. The parents reinforce gender differences in career aspirations acquired by their children at early childhood by encouraging the educational and career aspirations of boys but not those for their daughters (Heine et al. 1999).

Objectives

Goals of the Study

The study sought to explore the socio-demographic factors that influence career choice among psychology students at the University of Venda

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guided the study:

There is no significant difference between male and female students according to type and location of high school attended;

There is no significant difference between male and female students in type of educational funding;

There is no significant difference between male and female students in their parents' level of education;

There is no significant difference between male and female students in the factors that influenced them to choose psychology as a career; and

There is no significant difference between male and female students in their time of career decision-making.

METHOD

Research Design

Ex post facto research design was used to conduct the study. The ex post facto design eliminates the possibility that participants will be influenced by the awareness that they are being tested (Crawford 1997). In addition, the design is particularly suitable in a study of groups that are already different in some respect because through it, the researcher searches retrospectively for factors that brought about the difference (Cohen and Manion 1994). Therefore in the present study, the ex post facto design allowed the participants to reflect on the social agents that influenced them to choose psychology as a field of study.

Participants and Setting

Two-hundred participants (male = 100, female = 100, mean age = 21.35 years) took part in the study. They were randomly selected from students majoring in psychology at the University of Venda in South Africa. The sample comprised students drawn from first, second and third year-classes.

Measuring Instrument

A questionnaire was used to collect data. The study modified Myburgh's (2005) demographic section of the career motives questionnaire. Pilot testing of the questionnaire resulted in an alpha co-efficient of 0.89. The questionnaire was also validated by students and research experts.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee. Class registers were used to randomly select the participants. The questionnaire was

group administered in class. A hundred percent questionnaire return rate was realized.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the chi-square and t-test. The chi-square was used to test the difference between gender and type and location of high school attended. The t-test was used to test the difference between male and female participants in type of educational funding, parents' level of education, factors that influenced them to choose psychology as a career and the time of career decision making. Response frequencies and corresponding percentages were calculated and the corresponding percentages were worked out.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation in the study was voluntary. Information obtained from the participants was kept in strict confidence and the participants were not required to write their names on the questionnaire. The researchers did not subject the participants to harm. In addition, the participants were informed of the right to withdraw from the study.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that most of the participants did their secondary education at government high schools (94 males and 87 females) compared to nineteen (6 males and 13 females) who attended private schools. The chi-square analysis of the difference in type of school attended between male and female participants was not statistically significant with a p-value of 0.091.

Table 1: Participants by type of high school attended (n = 200)

High school attended					
School	*Male*	*Female*	*df*	χ^2 *value*	*p-value*
Government	94	87	1	2.85	0.091
Private	6	13			
Total	100	100	1	0	1

Table 2 shows that the majority of the participants attended high schools situated in rural areas (178) compared to their counterparts (22) who indicated that their schools were in urban locations. More males (94) than females (84) attended high schools situated in rural areas while more females (16) than males indicated urban locations. The chi-square analysis of gender difference in location of high school among the participants was statistically significant. The chi-square result had a p-value of 0.024.

Table 2: Participants by location of high school attended (n = 200)

Location of high school					
Location	*Male*	*Female*	*df*	χ^2 *value*	*p-value*
Urban	6	16	1	5.107	0.024
Rural	94	84			
Total	100	100	1	0	1

Table 3 shows that the common types of funding among the participants were bursary (77.2%), loan (10.7%) and parental aid (10.2%). Of the participants on bursary funding, there was a small difference between males (78) and females (74). Fewer participants indicated foreign aid (1.5%) and self (.5%) as their types of funding. The results suggest that most of the participants relied on government for the funding of their studies. There was no significant difference, $t(195) = -.247$, $p = .81$, between male and female participants in the type of funding.

Table 3 further shows that some participants indicated that both of their parents had post secondary educational qualifications (35.4%) while others had both parents with below secondary education level (32.3%). More females (46) than males (22) had both parents with post secondary education while more males (37) than females (25) had both parents with below secondary level of education. Additionally, more males (18) than females (12) indicated that only the father had post secondary education. More females (17) than their male counterparts (15) had only the mother with post secondary education. There was a significant difference, $t(190) = 2.880$, $p < 0.05$, between male and female participants in the educational levels of their parents.

The Table also reveals that the majority of the participants were influenced to choose psychology by the teacher (22.1%), friend (17.4%), mother (16.3%) and media (12.1%). Males had

Table 3: Participants by type of funding, parents' level of education, influencing factor and time of career decision making

Variable	*Gender*		*Total (%)*	*t-test results*		
	Male	*Female*		*t*	*P*	*df*
Type of Funding						
Parental aid	9	11	20 (10.2%)	-.247	p > .81	195
Bursary	78	74	152 (77.2%)			
Loan	10	11	21 (10.7%)			
Foreign aid	0	3	3 (1.5%)			
Self	1	0	1 (0.5%)			
Relative	0	0	0 (0%)			
Other	0	0	0 (0%)			
Level of Education						
Both parents post secondary	22	46	68 (35.4%)	2.880	p < 0.05	190
Only father post secondary	18	12	30 (15.6%)			
Only mother post secondary	15	17	32 (16.7%)			
Both parents below secondary	37	25	62 (32.3%)			
Influencing Factor						
Father	10	18	28 (14.7%)	.377	p > .71	188
Mother	12	19	31 (16.3%)			
Brother	3	3	6 (3.2%)			
Sister	1	2	3 (1.6%)			
Teacher	22	20	42 (22.1%)			
Friend	23	10	33 (17.4%)			
Other relative	8	4	12 (6.3%)			
Member of community	1	10	11 (5.8%)			
Foster parent	0	1	1 (0.5%)			
Media	13	10	23 (12.1%)			
Time of Choosing Psychology						
During primary school	3	6	9 (4.5%)	.696	p > .49	197
During secondary school	41	45	86 (43.2%)			
After secondary school	20	16	36 (18.1%)			
During registration at university	34	34	68 (34.2%)			

more response frequencies in friend (23), teacher (22) and media (13) while females scored higher in mother (19), father (18) and member of community (10). Overall, less common sources of influence were other relative (6.3%), member of community (5.8%), brother (3.2%), sister (1.6%) and foster parent (0.5%). There was no significant difference, t (188) = .377, p = .71 between male and female participants in career choice influencing factors.

Table 3 also shows that most participants (43.2%) made their career choice decisions at secondary level and during registration at university (34.2%). Fewer students made their career choice decisions during primary education (4.5%) and after secondary education (18.1%). Overall, the majority of participants (52.3%) made their career choice decision after completing their secondary education. Although gender proportions were similar, more females (6) than males (3) made their career choice decisions at primary school level. More females had higher response frequencies (45) than males (41) in career decision making at secondary school level. In contrast, more males (20) than females (16) chose their career after secondary education. There was no significant difference, t (197) = .696, p = .49, between male and female participants in time of career decision making.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the demographic variables influencing students' choice of psychology as a career field. The variables include type and location of high school attended, type of funding, parents' level of education, source of career information and the time of making the career decision.

Type and Location of High School Attended

Regarding the types of schools attended, more participants in the study sample attended

government secondary schools than private schools. Considerably, more females than males attended private schools. Inversely, more males than females attended government high schools. The difference between male and female participants in the type of high school attended was statistically significant.

These results are intriguing and suggest the need to investigate the underlying reasons why males constitute a large proportion of the rural based public schools. However, in line with the finding, researches of repute, Carter and Wojtkiewicz (2000) for instance, believe that female children receive more attention from parents than male offsprings. Perhaps males got less support because they can walk long distances to school and cope with other academic related challenges better than females.

The implication of the findings is that, school type (public or private) influences the decisions learners make about their future careers (Arsenovic et al. 2005; Falaye and Adams 2008). The majority of the participants made delayed career choice. This is not surprising since the majority learnt at rural public schools. Maree and Beck (2004) indicated that learners from disadvantaged communities of South Africa lacked career guidance information. The career guidance career counseling programme was underutilized in public schools. Similarly, Maree (2009) reported that in 2009, many learners passed Grade 12 without having received career counseling in any form. These learners were denied the opportunity to apply for acceptance into sought-after fields of study at tertiary training institutions.

Learners who attend private schools are better prepared for improved cognitive achievement and are oriented towards making informed decisions about their future careers (Falaye and Adams 2008). Thus, the majority of the students in this study who attended rural based public schools faced inhibitory influences on their career decision making process. On the other hand, the few who attended urban based private schools faced facilitatory influences that enabled them to make informed, realistic, satisfying and sustainable career motives for choosing psychology. Therefore, female students who constitute the majority of learners in private schools are assumed to have made more informed, realistic and satisfying career motives.

Type of Funding

The other major findings in the study concerned variations in gender and source of educational funding for the participants. Method of financing is crucial as it has an impact on career aspirations among university students (Huang 2008). The present study sample indicated that the most common type of funding was bursary (77.2%). Males had higher response frequencies than females on bursary and self- funding. On the other hand, more females than males indicated parental aid, loan and foreign aid as their sources of educational funding.

The above finding refutes research of Matope and Makotose (2007) that suggested that families facing financial crises give more educational support and opportunities to boys than girls. The present study found that more parents gave financial support to female as compared to male students. This may suggest a departure in respect of the traditional attitudes parents have toward the education of female children. Possibly, the community from which the students were drawn values the education of daughters more than sons.

However, the difference between male and female students in type of funding was not significant. Contrary to expectations from previous research regarding gender and type of funding, the hypothesized relationship between gender and type of funding was not supported.

Parents' Level of Education

Connected to career motives is the parents' level of education. Research evidence advances the notion that parents' educational background moderate children's educational decisions (Borchert 2002; Huang 2008). Judge and Livingston (2008) explain that highly educated parents may discuss social equality more openly with their children, hence sharing more egalitarian perspectives on gender roles more openly. Remarkable gender differences were found in the levels of education of all participants in the study sample. More female than male students had both parents with post secondary education and only mother with post secondary education. This suggests that female students benefited more from the mother's post secondary education than males. This corroborates several studies (Edjah et al. 2007; Esters and Bowen 2005; Falaye and

Adams 2008) that suggest that the level of education of the mother is the major contributor to the daughter's career choice. Further, Edjah et al. (2007) report that the higher the mother's level of education, the more she is likely to understand the importance and benefits of sending the child to school. On the other hand, more males than females had both parents with below secondary education and only father with post secondary education. The gender differences were statistically significant.

Source of Career Information

The participants regarded teacher (22.1%), friend (17.4%), mother (16.3%) and father (14.7%) as the main agents who influenced them to choose psychology. Males rated teacher and friend higher than females, while females ranked mother and father higher than males. Female participants' rating of the influence of the mother higher than that of the father is inconsistent with the findings of Esters and Bowen (2005). However, the finding supported studies by David et al. (2003) and Steele and Barling (1996) who found that girls mainly consulted their mothers than fathers.

The present findings also underscored the importance of friend in career decision making. This was expected since scientific studies explain that adolescents are easily influenced by their peers in decision making. Adolescents rely on friends to validate their career decision choices. Peers can create positive environmental contexts where skills of purpose and future can be developed (Barnett 2007).

Time of Career Decision-making

The findings indicate that the majority of the participants in the study sample made their career decision during registration at university (34.2%) and during their secondary education (43.2.%). The students described themselves predominantly as delayed career choice decision makers. This outcome supports Lucas (2003) whose study found that many students enroll at university without information on job prospects because of a lack of career guidance in schools. The students make career choices based on subjective factors like role model in the student's family or community.

Considerably, more females than males made their career choice at both primary and secondary school levels. More males than females made their career decisions after completing their secondary education. This suggests that females make early career decisions while their male counterparts make delayed career choices.

Worthy of mention is the fact that most participants made career choices after completing their secondary education. This minimises the role of culture in the delayed decision making process. The finding is congruent with the researches of Akojee and Nkomo (2007), Chuenyane (2004) and Lucas (2003) that suggest that learners experience difficulties when making decisions about their careers. This can be attributed to the rapid expansion and large enrolments at schools that make it difficult for newly established democratic African governments to provide enough qualified teachers and materials to help students make informed career choices (Hallak 1990).

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that demographic factors like type and location of school attended and parents' level of education influenced career decisions among students. The majority of the participants were influenced to choose psychology by the teacher, friend, mother and media. Gender of the student also influenced career decision among the students. More males were influenced to choose psychology as a career field by friend, teacher and media while females were mainly influenced by the mother, father and member of community. Most of the participants made their career choice decisions at secondary level and during registration at university. More female students made early career decisions while more males made late career decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need to revamp the career guidance programme in schools especially in rural communities where there is a significant lack of career information. Significant career influencers such as friend, parents, members of the community and media personnel need to be equipped with correct career information for them to guide students appropriately. This will help learners to make early and informed career choices. Appropriate career choices will subsequently in-

crease self-efficacy, achievement motivation and satisfaction with the subject choice and future job choice. Career information should be provided in early life. The provision of career information early in life will enable students to adjust their educational and occupational aspirations based on perceptions of how such requirements mesh with their own abilities. This is necessary if learners are to formulate realistic and congruent educational and occupational goals.

The study relied on the participants' memory of past events that may not be accurate. Data were gathered from psychology students at one university therefore the findings may not be generalised to students in other academic disciplines and institutions of higher learning. It is against this background that the present study be replicated with a larger sample drawn from diverse academic disciplines and institutions of higher learning.

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