

University of Groningen

Peers in careers

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rüschhoff, B. (2015). *Peers in careers: Peer relationships in the transition from school to work*. University of Groningen.

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Chapter 6

General Discussion

6.1. Introduction

The transition from school to working life is an important step in young people's lives. The successful mastery of this step is decisive for young people's early career trajectories, their future socio-economic standing, and their psychological well-being (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Erikson, 1959; Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008; Piquart, Juang, & Silbereisen, 2003; Savickas, 1999; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). This transition is not a single event but a developmental period that is characterized by numerous decisions and actions. In order to accomplish the tasks that comprise this transition, young people need to make occupational decisions about the desirability and attainability of their aspired future careers, prioritize their personal and professional goals, and effectively engage in a number of activities that help them achieve these goals. All these things do not happen in isolation. In time of uncertainties and when facing important life decisions, young people are likely to seek guidance and support from those who are close to them. In late adolescence and young adulthood, peers become an important source of social support, guidance, and advice (Cheng & Chan, 2004; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). The four empirical studies that comprise this book take a relational approach to early career development and address the issue, seeking to answer the question: *How do peer relationships affect the transition from school to work?*

This final chapter discusses the main insights of this book along with the implications for both researchers and practitioners. Finally, directions for future research will be discussed followed by a general conclusion.

6.2. Insights from the Studies

Theories of career development have long taken the stance that career development is a relational process that takes place in social contexts and that besides personal characteristics, interactions and social relationships affect career decisions and behaviors. So far, the role of peers has received relatively little attention in investigations of young people's career development. A prominent theoretical approach for investigating the role of peers in young people's career development is the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999; Leung, 2008), which specifically focuses on the interaction between personal and environmental factors in the development of career-

related decisions and behaviors. The insights of this dissertation support the notion that social relationships affect young people's early career trajectories and show that this also holds for social relationships with peers. The studies that comprise this book demonstrate that peer relationships play a role in young people's transition from school to working life in a variety of ways. In four empirical chapters the role of peers in young people's early career decisions and trajectories has been addressed from different angles and in terms of different outcomes. Part I of this book (Chapter 2 and 3) focused on career-related cognitions and behaviors and examined the link between peer relationships and young people's work values (Chapter 2), and the role of an efficacious peer network in the initiation of career-directed behaviors and the successful mastery of the transition (Chapter 3). Part II of this book (Chapter 4 and 5) focused on the developmental implications of the onset of employment and particularly the consequences for individuals' engagement in delinquent behavior throughout adolescence (Chapter 4), and their engagement in aggressive and norm-breaking behaviors at the end of vocational education (Chapter 5).

This book shows that young people's goals and relationship experiences with peers are associated with their work values and thereby their subsequent preferences for certain vocational contexts over others (Chapter 2), and that peers can stimulate the active engagement in career-directed activities (Chapter 3, Study 1). Being embedded in a network of efficacious peers in the classroom proved to be beneficial even beyond the school context as it increased young people's chances of having successfully completed the transition from school to work or follow-up education three years later (Chapter 3, Study 2). Results further show that the approaching onset of employment can act as a turning point in how young people evaluate their peers' aggressive and norm-breaking behavior (Chapter 5). However, the timing of employment is important, as employment in early adolescence was associated with higher rather than lower engagement in delinquent behavior (Chapter 4).

6.3. Practical and Scientific Implications

Research on the role of social relationships in career decisions and career-directed behavior often focuses on the importance of relationships with parents, spouses, and other adult mentoring figures (Dietrich & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Flap & Völker, 2001). Likewise, research on the role of social relationships in adult job seekers has strongly

focused on the benefits of career-relevant social ties, emphasizing the practical utility of job seekers' social networks for the attainment of information or other instrumental resources (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1995; Lin, 1999; Van Hove, Van Hooft, & Lievens, 2009). The results of the studies that comprise this book contribute to a growing stream of literature which demonstrates that socially oriented theories of career development can be applied to the peer context as well (e.g., Dietrich, Parker, & Salmela-Aro, 2012; Kiuru, Salmela-Aro, Nurmi, Zettergren, Andersson, & Bergman, 2012). Besides young people's relationships with adult attachment and mentoring figures, relationships with peers contribute to their career-related decisions and behavior. On a scientific level, these results demonstrate that current theories of career development that take an explicit relational stance can benefit from including the peer context as a relational context in which young people's career decisions and behaviors are shaped. Chapter 2 has for instance shown that young people's social goals and their relatedness in the peer group are associated with individual differences in work values, showing that besides their social origins and relationship experiences in the family context, peer relationships can serve as predictors of the relative preference that young people attach to certain rewards of work, thereby providing information on the motivation to choose certain careers or vocational contexts over others.

On a practical level, teachers, mentors, and practitioners working with young people in the transition to working life may benefit from these insights and more explicitly draw on the peer context when providing guidance and counseling. Chapter 3 has shown that being embedded in an efficacious peer network can facilitate young people's transition to work by stimulating greater engagement in career-directed activities (completing a greater number of applications) and increase their chances of successfully completing the transition within a three year time-frame. Practitioners might encourage such network effects by taking group approaches to career counseling in young adults in the transition to work. Practitioners might for instance encourage young people to increase their interactions with efficacious peers when making career-decisions and to jointly engage in career-relevant activities together with their peers.

Employment is often regarded as a factor that gives young people stability and draws them away from the engagement in adverse behavior (Carlsson, 2012; Sampson & Laub, 2005). Chapter 4 has shown that employed early adolescents showed higher levels of delinquent behavior as compared to their non-employed peers in the same age group.

Chapter 4 further shows that young people from ethnic minorities and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds who were employed in late adolescence scored highest in delinquent behavior, whereas the same group also showed the lowest level of delinquent behavior when they were not employed. Although employment might be regarded as a turning point in young people's engagement in adverse behaviors, Chapter 4 suggests that this might not be the case for all young people. It is possible that other than full time employment in older age groups, adolescents' employment situations often do not provide them with the stability that is believed to contribute to their desistance from delinquency (Lustig & Liem, 2010). It is also possible that adolescents with initially higher levels of delinquency are more likely to seek employment. Young people who value material goods and financial status but who have few means of obtaining these may engage in both legitimate and illegitimate ways to achieve their goals. Taken together, it is important to note that employment need not necessarily be a demarcation point of the desistance from delinquency or protect young people from the engagement in delinquent behavior. Practitioners and counselors may look out for the potential risks that can be associated with part-time employment in adolescence and tailor their counseling and support accordingly.

Chapter 5 further contributes to research on adolescent peer status and the concern that peer popularity as a distinct form of reputational status may pose a risk to young people's development in a long-term perspective due to its potentially harmful behavioral associations (e.g., Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). The results of chapter 5 do not support the concern that popularity can be regarded as a risk-factor in a long-term perspective. In the current sample of young adults, peer status is most consistently associated with prosocial behavior. As young people approach the transition to work, aggressive and norm-breaking behaviors appear to be less salient characteristics of high status members in the peer group. However, overt aggression remained to be associated with a higher status position in young adult males.

6.4. Future Directions

The role of peers in the transition from school to work has been an understudied topic and only recently have peers received attention in empirical work on young people's early career development. The insights of the studies that comprise this book have

demonstrated that it is worthwhile to devote greater attention to take into account the peer group as a development context in research on young people's transition from school to work. The present studies have shown that peer relationships matter both on the cognitive and the behavioral level. Future studies on career trajectories in late adolescence and young adulthood may build on these findings and extend these insights in a number of ways.

First, whereas the present studies have addressed a number of aspects of young people's peer relationships they are by no means exhaustive. Future studies may extend the scope of this research and include different relationship aspects of the peer context, both positive and negative, that can affect young people's transition to working life.

Second, the social and professional contexts in which young adults are embedded can be diverse. In this developmental period, both educational and occupational contexts can be considered normative and many young people enter neither context directly. The present studies have focused on peer relationships in the school context. However, due to the variability in social contexts in this developmental period the findings of the present studies may not be generalizable to other populations of young adults. Future studies may address the question of whether and how peer relationships matter for young people who are not embedded in educational contexts and hence pursue different transitions to working life. On a related note, the present study has focused on peer relationships among young people who are embedded in a stable school-based peer culture. Peer contexts become more diverse throughout adolescence and young adults may have meaningful peer relationships outside the classroom. This holds for both school-bound and non-school-bound young people alike. Both for young people who are embedded in stable school-based peer networks and even more for those who are not, peer relationships in other settings of everyday life may be an important developmental context as well. Future studies may incorporate peer relationships inside and outside the school context to take a more inclusive approach to young people's peer networks. However, this also complicates the accessibility of study participants as they can no longer be approached within the institutional setting of the school (see section 6.5.).

Third, the transition from school to work is not a single event but refers to a series of transitions that take place during an extended period of time during which young people make vocational decisions, set goals, explore their preferences and ambitions, and find their way in the labor market. The studies that comprise this book have focused on

the immediate transition period at the end of vocational education up until young people's first two years after graduation. Whereas these studies cover aspects of the *process* of the transition, they do not cover the *completion* of the transition for all study participants. Future research may extend the time frame of their studies to follow young adults through their early career pathways up until the completion of the transition. However, compared to previous generations, the transition to working life and to adulthood in general has been extended and delayed. Young people today move out from the parental homes later and spend more time in education than previous generations (Arnett, 2000; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). To study the completion of the transition to work, both longitudinal research that covers a longer time frame into respondents' late twenties and a clear definition of when the transition has been completed will be needed. In the present research, we have conceptualized the successful completion of the transition as the state when young people have made the transition from secondary school to either higher-level education or working life and were not planning to make any further changes to their current situation at the time of measurement (Chapter 3, Study 2). However, careers are less stable today than they were in previous generations, making job changes more common and frequent in today's young workforce. Accordingly, (planned) changes in educational and vocational pathways do not necessarily indicate non-completion of the transition for all individuals. Future studies may extend this operationalization to include additional indicators of a completed transition such as satisfaction with one's job and life situation.

6.5. Research on Young Adults in Transition: Reflections and Directions

Research on young adults in transition is a complicated endeavor and greatly differs from research on younger samples in educational contexts or older samples that are embedded in, for instance, work contexts. The transition from late adolescence to young adulthood is a developmental period that is characterized by an enormous variability in social contexts and by changing social relationships (Arnett, 2000). Whereas during adolescence, young people are usually part of a stable school-based peer context, the contexts in which young adults are embedded diversify. This and other practical constraints have resulted in an underrepresentation of research on non-college bound young adults - for this reason sometimes referred to as 'the forgotten half' (Blustein et al., 2002; Haggerty, 1989; Ling & O'Brien, 2012). The claim that young people who are

not embedded in educational contexts are an understudied population is not new. Over the past decades, studies on the transition to adulthood and the economic prospects of young people after the transition from school to work have primarily focused on college-bound youth. Already since the late 1980s, scholars called for the need to investigate the transition from school to work in non-college bound youth (Blustein et al., 2002; Haggerty, 1989; Ling & O'Brien, 2012). However, other than practical considerations there is no rationale to pay less attention to young people who do not enter a college education (or comparable form of follow-up education) after completion of their secondary education.

In the School to Employment (StEP) project I aimed to follow young people during their last year of vocational education and their first year after graduation, irrespective of their educational or occupational pathways. During the design and conduction of the School to Employment (StEP) project throughout the past years, I faced many obstacles. Some of these I had foreseen and had taken precautions to overcome them. Others I had not foreseen. I believe that it is worthwhile to share my experiences in designing and conducting such a study so that future researchers can benefit from the insights that I gained during the project. I have come to the conclusion that most of the recommendations that I can give to future researchers pertain to two greater topics: Communication and commitment.

6.5.1. Communication

Communication is important on a variety of levels. Communication of the goals and aims of the study to the respondents is an essential part in gaining young people's collaboration, and constant communication with the schools is important to ensure prolonged cooperation and support for the project from the executives and teachers. However, one of the greatest challenges of the project was the continuity of the communication after respondents had graduated from school and finding the proper means of staying in touch with them. Once respondents could no longer be approached in the classroom, they had to be reached through different channels. I anticipated on this by asking for extended contact information in the first two waves of the data collection. Respondents were asked to provide primary and secondary email addresses, landline and mobile phone numbers and their postal address. Although respondents were assured that this information would not be used for any other purpose than communication regarding

the research project, many were reluctant to provide personal contact information or only provided some details.

Among those respondents who provided contact information, different obstacles had to be faced. The transition to work is a phase where young people move to find jobs. Consequently, their contact information may be quickly outdated as postal addresses change. During the data collection I experienced that even phone numbers changed more rapidly than I expected. This appeared to be even more so the case for email addresses, through which survey links were primarily distributed. Often times, respondents could be reached by phone and were given a reminder to complete the questionnaire or an update on an outdated email address could be acquired in the conversation over the phone. However, in the end, not all of these reminders resulted in a completed questionnaire. In future research conducted on this age group it might be worthwhile to include phone interviews as a substitute for the online questionnaire where respondents fail to complete the initial survey. However, this is a costly and time-consuming approach to data collection that requires a larger team of researchers involved. Whereas it was not possible for one person to conduct all required interviews on the phone, future research projects involving larger teams may benefit from additional phone interviews to reduce attrition after respondents have left the school context. Finally, if surveys or invitations to complete an online survey are to be distributed over regular mail, my experience has shown that although young people often do not live in their parental homes anymore, their parental postal addresses are among the more stable contact details throughout this period. Hence, even though respondents do not live with their parents anymore, incorporating the parents, keeping them informed on the ongoing study, and encouraging them to pass on the surveys they receive by mail to their children may be a viable way to stay in touch with the respondents. Moreover, if parents are involved in the study, they may also encourage their children to complete the survey and to continue their participation, potentially resulting in higher response rates in the later waves.

6.5.2. Commitment

Besides reaching respondents to provide them with the possibility to complete the survey, it is also essential that they are committed to the project and are willing to complete a survey. Although motivating respondents to participate in research is an important part of any data collection, it may be more even important in samples of young

adults in transition during an often rapidly changing period in their lives. In the first waves, surveys were completed in the class context during a time that was specifically designated for the completion of the survey. This was not the case after respondents had left the school context. Whereas participation was voluntary and motivation to participate in the study was also an important factor in the first waves of the study, it became even more important once respondents needed to complete the survey in their own time. Other than in adolescent samples, material incentives may be encouraging participation but will most likely be of lesser value. Once respondents finish their education, get their first jobs, and start to earn money, small material or monetary rewards may be more easily attainable and less valuable as an incentive to them. The present study did not offer participants monetary incentives for their participation (a lottery for gift cards was held after the final wave). Instead, respondents received updates on the progress of the study through a regularly distributed newsletter to increase their commitment.

Next to respondents' commitment, communication and commitment of the participating institutes or school was of crucial importance. Schools were the primary facilitators of the data collection during the waves that were collected in the school context, and the way in which schools communicate the goals of the study to their students may affect students' conceptions of the importance of the research and their role in it. Even after respondents had left the school context, I have stayed in close contact with the educational institute where the research was conducted. Teachers as well as executives were informed about the progress of the study through newsletters and intermediate reports. Discussing the progress and intermediate findings of my research with the schools has often helped me get a better understanding of my data. Moreover, schools may have their own means of keeping in touch with their former students which may be an additional way to keep in contact with respondents in the later stages of the data collection.

Finally, before I started the project I did not know what young people's first year after graduation looks like or where and how I could reach them. These were issues that I had to figure out 'along the way'. Especially for researchers who work with young people in diverse and rapidly changing social contexts, commitment to the project and creativity in addressing the obstacles that arise will be an essential part of the work.

6.6. Concluding Remarks

Together, the four studies of this book underline the notion that social relationships with peers deserve closer attention when seeking to understand young people's transition from school to work. It is important to acknowledge that young people's career decisions and behaviors do not take place in isolation but are developed in interactions with significant others – in this developmental period often their peers. The insights of this research can help us to better understand why young people make the decisions that they do and how their career-directed behaviors are affected by their larger peer networks. Especially practitioners taking group approaches to counseling and guidance in young people's career development may benefit from these insights and devote greater attention to the group dynamics that may take place in these settings.

The results of this research can further contribute to a better understanding of how the (approaching) onset of employment can be a turning point in young people's engagement in adverse behaviors. Whereas it is often assumed that the onset of employment pulls young people away from the engagement in deviant or norm-breaking behaviors, our studies suggest that this may be the case in early or emerging adulthood but is not necessarily true at younger ages and not for all demographic subgroups. Both researchers and practitioners may derive valuable insights from the results of the present studies when trying to understand young people's early career-decisions and behaviors and when providing guidance and counseling to young people in transition.

