The impact of family influence on the career choice of adolescents

Ramona Palos\textsuperscript{a} *, Loredana Drobot\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} West University of Timisoara, V.Parvan Street no 4, 300223, Romania
\textsuperscript{b} Eftimie Murgu University of Resita, T.Vaia Street no 1-4, 320085, Romania

Received October 28, 2009; revised December 4, 2009; accepted January 14, 2010

Abstract

The aim of this pilot study was to identify some variables from the family environment which have an impact on adolescent decision for a future career. The sample: 60 pupils from the final high-school grade. The test portfolio: Parent Career Behavior Checklist (Keller and Whiston, 2008); EMBU questionnaire (Perris et all, 1980); Adult Attachment Scale (Collins and Read, 1990). The obtained results offer us an image of the variables which influence career decision making process and the way in which vocational counseling and the role of the counselor are perceived in school.

Keywords: Career; vocational counselling; family influences; partnership.

1. Introduction

Vocational development is a process which starts already in childhood and one in which the family plays a particularly important role. Variables such as family structure, roles assumed by each member, relationships between the members, the system of values and attitudes which lie at the basis of behaviors, influence career choice and development. If we follow the models which try to explain the stages a person goes through in the decision making process regarding the choice of a career, we can see that the first step is becoming aware of the need to take a career-related decision, followed by the establishment of a range of alternatives – built on the basis of knowing one’s own skills, interests and personal values. Going for these alternatives is both the consequence of the level of self-knowledge that the child has reached, as well as of exploring the social environment. A detailed exploration of the two dimensions (person and environment) facilitates the narrowing down of alternatives and the focusing on the one that is most appropriate for a person. Once the option has been substantiated, the decision becomes firm and is assumed, and one can then move on to concrete action in this respect (Hirschi and Läge, 2007). Throughout the decision making process, the family represents the support and stability element for the adolescent, because the success of vocational development needs information gathering activities regarding various types of jobs (what they imply, what the requirements are for their fulfillment, etc.); ensuring the necessary support for the exploration of vocational interests and skill potential; establishing professional aspirations depending on these variables; drawing up plans in order to accomplish them and developing the feeling of personal efficiency in the chosen profession (Bryant, Zvonkovic and Reynolds, 2006). The family’s financial capital – represented by the material support which
would give access to resources and information gathering activities of a vocational nature, the human capital – namely skills and abilities that parents have at their disposal and use in the support given to the child so that the child in turn can develop vocational skills, but also the social capital – defined by the parent-child relationships and interactions, by the family’s social support network, give the child a context favorable to academic development, and to the child’s vocational aspirations and options. The family’s knowledge, beliefs and values about work in general, and about certain professions in particular, accompanied by the child’s direct observations, are an important source of vocational knowledge. Their transmission depends on the parents’ availability, the time they can afford to set aside, but also their communication skills (Bryant, Zvonkovic and Reynolds, 2006).

A better understanding of vocational development is possible through a relational perspective approach. The nature of the relationships and interactions established between parents and children constitute the foundation of the vocational exploring process. The quality of parent-child relationships, open communication, support offered and trust, can influence exploring activities, vocational aspirations, future plans, the perception of barriers which may occur in choosing a career. The type of attachment developed by the child helps us understand its career evolution, but also the efficiency of career-related decisions, because internalized working models influence the child’s openness to exploring, to learning experiences, through behaviors of approaching or avoiding them. The modeling of career development depends on the feeling of personal efficiency – having faith in one’s capacity to face up to certain situations, on the results expected following a certain behavior and on the established objectives, on the intention to engage in a behavior which would affect future results (Lent et al. 1994, as cited in Wright and Perrone, 2008). A person with a securing attachment is far more willing to get involved and explore the environment, is far more curious, develops positive relationships with the others and seeks their support. Also, research shows that the child’s level of adaptation to the environment is also influenced by the parental style. Supportive, firm and affectionate parents ensure a family climate which favors the socializing process, and their children are characterized by a higher degree of emotional stability, extroversion, sociability and empathy (Aluja, Barrio and Garcia, 2005).

It is through this exploratory research that we have set out to capture the extent to which – variables such as the parents’ level of training, child rearing parental models or attachment styles developed by them influence and support the adolescent’s decision for a future career.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives and research hypotheses

The objectives established for reaching the proposed target were the following:

O1. Identifying the type of support given by the parents to the adolescent for career choice.

O2. Identifying those variables from the family environment (parental model, attachment style developed by the adolescent, parents’ level of training) which influence the support given by the parents in choosing one’s career.

2.2. Participants

The sample for this pilot research is formed of 60 12th graders (30 girls and 30 boys), specialized in informatics and mathematics-physics at a theoretical high-school.

2.3. Tests

The portfolio of tests used is represented by the following questionnaires: Parent Career Behavior Checklist (Keller and Whiston, 2008) – composed of 18 Likert scale type 5-step items, which reflects the general and the specific, career oriented parental behavior; the EMBU questionnaire (Perris et al, 1980) composed of 81 Likert scale type 4-step items, translated and validated on Romanian population, which measures the perceptions of parental rearing behaviors; Adult Attachment Scale (Collins and Read, 1990) comprises 18 Likert scale type 5-step items and identifies the three types of attachment developed by a person – securing, avoidant, anxious-ambivalent.
2.4. Procedure

The questionnaires were applied to a 60-pupil sample from a theoretical high-school. An important criterion which lied at the roots of this choice was that the high-school benefits from a school counselor’s services, as a warranty of the fact that both the children, as well as their parents, have had the possibility to address the school counselor for issues related to choosing their future career. Also, within the high-school, there were various vocational activities organized, with the purpose of providing information. For the statistical processing of the data, we used the SPSS 15.0 program. For the verification of formulated hypotheses we used the t test for independent samples, and the correlations between various variables – by calculating the Pearson coefficient.

2.5. The analysis and interpretation of the results

O1. Identifying the type of support given by the parents to the adolescent for career choice.

H1. Parents tend to rather give their children psychosocial support, than take concrete action regarding career choice.

The test used for capturing the type of support was developed by Keller and Whiston (2008); to make sure of its internal consistency we calculated α Cronbach for the whole questionnaire (α = .951), and for each of the two subscales (α psychosocial support = .929, and α career choice related actions = .931, respectively).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental support</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. dev.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial support</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>41.628</td>
<td>13.588</td>
<td>32.565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career oriented support</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>26.407</td>
<td>10.488</td>
<td>26.763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial support</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>45.842</td>
<td>11.324</td>
<td>3.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>37.339</td>
<td>14.432</td>
<td>3.480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career oriented support</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>28.964</td>
<td>9.755</td>
<td>2.687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>23.803</td>
<td>10.650</td>
<td>.2.685</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table no.1 one can see that parents rather give their children psychosocial support than take concrete action that would facilitate the adolescents’ decision regarding their career. This type of support consists of encouraging the child and supporting the child’s decisions, through discussions in which the parents state their support and express their interest for the child’s activities. Behaviors oriented towards concrete career-related actions, such as providing informative materials about jobs, taking part on various career development workshops or on aptitude tests, have a much lower frequency. This may also be determined by the need for time investment on behalf of the parents, who need to get informed themselves and to participate alongside their child in school or community organized activities. Furthermore, one can notice a difference between the two parents regarding the type of support given: the mother is the one who gets more involved in her child’s vocational development, by giving both types of support. As a matter of fact, research shows a much more intense involvement of the mothers in transmitting profession-related information, when it comes to career-related plans, being even more efficient than the father, school counselor, other relatives or friends, classmates (Tucker, Barber and Eccles, 2001, as cited in Bryant, Zvonkovic and Reynolds, 2006).

O2. Identifying those variables in the family environment (parental model, attachment style developed by the adolescent, parents’ level of training) which influence the support given by the parents in choosing one’s career.

H2. The parental model influences the type of support given to the children in choosing their career.
The affection and warmth displayed by parents in the way they raise their child, but also the level of restrictiveness, of parental control that they establish, influence the child’s sensitivity and openness to guidance and relating. Affection combined with rational and moderate control has the most benefic effects on the child’s social, emotional and intellectual development (Schaffer, 1996). It seems that parents who are perceived as getting involved more actively in the children’s vocational development are the tolerant, affectionate, stimulative ones and the ones who direct performance (Table no.2). All these parents frequently manifest their affection within the relationship, they trust their children’s decisions, they want very much their children to be personally and professionally successful and they support them in this direction with concrete actions.

H3. The type of attachment developed by the child influences the type of support demanded from the parents.

The only identified statistically significant relationship was the negative correlation between the child’s anxious-ambivalent type of attachment and specific career-oriented support given by the father (Table no.3). The type of attachment developed by the child influences vocational exploring, approaching career-related learning experiences or discovering one’s interests. Children with an ambivalent or anxious insecure attachment – closely related to negative parental behaviors to a greater extent than the securing or avoidant style – live with a feeling of insecurity and anxiety about the parents’ availability and support. In such conditions, they avoid contact with the parent as a way of coping with a possible rejection by the parent. Those with a securing behavior are very open to exploring the environment, the existing opportunities, they have positive expectations regarding the results of their actions, while children with anxious attachment avoid these explorations (Wright and Perrone, 2008). This explains why these children do no demand, are not open to support from the parents. Unfortunately, in this way they also avoid personal efficacy-building experiences, which influence a person’s cognitions about one’s own capacities in various situations and the development of the feeling of personal efficiency.

H4. The parents’ level of training influences the type of support given to the child for career choice.

The statistical processing of the data obtained does not confirm the hypothesis according to which the parents’ level of training influences the type of support given to the children. However, the role played by the level of training cannot be neglected, as it is well known that is has a modeling effect on family climate, in creating an environment rich in relationships and intellectually stimulating. The family’s financial and social capital gives several opportunities and alternatives. A more complex professional training influences the parent’s aspirations for
the child’s achievements, the need for the child to continue its studies, but also facilitates the development of the feeling of personal efficiency, of faith in one’s professional success (Bryant, Zvonkovic and Reynolds, 2006).

2.6. Limits of the study

The relatively small number of subjects involved in our research urges us to be cautious about generalizing results and imposes the need for the continuation of the study and the extension of the variables taken into consideration. On the other hand, the testing took place in an institution which has a counselor and a culture of school and vocational counseling, which highlighted the family’s involvement in the child’s vocational development. Due to the fact that the situation is not the same in all schools across the country, the conclusions we arrived at may not reflect the reality regarding the family’s involvement in the adolescent’s career choice. This may explain, to a certain extent, the adolescents’ confusion when starting their university studies and the fact that they register with a high number of university specializations (often totally different ones) based on some financial criteria and not according to their interests and skills.

3. Conclusions and future research directions

Choosing a career represents a very important decision for a person’s professional trajectory. Due to the fact that the decision-making process starts quite early on, the child’s decisions are modeled by family influences. Unlike the father, the mother involves herself more intensely when it comes to career-related plans, by initiating concrete actions, but also by giving psychosocial support. Parents who are affectionate, tolerant, stimulative and performance-oriented get more involved in the children’s vocational development. Also, children with a securing attachment are more open to guidance, to vocational exploring.

Starting out from the results obtained following this exploratory study, we set out to capture the influences exerted by the professor on the decision regarding one’s future career and the role of school-family-community partnership. Also, at the school where we are carrying out our research, we wish to initiate a pilot program for counseling pupils in their last two years of high-school, and monitor them in their first year of university studies, in order to observe the level of adaptation to the university environment.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to Eugenia Udrişte for her support in testing the subjects and collecting data from the field.

References