

Career Choices of North Dakota Adolescents: Major Influences

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High school traditionally has been viewed as a period of preparation for entry into the world of work or a higher level of the educational system. During this time, student experience considerable pressure, from parents, peers and teachers to make decisions about their future careers.

Adolescents do perceive and understand the importance of selecting a career and some of the potential obstacles to career achievements. Information generated by parents, peers, and the media about prevailing economic conditions begin to be understood by adolescents at an early age (Healy, 1982) and may well affect the general views that adolescents in North Dakota, including social factors that influence career choices, values associated with career choices, and perceived obstacles associated with future career plans.

In a review of the literature on the influence of the family on adolescent career decision making, Schulenberg et al. (1984) concluded that specific features of the family (i.e., economic status, family size and composition and interaction style) do influence adolescents in predictable ways. For example, researchers have found that parents who derive satisfaction from their occupations and communicate this satisfaction to their children exert the strongest and most positive influence on their adolescents' future occupations (Mortimer, 1976). In addition to this indirect influence, adolescents can acquire occupational knowledge directly. As they listen to their parents talk about their jobs, as they see their parents come home after a hard day at work, and as they spend time at parents' work places, they may develop feelings and ideas about work (Fields, 1981; Piotrkowski & Katz, 1982).

Personal experiences also may affect occupational aspirations. In a large sample of 11th graders, Tittle (1981) found that students mentioned direct personal experience - including having family members in an occupation - as being most influential on their occupational plans. In fact, in a study based on personal interviews, Piotrkowski (1979) reported that some adults remembered forming opinions about their parents' jobs in childhood, and they attributed decisions about their own occupational lives to these early impressions.

Because youth are continually being exposed to information about economic uncertainty, we directed our study toward examination of the views of the work world held by adolescents who reside in North Dakota communities where

the economic hardships of farming are understood by them. Data concerning adolescent career explorations are constantly in need of updating so that adolescents can be provided with more accurate and relevant information about future career possibilities.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the study were 2,154 North Dakota high school students, 918 residing in rural communities and 1,236 residing in urban communities. Students residing in communities of more than 2,500 inhabitants were designated as urban whereas students residing in communities of less than 2,500 were designated rural.

Urban students were equally divided by gender. Of the rural sample, 53 percent were males and 47 percent were females. Students represented approximately equal numbers from each of four grades (9, 10, 11, 12) and ranged in age from 14 to 19. The majority of students were from two-parent homes (85 percent urban, 90 percent rural) which averaged 4.5 persons per urban family and 4.6 persons per rural family.

Adolescents attending rural schools reported that their families had resided in their homes an average of 10.3 years while adolescents attending urban high schools reported 8.8 years on the average. Fathers and mothers of urban students held predominantly skilled (42 percent and 37 percent, respectively) or professional (33 percent for both parents) occupations. In contrast, farming (37 percent) was the primary occupation of fathers of rural high school students and their mothers were mostly homemakers (41 percent). Whereas 52 percent of the urban mothers and fathers attended college, 38 percent of the rural mothers and fathers attended college.

Questionnaire

A Career Decision-Making questionnaire was developed for this study consisting of five parts including statements about the farm economy, career planning, life experiences, decision-making, and personal and family characteristics. The questionnaire includes both standardized and non-standardized parts. The career planning section was examined in this report. This section contains non-standardized items that were pilot tested to determine readability and clarity. Within this section adolescents were asked to respond to a series of questions about their occupational ambitions and those individuals in their lives who most influenced their occupational choices.

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Procedures

The Career Decision-Making questionnaire was distributed to a total of 2,154 high school students in North Dakota. Participants were selected from 18 randomly selected schools, six urban schools and 12 rural schools. School staff administered the questionnaire in a standardized format to groups of students as determined by the school principal or contact person.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students responses were analyzed and compared across variables of gender, grade level, parent education, and residence. Two categories of grade level were used, 9th and 10th grades were included in category one, and 11th and 12th grades were included in category two. Parent education was categorized by college experience (at least one year) and no college experience. Finally, residence was classified as either urban or rural.

Influences

Students were to indicate which people in their lives most influenced them in selecting a future career. The most prevalent influence seemed to be parents, including both fathers (37 percent) and mothers (23 percent). Other people included friends (8 percent), siblings (7 percent), relatives (5 percent), and teachers and counselors (8 percent). These findings are consistent with previous research (Healy, 1982; Schulenberg et al., 1984) and indicate that North Dakota adolescents still perceive their parents as important informational contributors to their future career plans.

Job satisfaction (57 percent) and money (22 percent) accounted for a majority of students responses to the question, "What is most important to you in a career?" More males (29 percent) than females (14 percent) cited money as most important. Further, students whose parents had no college education and who lived in rural settings were more likely to cite money as a factor in selecting a career and were less likely to choose a career based on job satisfaction than students whose parents were college educated and resided in urban settings. Of lesser importance in career choice were factors of leisure time, job location, employer relations, value to others, and having the necessary skills for the job.

Occupational Ambitions

Students were asked to indicate what they would do after high school. Sixty-nine percent responded that they would attend college or a vocational school. One student whose comment was typical of many reported, "I think I will need a good education in the future." Nearly 17 percent reported that they would work at home or get married. For example, one student commented, "I want to work at home because it may be of some help to me to get used to work." Another student said, "I want to stay at home to farm." There also were gender and parent-education differences in adolescent responses. More females (75 percent) than males (61 percent) wanted to go to college whereas more males (14 percent) than females (6 percent) wanted to attend vocational school and get a job (20 percent vs. 14 percent).

When students were asked the reasons for choosing their post-high school activity, 70 percent of the students listed a better job, education and money as major reasons. Other response categories included; (a) learn a trade (3 percent), (b) this is what I want to do (11 percent), and (c) to make a

living (3 percent). Again, there were gender differences and parent education differences in adolescent responses. More females (64 percent) than males (54 percent) cited reasons of a better job and education. Adolescents whose parents had college experience cited more education as a reason more often (50 percent) than did adolescents whose parents had no college experience (37 percent). In addition, adolescents with parents with no college experience cited money as a reason more often (12 percent) than adolescents whose parents had college experience (7 percent).

Career Choices

Most students (80 percent) listed professional and skilled (e.g., teacher, engineer, mechanic, plumber) occupations as their top choices of future careers. More urban students (96 percent) than rural students (87 percent) selected professional and skilled careers. Eighty-four percent cited interest, desire to help people, and high salary as major reasons for their career selection. For example, one student cited a professional career as her first choice because, "I enjoy debate and arguments which are of an intelligent nature." Twenty-three percent reported that they perceived no obstacles to achieving their future career choice. Of those who reported obstacles, grades (24 percent), finances (43 percent), military obligation (4 percent) and marriage (3 percent) were listed most often. Thirty-seven percent of the students believed that their parents would not have enough money to send them to college.

Rural Farm Economy

Previous research has indicated that economic condition seems to be a major influence in terms of adolescent occupational choices. For example, Lewko (1987) suggested that when parents experience job or career stress they communicate their dissatisfaction and frustration to their children. In the present study, 34 percent of the students indicated that the North Dakota farm economy would influence their choice of an occupation.

The following comments suggest that many students are influenced by the realities of a depressed rural farm economy: "I won't go into anything farm related because of the farm economy." "There is not much money if you become a farmer." "I feel anything influenced by the farm economy will be hurting in a few years because if your parents are losing money, why go into it." "It will cost too much to be a young farmer starting out."

Apparently, North Dakota adolescents are not immune to the rural economy and many parents may be taking a more active role in encouraging their sons and daughters to explore different career options or seek careers that will be more satisfying to them. This dissatisfaction seems to be evident in both rural and urban communities.

Of those students who believed that the farm economy would not influence their career choices, examples of their comments reflect a less sympathetic reaction. "The farm economy doesn't have anything to do with me." "I hate farming. I don't know anything about farming and don't want to." "Let the farmers take care of their own problems, city people don't have that responsibility."

Adolescent vs. parent choices

Table 1 summarizes occupational choices of adolescents and adolescent perceptions of their parents choices for them. More professional careers (e.g., teacher, engineer, doctor, etc.) were selected by females (74 percent) than

Table 1. Occupational Choices of Adolescents and Adolescents' Perceptions of their Parents' Choices for them by Gender, Residence, and Parent Education.*

Occupations	Gender		Residence		Parent Education	
	Male N = 1,008	Female N = 944	Rural N = 802	Urban N = 1,152	College N = 997	No College N = 1,081
Adolescent's Choice:						
Professional	49	74	54	66	71	53
Skilled	36	25	33	30	24	38
Unskilled	1	1	2	4	1	2
Farming	11	—	10	3	4	8
Other	3	—	—	—	—	1
Parent's Choice for Me:						
Professional	28	36	28	35	36	29
Skilled	18	11	15	14	9	19
Unskilled	1	—	1	—	—	—
Farming	9	1	10	2	3	7
Whatever I choose	29	42	33	37	39	32
I don't know	11	6	9	9	8	9
Other	—	—	3	3	5	4

*Responses in percentages of responding adolescents.

males (49 percent). In contrast, more skilled (e.g., machinist, sales) and farming occupations were selected by males (47 percent) than females (25 percent). Females were more likely to cite "help other people" as a reason for an occupational choice whereas males were more likely to cite "money" as a reason for their career choices.

There also were differences in adolescents' career choices by residence and parent education level. A greater percentage of urban adolescents selected professional careers (66 percent vs. 54 percent) whereas rural adolescents were more likely to select skilled, unskilled and farming occupations (45 percent vs. 34 percent). Students of parents with college experience tended to report more professional occupational choices (71 percent vs. 53 percent). Students of parents without college experience were more likely to choose skilled and farming careers (40 percent vs. 25 percent).

For the most part, adolescent perceptions of their parents' choices of careers for them corresponded well with their own career choices. Forty-one percent of the students perceived that their parents wanted them to choose either professional or skilled occupations. Nearly 36 percent believed that their parents wanted them to make their own career choices; 11 percent indicated farming/agricultural related careers and 9 percent did not know what career their parents wanted them to select. More females (42 percent) than males (29 percent) indicated that their parents would allow them to make their own career choices. In addition, more urban adolescents with college educated parents (40 percent) than adolescents with non-college educated parents (32 percent) indicated that their parents would not interfere in their career decisions.

Summary

In summary, many adolescents in North Dakota are subject to many influences in making future career decisions.

Parents continue to be seen by adolescents as a major influence in their lives, and a large number of adolescents see consistency in their career ambitions and their parent's career ambitions for them. Broader social influences such as economic conditions also seem to be reflected in adolescent choices of occupations. For example, a majority of adolescents are choosing professional and skilled careers and view higher education as necessary for achieving these career goals in the future. There were some differences in adolescent responses due to urban or rural residence, gender, and parent education. However, across these variables, adolescents were more similar than dissimilar.

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