Society and Culture: A Review of Their Role in Educational and Career Choices

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Abstract

The relationship of society and culture to education and career is explored at length in the literature. The issues of experiences of particular groups in society and its influence on education and career choices are apparent in different countries, societies and cultures. The childhood development theory, historical, political and economic considerations, and Bourdieu's Habitus emerged as theoretical constructs related to understanding the interactions between the socio-cultural influences on the choices of educational and career decisions. Gender and ethnicity as socio-cultural characteristics was also identified as having contextual relevance to the choices of education and career opportunities. The nature of society and culture seems to involve all aspects of life including educational and career choices. Whether it was family, socio-economic, political, gender or ethnic considerations, all were found to be influential towards educational and career choices. Socio-cultural factors were found to influence education and career choices as well as create varied levels of success between genders and among ethnic groups. The family and immediate community seem to have a significant effect on an individual's choices surrounding education and career. Finally, the concept of habitus was found to be applicable to explaining the socio-cultural involvement in determining education and career choices.

1. Introduction

The relationship of society and culture to education and career is explored at length in the literature. Bourdieu [1] highlights the relationship with society and culture by describing the concept of 'cultural capital'. Cultural capital as noted by Bourdieu [1] includes family characteristics (particular practices) and social positions (class). Cultural capital suggests that children will have a tendency to adopt the practices of their parents. Also, such practices will conform to characteristics of the respective social classes and will be favored by the children. Aschaffenburg and Maas [2] note the application of cultural capital among students of arts. From data collected using surveys, Aschaffenburg and Maas concluded that for students at particular developmental ages, the educational transitions towards the study of arts were related to the influences of family practices and to social backgrounds. Society and culture therefore seem to interact and produce a particular set of standards and guidelines supporting the educational and career choices of individuals.

In terms of education and career choices, population groups can also be discussed in the context of their socio-economic background as it represents a social characteristic. De Graaf [3] reported in the Netherlands that the differences in educational attainment from different social backgrounds are disappearing. De Graaf [3] however also noted that the parental occupations and educational levels remain influential on children. The effect of familial influence and the expectations placed on children is also reported in a study on Chinese immigrant families of Canada [4]. Li [4] writes that personal life experiences were also noted to shape parental expectations through acculturative attitudes. In fact, the perception of visible disadvantages to minorities in the Canadian society provided the incentive for expectations of higher education attainment for these children.

The issues of experiences of particular groups in society and its influence on education and career choices are apparent in different countries, societies and cultures. And while the society and culture is different for each context, the nature of their impact on education and career choices remains the same. The issue of a social pathway for education and career choices can also denote a practice that is in fact devoid of choice. Furthermore, this social pathway can apply to groups in society where there has been no educational attainment or career development for generations.

As the concepts of education and career are not universal, they should however be placed in context. In fact, a career can be considered a cultural construction that does not apply to all cultures or societies. For example, in societies where children are placed to work in jobs, there is no functional contribution to the career development of the children. The discussion on the socio-cultural influences on education and career is therefore limited to societies and cultures where education is universal and opportunities for career development exist.

Education and Career Development Theories: A Review

Having reviewed different theories on career development relating to the social and cultural aspect of education and career choices, I will present the Childhood Development Theory, historical, political and economic considerations, and Bourdieu's Habitus.

2. Childhood Development Theory

Based on the previous section on socio-cultural influences, the experiences of early childhood are essentially those of the immediate and extended family and community. The socio-cultural experiences create a significant contribution to the decisions that are made towards education and career. Hartung, Porfeli and Vondracek [5] suggest middle childhood as being the beginning stage of vocational development. The rationale for this position by Hartung, Porfeli and Vondracek [5] is the alarmingly large number of children in the United States (US) that are failing to complete high school. This failure of completion among high school students may be due to their lack of interest in the structured curriculum. In this situation, if the early childhood development theory holds, this is the developmental stage where the student would have formed an opinion (if not make a decision) regarding their educational pursuits. High school may then be viewed as a means to an end, after which they can pursue their work interest. The decision to implement vocational training in schools may be beneficial to these students, assuming they identify with a particular training at that time. The term "vocational identity" is the concept that personal identity is related to work. This is supported by Erikson [6], Vondracek [7], Schmitt-Rodermund and Harter [8].

3. Historical, Political and Economic Considerations

A historical context suggests that changing economic and political practices in society would also change the opportunities that exist for employment, as well as training in the form of education. Dumont and Carson [9] noted an adjustment of career opportunities in the US with a shift from agricultural based activities to manufacturing and industrialization. This change represented a societal change towards urbanization, which also created different occupational opportunities.

From an international perspective, countries within the European Union (EU) are under the framework of policies including EU Social Class, EU Employment Action Plans and structural indicators which emphasize employment, innovation, social inclusion and economic reform [10]. The policy directives from this political action have led to activities such as the Leonard Program which funds individual opportunities for vocational education and training. This training opportunity is part of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme enabling persons to train in different countries. Policies for education and career development therefore represent another factor, which has its genesis as a political consideration.

4. Bourdieu's Habitus Theory

The theory that I have chosen as the main focus for the discussion on career development is the concept of habitus [11]. I would propose that that term habitus is connected to the word "habit". One meaning of habit is a behavior or activity that is repeated or an action that is imitated. Habitus relates to the common practices of persons based on their experiences in the society they belong to. The experiences of society refer to the cultural factors that influence the practices of persons. In the context of education and career choices, habitus relates to the experiences of others in the community, whether it is the choice of school, the level of education, or the preparation towards a particular career

destination. In another discussion by Bourdieu on habitus, the involvement of the family and society is significant when regarding choices made towards education and careers. This position explains the influence of society and culture as persons are essentially reflecting the practices, values, beliefs and behaviors of those around them in their educational and career choices. Bourdieu [12] recognizes the application of education and schooling activities into the habitus theory and the influence of society and culture, which Bourdieu termed 'a cultural habitus'. The socialization and interaction with the environment affirms the socio-cultural influences on education and career choices conceptualized by the habitus theory.

In an examination of Bourdieu's habitus, Reay [13] refers to the practice of higher education by middle class families as an influenced action from the experience of family members. From an interview with a parent on the question of choice for higher education, Reay reports:

> "Choosing was a very unscientific process actually. My father went to Trinity Cambridge to do law and he was always very keen to show her Cambridge and his old college, which he did when she was probably about thirteen. And she fell in love with it. And she decided that was where she wanted to go there and then"

This response from a parent highlights attending university as a family practice as well as attending even a particular institution. The young adolescent made a decision at an early age to accept the educational and career pathway that was shown to her by her grandfather. This practice, however, is a combination of the role of social influence from the income class level, as well as the 'cultural capital' concept of an imitated or repeated behavior on the part of the student in reference to the experience of the grandfather. The habitus theory is therefore relevant to this case presented by Reay [13].

Familial habitus acts by creating a pathway based on expectations towards education and career. This is related to the concept of a social pathway which was discussed earlier. However, I would argue that the presence of a strong family influence and the construction of a pathway are not sufficient to determine the choice for education and career. I would propose that the act of personal choice by an individual whether or not to accept the pathway created should also be a consideration. I am also certain that in any given family structure, social class or group in society, there are individuals who do not conform to the educational and career expectations or habitus of their family. Bourdieu and Paseron [14] best notes this argument in this statement:

> "Depending on whether access to higher education is collectively felt, even in a diffuse way, as an impossible, possible, probable, normal or banal future, everything in the conduct of the families and the children will vary, because behavior tends to be governed by what is reasonable to accept"

5. Gender and Ethnicity as Socio-Cultural Factors

Gender and ethnicity can be considered as well defined groups in a community and are described as social factors. Additionally, specific beliefs, values, practices and behaviors are associated with gender and ethnicity. An exploration of gender and ethnicity is therefore a discussion of socio-cultural factors when applied to education and career choices. In the book Degrees of Choice: Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education, Reay, David and Ball [15] discuss class, race and gender as issues of society that influences choices for higher education. Reay has previously referred to class in the application of Bourdieu's habitus, as middle class educational experiences. Class can also be considered as part of the social pathway discussion about education and career choices, as socio-economic position will direct specific opportunities towards education. However, the following sections will focus on gender and ethnicity and their role in education and career choices.

6. Gender Considerations in Education

In general, there is an increased involvement of women in higher education. Social Trends [16] from the Office of National Statistics reported that the proportions of women in higher education are more than men for the United Kingdom (UK). In addition to increased student population of women in higher education, the report noted increasing numbers of women gaining qualifications to enter higher education. This increase represents a relatively new phenomenon over the last three decades. However, this observation related only to countries where universal education was accessible to women.

In a study by Ball et. al. [17], of the ninety eight students that were interviewed, there was a significant report of parental involvement, especially the role of mothers with their daughters' decisions for higher education. The study by Ball et. al.[17] discussed how mothers held strong views towards higher education which directly influenced their daughters. The impact of the mothers' influence was highlighted in the study wherein mothers rejected certain education choices made by their daughters in favor of opportunities for higher education. The fathers who participated in the same study by Ball et. al. [17] was reported to be concerned more with the investments required for higher education during the interview process. The study suggests different gender roles between parents regarding the education of their children. I am also drawn to consider the impact of single mothers as it relates to the increasing presence of women in higher education. The number of single parent families is increasing. This conflict within the family seems to create a strong relationship between mothers and daughters. Women are seen as achieving greater success than their male counterparts and the mother and daughter dynamic may be related to the increased value placed on education by parents and the directed expectations for higher educational attainment towards daughters. The parental involvement in education results in a gender bias towards daughters and consequently women in higher education.

7. Gender Consideration in Career Development

While the previous section noted the role of gender and the resulting increase in women at higher education levels, this section will examine gender as a factor towards career choices. As women increase their educational attainment through higher education, it would stand to reason that diverse career opportunities would also be available to them. In studies reviewed however, there seem to be a gender disparity that exists when career opportunities are considered. The discussion of the two genders performance in their respective careers is termed "career maturity". Lundberg et. al. [18] explains career maturity as the readiness to make appropriate career related decisions. The gender disparity in career opportunities may be associated with differences in career maturity, as noted by Lundberg et. al. [18]. Kerka [19] reports differences between the genders, as differences in abilities, achievements, personalities, interests and values between the gender groups. Differences therefore exist. But for women in particular, there may be conflicts or barriers in their career development. While females are increasingly present in higher education, career development seems to be male centered. This brings to question the issue of barriers that exist for women, especially in career development.

Multiple studies noted below report different perceptions of barriers that can create different opportunities in education but mainly related to challenges in career development for women. These barriers to the equal participation of women, with their male counterparts in their respective careers, I would deduce are a reflection of social and cultural factors that have traditionally served to define the roles and function of the gender groups in their respective societies. Russell and Rush [20] reported barriers identified by a sample of female college students, including family concerns and femininity, while Swanson and Toker [21] noted discrimination and child rearing as disadvantages to career development when compared to males. These barriers are essentially a reflection of stereotypical positions of society in general towards women. Family care and child rearing are traditional roles society designates for women. The development of a career may therefore seem to be threatening to these noted traditional roles. In a study of 1294 senior high school students, these same barriers to career development were noted by McWhirter (1997, p.128). The assessment of barriers to career development suggests that women of all ages experience these limitations, which might be due to underlying social positions on the role of women in society. The social views on the role of women are shared among many cultures, and these practices and values are imposed on women.

8. Ethnicity Considerations in Education and Career Choices

The disparities in education and career between the genders also apply to different ethnic groups in various societies. In my review of ethnicities, I have identified groups that have disproportionately varied educational and career developments over others. In a study reported by McWhirter [22], high school students in the US were asked about their projections towards higher education and careers. McWhirter [22] noted that Mexican American students were more likely to be negative towards college education and were also more likely to anticipate ethnic discrimination in jobs when compared to Euro American students. These findings suggest that children at these stages of educational development were already aware of the challenges they could face because of their ethnicity. This reality, more commonly known as racism, is another societal generated position for persons of different physical appearance.

Additionally, practices within an ethnic group may not include practices that promote young members of said ethnicity to seek educational and career development. In the case of the aforementioned Mexican American high school students, their reality might include a need to support an interdependent extended family, which can exert a significant pressure on a young person to work rather than pursue higher education or a professional career.

Seemingly successful ethnic groups in various societies include persons of Asian descent. In the UK, these groups include Chinese and Pakistani students and professionals and are characterized by high levels of education and success within professional careers. Common to the Chinese and Pakistani ethnic groups is their migration to the UK and maintenance of their socio-cultural identity in the new society. Francis and Archer [23] explored the success of Chinese pupils and noted that irrespective of social class or gender, the value assigned to education by Chinese parents was significant. British Pakistani students were also observed to pursue higher levels of education when compared to their white peers [24]. The conclusion reported by Shah, Dwyer and Modood [24], as well as the previous example of the Chinese pupil's success in the UK from Francis and Archer [23], suggest that certain ethnic groups may possess a 'cultural capital', as previously referred to by Bourdieu. 'Ethnic capital' may be a more relevant term in the context of ethnically associated value positions that are placed on education by the British Chinese and British Pakistani ethnic groups. When compared to indigenous ethnic groups, the process of immigration itself may have been the reason for minorities to aspire to the attainment of competitively higher levels of education in order to be successful in the new society. If that is the case, then British Chinese and British Pakistani ethnic groups utilize higher education as a selective advantage towards career development as well as socio-economic mobility in the UK society.

9. Discussion

The nature of society and culture seems to involve all aspects of life including educational and career choices. Whether it was family, socio-economic, political, gender or ethnic considerations, all were found to be influential towards educational and career choices. Socio-cultural factors, as they were collectively referred to, were a consistent focus even when applied to theories on career development. Cultural characteristics that were highlighted included family practices and behaviors, and a consistent referral to the value associated with education by particular social groups in the society. Value positions toward education were clearly demonstrated in different ethnic groups as well as the discussion on gender especially as it related to female students and higher education attainment. There was also interconnectivity with the immediate family practice and resulting expectations that were placed on children to pursue similar educational and career paths. These observations gave credence to the identity characteristics and cultural capital descriptions as influences on education and career choices. The issue of social class, while not specifically explored, was referred to in its role of association with higher education and career choice, such as in Reay's discussion of Bourdieu's habitus and the middle income families.

The societal and cultural context of education and career development was also described in the childhood development theory and the habitus. The childhood development theory noted the identification of a career to be an early activity. This early identification was discussed in the context of societal experiences like political and economic factors, and was shown to inform educational and career choices. The political and economic influences were noted

to determine policy and programs towards specific educational opportunities. The examples of the Leonard program in the EU, were politically directed programs targeted towards educational and international mobility. Bourdieu's habitus was the focal theory selected, and was identified as being relevant to the socio-cultural discussion. The argument that the decision making process for education and career is constructed along a pathway of historical, childhood and family experiences, geo-political and economic influences suggests that socio-cultural characteristics are important in education and career choices. The concept of education and career choices as being a repeated practice within families, genders and ethnic groups also provides support for the application of habitus.

Gender and ethnicity, as two socio-cultural factors, were also discussed as being significant determinants of education and career choices. Between the genders, a changing distribution towards females was noted for higher education, which represented a difference from the traditional male centered focus in higher education. It was noted that this shift in gender distribution was a reflection of changing traditional roles of women in some societies. Family support for female education was shown to have increased, along with the opportunities for women to pursue higher education. The translation of education to career development, however, was not found to be comparable with regards to males. In spite of their educational success and competency, women were not attaining the same levels of career development success as their male counterparts. The change in societal position towards women was found to apply only towards education as barriers to career development related to their femininity, such as with child rearing and family care, was evident.

Ethnicity and its effect on education and career were highlighted in several ethnic groups including Mexican Americans, British Chinese, British Pakistanis and Afro and Indo Caribbean groups. Different levels of educational and career success among the ethnic groups seem to have had their genesis in the value position that is placed on education by the respective groups, especially for the immigrant Asian groups in the UK. Success was related to the value association placed on education. For the Mexican American students, barriers included family responsibilities and the lack of emphasis on education. Furthermore, the political inter-rivalry between Afro and Indo Caribbean groups seem to limit employment opportunities to public service jobs for the Afro Caribbean population, as well as reduce the level of educational success among this ethnic group.

Conclusion

Socio-cultural factors were found to influence education and career choices as well as create varied levels of success between genders and among ethnic groups. The family and immediate community seem to have a significant effect on an individual's choices surrounding education and career. Finally, the concept of habitus was found to be applicable to explaining the socio-cultural involvement in determining education and career choices.

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