

NEGOTIATING THE MEANDERS OF CAREER CHOICE AMID MILITATING VARIABLES: THE CASE OF ZIMBABWEAN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The study explored the sentiments of Zimbabwean secondary school learners regarding their career ambitions against a backdrop of economic uncertainty and industrial downsizing. The psychological theories of Maslow, Erikson and Bandura informed the study. The phenomenological research design was employed with questionnaires and focus group discussions as data gathering instruments. A sample of 35 secondary school learners comprising 20 Ordinary level and 15 Advanced level learners took part in the study. The generality of the respondents opined that making a career choice was not easy for a number of reasons including the unpredictable probability of ultimately getting employed. The presence of many unemployed graduates in society was cited by the respondents as a frightening phenomenon which made their quest to choose a career a challenging and daunting task. While some respondents expressed uncertainty and frustration emanating from the prevailing economic climate, others were quite optimistic and had their career ambitions set beyond their immediate borders. It was recommended, among other things, that career guidance sessions meant to familiarise learners with the various career options available not only in their countries but on the international scene should be undertaken in Zimbabwean secondary schools.

Key Words: Adolescence, identity versus role confusion, volatile economic climate, bleak employment prospects, career trajectory

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence as a developmental stage is popularly remembered for the overt anatomical and biological changes which occur in the developing individuals. However, developmental psychologists are aware of the fact that adolescence is punctuated by unique cognitive, emotional, social, moral, personality and physical traits which signal the transformation from childhood to adulthood (Mwamwenda, 2004). According to Jean Piaget, it is during adolescence that individuals are expected to intellectually operate at the formal operational stage which is characterised by deductive reasoning and the ability to handle hypothetical concepts such as religious, justice and love (Kufakunesu, 2015). Sigmund Freud maintains that adolescents are at the genital stage where they seek sexual gratification from non-relatives through various ways which include petting, kissing and hugging (Feldman, 2009). Erikson theorised that adolescents are engrossed by the quest to develop an identity and also to establish their career trajectories and future lifetime occupations (Erikson, 1968; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Against such a background of adolescence turmoil, the current study endeavoured to explore how adolescents in Zimbabwe grappled with making career choices amid a myriad of confusing and militating factors.

Background to The Study

From conception to death, people go through a series of developmental transformations at various stages, one of which is adolescence. According to Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) adolescence has been described by Stanley G. Hall as a period of storm and stress. Essentially, adolescence is a developmental stage at which individuals whose ages range from 12 years to 21 years will be changing from childhood to adulthood.

The individual undergoes apparent anatomical changes which include, among other things, the widening of hips and the onset of the menstrual cycle on the part of females and the deepening of voices, enlargement of genital, developing facial and widening of chests on the part of males. However, part of the storm and stress talked about during adolescence does not solely stem from physiological changes but revolves around the choice of careers. Olaosebikan and Olusakin (2014:44) define a career as an occupation or profession, especially one requiring special training, which a person follows as their lifework. Choosing a career is a vital episode in the life of an individual (Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014:44). Some adolescents take long to decide the career routes they intend to pursue for a number of reasons. According to Navin (2009) exploring career options prior to committing to a specific career increases future career success and satisfaction. The choice of a career is a way of satisfying the need to self-actualise as theorised by humanists such as Maslow and Rogers (Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014:45). It was against such a background that the researchers scrutinised the manner in which Zimbabwean secondary school learners juggled the issue of choosing careers.

One unique element of adolescence is the marked and notable mutation of the manner in which adolescents relate with their parents or guardians. According to Steinberg and Morris (2001:93) adolescents typically spend increasing amounts of time alone and with friends, and there is a significant and dramatic drop in the time they spend with their guardians or parents. In support of this, Eccles and Gootman (2002) posit that it is during adolescence that children's relationships with their parents dramatically and notably shift from dependency and subordination to one that espouses the adolescent's increasing maturity and responsibilities in the family and the community.

According to Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) adolescents in the western world normally gain independence from their parents upon becoming 18 years of age. Zarrett and Eccles (2006:21-22) back the already mentioned sentiments by saying, "One of the most major changes during adolescence is youth's increasing focus on peer relationships as indicated by increases in both the time they spend with peers and their engagement in activities done with peers". Santrock (2004:71) reiterates that adolescents tend to hold the opinions and sentiments of their peers in high esteem for the sake of being accepted. Adolescents usually feel comfortable to genuinely express their most candid feelings and ambitions when they are with their peers (Tuckman & Monetti, 2011:117). However, the rift between adolescents and their parents may have negative implications with regard to their career choices. This is so because several studies have revealed that there is a positive correlation between the quality of the relationship between adolescents and their parents or guardians and the quality of the career choices which the adolescents are likely to make (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017; Navin, 2009; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Taylor, Harris & Taylor, 2004; Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014:45; Keller, 2004). Therefore, one variable which adolescents have to grapple with when they decide on the career path to take is the nature and quality of the relationships they have with their parents.

Globalisation, technological advancement and transformations in the economic systems of many countries, among other things, have changed the career choice terrain. Zarrett and Eccles (2006:13) in Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) posit that about three decades ago, adolescents used to have explicit and clear paths to pursue as they marched into adulthood because by then the effects of globalisations were minimal. The same cannot be said now because of technological advancement and modernisation (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017). Furstenberg, Rumbaut and Settersten (2005) maintain that for most social groups, the well-defined pathways for adolescence into adulthood no longer exist and this compounds the challenges which adolescents have to grapple with. One domain which is likely to be a poser on the part of adolescents is the choice of a career (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017). The current researchers as adolescents did not encounter many hitches with regard to choosing careers because they were many lucrative career options which only hinged on one's secondary school academic passes. Employment prospects were very high and there were so many role models to emulate and vicariously learn from. However, as indicated by Zarrett and Eccles (2006) the career landscape has changed and decisions regarding career options are no longer as simple and linear as they used to be. This is the situation in which adolescent secondary school learners in Zimbabwe find themselves.

Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2011) carried out a study to explore the challenges associated with motivating secondary school learners in Zimbabwe. The study examined the variables which militated against learners' motivation from the point of view of teachers, parents and the learners themselves. Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2011) found out that learners had low motivational levels to learn principally because of bleak employment prospects. This implies that the way adolescents perceive their probabilities of getting employed after leaving secondary and tertiary education can impinge upon their motivation to study. However, the

study by Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2011) did not delve into the variables which adolescent secondary school learners have to consider and deal with when making career choices. Consequently, the current study endeavours to close that gap by focusing on how Zimbabwean adolescent learners choose careers amid a multiplicity of unfriendly variables.

An allied study was undertaken by Kufakunesu, Ganga and Chinyoka (2012) in which the sentiments of university students regarding higher education as a vehicle for upward social mobility were explored. In that study, Kufakunesu *et al* (2012) quizzed the respondents regarding why they continued to pursue higher education amid a diversity of militating variables. Just like the current study, the study by Kufakunesu *et al* (2012) was anchored on psychological theories. The study revealed that university students strongly believed that higher education would provide a gateway to a financially stable social life, albeit the expenses to be incurred. The respondents also indicated that they pursued higher education for other reasons apart from financial and social benefits such as the desire to satiate their inherent question for self-actualisation as postulated by Maslow. The study by Kufakunesu *et al* (2012) involved mature university students who had already made career choices. The current study sought to examine the sentiments of secondary school learners regarding the prevailing career choice dynamics in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

Erik Erikson is one neo-Freudians who propounded the psychosocial theory (Feldman, 2009). What makes Erikson's theory unique is the fact that it espouses eight lifelong stages which stretch from birth to death (Kufakunesu, 2015). Most stage theories in Psychology are devoid of such details. Of relevance to the current study is the fifth stage which Erikson named identity versus role confusion. During this stage, the individuals will be adolescents and there are principally concerned with developing an identity (Meggit, 2006:163). They are concerned with trying to establish who they are and also have a clear picture of their future social and career roles. The development of an identity and making career decisions are not easy decisions to make on the part of the adolescents (Erikson, 1968). Erikson maintains that some adolescents may experience identity moratorium, that is, they may pass through an experimental stage in which they will postpone to make decisions about who they want to be or which career options to pursue (Kufakunesu, 2015). It can be argued that identity moratorium may be prolonged by uncertainties in the employment arena. In situations where employment prospects are bleak, adolescents are likely to have a difficult time trying to establish the specific career trajectories they can opt for.

Albert Bandura revamped the Skinnerian ideas by acknowledging the role of reinforcement before adding the cognitive dimension to his social learning theory (Mwamwenda, 2004). After conducting what has come to be called the Bobo doll experiments, Bandura postulated principles such as observational learning, self-efficacy, self-regulation and the triadic reciprocal determinism. Observational learning is learning through imitation (Bandura, 2002). According to Kufakunesu (2015) and Santrock (2004:227) observational learning is a type of learning which takes place when an individual observes and subsequently imitates another person's behaviour. Observational learning

can also be called modelling or imitation. Feldman (2009:201) in Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) claims that it has been empirically verified that human beings are genetically pre-programmed to imitate other people. The Bobo doll experiments helped Bandura to establish that imitation can occur with or without reinforcement (Kufakunesu, 2015). Adolescents can be attracted by a certain career as a result of watching role models who have chosen such a career. The models can be imitated by adolescents vicariously, that is, as a result of being impressed by the rewards obtained by the models. On the other hand, if role models are encountering career challenges in the world of work, adolescents who will be the observers may be frustrated by the bleak employment prospects.

Abraham Maslow is an American humanistic psychologist who advanced a need theory in which he arranged needs in a hierarchy (Lahey, 2009). According to Maslow, human beings have needs which are sequentially arranged in such a way that the lower order needs must be satisfied first before the person can contemplate trying to satisfy higher order needs (Kufakunesu *et al*, 2012). The hierarchy has basic physiological needs at the bottom subsequently followed by security, love and belonging needs as well as cognitive needs with self-actualisation and transcendence at the summit (Feldman, 2009). Maslow maintains that self-actualisation is an individual's inherent desire to exhaust one's potential by becoming the best one can be (Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017). Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2010: 449) view self-actualisation as, 'the sense that one is fulfilling one's potential and doing what one is suited for and capable of.' To show that the quest for self-actualisation is serious, Maslow posits that sometimes people do not wait to have their needs at a particular level fully met before they can embark on trying to satisfy higher order needs. In the context of choosing careers, self-actualisation can cause individuals to remain optimistic despite being surrounded by seemingly bleak employment prospects.

Leading Research Questions

The research centred on the following leading questions:

- How do you rate your employment prospects locally and abroad?
- Which variables do you consider when choosing a career?
- How do you intend to penetrate the employment arena when you complete tertiary training?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The phenomenological research design was used in the current study to scrutinise how adolescent secondary school learners wrestle with the task to make career choices in the middle of many contravening factors. The phenomenological research design focuses on gathering data from people who are experiencing a phenomenon of interest or those who witnessed it (Kufakunesu *et al*, 2012). The phenomenological research design was deemed appropriate because adolescent school learners who were in the process of dealing with career choice decisions took part in the study. Research data was collected by means of questionnaires and focus group discussions. A questionnaire is a document containing pertinent items which the respondents have to answer as part of the empirical investigation (Kufakunesu &

Chinyoka, 2017). The researchers opted for questionnaires because the research participants were literate enough to understand the items on the questionnaires since they were secondary school learners. Moreover, questionnaires can guarantee anonymity thereby encouraging the respondents to honestly answer the questions (Kufakunesu, 2011). A focus group discussion is a conversation in which the researcher gathers information from a small group of respondents (Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017). The researchers decided to use focus group discussions as a form of instrumental triangulation and also to ensure the respondents made contributions in the company of their peers. According to Kufakunesu (2011) human beings are generally dialogical in nature and a lot of vital information can be gleaned when you engage them in a conversation.

The stratified random sampling method was used to select a sample of 35 secondary school learners constituting 20 Ordinary level and 15 Advanced level members. The stratified random sampling method is a probability sampling technique in which distinct layers of the population are proportionately represented in the sample (Chiromo, 2006). Stratification was done on the basis of variables such as gender, age and subject combinations in the case of level of Advanced level learners. In Zimbabwe, the secondary school education tier is divided into three levels, namely Junior Certificate level, Ordinary level and Advanced level (Kufakunesu, 2015). The researchers focused on Ordinary and Advanced level learners because they were in middle or late adolescence and were mature enough to think seriously about their career trajectories. The respondents had a mean age of 16.15 years and a standard deviation of 3.14 years.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The information gathered through questionnaires and focus group discussions revealed the following major findings:

- Twenty-eight out of the 35 respondents conceded that on the basis of the status quo, they rated their employment prospects as quite bleak on the local scene.
- Some respondents, mostly Advanced level learners pursuing Sciences, fancied their chances of getting employed outside the country.
- Variables such as personal passion, the pre-requisite array of skills, financial rewards, working conditions, chances of vertical upward mobility and views of parents and / or peers were mentioned as some of the crucial considerations made when one is choosing a career.
- More than half of the research participants expressed despondence with regard to how they would penetrate the employment circles and just hope against hope that they would be employed in one way or the other.
- Fourteen respondents indicated that they would embark on their own enterprises as a way creating employment for themselves and others.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Eighty percent of the research participants acknowledged that the situation prevailing in the country as far as employment is concerned was to a large extent not encouraging. The respondents rated their local employment prospects as bleak and shrouded by a cloudy of uncertainty.

They indicated that such a situation made it very dicey and complicated for them to settle for a specific career. The secondary school learners who participated in the study cited industrial downsizing and closures which happened in many towns in the country as a threat to their employment prospects. They also lamented the limited and irregular recruitment of employees in career lines such as the army, the police force and allied sectors such as teaching and nursing. The presence of a sizeable number of college and university graduates who were unemployed was mentioned as a source of stress to the adolescents with regard to making career choices. The respondents opined that some of the career lines which they wanted seemed to be dead ends because those who pursued such careers before them were having difficulties in getting formally employed on the local scene. Ordinary level students expressed their worry with regard to choosing subject combinations at Advanced level because such subject choices would channel them in specific fields of work. The findings of the current study were consistent with the findings of Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2011) who established that learners' motivation to learn was to a large extent undermined by bleak employment prospects.

The majority of the Advanced level learners majoring in Sciences were quick to express the view that they were not very worried about the slim chances of getting locally employed. They opined that their career options in the various fields of Sciences were quite bright outside Zimbabwe. Such respondents remarked that they aimed to enrol at foreign universities in countries such as South Africa, China, India and the United States of America and subsequently seek employment in those countries. Examples of fields which were mentioned were pharmacy, medicine, electrical engineering, chemical engineering, civil aviation and mechanical engineering. Asked whether they would compete well with other foreign students, this category of respondents expressed optimism which they based on the view that some of their predecessors have succeeded and they were also likely to succeed. This implies that the mentioned predecessors were acting as role models as postulated in Bandura's principle of observational learning (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017).

With regard to the variables which they considered in making career choices, the respondents mentioned a list of factors. The most prominently cited variables were personal passion, pre-requisite skills, employability, financial rewards, working conditions, chances of vertical upward mobility and views of parents and / or peers. Eighteen out of the 35 respondents indicated that one should be guided by his or her own unique professional passion and the skills or abilities which are required to function in the career path. The research participants pointed out that one challenge which they were grappling with was limited employment opportunities in some of their target careers. They stressed that it was not a wise and encouraging phenomenon to choose a career in which employment chances were extremely limited. Twenty-five respondents emphasised that one variable which had a definite bearing on their career choices was the financial rewards of a given career. The respondents argued that remuneration issues have been topical in determining the extent to which people patronise a particular career field since time immemorial. The influence of the experiences of role models as postulated by Bandura

was apparent in the way the respondents articulated their career perspectives (Bandura, 2002).

Apart from the already discussed career choice considerations, there were some research participants who indicated that their decision to pursue a given career line was strongly determined by the working conditions associated with a given career. This group of respondents expressed the view that they were bound to shun those careers where working conditions were risky in terms of health. A number of female respondents expressed their fears to work in areas such as mines or in war zones where their very survival would be in apparent jeopardy. However, male secondary school learners were not as much bothered by the conditions of employment as their female counterparts. It came to the attention of the researchers that the respondents were more attracted to white collar careers in which they would work in spacious offices enjoying convenient amenities such as air conditioners, internet connectivity and publicity. Moreover, the research participants remarked that the chance of being promoted in a particular career field was another factor which they considered when making career options. They expressed resentment of careers in which one risks being stuck at a single level for long periods of time. Such careers would frustrate their quest for self-actualisation as postulated by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014:45). It was also revealed by the respondents that careers in which they would be compelled to retire after serving for at most two decades were not attractive to them.

The issue concerning the input of parents in helping children to make career choices generated a number of surprising sentiments. Firstly, 21 out of the 35 research participants reported that they did not like a situation where parents dictate career options for their children. They echoed the sentiments that parents should only play a facilitative role in helping their children to make career choices. Some respondents even alleged that some parents had limited knowledge of the career dynamics in the career global economic climate; hence their ideas were sometimes antiquated and obsolete (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006:13; Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017). These findings contradicted the notion by Navin (2009), Mauand Bikos (2000) and Keller (2004) that the quality of the relationship between children and their parents positively correlate with the quality of the career decisions made by the children. Some of the respondents averred that they would rather seek the views of their peers rather than those of their imposing parents. These sentiments confirmed the claim that it is characteristic of adolescents to value the views of their peers more than those of their parents or guardians (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006:21-22; Santrock, 2004:71; Tuckman & Monetti, 2011:117). On the other, seven respondents remarked that they trusted their parents' opinions regarding choosing careers because their parents were educated and their experience would help them to make sound career decisions.

Nineteen out of the 35 research participants opined that they were not very sure of how they would endeavour to penetrate the employment domain after graduating from tertiary institutions such as colleges, polytechnics and universities. Their responses were laced with despondence as they reiterated that they had a good number of college and university graduates who have failed to penetrate the formal employment arena and have subsequently sunk into oblivion or started to do odd jobs which do not require the skills which

they acquired during tertiary training. However, it was encouraging to note that somewhere inside the respondents' minds; there was an attitude of positive expectancy which defied the prevailing status quo. The results agreed with the findings of Kufakunesu *et al* (2012) who established that people embark on tertiary training with an imaginary hope that in future they would get employed in one way or the other despite being engulfed by seemingly hopeless circumstances. The inherent quest for self-actualisation as postulated by Maslow in his need theory could be a credible explanation of such an unquenchable hope in people (Kufakunesu *et al*, 2012).

In response to the issue of how they intend to penetrate the seemingly impervious employment arena, 40% of the adolescent secondary school learners who to part in the current study remarked that they would embark on tertiary training which deals with skills training. Thereafter, they would utilise their skills to start their own enterprises as a way of creating employment for themselves and others. This set of respondents indicated that the dynamics of employment have changed so much that the mentality of getting educated so as to seek employment has to be abandoned. They stressed that the modern economic climate requires those who learn entrepreneurial skills and apply them to suite the volatile economic environment. The sentiments expressed by the 14 research participants were to some extent consistent with the issues espoused by the new curriculum in Zimbabwe. To some extent, the results agreed with Erikson's idea that during adolescence, individuals spend time meditating on their future career and social roles (Erikson, 1968).

CONCLUSION

The study explored the sentiments of adolescent secondary school learners regarding the factors they considered when making career choices. It came to the attention of the researchers that secondary school learners considered several factors when they make career decisions and choices. The volatile employment terrain currently obtaining in Zimbabwe was implicated by the respondents for complicating their career decisions. Some respondents expressed their willingness to undergo the necessary training to embark on their own enterprises rather than seeking formal employment. There were some respondents who harboured the belief that somehow they would still get employed at some point in future.

Recommendations

The researchers made the following recommendations guided by the research findings:

- Secondary school teachers should habitually shed more light on the variables which secondary school learners should consider when making career choices.
- Parents and guardians should research thoroughly on the current career dynamics before they attempt to engage their children in discussions concerning career choices.
- Career guidance sessions meant to familiarise learners with the various career options available not only in their countries but on the international scene should be undertaken in Zimbabwean
- Researchers interested in the issues raised in the current study can replicate the current study in

different geographical settings with variations in the composition and size of the sample, theoretical framework and research design.

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