CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE DURING ADOLESCENCE

Inga H. ANDREASSEN, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Bergen University College, Norway
inga.h.andreassen@hib.no

Abstract. *A longitudinal qualitative research study was conducted which sought to shed some light on how adolescents think about their future career and career choices. Nine Norwegian and Icelandic adolescents born 1996 were followed from age 13-19. Career aspirations, occupational conceptualization, personal values and the career decision-making process are key words that describe some of the main issues of the investigation. Career aspirations represent individual goals and choices. The aspirations are, among other things, influenced by the individual self-concept. In this paper we will look into how the career aspirations and self-concept are expressed through the participants' narratives during the research period. How do the adolescents manage different kinds of transitions in the aspirations as their self-concept develops with broader experiences and more awareness of the world of work?*

Key words:*Career aspirations, occupational conceptualization, personal values*

Introduction

At early age, most children are asked the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The answers are the children's aspiration of what they want to be as well as an expression of how they understand themselves and the world around them. Many career theoreticians are concerned with bringing out individuals' early career thoughts to shed light on career aspirations development later in life (Hartung, 2015). Therefore, this simple question we ask young children is not merely for fun.

To understand how individuals navigate to future roles and tasks in life, we need to look into their development in early childhood when the construction of self-concept begins (Gottfredson, 2002; Mead, 1934; Savickas, 2011; Super, 1957). The children's wishes for what kind of persons they want to become shows early (Guichard, 2005; Savickas, 2011), and these first wishes are often related to jobs they can see themselves in as grown-ups. With new

experiences and knowledge, the aspirations will change, develop or be confirmed through social interaction. The development of self is a lifelong process (Eriksson, 1971), but childhood and youth are important periods for our self-concept.

Career aspirations

Career aspirations are an individual's point-in-time expressions of educational and occupational goals (Johnson, 1995; Rojewski, 2005). They are an important indicator for the understanding of the individual's self-concept, career behavior and future career choices and achievement. Some researchers claim that career aspirations can predict future occupation membership equal or even better than interest inventories (Rojewski, 2005).

Not all aspirations represent the same degree of commitment but they can be an important element in understanding a person's self-concept. The aspirations are influenced by the individual self-concept, academic achievement, socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity. In this article, we will have the relations between aspirations and self-concept as a focal point and try to shed light on different elements of self-concept such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control and neuroticism.

The aspirations can be either ideal or realistic (Rojewski, 2005).The ideal aspirations reflect career goals given ideal conditions, while realistic career aspirations reflect the perceived likelihood for entering a particular education or occupation. During adolescence, the idealistic aspirations are adapted through more realistic expectations of what is actually reachable (Lee & Rojewski, 2012). This adjustment is partly based on deeper self-knowledge and academic achievements, but also on alternatives in the education system and the work of world.

Self-concept

The self has been an important variable in career theories ever since Parsons described three factors in the choice of a vocation where "a clear understanding of yourself" (Parsons, 1909, p.5) is one of them.

The self is dynamic and can be described as how we view and construct our self (Nygård, 2007). The self includes self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-worth and it is influenced by our social contexts. Our choices, conscious or unconscious, decide how much and in what way the context affects our self-concept, depending on the significance of situations (or people) and on the individual's resilience and self-regulation. A skilled adolescent might not take notice on negative critics on her/his results and behaviour, but it might be different when the adolescent feels that her/his skills and aptitudes are insufficient. Therefore, self-knowledge can be describing, evaluating and

emotional and at the same time a dynamic and fluid concept (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013).

The self has four core dimensions (Judge et al., 1998; Judge et al., 2002). Firstly, *self-esteem* that impacts learning, feeling of happiness and satisfaction. Secondly, *self-efficacy* that is the strength of one's beliefs in reaching goals and completing tasks. Self-efficacy impacts decision-making and the effort on reaching goals and resist on difficulties. Thirdly, *locus of control*, that implies to what extent we think we can control what happens and how we explain when events do not go as planned. Last, the negative dimension of self, *neuroticism,* which is characterized by anxiety, worries, dependency and helplessness. Individuals who score high on neuroticism tend to have high demands on what they consider as good enough; they are often dissatisfied with their lives in general.

Gottfredson describes how the self-concept and occupational aspirations go through a parallel development in four phases (Gottfredson, 1981) where the individuals circumscribe and compromise their aspirations to their self-concept and the realities in the world of work. She writes (Gottfredson, 2002, p. 88):

Self-concept refers to one's view of oneself – of who one is both publicly and privately. It has many elements, including appearance, abilities, personality, gender, values, and place in society. Some elements are more central to one's sense of self than others. People may not be able to articulate their self-concepts, nor may their self-perceptions always be accurate, but they act on them and protect them just the same. The self-concept is the object of cognition (the "me"), but it also reflects the person as actor (the "I").

Language is a central tool for reflections on experience; and reflections contribute in the construction of the self. The language constructs and constitutes social realities (Savickas, 2011). To reflect, we need experiences, particularly interpersonal experiences. The self and self-knowledge is constructed through an active process in collaboration with others, and it develops as a result of reflections through language and experiences. Therefore, self is shaped by culture, constituted in a social context and expressed by language (Savickas, 2002, 2011).

Method

This longitudinal research study tries to shed a light on how adolescents think about future career and career choices. In this article, data from the investigation are being used to throw light on the how participants' career aspirations and self-knowledge are expressed and developed through the participants' narratives during the research period.

Participants

Nine Icelandic and Norwegian adolescents born in 1996 were followed through their lower and secondary education (age 13-19) to investigate their thoughts on future career. The sample was a combination of purposeful sample and snowball sample, and included five girls and four boys who had just started their 8th year in 10 years compulsory education. One of the main reason for using purposeful sampling was to find participants with good or very good oral and written narratability.

All nine attended upper secondary school, which is not obligatory. By the end of the research period, seven of them were still in upper secondary education; one was a university student and one had dropped out of school and was employed.

Essays and semi-structured interviews

The investigation was organized through three phases. In the first phase, the participants received a list of open-ended questions and themes, all related to their thoughts on future career, and asked to write an essay about it. In the second phase, a semi-structured interview guide was developed after the essays' analysis and a literature review. The participants were then in the end of their first term in upper secondary school and were interviewed individually. In the third phase, a new semi-structured interview guide, based on data analysis and further literature review, was used. Most of the participants were then in their last term in upper secondary education, one in her first year of university studies and one had left school and was working in the fishing industry. They were all interviewed individually. A five-point Likert-scale was used to help the participants indicate a degree of agreement or disagreement in a part of the interview.

By using mixed methods in the data collection (essyas, semi-structured interviews and Likert-scaling), it is possible to gather more data than by using only one method. The field investigated is complex, including causalities, variables and processes. The participants' reality varies according to contextual factors which is of great importance. By using mixed methods the research can provide informative, compete and useful results (Johnson, 2016).

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed. Together with the participants' essays, the transcriptions make the data from the investigation. The analysis was rooted in grounded theory methodology. Open coding was used to seek broadness and diversity for recognizing patterns and themes that represent the participants' narratives. Through open coding, followed by selected coding, it is possible to identify events, compare them and make categories (Hjälmhult, 2014; Brinchman, 2014).

Results

As mentioned above, this article has the relations between aspirations and self-concept as a focal point. We will try to shed light on different elements of self-concept such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control and neuroticism. Through that focal point, we can see how the adolescents manage different kinds of transitions in the aspirations as their self-concept develops with broader experiences and more awareness of the world of work. During transition between school levels, students got different form of feedback on their work as the demands and school culture change. Most of the adolescents received lower grades in the beginning of upper secondary education than they had earlier, and this affected their self-concept and motivation for learning in different ways. Some felt this as frustrating, others more as a challenge to overcome. A few said they had to work on how to learn to get better grades, while others focused mostly on the increasing study work as a frustration element, "you have to work all the time and I think it is really demanding."

Through the research period, the career aspirations got more and more reflected. This is mostly because of broader experiences, especially from their study work, but also because they become more aware and reflected about their self-concept. Through their narratives, their self-concept shows directly as well as indirectly.

From time to time, the participants face resistance or difficulties related to their aspirations. During the research period, they used different approaches when facing this, but all show forms of adaptability and agency with initiatives that they feel are acceptable. Their knowledge and awareness increases on their own strength, limitations, interests, values, aptitudes and personality. According to their expression, this is mainly based on their self-evaluation. This new self-knowledge contributes to both confirming and compromises in their career aspirations.

What happens then when their aspirations were challenged, as by different forms of resistance and new experiences? The data show their responding to this in different ways. They used different types of strategies to cope with this. Three categories for their strategies were outlined; *adaptations*, *new solutions* and *withdrawal*. The participants used strategies within one or more of the categories.

Adaptation. The participants choose subjects that they feel as "right," meaning subjects needed for further education plans at university level or subjects in which they think it will be relatively easy for them to get good grades. Another form of adaptation is changing learning styles to meet new demands. There is also a more passive form of adaptation, manifested in following the mainstream and "just doing like the others do."

New solutions. Two participants changed school as they thought it would be easier to get good grades at the new school, which they think is not as demanding as their first. Other actively seek new learning experiences outside school to enhance their competences in school subjects or which will be valuable in their future occupation.

Withdraval is rather uncommon among the participants. One participant made a decision of leaving school; another decided to stay with a minimum of effort in his study work. By the end of upper secondary education, two girls said they were "exhausted" and "fed up" as students, and had plans on postponing higher education with a year off after graduating from upper secondary school.

In the last interview, the participants were asked to range their interests and strengths by using a Likert-scale. Three of them scored higher than average on self-reported stress related to career choices and they also scored lower than average when evaluating their interests and strengths. They all had a question of what made them proud and one of these three answered "nothing." Half a minute later she said: "I think it is embarrassing to think about such things. I don't have an answer."

For some of the participants, new and increased insight about themselves sometimes felt painful, as they realized limitations in reaching their aspirations. A few of them said that they hardly spoke to anyone about this, even though all participants reported on good or very good relations to their parents. The rest of the group talked to their parents; no one talked to the school counsellor or teachers about their career thoughts.

Discussion

Theories on constructivist career counselling based on narratives, emphasize early career thoughts to illuminate career aspirations later in life (Hartung, 2015). In the essays, the participants wrote about how they thought about future jobs when they were younger, what they wanted to be and why. The purpose was to increase their self-knowledge by thinking back in time and reflect on their aspirations from childhood. After finishing the last interview in the end of the research period, they read their essay. Many of them said they were surprised by how mature reflections they had expressed and many of them felt proud. Their narratives from earlier years can help them understanding career as a continuing life story consisting of three parts; self-knowledge, education and occupation that fit them, and planning they can build further on (Hartung, 2015). Knowing your story and narratives can help you feel career planning and career decisions as meaningful.

The three categories have one thing in common; they show how the participants cope with changes related to their self-concept and new situations. By withdrawal, one could claim that the adolescents give up, but

it is not so simple. They take action in a situation they feel as difficult, they find their own way to carry on. It might be considered as balancing between idealistic and realistic aspirations.

The participants' transitions from idealistic to more realistic aspirations are related to their idealistic and realistic self-concept; who they want to be and who they perceive they are. The school makes an important fundament for their experiences and reflections on their self-concept, aptitudes and alternatives. When facing difficulties and disappointment through the study-work, this is of great importance for them as school is an important arena in their life. As mentioned above, their self-esteem impacts their learning and feeling of satisfaction. When facing difficulties, including decreasing self-esteem, self-efficacy is important for coping. Those who strongly believe in their ability to reach their goals in spite of barriers, and resist on difficulties, have better odds than those who do not. The way the participants feel or believe in having control in the situation is important as well. By blaming others for poor results, there is little they can do; by looking for explanations within what they control, the chances are better. Good self-esteem, strong self-efficacy and realistic, internal locus of control are positive dimensions in building a solid self-concept. The opposite can lead to neuroticism. Individuals with low self-esteem have less self-knowledge and a more vague self-concept than individuals with good self-esteem (Campbell & Lavallee, 1993).

Self-efficacy, based on our self-esteem, is of great importance in career planning. Stories about how one coped in difficult situations, completed difficult tasks, etc., positive feedback from others, and stories from others in corresponding situations can contribute to self-efficacy. Through narratives awareness of the meaning of earlier experiences becomes clear (Savickas, 2011).

It is conventional wisdom that young people's career aspirations are point-in-time expressions of career goals and that they very often change. However, more knowledge is needed about what affects these changes and how the process is. This study gives some answers and leaves us with many questions. Further research is needed to get more knowledge about how young people's aspirations develop during adolescence and how career counselling can contribute to support adolescents in the process. The participants in this study are a small and homogeneous sample and the findings might indicate what is typical for their group, not others. However, it might provide some insight into how young people cope when facing the transition between idealistic and realistic aspirations.

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