

Unmasking Social Agents in the Career Choices of Black College Students in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The current study sought to identify the social agents that influenced Black African students in choosing a career-related field. An ex post facto study was used to conduct the study. Participants were a random sample of 200 students drawn from a rural-based university in South Africa (gender: male = 98, female = 101; mean age = 22.31 years; ethnicity = Black African). Data was collected using a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. The findings suggest that several social agents influenced students to choose psychology as a career field. They relied mostly on social agents who had limited career information.

INTRODUCTION

Choosing a career field is a Herculean task. The career decision is critical in that it affects the rest of the individual's life. According to Capuzzi and Staufer (2015) and Ozbilgin et al. (2004), career 'choice' is a complex phenomenon, which can be better appreciated through studying one of its key components—choice. For an individual to make a career choice there should be alternative career routes available and there should be an individual preference between these career options. The choice that the individual makes is influenced by, among other factors, the social environment.

The factors that lead college students to choose a particular career field over another are complex and poorly understood. A plethora of studies suggest that parents significantly influence the career choices of their children (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006; Bond et al. 2009; McQuerrey 2015; Esters and Bowen 2005; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008; Tillman 2015; Tsagala and Kordaki 2005). Parents influence the development of masculinity and femininity in their children (Jackson et al. 1986). Available literature does not agree on the more influential parent. According to McQuerrey (2015) and Jackson et al. (1986), a same sex parent was more influential in the choices of their children. Consistent with this line of argument, Edjah et al.

(2007), Esters and Bowen (2005), Falaye and Adams (2008), Hussain et al. (2015), and Leaper (2014) indicated that parents reinforce gender stereotypes by encouraging their children to choose gender stereotyped careers. In contrast, other studies (Cusk 2015; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008; Rani 2014; Williams 2015) reported that the mother was the more influential parent. Adolescents more often discuss their career choices with their mothers (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006; Bond et al. 2009; Esters and Bowen 2005; Otto 2000). Cusk (2015) and Hairston (2000) contends that mothers provide support that eases their children's apprehensions about careers. However, Tsagala and Kordaki (2005) indicated that fathers were more influential in the career choices of their sons.

The influential role of parents anchors on their level of education (Borchert 2002). The level of education of the mother is believed to be a major contributor to the daughter's choice of career (Adams 2015; Edjah et al. 2007; Esters and Bowen 2005; Falaye and Adams 2008; Streep 2014). Educated women help their daughters understand the importance and benefits of formal education (Edjah et al. 2007). The other line of argument is that the father's educational background and mother's occupation appear to be the most influential in motivating students to pursue high ranking careers (Falaye and Adams 2008; McAllister 2015; Streep 2014). Parents who are highly educated may discuss social equality more openly with their children, thus sharing their more egalitarian perspectives on gender roles more openly (Judge and Livingston 2008). Young people also look up to their parents as role models (Cusk 2015; Hairston 2000). For in-

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stance, African American children's career choices were found to be influenced by the desire to imitate their parents' altruistic behaviors and roles as community contributors. Some young people choose career fields to imitate their role models (Blackett 2015; McGarraugh and von Wellshein 2009; Straus et al. 2006). Modeling helps them learn new tasks, norms and skills (Blackett 2015; Gibson 2004). Role models are people whose lives and activities influence other persons in specific life decisions, such as career choice and behavior decisions (Basow and Howe 1980).

Teachers, like parents, are viewed as key players in the career paths that young people eventually pursue, especially females (Barnett 2007; Davis 1990; Krisbergh 2015; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008). The teachers formalize stereotypes by reinforcing rather than correcting the problem of gender imbalance in career choice (Barnett 2007; Denga 2004; Erinosh 1997; Kloosterman 1994; Son and Kakwani 2006). Inconsistent with the above, Boser et al. (2014) and Kotlik and Harrison (1989) reported that teachers, though influential in career decision-making, have far less influence on high school students. This line of argument corroborates the less influential role the school career guidance program plays in schools situated in disadvantaged communities (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006; Boser et al. 2014; Bryant 2015; Maree and Beck 2004; Maree 2009). Their career choices of tertiary students from previously disadvantaged schools are negatively impacted by lack of career information and unsatisfactory career counseling services among other challenges (Bryant 2015). For instance, in South Africa, Maree (2009) noted that in 2009, many learners passed Grade 12 without having received career counseling in any form and consequently denied the opportunity to apply for acceptance into sought-after fields of study at tertiary training institutions.

Previous researches affirm that peers are very influential in the career choices of students (Krisbergh 2015). Studies by Boser et al. (2014) and Esters and Bowen (2005) with agricultural students, Esters (2003) with landscape architecture students and Singaravelu et al. (2005) with foreign and domestic students in United States of America found peers to be the most influential career choice social agents. This finding was consistent across students from US and Asian international students with the latter rating high-

est for the influence of peers. Peers were found to be more influential than other persons including parents, siblings, teachers and guidance counselors.

According to Auster and Auster (1981) and Krisbergh (2015), young people rely on their peers to provide validation of the choices that they make including career decisions. The peers can create positive environmental contexts where social competence, problem solving, skills of purpose and future can be developed (Barnett 1987; Boser et al. 2014). Contrary to the above, in South Africa, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) reported peers as not influential in career decision-making among university students.

Media is considered to be among the major factors that moderate career choice decisions among students (Asamo 2015; Ferry 2015; McGarraugh and von Wellshein 2009; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008). The types of media include television, radio, magazines, movies, dramas and advertising. Career stereotyping or popular images of occupations portrayed by the media influence career decisions of young people (Barford 2015; Fuchs 2015; Reddy 2014). Inherent in these stereotypes is the perceived suitability of the career to either males or females or gender role stereotyping. In the same vein, Hesse-Biber and Carter (2005) assert that the media as an agent of gender role socialization reflects the relationships and behaviors of males and females in dominant society and influence people's perceptions and expectations of gender roles. Young women seem to be more influenced than young men by the media (Asamo 2015; Tsagala and Kordaki 2005). They are influenced particularly by media advertising and they pay attention to the information about jobs the organizations provide (Barford 2015; Ferry 2015; Reddy 2014). In Southern Africa, a study by Pillay et al. (2008) with Mauritian and South African psychology students found that the majority learned about the profession from the media than from all other sources combined.

The influence of social agents, like family and peers, is relatively understudied, at least in the southern African context. The influence of career choice of social agents, such as peers, or the social constellation of family is less well known. They analyzed career choice social agents, acknowledging a career field as a product of socially situated choices, which are negotiated through structural constraints (Ozbilgin et al. 2004).

Goal of the Study

The study sought to identify the social agents that influence career decision-making among psychology students. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- a. What social agents influence undergraduate students to choose psychology as a major subject?
- b. Are there gender differences in the psychology students' perceived influence of social agents in their career choice decisions?

METHODOLOGY

An ex-post facto design was used to explore the social agents that moderated the choice of psychology as a career field by college students. The present study was conducted with students who had already made their career decisions. The research design eliminated the possibility that students were to be influenced by the awareness that they were being tested (Crawford 1997). Additionally, the ex post facto research design enabled the researcher to quantify the various social agents that moderated the career choices of the participating students.

Participants

One hundred and ninety-nine participants (male = 98; female = 101; mean age = 22.31 years) were randomly selected from students majoring in psychology at the University of Venda situated in the rural part of Limpopo Province of South Africa. All the students were of Black African ethnicity. The participants were mature enough to express informed and well-thought-out views. Students who were in their first, second and third years of study were considered. The fourth year students were on internship at off campus locations.

Research Instrument

A questionnaire was used to collect data. The demographic section of Myburgh's (2005) questionnaire on career choice was adopted. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of the adopted instrument was .89. Ten participants in the pilot study validated the questionnaire checking its suitability for use with Black African students. Research experts also validated it.

The questionnaire gave the researcher feedback from the point of view of the participant (Kirkowski 2000). In addition, the questionnaire allowed for simultaneous collection of data, as it was administered in groups to the participants.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee. Class registers were used to select 199 participants who took part in the study. The researcher hand delivered the questionnaire to the randomly selected participants in class at a time convenient to the lecturer and students. Upon completion, all the participating students submitted the questionnaires to the researcher in class. All selected students who took part in the study returned the completed questionnaires.

Analysis of Data

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze data. Response frequencies and percentages were collated. In the present study, frequencies were used to indicate the level of influence of each social agent (Kothari 2004). In addition, descriptive statistics was preferred for its ability to collect, organize and compare vast amounts of discreet categorical data in a more manageable form (Trochim 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was formally obtained from the participants. Their participation was voluntary and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. The participants were not subjected to physical or psychological harm. Reporting by the participants was anonymous. They were not required to write their names on the questionnaire. The researcher assured them that the information that might lead to their identification was to be kept in strict confidence.

RESULTS

Tables 1 and 2 show the career choice social agents by level of influence and gender of participant, respectively.

Table 1: Influential social agents (n=190)

<i>Social agent</i>	<i>Level of influence (%)</i>
Parents	32
Teacher	22
Peer	17
Media	12
Sibling	5
Other relatives	6
Significant other	6

Table 1 shows that the majority of the participants were influenced to choose psychology as a career field by the parent (32%), teacher (22%) and peer (17%). The less popular social agents were media (12%), other relatives (6%), significant other (6%) and sibling (5%).

Table 2: Influential social agents by gender of participant (n=190)

<i>Social agent</i>	<i>Level of influence</i>	
	<i>Male students</i>	<i>Female students</i>
Father	10	19
Mother	12	19
Brother	3	3
Sister	1	2
Teacher	22	20
Peer	23	10
Media	13	10
Other relatives	8	4
Significant other	1	10

Table 2 shows that more male than female participants were influenced to choose psychology as a career field by their peers (23), teachers (22) and the media (13). Comparatively, more female than male participants were influenced by their fathers (19), mothers (19) and significant others (10). However, male and female participants had similar response frequencies in brother.

DISCUSSION

It emerged from the present study that the choice of psychology as a career field by the participating students was influenced by several social agents. The social factors include teachers, parents, peers, media and siblings.

Teachers were the most popular career choice moderating social agents among the participants. Consistent with previous studies (Barnett 2007; Boser et al. 2014; Bryant 2015; Davis 1990; Krisbergh 2015; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008),

teachers were popular social agents in shaping the career decisions of college students. A plausible explanation is that young people look up to their teachers as role models (Blackett 2015; Cusk 2015; McGarraugh and von Wellshein 2009; Straus et al. 2006). It therefore, can be concluded that the little impact the career guidance program has in South African schools (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006; Maree and Beck 2004; Maree 2009) had no association with the direct impact individual teachers have on the students. The teachers formalize gender stereotypes through the emphasis of career appropriateness of a career field to particular gender (Barnett 2007; Boser et al. 2014; Bryant 2015; Denga 2004; Erinosh 1997; Kloosterman 1994; Son and Kakwani 2006). Furthermore, it emerged from the present study that the teachers' influence was higher in male than female participants. However, the findings of the study refute the notion that teachers had little influence in the career decisions of high school students (Kotrlik and Harrison 1989).

Parents were reported as the second most popular career choice socializing agents. This finding draws support from several previous studies (Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa 2006; Bond et al. 2009; Esters and Bowen 2005; McAllister 2015; Streep 2014; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008; Tsagala and Kordaki 2005). This is not surprising as young people also look up to their parents as role models (Cusk 2015; Hairston 2000). Through modeling, young people learn new tasks, norms and skills (Gibson 2004). Many parents impose their values and beliefs onto their son's or daughter's career field of interest (Orndorff 2012).

According to Jackson et al. (1986), parents influence the development of masculinity and femininity in their children. Consequently, they influence their children to choose gender appropriate career fields. The study revealed that parents were more influential in career decisions of their daughters than sons (Adams 2015; McAllister 2015; Streep 2014). This does not lend support to Jackson et al.'s (1986) assertion that the parents were more influential in the choices of children of their gender. For instance, Tsagala and Kordaki (2005) had indicated that fathers were more influential in the career choices of their sons. This support affirms the female dominance in psychology (Carey 2011). Thus, most parents possibly recommended that their daugh-

ters major in psychology, which they viewed as suitable for women.

In the present study, the influence of peers in the career choices of participating students was discernible. The finding corroborates the researches of Boser et al. (2014), Esters (2003), Esters and Bowen (2005), Krisbergh (2015) and Singaravelu et al. (2005). According to Sherriff (2007), friends play a key role in young people's identity development. The peers share ideas about study and career possibilities. As expected, the peers validate the career choices that young people make. This finding was inconsistent with Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa's (2006) finding that peers had little influence in the career choices of college students. Gender difference on peer influence was marginal on the female sibling. The assumption here is that young people mix fairly equally with peers of either gender.

In line with previous studies (Barford 2015; Fuchs 2015; McGarraugh and von Wellshein 2009; Muthukrishna and Sokoya 2008; Reddy 2014), the media was an important factor in the choice of career fields by college students. This could be a reflection of several types of cyber, print and electronic media that young people in South Africa are exposed to. This underscores the importance of media as a source of career information (Pillay et al. 2008). The media reinforces gender stereotypes in career decisions of young people (Asamo 2015; Ferry 2015; Fuchs 2015; Hesse-Biber and Carter 2005). The media merely mirror gender stereotypes prevalent in a society. Refuting Tsagala and Kordaki's (2005) finding, more male than female participants reported that they were influenced by the media. This suggests that male dominance is still prevalent in South Africa, which is viewed as a patriarchal society (Robertson 2012).

Although less popular, having siblings was a factor in the career decisions made by young people. Females consulted both their brothers and sisters while males seem to prefer brothers to sisters. Presumably, older siblings disseminate the acquired career knowledge to their younger siblings to help them make informed career choices.

CONCLUSION

The present study identified several social agents that moderate the choice of career fields among college students. The students mainly

rely on teachers, parents and peers when making their choice of suitable career fields. It can be drawn that the students who were drawn from mainly rural-based high schools lacked knowledge of career professionals in the country. They mainly relied on social agents with limited career knowledge and skills. Male students relied mainly on peers, teachers and media while females depended more on their parents and significant others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study was conducted with psychology students drawn from one university in South Africa thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should be conducted with a representative sample of students drawn from South Africa's diverse socioeconomic disparities and ethnic differences.

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