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Factors Influencing Adolescent Career Choice with Particular Emphasis on the Role of Personality

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Abstract

First year students in Ireland studying in the Institute of Technology (IOT) sector are up to three times more likely to drop out of their courses than those in universities. The students may go on to pursue different programmes of study, but a report by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has offered stark evidence that too many initially make the wrong choice. An average of 9% of first-year students on level eight programmes do not continue to second year in that course; this rises to an average of 22% in the IOTs. Non-progression is even higher among first-year students on level six and level seven programmes with rates averaging 25% and 26% respectively, and sometimes rising to 33%. Changing course choice, or dropping out of college altogether, is a traumatic and costly experience for the students and their families, and a waste of taxpayers' money. The Irish educational system is based on a quantitative system of course achievement, that is, the higher the points achieved in the terminal examination at second level, the greater range of courses available to the student at third level. Students make choices based on the points they score, perhaps at the expense of choosing courses or programmes that they are more suited to pursuing. A recent decision by the Irish government not to fund the role of career guidance at second level schooling may prove to be costly; financially from a taxpayer's point-of-view, but more importantly socially. This decision was budgetary driven. The role of career guidance is to assist students on a path of discovery: discovery of themselves and their personalities. Career guidance endeavours to assist in the process of matching personalities with careers, careers that will be beneficial and rewarding to the student, and, in turn, to the greater community. Failure to engage in the career guidance process at second level may lead to an increase in dropout rates at third level, and can result in much larger costs later. Reasons why students do not progress to the second year of a course can be traced back to before they enter college. These reasons are many and varied. One of the primary reasons is the mismatch of personality with a course/career, which can be costly. There is a danger of failing to recognise the significance of the role of personality in the process of making a choice. Productivity and satisfaction are directly related to the fit between the characteristics of individuals (ability, personality, temperament) and the demands of the job. One of the main causes of stress and dissatisfaction in the work environment is a lack of fit.

This paper explores:

- *the factors influencing career choice;*
- *the reasons for, and costs of, non-progression.*

Factors influencing career choice

The factors influencing adolescent career choice have been well documented in the literature. These factors can be divided into two categories; factors in the *external* environment in which the adolescent exists, and factors *internal* to each individual decision-maker. External factors are those over which the adolescent has no power or control and which cannot be changed. Internal factors are unique to each decision-maker and are rooted in individual *personality*. However, it may be possible to change these factors as the adolescent develops cognitively. These factors come together and influence the career or occupational choice of the adolescent. In the early teen years internal factors become predominant influencers for occupational preferences, with these factors facilitating or impeding career choice [1].

Personality

Understanding personality is important for understanding occupational decision-making. The psychologist Marie Jahoda describes a healthy personality as one that actively masters its environment, shows a unity of personality, and is able to perceive the world in relation to itself [2]. Career psychology has long assumed that personality is a critical component of effective career choice and career success. Holland [3] suggests that the choice of a vocation is an expression of personality. Smart [4] showed that vocational-type development of the personality is a function of a long series of life-history experiences that extend from individuals' family backgrounds through their experiences in education. Eysenck and Eysenck [5] suggest that performance for different kinds of occupation and occupational success are both determined, to some extent, by personality. Personality shapes the goals of the individual that direct decision making, and shapes the content of decision making via selective attention to salient information and situational influences [6].

People approach decisions in different ways. In broad terms the major differences can be grouped into three categories [7]:

1. Cognitive abilities such as ability to learn, retrieve information, spatial and verbal abilities;
2. Personality features such as disposition and temperament;
3. Attitudes.

Occupational psychologists agree that as far as personnel selection is concerned, in order to match the personality and the job effectively, *cognitive ability* and *personality* are the most important considerations [7].

Much work has been done in an attempt to understand personality through the study of personality types and traits and, in turn, matching of these with occupational fields. Known as the *trait-factor* approach, the rationale behind this approach assumes that because of the inherent differences in the roles that occupations require people to play, the ideal personal characteristics of members of various occupational groups vary. However this approach acknowledges that most people are not fully formed when they enter their occupations. Exposure to the characteristic activities and climate of any occupation will exert an influence upon an individual's behaviour and personality [8].

In his research on personality Hans Eysenck suggested that there are three fundamental and unrelated traits: extroversion/introversion, neuroticism and psychoticism [9]. These can be measured and described on a continuum, are biologically based and have many behavioural implications. Research on extroversion suggests extroverts succeed in high pressure jobs that involve considerable interaction with strangers. They handle overload and stress well, have strong feelings of self-efficacy and a good sense of well-being. Neuroticism is associated with stress vulnerability, sensitivity to punishment and threat avoidance. Neurotics portray highly selective biases in cognitive processes with considerable awareness of danger, are cautious at decision-making, have a generally negative self-concept and are often depressed with pessimistic outlooks.

The psychologist John L. Holland developed the Holland Occupational Themes, known as RIASEC (Realistic; Investigative; Artistic; Social; Enterprising; Conventional) [10]. He proposed that it is possible to characterise people by their resemblance to each of the six vocational personality types which are a product of characteristic interaction among a variety of cultural and personal influences. These personal influences come from two different sources that are in a constant interplay and can influence behaviour. One source is the set of characteristics children are born with (sex, basic personality traits). The other source compromises contextual factors, such as the environment in which one is reared (family, schools etc.). Each vocational personality type displays certain traits and is suited to, and flourishes in, a particular occupational field.

Costa and McCrae [11], working in the psychometric trait tradition, settled on five dimensions of personality (Neuroticism; Extroversion; Openness to experience; Agreeableness; Conscientiousness) now called the Five-Factor Approach, or the Five-Factor Model. They suggest that people with particular personality traits are likely to develop interests in those vocations that permit the expression of their preferred ways of thinking, feeling and acting. They believe neurotics are likely to be unhappy in whatever jobs they have with a different job unlikely to solve problems that are rooted in the individual's basic emotional make-up. The traits of extroversion and conscientiousness are important, particularly if the job involves people contact. What is clear from the extensive literature is that some personality dimensions are good predictors of job proficiency [12].

Rooted within the personality of the individual are variables which can influence occupational decision making. Space restrictions prohibit a review of each of these though an overview is necessary.

*Locus of **c**ontrol* is key to the capacity to make decisions about one's life [13]. Those who feel in charge and see themselves as agents of their own destiny are said to have a strong *internal* locus of control. It has been found that those who are internally controlled score higher academically; are more self-confident; enter occupations requiring leadership qualities and managerial skills; are more task-orientated, and generally prosper in challenging and uncertain environments [14]. Those who feel little control over their destiny are described as having a strong *external* locus of control. They believe chance, luck, powerful individuals or institutions are factors which play a large role in their lives. Such people are more socio-emotionally orientated, follow rather than lead, and prefer and prosper in more structured environments. A strong external locus of control is associated with career decision-making difficulties [15].

Self-efficacy (SE) is an individual's assessment of or belief in his/her ability to carry out actions in order to reach career goals [16]. SE affects the level of performance goals the adolescent sets for him/herself, so stronger SE leads to more ambitious goals. SE involves self-belief acquired and modified through four sources of information or experiences (personal performance accomplishments; vicarious learning; social persuasion, and psychological and effective states). Personal accomplishment is the most powerful source of SE [17]. Adolescents who underestimate their efficacy tend to give up more easily, set lower performance goals, suffer from debilitating performance anxiety, and avoid challenges, even when they are capable of meeting these challenges.

Self-concept (SC) develops throughout life, particularly in adolescents as they strive to find their identity and place within the world [18]. Once formed (from the interpersonal world that children inhabit, with parents and role models particularly influential) SC functions to control, guide, and evaluate behaviour [19]. Those with vague SC have difficulty picturing themselves in occupational roles and underachievement may occur. Gottfredson [20] divided SC into two parts, the social self (gender, social class, intelligence) and the psychological self (personality, values) each of these can influence occupational choice.

Self-esteem (SE) describes the value that the adolescent places on him/herself and the feelings of personal worth that result. Low self-esteem can be linked to depression and anxiety [21] which can have an impact on occupational choice. Korman [22; 23] found that SE is related to perception of the difficulty of an occupation and, as a result, serves as a moderator of occupational choice, e.g. high SE adolescents are more likely to seek self-fulfilling occupations than those with low SE. Career indecision is associated with distress and poor well-being; including lower SE, anxiety and lower life satisfaction [24].

The reasons for, and costs of, non-progression

Third level non-progression rates in Ireland remained stubbornly high in 2014 with 'incorrect course/career choice' most commonly cited as the reason for this by first year students. Lack of financial resources to fund increasing registration fees and dissatisfaction with third level experiences were also influential. In an effort to address the second point some students took on part-time work but this, in itself, was also a cause of failure to progress. Thus, students trying to overcome the financial burden through work were in fact disadvantaging themselves further. Lack of attendance was also often an influential factor. Students who failed to engage with their programmes, their peers, and college communities were more likely to drop out.

A report by the HEA published in 2010, entitled *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education,* and based on data from the academic years 2007 and 2008, explored some factors contributing to non-progression in Ireland.

- Students with lower Leaving Certificate examination points are less likely to progress from first year to second year.
- Those with higher points in Mathematics are most likely to progress, with higher points in English also an influential factor in progression.
- Rates of non-progression varied, based on field of study with profession-orientated courses showing the lowest rates of non-progression.
- The provision of grant aid had a positive impact on progression rates.

The costs associated with non-progression are substantial. Research published by the HEA in 2013 in its report *Towards a Performance Evaluation Framework: Profiling Irish Higher Education,* and based on the

academic year 2010/2011, documents the extent of non-progression rates of first year undergraduate students and the costs associated with funding education in Ireland.

In the university sector:

- Non-progression rates from first year to second year averaged 9% (level eight programmes).
- New entrants totalled 20,147, with 1,813 failing to progress (a cost in excess of 4.5 million to students based on the current registration fee of 2,500 euro).
- Total expenditure per student was 15,057 euro.
- Non-progression of first year students cost in excess of 27 million euro.

In the IOT sector:

- Non-progression rates from first year to second year averaged 22% (16% on level eight programmes; 26% on level seven programmes, and 25% on level six programmes).
- Total new entrants were 18,719, with 4,118 students failing to progress (a cost in excess of 10 million euro to students).
- Total expenditure per student was 10,491 euro.
- Non-progression of first year students cost in excess of 43 million euro.

However, non-progression rates dropped dramatically for specialist third level colleges. These colleges are made up of teacher-training colleges, the National College of Art and Design and the Royal College of Surgeons. Collectively the number of new entrants totalled 1,883 with a non-progression rate of only 4% (75 students) on average. This ranged from 5% in the National College of Art and Design to zero in the Royal College of Surgeons.

Conclusion

Getting a job is an essential first step to escaping from poverty [28]. In light of the high non-progression rates in higher education in Ireland it is evident that adolescents need to improve the accuracy of their career choice. Failure to effectively choose a career can have long-lasting detrimental consequences for all. Some communities may find themselves in a perpetual state of static economic development if successive generations fail to choose successful careers in line with their personalities. Recent government policy in Ireland to withdraw funding of career counselling in second level schools may prove costly to students, their families and communities and, indeed, may impede the recovery of the Irish economy. If society is to develop in a manner which is fair and equal every adolescent should be afforded the opportunity to make a successful career choice and achieve his/her potential. There is evidence that many people who are introverted express an interest in social and enterprising careers [29]. This may not be an advisable fit. This highlights the importance of career guidance assisting the adolescent decision maker in making a successful choice. It appears that students registered on courses with a clear occupational path, such as teaching or medicine, are less likely to drop out than students registered on more general programmes. Further research is required to ascertain if these highly motivated/successful students are more likely to have an internal locus of control with higher levels of self-efficacy and self-concept but anecdotal evidence would suggest that these students are likely to have engaged with the career planning process more effectively.

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