

**Title:** Career planning orientations of disadvantaged high school boys: a study of socioeconomic and social cognitive variables

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## **Abstract**

The present study was conducted in India and examined the impact of socioeconomic factors and the variables of self-efficacy and career beliefs on the career planning orientation of 755 high school boys from disadvantaged backgrounds. The sample had four orientations to career planning, namely, the intention to begin working immediately, pursue college education, enter vocational training and no career plans. The children of illiterate and unemployed parents exhibited the highest tendency to prematurely discontinue education and enter the world of work as unskilled labourers. A significant effect of parent employment on self-efficacy was found, indicating that respondents whose parents had full time employment had higher self efficacy scores than those whose parents were unemployed. It was also found that the children of illiterate and unemployed parents had a higher level of negative beliefs about career preparation. This study also presents information regarding the translation of existing measures of socioeconomic status and self-efficacy into Kannada, a South Indian language and preliminary information about the construction of a scale to measure career belief distortions among high school students.

### **Key Words:**

disadvantaged, high school boys, self-efficacy, career beliefs, socioeconomic status, career planning, India.

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The last twenty years have seen vigorous investigations into career psychology and there has been considerable movement and vitality evident in theories and research on career development. Critiques of existing careers research however point out that since theory development was originally based on a homogenous group of white, middle-class adolescents, the relevance of these ideas to non-white groups and persons from other countries and socio-cultural backgrounds has not been clearly articulated. A small but growing body of evidence has begun to suggest that socially and economically disadvantaged youth differ in career maturity from their non-disadvantaged peers (Wilgosh and Mueller, 1993). Chartrand and Rose (1996) point out, that although it is the lower socioeconomic status (SES) groups who may be in greatest need of assistance for career development, the least is known about this section of the population. While efforts are beginning to be directed toward addressing these issues in the Western literature, these studies focus on racial and ethnic minorities *within* these countries. Contributions from developing countries addressing these themes have not as yet begun to figure prominently in the literature.

A review of the existing literature raises three important points that throw light on career development in the Indian ethos.

Firstly, an examination of the Indian situation indicates that *socio-economic status* could differentiate between individuals' career interests, aspirations and attainments and that SES could strongly influence career choice behaviour. For example, national surveys have revealed that in India, higher proportions of chronic unemployment and underemployment are experienced by those from lower SES backgrounds (National Sample Survey Organisation, 1999). Young people from lower SES groups have been reported to obtain lower scores on measures of career maturity when compared to those from higher SES homes (Gupta, 1986; Mohan, 1999). These observations indicate that, it is possible that the lower SES groups could be at higher risk for discontinuities in their career development. It is important both from the theoretical and practical view points, that research is directed toward understanding the dynamics of career development amongst this potentially 'high risk group'.

A second important point to be taken note of is that a significant portion of existing careers theory seems closely linked to the individualism on which Western, industrialised culture is based. Indian child rearing practices, family structure, hierarchical social organisation and value systems promote social support and interdependence and independent decision making may not be directly nurtured in the Indian child (Sinha, 1979). It is possible that the individual's *family and community* could play a powerful role in his or her career decision making. Examination of the links between the characteristics of the low SES family and the career planning orientations of the young career chooser within the family could provide important information about occupational socialisation amongst low SES groups.

Thirdly, it has been observed that *cognitive variables* such as beliefs and attitudes have been reported to strongly influence career planning orientations. Wenzel (1993) for example, points out that persons of lower socioeconomic status often underestimate their capabilities. Chartrand and Rose (1996) found that low SES subjects exhibited thinking patterns that reflected a poor self-image, overall feelings of hopelessness and a belief that they could not help themselves. In the Indian situation, Ojha (1996) found that the self-perceptions of low SES working children who had dropped out of school were characterised by ideas of failure and a fatalistic acceptance of their situation. These indications in the literature point to the possibility that an examination of the cognitive structures underlying the career planning orientations of low SES groups, could provide valuable information about their career development.

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory provides an effective framework for furthering our understanding of the career developmental process. Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994) through their Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) have extended Bandura's Social Cognitive Model to career planning behaviour. SCCT takes a cognitive constructivist approach to career development and specifically points out that career development can be impeded by environmental factors such as differential socialisation, as well as by the internalisation of these forces. Of particular interest to this study is the social cognitive construct of self-efficacy beliefs.

*Self-efficacy* has been described by Bandura (1977), as beliefs about one's own ability to be successful in the performance of a task. The concept of self-efficacy rests on the premise that self-referent thought influences human behaviour. Bandura (1995), has been able to demonstrate that self-efficacy cognitions determine whether behaviour will be initiated, how much energy will be expended and the duration of the maintenance of this behaviour in the face of obstacles and adverse experiences. In Bandura's formulation, inadequate opportunities for performance accomplishments or mastery experiences could hinder the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). The literature indicates that Indian young people from lower SES backgrounds could experience a lack of opportunities for such experiences (Bhargava and Sharma, 1995). The environment and the role models that low SES youth in India are exposed to often reflect failure experiences, with the bitter and defeatist attitudes of adults often being transmitted to the younger generation (D'Souza, 1981; Dube and Sachdev, 1983). This could affect their self-perceptions and lead to low self-efficacy levels.

Based on these indications in the literature, this study has two defined objectives. The first is to obtain a clearer picture of the impact of socioeconomic status on orientations to career planning. The second is to explore the associations between social cognitive variables (self-efficacy and career beliefs) and socioeconomic factors.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 775 high school boys randomly selected from nine urban schools in Bangalore, South India. The age of the participants ranged from 14 to 16 years (mean age = 15 years and one month; SD = 0.68). This study was conducted in Government schools and students participating in the study were therefore more likely to be from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. Student participation was voluntary.

## *Measures*

*Criteria for selection of the questionnaires:* This study was conducted in an environment where very little research pertaining to career planning and development has been conducted. An important consideration for the compilation of the test battery therefore, was the suitability of the scales to the sample. The following criteria were set to assess the suitability of the measures.

1. Cultural relevance to the target group.
2. Age appropriateness of the questionnaires.
3. Translatability of test items into Kannada (the local vernacular).

*Measurement of Socioeconomic Status.* The Socioeconomic Status Scale Questionnaire (SESSQ) developed by Kapoor and Singh (1998) was identified as the most suitable to assess the socioeconomic status of the sample. The SESSQ comprises ten categories of items covering a wide range of economic and socio-cultural factors (e.g. family income, living conditions, material possessions). Items addressing the following themes were used in addition to the SESSQ to obtain more detailed information regarding the influence of SES on respondents' career planning behaviour:

1. Employment and educational status of parent.
2. The respondent's plans immediately following high school.

*Measurement of Self-Efficacy.* The Middle School Self-efficacy Scale (Fouad, Smith and Enochs, 1997) was selected as the most suitable measure of self-efficacy for this study. The MSSSES comprises 22 items that assess career decision-making self-efficacy. Respondents are required to indicate on a 5 - point scale, the extent to which they 'agree' that they could be successful in the activities described by these items. The maximum obtainable score on the scale is 110 and the minimum is 22. The MSSSES was originally standardised on a sample of 361 middle school students from a low socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic minority population in the United States. The authors report evidence for the reliability of the scale through an internal consistency coefficient (coefficient  $\alpha$ ) of 0.79. An adjusted goodness-of-fit of 0.91 and a root mean-square residual of 0.046

indicates that the MSSES has a high degree of validity. In addition, the chi-square / degrees of freedom ratio reported by the authors is 1.96 indicating a reasonably acceptable fit.

***Measurement of Career Beliefs.*** The Career Beliefs Distortion Scale (CBDS) was developed for this study and comprises 18 vignettes that reflect dysfunctional and negative career planning beliefs commonly seen amongst low SES high school boys. Respondents are required to indicate on a seven-point scale, the extent to which they 'agree' with each vignette. The sample for the development of this scale comprised 1366 (808 females and 558 males) high school students drawn from 18 different schools. The mean age of the sample was 15.49 years (SD = 0.93). The Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate internal reliability of the scale and yielded a value of 0.76. The maximum obtainable score on the CBDS is 126 while the minimum is 18. According to the design of the scale, the higher the respondent's score, the higher would be the extent of dysfunctional thinking.

*Translation of the questionnaires.* Two translators were involved in the translation of the English questionnaires to Kannada. Translator one was asked to translate the original English scales into Kannada. The Kannada versions of the questionnaires were then given to Translator two, who was blind to the original English questionnaire, with instructions to now re-translate the items into English. Changes in the meaning and content of the items were noted. These items were modified and iteratively reviewed by the translators until the items conformed to the English original. The English and Kannada versions of the tests were administered to a randomly drawn sample of high school boys (n = 112) fluent both in Kannada and English, with each administration being separated by three weeks. The cross-language Pearson's correlation coefficient for the scales in the battery were as follows: SESSQ 0.99 (p < 0.001), MSSES 0.71 (p < 0.001) and CBDS 0.81 (p < 0.001). The Kannada translations were accepted as being adequately equivalent to the original English versions of the questionnaires.

## *Procedure*

The study was cross-sectional in design. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The battery was administered in Kannada to the sample in groups of about 40 to 60 students per group. The entire battery was completed in approximately one hour with five-minute breaks between each questionnaire. Although only students who answered all the items in the questionnaire were included in the data analysis, the services of the researcher for further career guidance was made available to all respondents, over and above the purview of this study.

## RESULTS

### *Part 1: Socioeconomic variables and orientation to career planning*

*Socioeconomic Status Level.* The maximum obtainable score on the SESSQ is 103 and the minimum is 10. The sample's scores on the SESSQ ranged between 12 and 28, with the mean SES score being 20.32 (SD = 5.48). According to the norms provided by the authors of the SESSQ, this places the sample in the 'upper-lower stratum' of socioeconomic status. Families of the 'upper-lower' SES level typically are slum dwellers, living in *kutcha* (flimsy) houses. At this SES level, the family can usually afford one main meal a day.

### *Orientation to career planning*

Participants' responses to the additional questions used with the SESSQ revealed that this low SES sample had four orientations to the future. *Intention to work immediately:* A substantial number of respondents in this sample (41.6%, of the total sample, n = 314), planned to start work immediately after school. *Intention to pursue college education:* The number of students expressing the intention to go to college after high school was also quite large (35.5%, n = 268). *Intention to pursue diploma and vocational courses:* Interestingly, only 10.5% (n = 79) of students considered the option of diploma courses

although these are cheaper courses, leading directly to jobs in a shorter period of time. *No career plans*: It was anticipated that a small number of students at the high school level (age 14 to 15 years) will not yet be developmentally ready to make career decisions. Amongst this sample, 12.5% (n = 94) of students had no clear career plans.

*Parent education and students' career planning orientation*

Information obtained indicated that 24.8% (n = 187) of the parents of the sample were *illiterate*, 18.5% (n =140) had studied upto *primary school* and 22.6% (n = 171) had completed their *middle school* education. Only 19.1% (n = 144) of parents had completed *high school* and 14.9% (n = 113) had obtained *pre-university* or *technical education*. Table 1 summarises the associations observed between students' career planning orientation and their parents' education level and shows that the number of students who are planning to look for a job immediately after school, increases as parent education levels decrease.

**Table 1: Students' orientation to the future in relation to parent education: frequency and percentage of responses**

<b>Parent Education level</b>	<b>Plans to Start Work Immediately</b>	<b>Plans to go to College</b>	<b>Plans to enter Diploma course</b>	<b>No Career Plans</b>
Pre University (n = 113)	46 (40.7%)	45 (39.8%)	14 (12.4%)	8 (7.1%)
High school (n = 144)	49 (34.0%)	69 (47.9%)	21 (14.6%)	5 (3.5%)
Middle school (n = 171)	66 (38.6%)	75 (43.8%)	19 (11.1%)	11 (6.4%)
Primary school (n = 140)	59 (42.1%)	40 (28.6%)	15 (10.7%)	26 (18.6%)
Illiteracy (n = 187)	94 (50.5%)	39 (20.7%)	10 (5.3%)	44 (23.4%)

A 5 x 4 chi-square was performed on the data and was found to be significant ( $\chi^2$  (n = 755) = 76.23, p <0.001). Among those intending to work immediately, the largest percentage are the children of illiterate parents (50.5%, n = 94). The percentage of students intending to study further (college or diploma) decreases with parent education. The lowest percentage of students opting either for college or diploma education are the children of illiterate parents. It is interesting to note that the largest percentage of students who are undecided about their next step (23.4%, n = 44), have parents who are illiterate.

*Parent employment and students' career planning orientation*

Information obtained about *parents' employment status* indicates that approximately 33.4% (n = 252) of the parents had regular employment, while 17.7% (n = 134) worked as casual labourers (no fixed source of income or employment). High levels of unemployment were observed, with 48.9% (n = 369) of the parents being currently unemployed for varying periods. Table 2 summarises the associations observed between students' orientation to the future and their parents' employment status and shows that a larger percentage of students who are planning to pursue further education have parents hold full-time employment.

**Table 2: Students' orientation to the future in relation to parent employment status: frequency and percentage of responses**

<b>Parent Occupation level</b>	<b>Plans to Start Work Immediately</b>	<b>Plans to pursue College Education</b>	<b>Plans to enter Diploma course</b>	<b>No Career Plans</b>
Employed full time (n = 252)	99 (39.3%)	112 (44.4%)	26 (10.3%)	15 (5.9%)
Occasionally employed (n=134)	44 (32.8%)	52 (38.8%)	21(15.7%)	17 (12.7%)
Unemployed (n = 369)	171 (46.3%)	104 (28.2%)	32 (8.7%)	62 (16.8%)

A 3 x 4 chi-square was performed on the data and was found to be significant ( $\chi^2$  (n = 755) = 32.27, p <0.001). It is noticed that among students whose parents' employment is uncertain (occasionally employed group and unemployed group together, n = 503) a large percentage express the intention to begin working immediately (42.7%, n = 215). In comparison, among those whose parents have full time employment, a smaller percentage express this intention (39.3%, n = 99). Amongst students who do intend to pursue further education, 44.4% (n = 112) of the children of parents with regular employment express an intention to pursue college education. Only 31% (n = 156) of the children of parents with uncertain employment express the desire to consider college education.

### *Part 2: Social Cognitive variables*

The present study used the MSSES and the CBDS to examine the social cognitive variables of the self-efficacy and career beliefs amongst this sample of low SES high school boys. Table 3 provides the mean scores and standard deviations obtained by the sample (divided into sub-groups according to parent education and parent employment status) on these variables.

**Table 3: Students' Performance on the Middle School Self-efficacy Scale and the Career Beliefs Distortion Scale in relation to Parent Education and Employment:**

	<b>Middle School Self-Efficacy Scale Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Career Beliefs Distortion Scale Mean (SD)</b>
The Total Sample (n = 755)	22.28 (4.91)	100.23 (10.19)
<b>PARENT EDUCATION</b>		
Parent Education - Pre University (n = 113)	22.60 (5.14)	98.91 (11.01)
Parent Education - High School (n = 144)	22.85 (4.96)	98.54 (10.15)
Parent Education - Middle School (n = 171)	22.21 (5.12)	98.25 (10.94)
Parent Education - Primary School (n = 140)	22.0 (5.24)	102.37 (9.44)
Parent Illiterate (n = 187)	21.94 (4.25)	102.54 (8.79)
<b>PARENT EMPLOYMENT</b>		
Parent Employed Full Time: (n = 252)	23.03 (5.30)	98.30 (10.84)
Parent Employed Part Time: (n = 134)	22.38 (4.67)	98.20 (11.80)
Parent Unemployed (n = 369)	21.74 (4.66)	102.29 (8.60)

*Associations between the social cognitive variables and parent education*

A series of one-way ANOVAs did not show any significant differences between the five parent education levels on self-efficacy scores ( $F(4,750) = 0.949, p > 0.05$ ). On the CBDS however, a significant parent education effect was found ( $F(4,750) = 7.249, p < 0.001$ ). Tukey post hoc comparisons show that the mean CBDS score of students whose parents had completed pre-university, high school and middle school levels of education

were significantly lower than the mean score of those whose parents had completed only up to primary school education and those whose parents were illiterate (see Table 3).

#### *Associations between the socio cognitive variables and parent employment*

A significant effect of parent employment was found in self-efficacy scores as measured by the MSSSES ( $F(2, 752) = 5.211, p < 0.01$ ). A post hoc Tukey test showed that the mean Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy score of students whose parents had full time employment was significantly higher than the students whose parents were unemployed (see Table 3). A significant effect of parent employment was also found on the CBDS scores of the students with parents having different employment statuses ( $F(2, 752) = 15.229, p < 0.001$ ). Tukey post hoc comparisons showed that the mean CBDS score of students whose parents had full time employment was significantly lower than the students whose parents had part time jobs or were unemployed (see Table 3).

## DISCUSSION

#### *Socioeconomic status and orientation to career planning*

Data obtained through this research provides a basis upon which to examine the potential links between low SES students' orientation to career planning and two important SES components, namely, parent education and employment. The impact of these two factors is discussed below across each of the different career planning orientations expressed by the members of this sample.

#### *Intention to begin work immediately*

A large number of this low SES sample intended to begin to work immediately after high school. This finding concurs with the few other reports in the literature indicating a higher predisposition amongst the low SES group to begin working *before* their education is complete (Banks and Roker, 1993). In the Indian context, Satyarathi (1982), studying

the effect of economic status on Indian students' attitudes to school found that low SES students placed a lower value on education and tended to leave school early. This finding could indicate that contextual factors arising out of the individual's socioeconomic environment play a significant role in the career planning process. The low SES group is required to make career plans, while simultaneously grappling with poverty and severe financial restrictions. At a practical level, these impoverished families may have realistic concerns about their ability to pay for their children's further education. Day-to-day survival and meeting physical needs in the here-and-now may be of more urgent importance to these individuals than making plans for the future.

The literature indicates that entering the world of work before obtaining adequate qualifications has far reaching implications on the person's career development.

Ekstrom, Freeberg and Rock (1987), studying the effects of premature entry into the world of work on later employment, assert that poorly educated persons are at highest risk for unemployment in their later lives. Banks and Roker, (1993), found that young people who left school at the minimum age to get work, are likely to spend most of their lives in part-time, unskilled jobs or on the dole. The present study indicates that the low SES group has a tendency to prematurely terminate education and enter the world of work before their skill development is complete. This could place them on a trajectory toward low-skill employment, underemployment or even chronic unemployment in the long run.

#### *Intention to pursue further education*

A second group exists within the sample under study that *does* express a desire to pursue further education. It is observed that a large number of those intending to pursue further education are oriented to long term, college-based education. A much smaller number are oriented to short term, skills-based training, obtainable through diploma and certificate courses. Most Indian studies of occupational aspirations have indicated that the low SES groups have low occupational aspirations (Jhaj and Grewal, 1976; Mehta, Bhatnagar, and Jain, 1989). However these studies do not seem to account for sections of

low SES groups that do have higher occupational aspirations. Conclusions drawn by Indian researchers seem to overgeneralise their findings to the entire low SES section of the population. Information emerging from the current research indicates that the number of students intending to pursue further education increases with the educational level and employment status of their parents. Although they do belong to the low SES level, these young people seem to aspire to rise above their predicament through further education.

It must be noted however, that the orientation to a college education amongst the low SES group does not in reality pave the way for successful employment. As indicated by Thomas (1997), college-based courses are not designed for specific skills development and require long term study before employment can become a reality. Low SES students intending to pursue college education therefore maybe at risk to spending their meagre family resources on courses that could lead them not toward employment, but toward the ever growing ranks of the educated unemployed in India.

*Could lower SES students have higher career decision making self-efficacy beliefs?*

The literature indicates that low SES groups as a whole are likely to have lower self-efficacy beliefs (Lauver and Jones, 1991; Fouad, 1995). Findings from the current study point to a possible variation on this theme. Within the low SES sample studied, it is observed that the children of parents who are unemployed have lower self-efficacy scores when compared to those whose parents have employment. It was suggested early in this paper that within the Indian sociocultural ethos, familial factors could play a significant part in the career development of the individual. The possible relationship noticed between parental employment status and the individual's career decision making self-efficacy points to the potential impact of this component of socioeconomic status on the career development process.

*Do all low SES students have negative career beliefs?*

Students whose parents are illiterate and unemployed show a higher level of negative career beliefs when compared to their counterparts whose parents are educated and have full time employment. This finding once again highlights the possibility that career beliefs reported by individual members of the sample may in fact be rooted in attitudes prevalent across a particular *section* of the low SES group. Arbib and Hesse (1986) point out that beliefs held by the individuals of a community may cohere into a pattern of *commonly* held cognitions characterising a social group. Arbib and Hesse (1986) refer to this pattern as a *social schema* and stress that these belief structures may not be internalised within the minds of single individuals but rather in the relational processes of social exchanges. Fournier, Drapeau and Thibault (1995), studying the origin of career beliefs, found close links between the individuals' social origins and the type of beliefs he or she held. It maybe postulated then that negative cognitions about career planning may not be common to the low SES group as a whole but may instead be more prevalent amongst those within the low SES group whose parents are unemployed and illiterate.

It is important that careers research includes in its purview the potential effects of poverty, discrimination and differential socialisation seen across socio-economic status groups. As with most developing nations, manpower is one of India's strongest assets. Sound careers research that systematically informs careers practice could make a significant contribution to helping young people maximise their potentials and in the long run, such research could facilitate the effective use of the nation's human resource.

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