
Personal constructions of parental influence related to career development

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Abstract

Psychological researchers, influenced by sociological and ecological approaches to human development, have begun to question the lack of attention to interactive processes in the family related to the career development of adolescents and young adults. The purpose of the present study was to explore the ways parents and young adults socially construct the interactive domain of parental influence. A sample of 279 parents and young adults were randomly assigned to complete a Q-sort set describing various family activities and interactions thought to influence career development. Consistent with Q-methodology, factor analyses were conducted for subjects rather than items, followed by qualitative analyses. Results revealed that interactions perceived as key elements in career development refer to either the process or outcomes of parental influence and address responsibility, autonomy, open communication, support and encouragement, and direction and guidance. The results are discussed in light of the theoretical perspective proposed.

Résumé

Les chercheurs en psychologie, influencés par les approches sociologiques et écologiques pour le développement personnel, commencent à se poser des questions sur le manque d'attention portée aux processus interactifs de la famille relativement au développement de carrière des adolescents et jeunes adultes. La présente étude vise à explorer les façons dont les parents et jeunes adultes construisent socialement le domaine interactif de l'influence parentale. Un échantillon de 279 parents et jeunes adultes a été choisi au hasard pour compléter un jeu de triage-Q décrivant diverses activités familiales et interactions qui pourraient influencer le développement de carrière. Dans le même contexte que la méthodologie-Q, des analyses d'éléments ont été faites sur des sujets plutôt que des articles, suivies d'analyses qualitatives. Les conclusions révèlent que les interactions perçues comme éléments-clé dans le développement de carrière se réfèrent soit au processus soit aux conséquences de l'influence parentale, et adressent la responsabilité, l'autonomie, la communication ouverte, l'appui et l'encouragement, ainsi que la direction et l'orientation. Les résultats sont discutés dans le contexte de la perspective théorique proposée.

Young people continue to seek out their parents as sources of help and information in the area of career guidance (e.g., Arnold, Budd, & Miller, 1988). As well, parents act intentionally to influence their children's career and life direction. In our previous research, we (Young & Friesen, in press; Young, Friesen, & Pearson, 1988) elicited accounts from parents about how they intentionally sought to influence their children in their career development. These accounts served to develop categories of parental activities, interpersonal structures, and intentions in this domain. In the present study, these accounts are used as the bases for the exploration of the way in which parents and young adults construct the

domain of parental influence. It is assumed that parents and young adults may construct the nature of parental influence differently both between and among themselves.

The influence of parents on career development can be best understood from an ecological perspective (Collin & Young, 1986; Young, 1984) in which the interaction between the developing person and the environment is central. For most young people, parents comprise an important part of the environment with which they have a dynamic interaction. The nature of the interaction can be understood, at least in part, through the constructs that parents and young people use to describe, explain, or otherwise account for their intentional actions in this domain.

Descriptions of parental activities represent accounts of the complex nature of family interactions and the unique ways they are seen to impinge upon the career development of children. The specific aim of this research is to propose an expanded view of career development, based on the assumption that heterogeneity is characteristic of the way career conceptions evolve. As a result, different types of parental influence can be accounted for in the explanation of young people's career development.

This study employed Q-methodology which allows for the orderly investigation of human subjectivity (Stephenson, 1953). Because it emphasizes the uniqueness of individual experience, including the uniqueness of language, it is particularly suitable for studies in which advances in knowledge and theory development are sought. The Q-method used in this research and the qualitative procedure used in its predecessor (Young & Friesen, in press; Young, Friesen, & Pearson, 1988) are founded on the axiom suggested by Kitzinger (1986) that researchers acknowledge participants' subjective constructions of reality.

The focus of this paper is on the qualitative interpretation and summary of the Q-analyses of two versions (long and condensed) of four sets of items or incidents. A more comprehensive account of our method and the results of specific Q-analyses can be found elsewhere (e.g., Young, Friesen, & Dillabough, 1990).

METHOD

A volunteer sample comprised of 123 parents and 156 young adults contributed to the present analysis. The young adult sample consisted of 88 females and 68 males between the ages of 18 and 25. The parent sample included 92 females and 31 males.

The items that comprised the Q-sort in this research were derived from an earlier study (Young & Friesen, in press; Young, Friesen, & Pearson, 1988) in which parents provided descriptions of critical incidents in the domain of parental influence. Two of four sets of 20 incidents per set

were randomly assigned to subjects for the Q-sort ranking procedure. Subjects were asked to complete four Q-sorts in total. The analyses of two of these sorts contributed to the findings on which the following discussion is based.

The particular sorts described in this paper were intended to measure the personal experience of subjects. Each subject was presented with a set of cards and was asked to sort the cards following a normal distribution according to a relevant criterion. For one set, parents and young adults were asked, "How valuable do you think these activities would be in the career development of young people?" For the second set, parents were asked "How valuable are these activities to you personally when you think of helping your children with their career development?" For the second set, young adults were asked, "How valuable have these activities been to you personally during your own career development?"

On completion of each sort, subjects were asked to examine their sort and write a sentence or two explaining the reasons for their placements of the three highest, and the three lowest, ranking incidents. Subjects were also asked to provide demographic information including: sex, level of education completed, and occupation.

The Q-method requires that subjects rather than items be factor analyzed. By doing so, we are informed about how groups of people respond to groups of items rather than to individual items. This enables us to describe salient constructs for the domain of parental influence in career development under which individuals can be subsumed. In this study, the parent and young adult samples were considered together. Factors that were common across sets are named and discussed as representative constructs.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF PARENTAL INFLUENCE

The broadest constructs that emerged in the factor structure is the difference between factors that address the outcomes of parental influence for the young person compared to those that point to the process of parental influence or parental style.

The Outcomes of Parental Influence

The factors that addressed child outcome were broad. Particularly salient among them were responsibility and autonomy. Specific outcomes such as being employed or reaching a particular occupation or career goal were not found in these subjects' constructions.

Responsibility

The theme of responsibility arose in several of the analyses. Essentially it represented the construction that parental influence should provide the basis for learning long-term personal responsibility which, in turn, enables one to make important, independent decisions when they are called for. Responsibility, as understood by this group, is comprised of realizing the consequences of one's own actions, and learning that success in one's career is a function of taking responsibility for it through persistent effort, work habits, and work ethic. The outcome of parental influence is the development of a responsible young person.

Reflecting on this construction, one person commented that children need "to take responsibility for their actions and their lives." It is not seen as helpful when parents do things, such as homework, for children that they should be doing for themselves.

Autonomy

A number of other subjects framed the outcome of appropriate parental influence as the autonomous person. This view suggested that if children have the freedom to choose their own interests without too much interference from adults, then they will develop as autonomous adults. To the extent that this goal is met, individuals will be able to find employment and be successful in their careers. This was frequently the expected outcome of young people or parents who are in occupations, such as teaching and social work, that recognize the adolescent's need for individuation from the family.

The Process of Parental Influence

Some parents and young adults constructed parental influence as parental style or process, and only implicitly addressed the effect or outcome that the parenting has. A range of parenting approaches or styles were supported, including open communication, parental encouragement and support, and direction and guidance.

Open communication

Some subjects in this study defined an interactive parenting style as important to the career development of the young. Specifically, parental respect of the child, respect for others, positive and open parent-child communication, reciprocal interaction between parent and child, and minimal interference by the parent are characteristic of this construction.

For example, one person stated, "Open communication, care, support but not over-interference is the basis for good parenting".

Young people in one of the analyses responded favourably to incidents in which there was some form of narrative in which the resolution of a difficulty occurred by the parent initiating an open exchange with the child or showing interest in her or him. The clearest contrast to this construction was provided by those subjects, all of whom were parents, who viewed parent-initiated, non-conflictual type of parenting as most beneficial to influencing young people.

Support and encouragement

In this construction of parenting style, a more specific role for the parent is defined. Here, the parent is to act as a supporter and encourager to the child's goals and activities. Educational attainment, for example, is seen as being fostered through the encouragement and involvement of parents. The process of parenting includes being available to the child, and responding positively to the children's interests. It does not include taking over, discouraging the child, or not showing confidence in her or him.

For some parents, support is demonstrated through parental involvement which should come early in life. This early involvement, in the preadolescent years, is in contrast to attempts to influence adolescents which seem futile if the supportive attitude had not been created earlier.

Active parental involvement is also recognized by young adults, who in looking retrospectively at their own childhoods and adolescence, see the lack of parental involvement as being a significant factor in the absence of career direction in their own lives. As one young person commented, "Kids need affirmation, love and punishment from parents in order to feel supported enough that pursuit of a career becomes valuable to them."

Direction and guidance

A tighter construction of parental style pertinent to career development, involving direction and guidance of the young, was represented by a small number of participants. It suggests a parental style that focuses on helping young people deal with the range of options and choices among educational programs and occupations that young people face. This construction of influence is viewed as unidirectional, from parents or their representatives to the young person. Terms such as "direction", "guidance", and "discipline" were used by parents to respond to the difficulty a young person may have in deciding among career choices. The use of

outside resources, such as school counsellors, was consistent with this construction because of their expertise and focus for the adolescent.

DISCUSSION

A primary finding of this research is that distinct parenting constructions emerge when parents and young adults are asked to sort items pertaining to parental influence of career development. These constructions illustrate various ways in which parenting, development, particularly career development, and socialization are thought to optimally occur.

The identification of these constructions represents a significant step in efforts to describe the domain of activities that parents engage in when influencing the career development of their children. This conceptualization of parental influence is consistent with an ecological approach to career development (Collin & Young, 1986; Young, 1984). To use the language of the ecological perspective, both parents and young people construct or make the environment in which they participate. Furthermore, both between and among parents and young people, there are both individual differences in their constructions as well as shared meanings.

The findings of this study provide a basis for further investigation of the extent to which parental influence is conceptualized as a unilateral or bilateral process (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). Some constructions suggest more of a unilateral process (e.g., direction and guidance). In contrast, a relational approach is more evident in the construction, Open communication. These factors reflect the need for a distinctness of self from significant others and a connectedness with the family as the basis for adolescent development posited by Grotevant & Cooper (1986).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The present discussion suggests several implications for counsellors working in the area of career development. First, this research brings home the importance of family influence in the career development of children by identifying parental influence as being both outcome and process oriented, each valued differently by parents and young people. Parents can be encouraged to help their daughters and sons to make accurate and realistic self-appraisals, gain access to critical information, and try out various work roles. But these activities, and many others parents use, need to be understood from the perspective of the construct system employed by both parent and young person.

Secondly, it highlights the importance of families as transmitters of cultural values and norms and suggests that counsellors need to understand the domain of parental influence in which their career guidance programs are tacitly embedded. Finally, it suggests that a systemic approach in vocational counselling may be useful in responding to the complexity of parent-child interaction in this domain.

In sum, the value of this research is to make the nature of parental influence and its effects more accessible by counsellors and their clients. Although there is not a direct correspondence between the way in which individuals construct their worlds and the activities they engage in, the former provides the key to the latter. Ulrich & Dunne (1986) extrapolate from this view and set the stage for the importance of this type of research for practitioners:

... the tension between the family designation of the child's usefulness and the child's own definition of productive effort — and the subsequent impact of this tension on career choice and work experience may be one of the most critical aspects of an individual's developmental history (p. 5).

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Note

This study was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Strategic Grants Program — Family and Socialization of Children, Grant No. 498-86-0020.

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