

Career development involves establishing and refining a worker identity through exploring, committing to, and reconsidering career alternatives across the life span.

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Career development during childhood and adolescence

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT BEGINS during the childhood period and extends across the life course.¹ It unfolds as an individual establishes a sense of self at work, also known as establishing a vocational identity.² Establishing a vocational identity is the response to the question, “Who will I become at work?” The response to this question during childhood is often more gendered and more glamorous than what will follow later.³ Childhood tasks include learning about the world of work through the work experiences of others, establishing a sense of self, and matching the self with the world of work to establish a budding worker identity. During adolescence, vocational identity development proceeds from a hazy and varnished sense of self relatively detached from a stylized and stereotyped image of work to become a sharper, more realistic, and poignant image of the self at work. The process of refining the self-image is associated with achieving progress on vocational identity development tasks, on the one hand, and improved well-being and diminished distress throughout adolescence and into young adulthood, on the other.⁴

In this article, we offer a general perspective of vocational identity development as central to child and adolescent career development. A review of the pertinent literatures suggests that identity development is the product of three developmental strands—career exploration, commitment, and reconsideration—that appear to begin during childhood and extend into adulthood. We then demonstrate how these three identity processes combine to yield a vocational identity. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this developmental model of vocational identity development for career interventions.

A process model of vocational identity

Identity development is situated within a developmental model that is presumably preceded by developing a sense of industry and followed by establishing a long-term intimate relationship with a romantic partner.⁵ Establishing a strong sense of industry, or the capacity to derive pleasure from work and the worker role, readies children to establish a vocational identity during the adolescent period and predisposes them to exhibit improved well-being during early adulthood.⁶ Establishing a strong sense of industry and vocational identity appears to be pivotal because working and working well are central to adult life in modern economies.

Establishing a vocational identity is composed of the tasks of exploring, committing to, and reconsidering career alternatives.⁷ These three processes can be used to understand adolescents' and young adults' current identity statuses, which helps identify what should be done to promote vocational identity development.⁸ Before proceeding to the discussion about such interventions, we first provide a review of what is known about the exploration, commitment, and reconsideration processes across childhood and adolescence in an effort to establish a rationale for the intervention suggestions that follow.

Career exploration

Identity exploration involves learning broadly and deeply about a particular life domain (for example, friendships, family, religion, work, and politics). Career exploration involves exploring the self and the world of work to obtain a better understanding of the general features of the self and learn about potential career options that might suit these features.⁹ Vocational exploration answers the question, “What kinds of work will be suitable to me?” The answer to this question often comes from the work experiences intentionally and unintentionally shared by parents and the media. Youth also try to find an answer to the question by seeking out and learning about careers and the extent to which they might be a more suitable or less suitable choice.¹⁰

Career exploration presumably proceeds from a broad (in-breadth) exploration of possible vocational identities to increasing deep (in-depth) exploration of core features of the self (interests, values, and life goals, for example) in relationship to specific career opportunities that are perceived as suiting these core features.¹¹ Young children are exposed to and learn about various careers through textbooks, adults they know, and multimedia sources without having a specific focus on certain careers. Theory suggests that once they find a career that seems interesting to them, they try to learn more about it, seeking out further information from known sources. Both forms of exploration likely operate across the life span as the perceived suitability of career choices and job satisfaction waxes and wanes. Diminished confidence in a career pathway or growing job dissatisfaction may prompt in-breadth exploration (that is, “looking around”) that may lead to focused exploration centering on the steps needed to change career goals, prepare for a new career, or make a career transition.

Research supports the distinction between in-breadth and in-depth career exploration but suggests that they have different impacts on career development. In-breadth exploration promotes greater flexibility in approaching a career choice, but it also is associated with a lack of career planning and confidence, especially

when the process is prolonged without any experience of in-depth exploration.¹² In-depth exploration has been associated with increasing career planning and confidence, less doubt in one's career choice, and a stronger commitment to a career.¹³ Coupled with theories of identity, this research suggests that children and adolescents in the throes of establishing a sense of self may benefit from engaging in a period of in-breadth exploration to the extent that it prevents a premature foreclosure on a career choice that may eventually become less than suitable.¹⁴ On the contrary, adolescents who have established a strong and clear sense of self may benefit from a transition to a period of in-depth exploration as this process tends to lead to a narrowing of alternatives and an eventual commitment to a career.

Career commitment

Career commitment generally has two components: deciding on a career and identifying with it.¹⁵ A career commitment involves making a choice and then attaching one's self to that choice. Career commitment is the product of a process that is presumably rooted in childhood and made manifest at an early age when adults begin to pose the age-old question, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" The response to this question reflects a commitment. Commitment to a career is demonstrated in the decisions (that is, thoughts), choices (that is, behaviors), and vocational identities (that is, a personal connection to one's decisions and choices) that children establish.¹⁶ The answer to this question is often influenced by a number of personal characteristics and most notably by gender, social class, and age.¹⁷ Children tend to identify with jobs that are occupied by people of their gender and social class and tend to be attracted to jobs that are more sensational and glamorous (athlete, model, and movie star, for example) than what they will eventually choose later in life.

Adolescents generally exhibit increasing career decidedness over time, but the pattern is highly variable.¹⁸ The decidedness research suggests that increased decidedness contributes to favorable outcomes like personal adjustment, career maturity, persistence in

pursuing an undergraduate degree, and favorable academic and work outcomes.¹⁹ These findings demonstrate that career commitment is an integral part of child and adolescent career development. Combined with theory, these results suggest that career commitment (a career decision coupled with a person connection to the career) is generally a favorable process. However, a premature foreclosure to a career choice before establishing a clear and realistic sense of self can be rather unfavorable in the long term. The ideal timing of a career commitment is contingent on when a person has a clear enough sense of self and sufficient motivation to make it, which suggests that the timing can be different for each individual; in other words, it is difficult to say that there is one perfect period in which to choose a career.

Career reconsideration

Career reconsideration refers to reexamining current commitments and making an effort to compare available alternatives to further specify a career choice or change career choices. Reconsideration can emerge when one has established a career commitment but maintains a flexible attitude toward it. It also occurs when one experiences a self-doubt that often comes from making life-changing decisions.²⁰ Reconsideration is believed to be a critical process in identity development from the adolescent period onward and is likely to emerge after tentative commitments are made.

Career reconsideration is believed to be reflective of the variability that people tend to exhibit in their career commitments over time.²¹ Increased commitment is generally associated with decreased reconsideration, but the process of reconsideration may actually lead to more suitable commitments over the longer term to the extent that it reflects a careful systematic approach to making a career choice.²² On the positive side, reconsideration can be facilitated by career flexibility, which reflects openness to alternative careers that may emerge over time. On the negative side, reconsideration can be prompted by career self-doubt.²³ Career self-doubt is a tendency to question whether one can achieve a suitable career choice. At the extreme, career self-doubt can breed

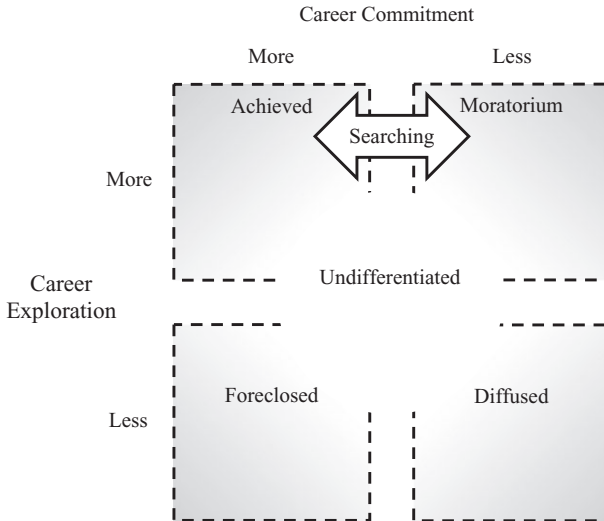
chronic career indecisiveness and diminished well-being.²⁴ Indecisiveness has also been shown to limit one from exploring careers.²⁵ The overall effect of reconsideration of vocational identity is therefore neither good nor bad and hinges on the underlying features of self-doubt and flexibility and the extent to which they dominate one's thoughts, behaviors, and connection to the world of work.

The contemporary world of work is increasingly dynamic and generally favors a more flexible, considerate, self-reflective approach to career commitments.²⁶ As a consequence, one's vocational identity may become more dynamic over the life course compared to the typical case in the twentieth century.²⁷ The goal of achieving an increasingly crystallized vocational identity may give way to maintaining a sufficiently adaptable and flexible vocational identity partly as a consequence of ongoing reconsideration through the majority of one's working life. The process of career reconsideration therefore appears poised to become an increasingly important aspect of vocational identity and career development in today's highly changeable world of work.

Exploration, commitment, and reconsideration as three interwoven threads of identity status development

The literature reviewed here suggests that three identity processes may emerge during later childhood, become more pronounced and salient, and mutually influence one another in a complex dynamic fashion across adolescence.²⁸ The findings suggest that changes in one process may be associated with changes in at least one or both of the other two.

The identity status concept is used to merge the three processes into process patterns and therefore offers a complementary perspective on a person's progress in developing a vocational identity.²⁹ The six statuses depicted in Figure 1.1 are defined by combinations of career exploration, commitment, and reconsideration. For example, those in the achieved statuses are characterized

Figure 1.1. Vocational identity status model

by having explored careers broadly and deeply and being committed to a career. People in this status also report very little reconsideration. The diffused pattern reflects a lack of exploration and commitment with a fair amount of reconsideration. These statuses help to distinguish people in terms of their vocational identity progress; hence, they offer a way of matching people to interventions on the basis of their developmental status. In the next section, we provide examples that show the utility of the statuses and point to a means of assessing adolescents to identify their vocational identity status.

Implications for career interventions

Establishing a vocational identity is a crucial developmental task. That said, the goal for career interventions should be to facilitate vocational identity development, which is basically helping youth understand who they are and finding what careers in the world could fit into their self-images. Several considerations are suggested

when developing career interventions that address vocational identity processes or the goal of promoting vocational identity development.

First, the world of work is increasingly dynamic. Learning skills and knowledge about how to establish and revise a vocational identity will prepare youth to adapt to ongoing work and employer changes. While much emphasis is placed on preparing youth for job tasks like problem solving and communication, destabilization of careers in the modern economy dictates that we also prepare our children for lifelong career development tasks like career exploration, commitment, and reconsideration.

Second, vocational identity processes are interwoven, generally moving in a favorable direction over time but highly variable across people. Practitioners should keep in mind that interventions designed to influence any one of the three processes may also have indirect effects on the other two and that they may run into unintended consequences. Interventions designed to strengthen career commitments may also diminish exploration and reconsideration. Interventions to bolster in-breadth career exploration may prompt more reconsideration for those who have already established commitments. We expect increasing commitment and in-depth exploration and decreasing in-breadth exploration and reconsideration over the long term, extending into middle adulthood. The common pattern for children and adolescents will likely reflect a pattern of uneven progress with times of advance and retreat away from establishing a vocational identity, with the long-term trend reflecting progress.

Third, thinking in terms of vocational identity statuses (that is, patterns of identity processes) and shaping interventions to account for the patterns may yield more favorable outcomes. Using an assessment tool, such as the Vocational Identity Status Assessment, to identify identity statuses can be helpful. Vocational identity statuses can be used to direct group-based interventions. Students who went through a lot of exploration and are highly committed to a specific career may benefit from further in-depth career exploration of their career choices coupled with activities

that serve to affirm their choices. This group of students may not benefit as much from programs aimed at in-breadth exploration or reconsideration given that this process may erode the gains they have already made in these areas. Adolescents who did not explore enough to make a commitment could benefit from interventions that stimulate thinking broadly about themselves and a range of suitable career choices to facilitate in-breadth career exploration and a focus on general work features that align with their strengths and weaknesses. This group may not benefit from immediate attempts to promote in-depth exploration given that they are less ready to do so, and it may prompt premature foreclosure on a job choice. Youth who have explored but have not settled on a specific career may benefit from activities that prompt progress in terms of commitment. Those who have made a career commitment without any exploration may benefit from some reconsideration of the choice. The point here is that each status lends itself to a slightly different programmatic approach, with the goal being that adolescents generally engage in exploration, commitment, and reconsideration processes before fully establishing a vocational identity.

Fourth, children's contexts should be taken into account. A person-centered intervention, such as personal career counseling and guidance, is likely to be the most effective way to promote vocational identity development partly because the person's environment is likely to be taken into account.³⁰ However, this can be very costly, so integrating an individualized approach into group-based interventions, much like educators differentiating their instruction to suit various learners, is another way of benefiting from the advantages of one-on-one relationships. If one seeks to intervene with a larger population, there must be some recognition of their contexts and how they support or oppose establishing favorable vocational identities. For example, school counseling programs could create curricula that help students make connections between school subjects and different types of occupations as a way of showing how their learning will apply to the future and how academic strengths and weaknesses align with job imperatives. Community groups such as workforce development organizations

and faith-based organizations may contribute by providing career programs that demonstrate job opportunities offered by local businesses. Knowing that job opportunities are available in the community may stimulate adolescents to feel more comfortable in exploring such opportunities in a classroom environment and more confident in making a tentative commitment to one of them. The community context acts as a holding environment for students and their opportunities and constraints. Accounting for them should be considered a focus of intervention efforts directed toward promoting a vocational identity.

Finally, the timing of interventions matters. Traditional career guidance and intervention programs focus on the adolescent years. The lack of career programming for children is often based on the assumption that children are entirely disconnected from the working world. The literature simply fails to support this assumption and in fact shows that preschool children demonstrate an accurate awareness of work.³¹ Children develop their interests and values through interaction with family members, teachers, the media, and peers, which in turn has an impact on their broad ideas about work, their career interests, and decisions in later life.³² Early to late childhood may be the ideal time for career exploration because it is fairly absent of the burden of making an immediate commitment. Moreover, the added time to try out many different options may reduce the uncertainty of commitment, which is usually problematic for older adolescents when the time to make a decision arrives. This last implication may be one of the most important given that many fewer programs exist for children relative to adolescents. This amounts to a missed opportunity for many of our children. In an era when the world of work places increasing pressure on workers to guide their own careers, we may need more time to prepare our children and adolescents for this increasingly important life skill.

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