CAREER PATHS AND IDENTITY

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March 17, 2020

How Career Paths Are Chosen and Relate to Identity and Subjective Wellbeing

Literature Review

Personality and skillset are key determinants of occupational choices and how one identifies with their work. There are a wide range of approaches to assessing the relationship between occupation, identity, and subjective wellbeing. The theory of vocational choice proposes that work environments are chosen based on personalities. Various personality theories can be applied in this context including the Big 5 (Brown & Hirschi, 2013). Other approaches factor in skills as well (Barth, Shore & Jensen, 2017). Notably, not everyone has a choice when it comes to career options, such as those with limited education, or those who live in communities with limited job opportunities. However, this research is focused on why people choose certain occupational paths when they have the choice. Other studies look more specifically at the traits behind specific occupational paths, such as high-risk professions, entrepreneurship, or the role of gender in career choice. For example, Hirschi & Fischer (2013) assess what variables influence entrepreneurial intentions and found that openness to change and self-enhancement are key determinants. In another example, Onyedire, et al. (2017) research what personality variables shape how people respond mentally to high-stress job environments. Overall, the objective of this literature review is to explore the following areas: Factors that shape career choice, factors that associate career choice with identity, and factors that link career choice and identity to mental wellbeing.

Why Occupational Paths are Chosen

There are a range of theories that try to explain why career paths are chosen. Benjamin, et al. (2013) conducted a survey with a convenience sample of n=1,066 participants, of which

n=633 were students, and the remainder were working adults. Their findings reveal that several variables shape whether a person deliberately seeks to increase their subjective well-being in their career choice. Accordingly, perceived control over one's life, sense of purpose, social status, and family happiness, were predictors of whether subjective wellbeing was factored into career choices (Benjamin, et al., 2013). In another study, Barth, et al. (2017) assess the role of income risk and risk aversion in career choices, and found that, "idiosyncratic skill and idiosyncratic taste are meaningful determinants of occupational choice" (p. 598). Thus, Barth, et al. (2017) propose that people are inclined to choose a career path based on both skill and enjoyment in that line of work. In a study by Ng, et al. (2017), researchers assessed why accounting majors choose this career path, and found that they are more motivated by intrinsic factors and career exposure. Therefore, the intrinsic motivation connects to the perceived abilities or competence to do well in this field, and career exposure implies a belief in having many career opportunities with this path.

Beyond the question of why people choose certain career paths, is the subtopic of why women choose certain paths, and what barriers women face in their occupational growth in traditionally male-dominated fields. Barbulescu & Bidwell (2013) assessed the determinants behind females' choices in managerial career paths. Accordingly, females are less likely to apply to consulting and finance jobs compared to males, and are more likely to pursue careers in general management roles. The following factors are presented as the reasoning behind this trend: Lower expectations of career success in traditionally male-held roles, lower identification with stereotypically male-held jobs, and higher preference for work-life balance (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013). Essentially, if a female is pursuing a career path in a male dominant field, it comes with the territory of wanting to face barriers to advancement, stereotype, discrimination,

and other factors that can increase perceived risk when considering fields. Furthermore, there is a lack of policy that supports parenting in the United States, as one of the only developed countries to not require mandatory paid maternity or paternity leave. As a result, women are often compelled to choose between the roles of parenting, and their professional roles, which can result in identifying more with career choices offering more flexibility to females in terms of hours, work environment, and identity, such as teaching or nursing (Adda, Dustmann, & Stevens, 2017). Adda, et al. (2017) look into the costs of parenting in female career paths and find that there is, "loss of skills during interruptions, lost earnings opportunities, and selection into more child-friendly occupations" due to the lack of organizational policies encouraging or supporting fertility, child rearing, and raising children (p. 293). Parents, particularly females, often experience conflict between their house making roles, and their career roles, due to a lack of accommodating multiple roles in workplaces. Overall, personality and identity have a key role in shaping career decisions from the selection of a major to study, to the specific positions that are applied for in one's chosen field. Once employed, there are a range of behavioral and motivational factors that shape the work identity and its relationship to mental wellness.

How Occupation Shapes Identity and Motivation

There are various approaches to motivating employees, including compensation and benefits, and applying organizational behavior and developing a positive workplace environment and organizational culture.   There are two types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is when individuals engage in work out of a sense of enjoyment, interest or self-fulfillment. The motivation is generally more constant because it comes from within. Extrinsic motivation is based on some sort of external gain; such as praise or compensation. Extrinsic motivation is less consistent, because as an individual is accustomed to a certain income, because

the drive is attached to something external to the individual. It is important for HR to target both

intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in employees (Baack, 2017). If there is a lack of intrinsic

motivation in a workplace, a lack of organizational culture, little or no opportunities for growth,

and poor communication; these can lead to low employee-morale. Low employee morale regards

negative views toward one's job, coworkers, management, work environment, and the overall

organization. Low employee morale can relate to high rates of absenteeism, low employee

engagement, and high turnover-rates, all of which can be costly and hinder organizational

performance. The opposite of low employee morale is high job satisfaction. Workplaces with

high levels of employee satisfaction correlate with greater levels in motivation, goal

achievement, workplace morale, productivity, collaboration, and performance (Baack, 2017).

Psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a "Hierarchy of Needs" which includes five

levels on a pyramid of what a person most needs for motivation. From the lowest level to the

pinnacle, the needs are as follows: Physiological needs, Safety needs, Belongingness, Self-

Esteem Need, Self-Actualization. The most basic need is physiological needs, which includes

fulfilling hunger, thirst, and a variety of bodily comforts (Wilson, 2014). Safety involves the

needs to stay free from harm or danger and can relate to one's shelter and security (such as

housing security). Some people will choose a career specifically aiming for greater income,

because of the higher motivation in financial incentives or because they prioritize greater

financial security. Others may choose a career that is driven more by what makes them happy or

feel fulfilled, yet they are still able to meet physiological and safety needs. According to

Whillans, Weidman, & Dunn (2016), people who value time more than money tend to be

happier, with a greater subjective wellbeing, compared to people who value money over time. In

another study by Barth, et al. (2017), "those who self-identify as risk-tolerant are more likely to

have volatile incomes" (p. 553). Therefore, people with high risk aversion are more likely to

gravitate to career choices with higher financial security, whereas those with low risk aversion

are more likely to choose a career path on other factors such as passion, sense of purpose, or

fulfilment.

      Many people associate their career with their ability to meet these physiological and

safety needs. The compensation and benefits they earn allows them to pay for bills and basic

needs. Notably, there are cases of jobs that are high risk in terms of safety, such as working with

Doctor's Without Boarders or in the military. This is why measures are taken to increase the

feeling of safety in these positions, so that professionals can stay motivated in the face of danger.

A high-stress career like firefighting and military are associated with psychological conditions

like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Not only is the job high-risk to personal security, but

there is a high risk of exposure to traumatic experiences (Onyedire, et al., 2017). Onyedire, et al.

(2017) assessed a sample of professional firefighters (n=116) and found that work lotus of

control and resilience were predictors of PTSD. Work locus of control relates to how much an

employee believes they are able to control aspects of work events. Thus, in this case, it would

reflect how confident a worker is able to get a task completed in the face of danger. In contrast,

people with a low work locus of control perceive external factors to have a higher role in shaping

the outcome, and then internalize the fears or security risks, which increases the likelihood of

PTSD, as shown in this study (Onyedire, et al., 2017).

      The next level after physiological and safety needs on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs are

met are belongingness needs. Belongingness involves the need for human interaction, and to be

accepted by others (Wilson, 2014). While there are a range of motivators that attract people to

different career paths, there is generally a process in which occupation is linked to identity or an

aspect of identity. The organizational identity and culture can attract or influence employees. If

an employee's traits and values are aligned with the organization, it can enhance productivity

and loyalty. In contrast, if there is a conflict of identity it increases risks of job dissatisfaction,

turnover, and lower subjective wellbeing for the individual. From a human resources

perspective, the objective is alignment between organizational identity and employee identity

(Fieseler, Meckel, & Ranzini, 2015). Harmony between the individual and collective, "generates

a sense of belongingness through which the characteristics and the goals of the organization

become increasingly integrated or congruent with those of the individual" (Fieseler, et al., 2015,

p. 157). Belongingness relates to a sense of community and having a role among a group

working toward a shared cause.

        Whereas most jobs address or recognize the physiological and safety needs of employees,

cultivating belongingness is less obvious. However, it is a critical aspect of employee identity

and motivation. Blank, et al. (2015) assess how people with severe mental illness regard work in

terms of their identity. In depth interviews were conducted over the span of 18 months. The

interview findings reveal two main themes, "building and maintaining an occupation identity" in

which the participants' occupations were referred to as, "the building blocks of an evolving

identity" (p. 197). Thus, work was considered an important aspect of their identity. In this theme,

it is reflected that engaging in a career is an essential aspect of recovering from or managing a

mental or psychological condition. The second main theme in Blank et al.'s (2015) study is

"work and other ways of belonging encapsulated the need to feel connected to others" (p. 197).

Thus, work itself appealed to the sense of belongingness for participants in this study. Whether

one identifies with something has a significance impact on how they will fulfil that role and

integrate that work role into the different roles they carry in life. Accordingly, "As the

relationship between individuals and their organizations become more salient within the

hierarchy of existing connections in a person's life…that person's belongingness to the

organization will increase in importance within her overall identity (Fieseler, et al., 2015).

Therefore, not only does belongingness in an organization help improve job satisfaction, it can

also increase the overall wellbeing of the employee.

The next step of the pinnacle is self-esteem involves being appreciated by others and

possessing the capacity to grow and make accomplishments (Wilson, 2014). Therefore, the next

stage in striving to manage a highly motivated workplace is to appeal to self-esteem with

opportunities for growth within the company. Many workplaces do not feature this. For example,

a worker on an assembly line is highly unlikely to feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of

the day after conducting the same repetitive work. They are more likely to be motivated based on

the physiological and safety needs being met from earning money. Thus, it is predictable that

subjective wellbeing would be lower for an assembly line worker compared to a career path

where the worker and the organizational identity are integrates, such as a financial manager, or a

copywriter, who apply their specific skill set and personality traits to complete their work.

How Occupation and Workplace Relate to Mental Wellbeing

Organizations are increasingly addressing subjective wellbeing and how well employees

manage stress and other emotion- and mental-related scenarios in workplaces. According to

Ammendolia, Cote, Cancelliere, et al. (2016) investments in workplace wellness and health

promotion programs help to reduce presenteeism, which is the issue of employees not fully

functioning while at work due to a health condition, of which mental health is the top factor

resulting in productivity losses in workplaces. Accordingly, "depression and stress [are] the first

and second highest cause of productivity loss" (Ammendolia, et al., 2016, p. 1190). Thus,

investing in wellness programs as well as employee development programs helps to increase job

satisfaction, identification with the organization and their role, and reduce the costs of lost

productivity and high turnover rates (Ammendolia, et al., 2016).

One guiding concept for addressing subjective wellbeing in workplaces is Emotional

Intelligence (EI). EI regards how well individuals perceive, recognize, and manage emotions

ranging from stress to excitement, in addition to being able to recognize EI in others and discern

how to communicate effectively (Njoroge & Yazdanifard, 2014). EI is essential in personal and

professional settings and it first requires understanding and regulation of one's own emotional

regulation, after which one can recognize and try to help others navigate emotion. This is

particularly important when dealing with conflict and recognizing how one's own and others'

perspectives may be fueling tensions with emotionally charged reactions, in which EI can

support a more harmonious, communicative, and productive workplace (Ammendolia, et al.,

2016).

One mental wellbeing risk that particularly affects people in high-stress occupations is

burnout. Burnout contains three features: emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and reduced

personal achievement (Fumis, et al., 2017). Emotional exhaustion is a point where an employee's

emotional resources such as coping, or resilience become depleted, and as a result, an employee

feels unable to be emotionally and psychologically present at their job. Disengagement is

characterized a depersonalization, in which an employee develops negative or cynical attitudes

about their work, which can be directed toward clients, employees, and management. The third

component of burnout involves dissatisfaction with achievement level, in which negativity is

directed inward and an employee is dissatisfied with their self on their job (Moss, et al., 2018).

Burnout, like most conditions related to subjective wellbeing, adversely effects job satisfaction. Burnout syndrome is a prolonged psychological state resulting in workplace inefficiency and pessimism fueled by this chronic exhaustion and emotional dissatisfaction. Highly demanding work environments can cause extreme stress, which can incite fatigue, insomnia, anxiety, irritability, and depression (Moss, et al., 2018). There are various work-related factors such as workload, autonomy, workplace relationships, and end-of-life care that can contribute to burnout, as well as personal factors such as age or an overly-committed or authoritarian personality (Moss, et al., 2018). Research indicates that there are various interventions that can reduce or prevent burnout, including policies, more participatory decision-making, increasing worker autonomy, and opening the lines of communication and collaboration (Moss, et al., 2018).

Summary of Findings

Overall, there is a range of research concerning the roles of personality, skillset, emotional intelligence, and other variables in influencing occupational path, identification with one's work role, and the management of mental health in relation to work identity and workplace stress. Occupational choice is often related to personality and skills, as cultivated or encouraged in education. Factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and risk-aversion can contribute attraction to different career choices, such as seeking financial security, flexibility, or growth opportunity. Thus, there are broad societal factors, as well as individual factors, that influence career path interests and decisions. Additionally, how one identifies with their career and role relates closely to motivation variables. The more that an occupation suits motivational needs, the stronger the connection one forms to the role in terms of identity and self-actualization, or perceiving one's work as fulfilling. Furthermore, identification and motivation relate closely to

one's subjective wellbeing, in addition to the workplace environment. While workplace

environments vary based on leadership and management styles, individual inclinations to stay

motivated are largely linked to their EI and ability to manage burnout, stress, and other variables.

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